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Exploring the Perceptions of Three Male Exceptional Students: A Hermeneutical Phenomenology

Bailey Andrea Regts
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Exploring the Perceptions of Three Male Exceptional Students:

A Hermeneutical Phenomenology

by

Bailey Andrea Regts

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Faculty of Education
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Education
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2018

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Exploring the Perceptions of Three Male Exceptional Students:

A Hermeneutical Phenomenology

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April 27, 2018
DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I hereby certify that I am the sole author of this thesis and that no part of this thesis has been published or submitted for publication.

I certify that, to the best of my knowledge, my thesis does not infringe upon anyone’s copyright nor violate any proprietary rights and that any ideas, techniques, quotations, or any other material from the work of other people included in my thesis, published or otherwise, are fully acknowledged in accordance with the standard referencing practices. Furthermore, to the extent that I have included copyrighted material that surpasses the bounds of fair dealing within the meaning of the Canada Copyright Act, I certify that I have obtained a written permission from the copyright owner(s) to include such material(s) in my thesis and have included copies of such copyright clearances to my appendix.

I declare that this is a true copy of my thesis, including any final revisions, as approved by my thesis committee and the Graduate Studies office, and that this thesis has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other University or Institution.
ABSTRACT

This paper presents a study in response to the absence of literature on the voices of exceptional students receiving special education services. This hermeneutical phenomenology will help to address this empirical gap in the literature by providing insight into improving the educational experiences for exceptional students in the Ontario public education system. Data were collected through differentiated interviews, which allow participants to share their perceived experiences through authentic tasks, designed in recognition of their unique strengths and challenges. The collected data were interpreted through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) in order to both describe the essence of being identified as an exceptional student receiving special education services in the Ontario public education system, and to make sense of the claims of each student. The following themes emerged from the data: (1) Help, (2) Difference, (3) Communication, and (4) Growth.

Keywords: elementary education, secondary education, special education, student voice, perceptions of exceptional students, phenomenology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to my students, past and present. Thank you for inspiring me to constantly look for ways to improve myself, both as an individual and as an educator, and the field of education itself. Together, I believe we will make the world a better place.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would first like to express my gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri, who first suggested I pursue my Master of Education studies, and to my committee members, Dr. Irene Carter and Dr. Finney Cherian. Thank you for believing in and respecting my passion for this research and for your patience as I searched for how to make it a reality. I am also grateful to Research Ethics Coordinator Sarah Braganza, who was a tremendous support in making this research a reality. Thank you for your encouragement and guidance.

To my participants, Bryce, Graham, and Murray: thank you. You were an answer to prayer and I am eternally grateful for your willingness to share your views on your educational experiences with me with such honesty. Our interviews together were my favourite part of this research.

Lastly, I must thank my family and friends, especially my Mom and Dad, who encouraged me through every step of this ultimate test of resilience. I appreciate and love you more than I can put into words.
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<td>IEP</td>
<td>Individual Education Plan</td>
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<td>IPA</td>
<td>Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis</td>
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<td>IPRC</td>
<td>Identification, Placement, and Review Committee</td>
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<td>REB</td>
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the Ontario education system, it is not a surprise that special education is a prevalent concern for administrators, educators, parents, and students (People for Education, 2015). Given the challenges associated with special education and its capacity for improvement, it does come as a surprise that a gap exists in the literature, as the manifold experiences of exceptional students receiving special education services are unexplored (Whitley, Lupart, & Beran, 2009), despite an increasing number of students receiving these special education services in Ontario schools each year (People for Education, 2015). This thesis provides a detailed overview of a hermeneutical phenomenological study, analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which I believe begins to address this dearth in the literature. The voices of both elementary and secondary students have been called upon in order to describe the essence of what they have experienced as identified exceptional students receiving special education services, and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). The use of IPA allows for the claims of the students to be contextualized, positioning their accounts in regards to various aspects of their individual identities, including race, ethnicity, social class, and gender (Connor, 2009).

Problem

A research problem provides the rationale for the study at hand (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). The rationale for my study is as follows: the voices of exceptional students receiving special education services, in regards to their educational experiences, are largely unheard.
**Summary of Recent Studies**

With an increasing number of students being identified as exceptional students and thus receiving special education services in today’s schools (People for Education, 2015), it follows that there has been a significant amount of literature on special education produced in the past decade (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Brock & Carter, 2013; Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008; Horne & Timmons, 2009; Glazzard, 2011; Lalvani, 2012; Runswick-Cole, 2008; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006; Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber, & Luptt, 2009; Shogren et al., 2015; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Whitehurst, 2007). The literature portrays special education as both controversial and complex, featuring the views of a variety of stakeholders, including scholars, administrators, teachers and other school staff, as well as parents, exceptional students, and students without exceptionalities. The controversies and complexities are apparent through a review of the literature, as diverse perspectives are apparent within and across these groups of stakeholders (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Brock & Carter, 2013; Zaretsky et al., 2008; Horne & Timmons, 2009; Glazzard, 2011; Lalvani, 2012; Runswick-Cole, 2008; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Hess et al., 2006; Loreman et al., 2009; Shogren et al., 2015; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Whitehurst, 2007).

While some scholars urge for the reconsideration of inclusive education (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011), others identify the effectiveness of special education, given proper supports (Brock & Carter, 2013). Administrators reportedly feel unprepared to deal with special education in their schools (Zaretsky et al., 2008). The perspectives of teachers are as diverse as the students they teach, with some viewing inclusive education positively (Horne & Timmons, 2009), and others demonstrating resistance to it based on
their deficit-based views of disability (Glazzard, 2011; Lalvani, 2012). These views of
disability have been shown to guide parents’ decisions on school placement for their
exceptional children, as parents with a deficit-based mindset tend to opt for specialized
schooling rather than inclusive education in the general education classroom (Runswick-
Cole, 2008). Parents perceive their role in their children’s special education in a
multitude of ways, but most commonly, as an advocate desiring positive school relations
(Stoner & Angell, 2006; Hess et al., 2006). Finally, students themselves are also
increasingly featured in the literature. Both exceptional students and students without
exceptionalities speak to the benefits of inclusion (Loreman et al., 2009), and the
downsides of segregation (Shogren et al., 2015). The value of student insight is becoming
better recognized and accepted with time (DeFur & Korinek, 2010), although obtaining
and accepting the perspectives of exceptional students remains a challenge (Whitehurst,
2007). These ideas provide evidence from the literature that special education remains a
field of controversies and complexities (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011; Brock & Carter,
2013; Zaretsky et al., 2008; Horne & Timmons, 2009; Glazzard, 2011; Lalvani, 2012;
Runswick-Cole, 2008; Stoner & Angell, 2006; Hess et al., 2006; Loreman et al., 2009;
Shogren et al., 2015; DeFur & Korinek, 2010; Whitehurst, 2007).

**Deficiencies in Recent Studies**

Although the voices of exceptional students are becoming more prominent in the
literature, there are no Canadian studies which explore the educational experiences of
exceptional students receiving special education services (Whitley et al., 2009). Whitley
et al. (2009) identified this dearth in 2009, and to date, no further Canadian literature has
begun to address this gap. While there is evidence of Canadian studies which look at
inclusion (Horne & Timmons, 2009; Loreman et al., 2009), a single element of special education, the literature fails to explore how exceptional students in Canada perceive their received special education services and the meaning they ascribe to their experiences with special education. Additionally, as a researcher using a disability interpretive lens, I believe that differences across exceptional students, such as race, ethnicity, social class, and gender, impact educational experience (Connor, 2009). Since these differences across students with exceptionalities are not commonly explored in the literature, I would suggest that this is another gap in need of further research. I address some these deficiencies in the literature in my study.

**Significance of the study.** An analysis of the perceptions of students receiving special education services becomes an important starting point in addressing their needs as exceptional students within the Ontario public education system. The perspectives and attitudes of exceptional students in regards to their educational experiences might be related to their resiliency, mental health, and academic successes. Exploring the essence of the educational perceptions of such students may provide policymakers, administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents with suggestions for areas of improvement in order to effectively improve the experiences of and support for exceptional students in Ontario public schools.

**Purpose**

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions of exceptional students receiving special education services within the Ontario public education system in Southwestern Ontario. I use the term ‘exceptional student’ to refer to any student in grades K-12 who accesses the Ontario curriculum via
an Individual Education Plan (IEP). For the sake of this study, the student need not be formally identified as an exceptional pupil by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to fit this definition of the term ‘exceptional student’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016).

**Research questions.** Qualitative research requires inquirers to state two forms of research questions. The first is the central question, which broadly asks to explore the phenomenon in the study (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). The second form of research question is the sub-question (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2012). Sub-questions narrow the focus of the study, and can be adapted into interview questions (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2012). The questions must be designed open-endedly in order to evoke participants to share diverse perspectives (Creswell, 2014; Maxwell, 2012; Mertens, 2015). My central question and associated sub-questions follow.

**Central question.** What is the essence of the perceived experiences of a group of exceptional Intermediate and Senior students in Southwestern Ontario?

**Associated sub-questions.** The following three sub-questions supplement the above central question:

1. How do exceptional students perceive their experiences inside the classroom?
2. How do exceptional students perceive their experiences outside the classroom?
3. How do exceptional students perceive their received supports, accommodations, and modifications?

**Definition of terms.** There are a variety of terms used throughout this thesis which may be unfamiliar to readers. In an attempt to improve the readability of this
thesis, I will now provide a series of definitions. Any terms not defined here are not prominent ideas in the study, and will instead be defined as they are introduced.

**Essence.** Throughout this study, the term *essence* is used as explained by van Manen (2016). van Manen (2016) explains essence as the aspects, properties, and qualities that make up something such that, in their absence, that something would no longer be considered to be that particular something. Essence is complex and multifaceted (van Manen, 2016). In the context of my study, I am aiming to describe the essence of a phenomenon, with the phenomenon being the perceived experiences of a group of exceptional students receiving special education services in the Ontario public education system within Southwestern Ontario.

**Exceptional student (or exceptional child).** I use the term *exceptional student* (or *exceptional child*) to refer to any student in grades K-12 who accesses the Ontario curriculum via an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The student need not be formally identified as an exceptional pupil by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to fit this definition of the term *exceptional student* for the sake of this study. Please note that this definition differs from the definition of the term ‘exceptional pupil’ by the Ontario Ministry of Education (2016a). In the context of my study, my participants are all exceptional students.

**Differentiated interview.** In this thesis, I coin the term, *differentiated interview*, to refer to an interview format and process which caters to the strengths and challenges of the participant at hand. In the context of my study, each participant is an exceptional student receiving special education services. Each participant’s differentiated interviews have taken into account their unique strengths and challenges. For example, each
participant was able to use the resources available (i.e., paper and writing utensils, Lego, play dough, etc.) to help them with sharing or explaining their ideas. This notion of a differentiated interview recognizes and embraces the diversity across my participants.

**Individual Education Plan (or IEP).** An Individual Education Plan (IEP) “…identifies [an exceptional] student’s specific learning expectations and outlines how the school will address these expectations through appropriate accommodations, program modifications and/or alternative programs as well as specific instructional and assessment strategies” (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016b). An IEP is implemented for an exceptional student in order to provide the student with the necessary conditions and components of equitable education so that they will hopefully “… be able to achieve the grade-level learning expectations of the provincial curriculum” (Ministry of Education, 2016b). In the context of my study, each of my participants has an IEP.

**Perceived experience.** By perceived experience, I am referring to how each participant views and understands their lived experiences as an identified exceptional student receiving special education services. Typically, a phenomenology simply studies the lived experiences of participants (van Manen, 2016); however, in the case of my study, my participants are exceptional students who view and/or understand their lived experiences in unique ways. Thus, the term perceived experience recognizes that uniqueness of the lived experiences of each participant based on their exceptional perspective, and acknowledges that these perceived experiences are real to participants.

**Positionality.** The term positionality is used throughout this thesis as defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012): positionality is “… the recognition that where you stand in relation to others in society shapes what you can see and understand about the world” (p.
Sensoy and DiAngelo (2012) further explain how “[positionality] asserts that knowledge is dependent upon a complex web of cultural values, beliefs, experiences, and social positions” (p. 8). In the context of my study, my participants each perceive their experiences as an identified exceptional student based on their own positionality. Similarly, I have interpreted the collected data while taking into account the positionalities of my participants, and acknowledging my own positionality as the researcher.

**Special education services.** The term *special education services* is used throughout this thesis to refer to all resources required to implement a special education program as per an Individual Education Plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). These resources may include, but are not limited to, assistive technology, access to a special education resource teacher, and any accommodations listed in an Individual Education Plan (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017). In the context of my study, each of my participants receives special education services.

**Delimitations and limitations.** A delimitation refers to “… a systematic bias intentionally introduced into the study design… by the researcher” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 66). Based on this definition, the delimitations that I am aware of include the young age of my participants and the location of my data collection. I consider these elements of the study to be delimitations because I have consciously decided to select only Intermediate and Senior division student participants receiving special education services within the Ontario public education system in Southwestern Ontario. In contrast to a delimitation, a limitation can be defined as “… the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results” (Price &
Murnan, 2004, p. 66). One limitation is that the results cannot be generalized, as this is a phenomenological study (van Manen, 2016). Additionally, I have brought a personal bias with me to the study, as an educator passionate about special education; I believe this bias, however, to be addressed by my use of IPA in interpreting the data, as IPA allows the researcher to use their understanding of the world to then interpret their participants’ understanding (Mertens, 2015; Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006).

**Locating Myself**

In my pre-service year at the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor, I participated in the Leadership Experience for Academic Direction Enrichment Program (LEAD), which permitted me to complete all four of my practice teaching placements in the same inner-city elementary school in Southwestern Ontario. Two of these placements were in the school’s Intermediate division Special Education Resource Room. The group of students who made up this class each brought with them diverse needs, with their identified exceptionalities ranging from intellectual to behavioural. Each day teaching these exceptional students brought unique challenges and frustrations, but also revealed to me the rewarding aspect of providing special education services to students with exceptional needs in the Ontario public education system.

Immediately following my pre-service year, I enrolled in an Additional Qualification course to earn my Special Education: Part 1 certification. This course permitted me to further explore my professional interest in the field of special education, as it provided an “[introduction] into the theories and practices for understanding and identifying exceptionalities of students” (Continuing Education, 2016). Now as a Master of Education candidate, I am continuing to expand my professional knowledge within the
field of special education by exploring the field through my course assignments and my ongoing, self-directed learning.

Most recently, I completed a Long Term Occasional teaching assignment in another school board. The position I held for two months was the Junior/Intermediate Resource Teacher. I was given a caseload of nearly 60 students who were all accessing their education via an IEP. This assignment provided me with the opportunity to familiarize myself with the legal underpinnings of special education and the associated paperwork, while also giving me a closer look at the experiences of my exceptional students. The professional experience I gained in this particular teaching assignment is relevant to this study because it contributes to my positionality, and impacts my interpretation of the data as I utilize IPA.

**Philosophical Assumptions and Interpretive Framework**

Philosophical assumptions refer to a researcher’s ontological, epistemological, axiological, and methodological beliefs. Creswell (2013) and Mertens (2015) both emphasize the importance of the comprehension and expression of the philosophical assumptions underlying qualitative research. Our philosophical assumptions guide our composition of a research problem and the research questions, as well as the route we take to search for answers to these questions in order to address the problem (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). Philosophical assumptions are reflective of our academic education and scholarly community (Creswell, 2013), as well as of the nature of the phenomenon of study (Mertens, 2015), which suggests that our assumptions are dynamic in nature. Finally, we must acknowledge that our readers may not share our beliefs, and
thus we must outline ours as researchers to prevent areas of difference from becoming grounds for critique (Creswell, 2013).

Interpretive frameworks are used by qualitative researchers either to frame their theoretical perspective, as in social science theories, or to advocate for change, as in social justice theories (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). Each framework is constructed upon philosophical assumptions in terms of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology. Based on the assumptions associated with disability theory, I have chosen to utilize a disability interpretive lens to guide my research. Such a perspective necessitates that the researcher views disability as a single element of what sets individuals apart, rather than as a defect (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). Viewing disability as a human difference implies that disability is socially constructed (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). This, along with the beliefs which follow, lays the theoretical foundation for my study of the essence of the educational experiences of exceptional students receiving special education services.

**Ontological beliefs.** In the context of qualitative research, ontological beliefs refer to what the researcher believes about the nature and characteristics of reality (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). As a beginning qualitative researcher, at this point in time I believe in multiple realities, in that an individual will experience the world based upon their positionality. This belief will be reflected in my research by consulting individuals as participants and reporting on their varying perspectives.

According to disability theory, “[reality] is based on power and identity struggles” (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). This model believes social factors, as opposed to biological factors, construct disability (Mertens, 2015). This belief is reflected in my research in that
I am exploring the experiences of exceptional students, with each student having a unique positionality shaping their reality.

**Epistemological beliefs.** Epistemology is the study of knowledge (Mertens, 2015). Understanding my own epistemological beliefs has required me to ask myself what knowledge and knowing are (Mertens, 2015). I believe that knowledge and knowing are subjective, meaning positionality plays a large role in how one understands their reality. These beliefs are reflected in my research as I spend an extended period of time in the field alongside my participants, becoming an insider who relies on quotes and other data sources to support my participants’ claims of knowledge and knowing.

Reality becomes known, as per disability theory, “…through the study of social structures, freedom and oppression, power, and control. Reality can be changed through research” (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). These beliefs are reflected in my research, as my exploration seeks to improve the educational experiences for exceptional students, thus changing their realities.

**Axiological beliefs.** Qualitative research is characterized by the researcher’s disclosure of their axiological beliefs, or values, within their study (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). I acknowledge the value-laden nature of research, and am aware of the presence of bias in research. I believe that my own positionality biases my interpretations, and this belief is reflected in my research by my open discussion of the values which shape how I interpret the experiences of my participants.

Fittingly, disability theory emphasizes diversity in values across communities (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). This belief is reflected in my research through my ongoing recognition and appreciation for diversity across my participants.
**Methodological beliefs.** The methodology of qualitative research is distinctively “… inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing the data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). Researchers who utilize qualitative methods do so to obtain thick descriptions of the given area of study (Mertens, 2015). Given that education is my field of study, with my research interests lying in special education, I believe in the appropriateness of inductivity, emergence, and considering my own strengths in data collection and analysis. These beliefs are reflected in my research as I continuously, descriptively outline the context of the study.

The methodological beliefs of disability theory necessitate that the researcher “[begin] with [the] assumption of power and identity struggles, document them, and call for action and change” (Creswell, 2013, p. 37). Mertens (2015) also explains how “[a] common theme in the methodology is inclusion of diverse voices” (p. 33). These beliefs are reflected in my research as I seek understanding of the meaning given by a group of diverse exceptional students to their educational experiences, and ultimately seek ways of improving these educational experiences.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There are a number of stakeholders in the field of special education, with each group holding unique perspectives. Today, inclusive education, which entails that all students are taught within the same general education classroom as often as possible, is the most common placement option for exceptional students (People for Education, 2015). Inclusive education requires that these exceptional students be provided with appropriate accommodations and modifications to maximize their success in the general education classroom. Scholars, administrators, teachers and other school staff, along with parents, exceptional students, and even students without exceptionalities, all have something to say regarding current practices in the education of exceptional students. What follows is a review of the literature on this topic, with emphasis on the diverse views across, and within, groups of stakeholders.

To begin, scholars in the field of special education discuss the controversies and complexities of the field. McLeskey and Waldron (2011) state that “[one] of the most controversial issues in special education over the last 40 years has been the extent to which [exceptional students] should be educated in general education classrooms” (p. 48). They provide a review of the literature which suggests that inclusive education should be reconsidered, as the research they cite in their article suggests that a separate setting may provide [exceptional students] with higher quality, more intensive instruction based on their unique needs (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). McLeskey and Waldron (2011) argue that elementary special education resource classes are designed to provide exceptional students with individualized instruction so that they can advance their skills
to that of their peers. Brock and Carter (2013) also conducted a systemic review of the literature, but narrowed their focus on the role of paraprofessionals in the education of exceptional students. Paraprofessionals are often used to support exceptional students in the general education classroom, thus making inclusive education possible. Based on this review, Brock and Carter (2013) assert that the literature indicates that paraprofessionals with adequate training can effectively contribute to improving both academic and social outcomes for exceptional students. In contrast to McLeskey and Waldron (2011), Brock and Carter (2013) view inclusive education as a viable option for the education of exceptional students, given that they are supported by trained paraprofessionals.

Zaretsky et al. (2008) explain how school leaders in Canada are challenged by increasing diversity across students, especially given the demand for educational accountability. They state that “[a]s more students with disabilities and other special needs are educated in regular education settings, school leaders must also be attuned to the legal underpinnings and requirements inherent in special education programs and services…” (Zaretsky et al., 2008, p. 162). Zaretsky et al. (2008) conducted a study on administrator’s views of their preparation programs, gathering data which suggested these preparation programs must better prepare principals to understand what exceptional students require from them, the legislation surrounding special education, and the struggles of teachers who are assigned to teach exceptional students. Through their review of the literature and their analysis of their own collected data, Zaretsky et al. (2008) affirm that administrators feel special education is not properly emphasized in administrator preparation programs.
Horne and Timmons (2009) investigated the perceptions of Eastern Canadian teachers on the impact of inclusion of exceptional students within the regular classroom. They stated that “[findings] revealed that some of the [Prince Edward Island] teachers’ primary concerns were planning time, meeting the needs of all students, and ongoing professional development to respond effectively to the increasingly diverse needs of students in the classroom” (Horne & Timmons, 2009, p. 273). The attitudes of the teacher participants suggested that they viewed inclusion as the best placement option for exceptional students, but that they continue to question how to make inclusion more effective for all (Horne & Timmons, 2009). Glazzard (2011) also explored the perceptions of teachers in regards to inclusion. In contrast to the teachers who participated in Horne and Timmon’s (2009) study, Glazzard (2011) reported that teachers demonstrated resistance to including exceptional students in the regular classroom: “[for] teachers, children with behavioural issues may test their skills and patience and have a detrimental impact on the education of the majority. Children with special educational needs can have an adverse effect on school attainment data and individual teachers are held to account on the basis of their score” (p. 61). Teacher participants in Lalvani’s (2015) study on the perspectives of both teachers and parents demonstrated that they believed disability to be biological, which corresponds with the medical model. These deficit-based model views align with the perspectives of Glazzard’s (2011) participants (Lalvani, 2015).

Runswick-Cole (2008) studied the attitudes of parents towards the integration of their exceptional child into a mainstream school. Runswick-Cole (2008) explains that some parents do adopt the medical model of disability, as described above. This “…
medical [or deficit] model of disability constructs disability as the direct result of physical, sensory and/or neurological impairment due to damage or disease… A medical model assumes that the disabled child is deficient but, it is hoped, alterable…” (Runswick-Cole, 2008, p. 176). Analysis of the data collected by Runswick-Cole (2008) suggests that parents who view disability through a medical model tend to select a specialized school for their exceptional child, while in contrast, parents who view disability as socially constructed tend to select a mainstream school for their exceptional child. Hess et al. (2006) explored the voices of parents who tend to advocate for these mainstream schools, and thus inclusive education, for their exceptional child. Hess et al. (2006) provided evidence that parents become the principle advocate for their exceptional child, all while striving to understand what it means for their child to have special needs. Participating parents in this study demonstrated that they often seem to be looking for somewhere where their child can fit in (Hess et al., 2006). Similarly to Hess et al. (2006), Stoner and Angell (2006) looked into the roles played by parents of exceptional children. Stoner and Angell’s (2006) “… findings revealed that parent participants, especially mothers, consistently engaged in four roles: (a) negotiator, (b) monitor, (c) supporter, and (d) advocate” (p. 177). Lalvani (2012) also found that parents of exceptional children shared a self-perception as an advocate for their child, while also noting that the research literature demonstrates the diversity in parent perspectives of special education. Despite this diversity in parent perspectives, a positive partnership between home and school appears to be a common goal (Lalvani, 2012). Likewise, Fish (2008) suggests that listening to parents’ voices encourages the formation of positive partnerships between home and school.
Loreman et al. (2009) studied the perspectives of Canadian students on inclusive education. They explain how exceptional students view inclusive education as beneficial because it immerses them in authentic social and academic situations (Loreman et al., 2009). These students “… reported feeling like they learned more, made more friends and had higher levels of self-concept, including self-efficacy and self-esteem” (Loreman et al., 2009, p. 3). Shogren et al. (2015) similarly report that, in their study, both exceptional students and students without exceptionalities felt segregation limited the academic goal of learning and the social goal of building friendships. It is also noteworthy that the “… students without exceptionalities reported higher degrees of friendship and advocacy, as well as lower degrees of abuse, towards students with disabilities in inclusive settings as opposed to special education settings…” (Loreman et al., 2009, p. 4). DeFur and Korinek (2010) argue that both exceptional students and students without exceptionalities are able to provide applicable outlooks to schools looking for ways to improve their learning and social communities. Although “[obtaining] the views of students with profound and complex learning difficulties arguably requires more meticulous planning and implementation, greater consideration of ethical issues and enormous care with interpretation of findings…[if] we continue to hear only the voices of others, we continue to do unto this population and ignore the messages they have for us” (Whitehurst, 2007, p. 60).

Special education remains a field of controversies and complexities. Scholars, administrators, teachers and other school staff, parents, and students of all abilities are all considered stakeholders in this field. As stakeholders, each of these groups has a voice, with some louder than others. This review of the literature demonstrates the diversity of
these voices, as well as the messages being sent both within and across groups. This review also examines the voices of students, particularly exceptional students, becoming increasingly more important and valuable in the field, signifying a need for further research in this area.

**Literature Review Concept Map**

Based on the literature presented above, I have developed a visual summary in the form of a concept map. The left half of the diagram represents the literature which takes on the perspectives of what I refer to as “education stakeholders”, including scholars, administrators, teachers, and other school staff, such as paraprofessionals, while the right half of the diagram represents the literature of “family stakeholders”, including parents, and both students with and without exceptionalities. While the fraction of the circle allotted to each stakeholder group does not imply the amount of literature existing from each perspective, the gradation does represent my perception of the prominence of the voices from each stakeholder group. A darker shade suggests a more prominent voice, whereas a lighter shade suggests a less prominent voice. This concept map is presented in Figure 1 below.
Summary of Study

What follows is the Methodology section of this thesis. In this section, I provide descriptions of the qualitative tradition and the phenomenology research design. I then provide a rationale, which explains why the phenomenology research design is appropriate given the purpose of my study. Next, I outline the procedure of the study, followed by a description of my role as the researcher. I also delineate my ethical considerations. Subsequently, I delineate my data collection procedures, setting, and participants’ demographics and selection. The Methodology section of this thesis concludes with my data analysis procedure.

1 The left half of the diagram represents the literature focusing on the perspectives of “education stakeholders”, while the right half of the diagram represents the literature of “family stakeholders”. The fraction of the circle allotted to each stakeholder group does not imply the amount of literature existing from each perspective, while the gradation does represent my perception of the prominence of the voices from each stakeholder group.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Characteristics of the Qualitative Tradition

Qualitative research stems historically from the fields of anthropology, sociology, and psychology (Creswell, 2014; Greig, Taylor, & MacKay, 2012). Sutton (1993) explains that qualitative research is associated with the interpretations and verbal representations of data. The qualitative tradition is also associated with exploration, analysis, and description, all while adopting an inductive, open-ended approach (van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). Qualitative researchers recognize the subjective nature of individuals and, thus, seek to understand how individuals make sense and understand human phenomena (Maxwell, 2012; Greig et al., 2012; van Manen, 2016). Researchers using the qualitative tradition tend to use recruit a small number of individuals as participants and to collect data in the natural setting, in order to obtain rich description of the phenomenon of interest (Maxwell, 2012; Marshall & Rosman, 2015; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013). Additional elements of the qualitative tradition include an emphasis on participants’ meanings, reflexivity on behalf of the researcher, and the development of a holistic account (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015). That is, in a qualitative study, researchers are aware that context gives meaning to observations (Sutton, 1993; Maxwell, 2012; Greig et al., 2012). Each of these defining elements is encompassed in the phenomenology research design of this study.
Characteristics of the Hermeneutical Phenomenology Research Methodology

The approach to qualitative research I utilize in my study is the phenomenological research design. The word ‘phenomenon’ “[originates] from the Greek word ‘phaenesthai’, meaning ‘to show itself’, [thus] a phenomenon might be considered anything that presents itself. Therefore, phenomenology is the study of phenomena” (McConnell-Henry, Chapman, & Francis, 2009). More specifically, however, I utilize the hermeneutical branch of phenomenology. The term “… hermeneutics comes from the Greek word hermeneusin, a verb, meaning to understand or interpret” (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). This methodology, which may be better viewed as a philosophy than a methodology, has been shaped by the contributions of various individuals in the field of philosophy, and continues to evolve as an approach to qualitative research (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Hermeneutical phenomenology is better understood by acknowledging this evolution rather than simply providing a list of attributes. What follows is a brief history of the shaping of present-day hermeneutical phenomenology.

The beginning ideas behind phenomenology first appeared in the writings of Immanuel Kant, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, and Ernst Mach in the eighteenth century (Moran, 2002); however, Edmund Husserl, a mathematician turned philosopher, is often referred to as the Father of Phenomenology because he formally announced phenomenology as a new approach to philosophy (Moran, 2002; Larkin et al., 2006; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). As a mathematician, Husserl valued the rigor and unbiasedness of the positivist paradigm, and attempted to mimic these characteristics through bracketing (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Bracketing, which requires the researcher to put aside their assumptions, including their scientific, philosophical, and
cultural views (Moran, 2002; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), was thought by Husserl to provide objectivity to the research (Koch, 1995; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Husserl’s phenomenology is referred to as transcendental phenomenology, which examines the lived experiences of participants and aims to provide absolute truth by describing the given phenomenon in terms of its essence, or what makes the phenomenon the phenomenon (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016).

Martin Heidegger, a student of Husserl, radically transformed Husserl’s transcendental phenomenology into what is referred to as hermeneutical phenomenology (Moran, 2002). Heidegger disagreed with Husserl on many counts, arguing that there is no absolute truth and, accordingly, that context must be considered in order to shape understanding (Holroyd, 2007; Koch, 1997; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). He recognized the researcher as a critical part of a research study, and thus rejected Husserl’s use of bracketing (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Heidegger’s hermeneutical phenomenology emphasizes interpretation, rather than description, as he introduced the use of texts, such as writing, spoken communication, visual arts, and music (van Manen, 2016; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; Laverty, 2003; Holroyd, 2007), all of which must be deciphered by the researcher. The aim of hermeneutical phenomenology is to provide understanding through meaning by permitting these texts to speak for themselves (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009).

One of Heidegger’s students, Hans-Georg Gadamer, enhanced hermeneutical phenomenology (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Like Heidegger, Gadamer believed “… that all researchers bring a history to the research environment and that these ‘… values… make the research meaningful to consumers.’” (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009,
Further, this meaning comes from the researcher’s interpretation based upon this history (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016). Gadamer added to hermeneutical phenomenology in two main ways. First, he contended that understanding is language bound, in that it comes through dialogue (Van Niekerk, 2002; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). By this, Gadamer meant that dialogue is a vehicle which delivers understanding (Van Niekerk, 2002). Gadamer viewed this understanding as an interpretation based upon one’s personal history, with no room for separation from this history (van Manen, 2016; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). Second, Gadamer asserted that researchers using a hermeneutical phenomenological approach must be willing to witness a new perspective (Holroyd, 2007; McConnell-Henry et al., 2009). That is, the researcher must acknowledge that “[to] engage with human phenomena, one must be willing to disclose what is enclosed, to see things in their immediacy, and, more importantly, to seek a fresh perception of the world” (Holroyd, 2007, p. 10). Gadamer’s contributions to hermeneutical phenomenology emphasize his belief that the purpose is not to construct a rigid procedure but to discover which conditions best provide access to understanding the given phenomenon (Holroyd, 2007).

More recently, Max van Manen, a recently-retired Canadian professor, has extended the work on hermeneutical phenomenology, particularly into the field of education (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009; van Manen, 2016; Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Like Heidegger, van Manen does not approve of bracketing because he recognizes the value of the personal histories of researchers (Dowling, 2007), and like Gadamer, van Manen believes that language provides historical and cultural context for both the researcher and participant (Sloan & Bowe, 2014). Further, van Manen (2016) explains how “… we
recognize differentiated possibilities of meaning that adhere to the socio-cultural context to which a given language belongs” (Preface to the 2nd Edition section, para. 8). van Manen asserts that hermeneutical phenomenology is characterized by tradition, rather than method (Koch, 1995), requiring reflectivity, sensitivity to language, and openness on behalf of the researcher, qualities he has demonstrated in the studies he conducted throughout his career (van Manen, 2016; van Manen, 2007). In addition to conducting studies, van Manen has expressed his beliefs regarding hermeneutical phenomenology in a multitude of publications, including books, articles, lectures, chapters, and reviews, amongst many others (van Manen, 2016; van Manen, 2007). van Manen offers researchers access to hermeneutical phenomenology as a fluid methodology by demonstrating his implementation in various studies, and by outlining his understanding of the philosophical assumptions in many of his publications (van Manen, 2016; van Manen, 2007).

Based on the accessibility offered by van Manen (2016), in addition to my beliefs aligning with his, I have opted to adopt van Manen’s approach to hermeneutical phenomenology in my study. Despite differences in philosophy and epistemology, all phenomenological approaches aim to explore the lived experiences of participants (McConnell-Henry et al., 2009), and my hermeneutical phenomenological study is no different. Through exploration of the lived experiences of my exceptional student participants I am able to describe both what the participants have experienced with the phenomenon and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013). In culmination, I am able to combine and reduce these descriptions to describe the essence of the phenomenon, that is, what the phenomenon is, and without, would not be (van Manen, 2016). I believe
that the interpretive element of the hermeneutical phenomenology research design, as understood by van Manen (2016), strengthens my study as it allows me to use context to better understand the lived experiences of my participants, who, at times, portray their experiences in unique ways or through unusual mediums.

**Challenges.** The phenomenology research design is not without challenges. The first challenge is that it is typically a highly structured, systematic design, which is uncommon in qualitative research (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). I view this challenge as a strength, however, because this structure is helpful to novice researchers, like myself, who have little to no experience in designing or conducting research. Also, by adopting van Manen’s hermeneutical phenomenology research design, I am permitted to exercise the fluidity of the hermeneutical branch of phenomenology (van Manen, 2016; van Manen, 2007). Second, utilizing this design necessitates an understanding of the underlying philosophical assumptions, which should be identified in the study (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015). Although this can be difficult in writing into a study, I believe that my strong writing skills, along with the expertise of my advisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri, prepare me for this challenge. Third, finding a relatively homogenous group of individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon may be perplexing, depending on the research topic (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). I do not believe that this challenge is applicable to my study as an average of more than 17% of elementary students are identified as exceptional students and, therefore, receive special education services in publicly-funded schools in Ontario (People for Education, 2015). Additionally, in an attempt to find a relatively homogenous group of individuals to participate, I have opted only to include individuals
in the Intermediate or Senior divisions who attended the same elementary school. Finally, since this methodology allows for the use of interpretation, I must understand that these interpretations will be informed by my positionality and my own assumptions as an individual (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I believe this to be a valid concern, and I have addressed this challenge by outlining my philosophical assumptions and interpretive framework and by locating myself (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; van Manen, 2016). The use of IPA as my approach to data analysis also helps to guide me in addressing this challenge.

**Rationale for Research Methodology**

The phenomenology research design is characterized by, just as its name suggests, its emphasis on a common phenomenon across a group of individuals (van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015). Such a study seeks to describe the meaning individuals assign to their lived experiences with the common phenomenon (Mertens, 2015). In fact, every phenomenology concludes with a description of the essence of the phenomenon based on the lived experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016).

Through my research, I describe the perceptions of a group of exceptional students receiving special education services, and the meaning these individuals ascribe to their perceived experiences with special education. Thus, this group of students shares a common phenomenon: the human experience of being an exceptional student, and accordingly, receiving special education services. Adopting the hermeneutical branch of phenomenology affords me to interpret the collected data, taking into account the context and the positionalities of the participants. For these reasons, the hermeneutical phenomenology research design is most appropriate given the purpose of my research.
Procedure

After approval from the University of Windsor’s Research Ethics Board, a participant recruitment poster (see Appendix A) was posted on a Facebook page I created for my study, entitled “Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students,” which was my working title at the time. This page and the recruitment poster Facebook post was shared by my friends and family members using their personal Facebook accounts, but not my own. Interested parents and/or guardians contacted me via email to inquire about their child participating. My approach to participant recruitment allows potential participants to volunteer, or self-select, while reserving my choice as the researcher to take a purposeful sample of these participants to ensure homogeneity (Creswell, 2013). My initial response email (see Appendix B) thanked each parent or guardian for their interest, asked for confirmation that their child met the inclusion criteria, and provided a digital copy of the Letter of Information (see Appendix C). At the time of recruitment, a child who was said to have met the inclusion criteria must have: (a) been an Intermediate or Senior student (grades 7-12); (b) been enrolled in a publicly-funded elementary or secondary school in Southwestern Ontario; and (c) have had an IEP. Upon response, and successful confirmation of meeting the inclusion criteria, I began to complete the Participant Information form (see Appendix D) for my own records. My email reply to the parent or guardian (see Appendix E) provided a copy of the Consent and Assent Forms (see Appendices F and G, respectively), and began the interview booking process.

Differentiated interviews were conducted over the course of three weeks, with each interview conducted at the given participant’s home for roughly 30 minutes. Each participant received the same interview questions, but was given the opportunity to
respond through a different approach or task suited to their learning strengths and challenges. For example, two participants felt sharing their experiences through conversation to be most effective, while the third relied on both conversation and manipulatives, including Lego and playdough, to represent his ideas. In the first interview with each participant, I questioned them on their learning preferences and needs so that I could be more prepared to support them in subsequent interviews. This idea of differentiated interviews is based upon equity, a cornerstone of education in Ontario schools (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Additional questions were asked to seek clarity to participants’ responses; however, my initial list of interview questions (see Appendix H), which were each available aurally as well as visually as an added support to participants, follows:

- What is special education?
- What is your experience with special education and how do you view your role in it?
- How would you describe being a student receiving special education services?
- What feelings come to mind when you hear “special education”?
- What meaning does special education have in your life?

**Role of the Researcher**

In qualitative research, the researcher is a key instrument (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2013). Rather than through a questionnaire or survey, qualitative researchers collect data themselves through the examination of products, through the observation of participants, and through interviews (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2013). Any instrument used by the researcher consists of open-ended
questions, and is generally designed by the researcher themselves (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015). The researcher is also responsible for analyzing the collected data to find key themes (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; van Manen, 2016). In the case of my particular study, choosing IPA to analyze my collected data necessitated an active role for me as the researcher, as this was a dynamic process (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Thus, my role in my study is significant, involving collecting and analyzing data (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Ritchie et al., 2013; van Manen, 2016).

Creswell (2013) argues that qualitative researchers conduct qualitative research “… to empower individuals to share their stories, hear their voices, and minimize the power relationships that often exist between a researcher and the participants in a study” (p. 48). Ritchie et al. (2013) attest that while the researcher may encourage individuals to share their thoughts, feelings, views, and experiences, it is not the role of the researcher to act as an adviser or counsellor. Thus, I also view my role to be an encouraging questioner in my study (Creswell, 2013; Ritchie et al., 2013).

Since I have played an active role in my study, acting as the data collection instrument, it became necessary that I identify my values, assumptions, beliefs, and biases because these each impacted my study, especially in terms of interpretation (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015). Albeit limited, my experiences working with students with exceptional needs, as described earlier, entail that I have brought certain biases to this study (Creswell, 2014; Greig et al., 2012; Mertens, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). I strived for objectivity throughout the research process, although I am aware that my biases have impacted my understanding and my experiences throughout the study (Creswell, 2014; Greig et al., 2012; Mertens, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical issues may arise throughout a research study, and researchers are required to attempt to anticipate these issues (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012). Maxwell (2012) and Mertens (2015) assert that ethical issues must be addressed and guide the entire research process. The University of Windsor Research Ethics Board (REB) reviewed my study multiple times to ensure that this exploration would meet the expectations of the Tri-Council Policy Statement 2 (TCPS 2), a policy document created by three Canadian research agencies to guide Canadian researchers in conducting ethical research involving humans (Government of Canada, 2018). Accordingly, the REB required me to delineate all aspects of my study in an application protocol, including any dual roles that may exist, any risks to participants, the recruitment process and associated tools, the consent and assent processes, the methods used, participant withdrawal procedures, any compensation of participants, the storage of data, as well as subsequent use of data. I developed a Letter of Information to provide to interested parents or guardians who could contact me via email. This Letter (see Appendix C) provided the purpose of the study, the procedures, potential risks and discomforts, potential benefits, compensation, confidentiality, withdrawal, feedback of the results, subsequent use of data, the rights of the research participants, as well as contact information (Ritchie et al., 2013; Greig et al., 2012; Mertens, 2015; Creswell, 2013). The Consent to Participate in Research form (see Appendix F) provided the same information as the Letter of Information but required a signature from the parent or guardian. The Assent Form (see Appendix G) was developed for the participants themselves and is written in plain language, emphasizing that it is ultimately their decision whether they wish to participate
or not. This Assent Form was revisited with each participant at the beginning of each interview. Being conscientious of assent was crucial in this study as I was interviewing a vulnerable population (Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012). If at any time the participant said or showed that the process was uncomfortable or that they did not wish to continue, I respected that and allowed them to end their participation for that session, or withdraw entirely from the study, if necessary (Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). If a participant chose to withdraw entirely from the study their parent or guardian was informed, given the interviews took place in their home (Mertens, 2015). Upon completion of the final interview, each parent or guardian received a Post-Study Letter (see Appendix I) outlining the next steps of the study (i.e. data analysis, thesis writing, thesis defence etc.), describing when the results will be available on the REB website, how to access the results from the REB website, and thanking them for allowing their child to participate. The Post-Study Letter also thanked the participant for their participation and enclosed $50 Amazon gift card as compensation.

**Data Collection Procedures**

Data was collected over the course of three weeks. This involved a series of three weekly differentiated interviews with each of the participants, with each interview lasting up to approximately thirty minutes at the participant’s home. The interviews were held at a time and on a day convenient to the participant. These differentiated interviews catered to each participant’s unique strengths and challenges as an exceptional student receiving special education services. Thus, these differentiated interviews involved asking the participant the open-ended interview questions which they could answer through conversation, or through authentic documents or tasks. Resources were available for the
participants to use to share or explain their ideas. These resources included paper and writing utensils, play dough, Lego, and personal technological devices. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder and any artifacts created by the participants were captured using a digital camera for further analysis.

Additionally, I triangulated my data sources as a validation strategy (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Triangulation entails that the researcher collects data using diverse methods and data sources (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Ritchie et al. (2013) explain that triangulation provides security, in that the use of diverse methods and data sources provides a more thorough description of the phenomenon at hand. Without triangulation, findings may appear weak, rather than rich and robust (Greig et al., 2012). In the case of my study, triangulation involves not only differentiating interviews based on each participant’s strengths and challenges, but also providing each participant with various opportunities to share their perspective. That is, I attempt to triangulate across participants, by differentiating interviews, but also within participants, by providing multiple interview opportunities for each participant.

Setting

It is crucial for qualitative research to be conducted within the natural setting (van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012). The researcher is to interact with the participants in this natural setting over a period of time, which allows the researcher to build a relationship with each participant and to obtain rich data that provides a thick description of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Optimally, the natural setting for my study would have been in the
elementary or secondary school of each participant; however, seeking permission from a school board to conduct my study within one of their schools became a year-long struggle resulting in rejection from both school boards I approached. Given that the purpose of my study is to explore the perceptions of exceptional students, which I believe are held by these students and carried with them outside of school and into all other aspects of life, including their home life, I feel it was appropriate to interview my participants in their homes. Interviews were held in a private area of each participant’s home.

**Participants’ Demographics and Selection**

Phenomenological research studies typically involve small number of participants (Smith, 2004; Greig et al., 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Phenomenological research requires a homogenous group of individuals experiencing, or who have experienced, a common phenomenon; the common phenomenon to be explored within my study being the human experience of being an exceptional student, and accordingly, receiving special education services (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Accounting for attrition, I planned to recruit five to seven participants, as three was the minimum number of participants for the research to succeed (Greig et al., 2012; Creswell, 2013). A homogenous group of participants is necessary in phenomenology, as a diverse group of participants may not have common experiences, thus describing the overall essence may not be possible for the researcher (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; van Manen, 2016).

Recognizing that the diverse exceptional needs of my participants is what would make their experiences unique, I developed inclusion criteria that a child would have to meet in order to participate. At the time of recruitment, a child who was said to have met the inclusion criteria must have: (a) been an Intermediate or Senior student (grades 7-12);
(b) been enrolled in a publicly-funded elementary or secondary school in Southwestern Ontario; and (c) have had an IEP. I felt that these criteria would promote a relatively homogenous group, and although my approach to participant recruitment allows potential participants to volunteer, or self-select, I reserved my choice as the researcher to take a purposeful sample of these participants to ensure homogeneity (Creswell, 2013).

I opted to include only Intermediate and Senior students because I feel that students in this age group are better able and willing to share their perceptions given that most of these students will have experienced special education for a longer period of time than students in the Primary and Junior divisions. Due to my own personal time constraints and to reduce travel time and costs, I opted to include only students within one public school board in Southwestern Ontario. Finally, while I originally planned to include only students who had been formally identified as exceptional as per an IPRC, I considered that it may become difficult to confirm this with a parent or guardian and also that I could find myself turning away other individuals willing to participate who simply had an IEP but no formal identification. Adjusting the inclusion criteria and including only students who have been formally identified by an IPRC may be a worthwhile future study.

In reality, I was able to recruit three participants: Bryce, Graham, and Murray. Bryce, is a grade 11 student who has an IEP and has been formally identified with a learning disability. Graham is a grade seven student who also has an IEP but has not been formally identified as exceptional. Murray is a grade ten student who, too, has an IEP and, like Bryce, has been formally identified with a learning disability. Bryce, Graham, and Murray are all white males who belong to nuclear families and have attended or
currently attend the same public elementary school in Southwestern Ontario. Bryce and Murray are now both in high school, but attend two different high schools within the same school board as their former elementary school. I consider this group of participants to form a homogeneous group, making them appropriate choices as participants for this study (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

**Characteristics of Approach to Data Analysis**

As stated earlier, IPA stands for interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008). IPA is relatively young qualitative approach (Smith, 2011) and, in the case of my study, it is best understood as an approach to data analysis, rather than a prescribed method (Larkin et al., 2006). IPA is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative in nature, which aligns with its strong connections to hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith, 2011), as it “… aims to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). The researcher must make sense of how each participant makes sense of their lived experiences and perceptions, thus IPA is often considered a double hermeneutic (Smith, 2004).

A small number of participants are typically included in studies employing IPA (Smith, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Because the richness of the data will correspond with the importance of the lived experiences with the phenomenon to each participant (Smith, 2004), it is necessary that the researcher selects a homogenous, purposive sample of participants who consider the phenomenon significant in their lives (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Using a flexible data collection instrument (Smith & Osborn, 2008), such as a semi-structured interview (Smith, 2011), the researcher can then begin collecting data
from the participants, with the option of using their professional expertise to enhance the process (Smith, 2004). The semi-structured interviews must be transcribed verbatim (Smith, 2011) before the researcher can begin to analyze the data. Analyzing data through IPA involves the researcher asking themselves “… ‘What does this mean for this person, in this context?’…” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 117). In other words, the interpretative aspect of IPA puts the claims of each participant into context, given their unique positionality (Larkin et al., 2006). It follows that IPA can result in powerful research (Larkin et al., 2006).

**Challenges.** IPA, as an approach to data analysis, is not without challenges. One major challenge is that IPA is a relatively young approach and there remains much debate over its characteristics (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 105), including the misconception that IPA is simply descriptive (Smith, 1996; Larkin et al., 2006). For example, many IPA studies simply summarize the concerns of participants, because it seems sufficient enough to simply collect and represent voice not normally heard (Larkin et al., 2006). I have addressed this challenge of debate over the characteristics of IPA in my study by clearly defining my understanding of IPA, as above, and strictly adhering to this definition. Thus, I have abstained from simply summarizing, and instead, considered each participant as a “person-in-context” while acknowledging that my observations were made in a “meaningful world” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 108). This leads to the other major challenge of IPA as an approach to data analysis. IPA is closely linked to the hermeneutic branch of phenomenology in that it entails that the research engages with and interprets the collected data (Smith, 2011). This, in itself, is a challenge because, as Smith eloquently explains, “… experience cannot be plucked straightforwardly from the heads
of participants…” (Smith, 2011, p. 10). I addressed this challenge through my carefully
designed interview schedule and my differentiated interviews. My series of three
differentiated interviews allowed me to develop a positive rapport with each participant,
affording me the luxury of becoming better aware of their positionality. The
differentiated interviews were designed in congruence with each participant’s strengths
and challenges, thus, giving each participant an authentic opportunity to share their ideas
with me, as the researcher. I consider myself well-equipped to engage with and interpret
my collected data as I have become familiar with my participants’ cultural values, beliefs,
experiences, and social positions (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). While both the
misconceptions associated with IPA and the interpretative aspect of IPA are valid
challenges, I believe that the thoughtful design of my study addresses them.

Rationale for Approach to Data Analysis

I chose to adopt IPA as my approach to data analysis in my study. IPA seeks “…
to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how
they are making sense of their personal and social world” (Smith & Osborn, 2008, p. 55).
It also requires the researcher to make sense of how the participants are making sense of
their experiences (Smith, 2004). In my study, my participants are all experiencing the
same phenomenon: the human experience of being an exceptional student, and
accordingly, receiving special education services. IPA is an approach to data analysis
which allows me to describe the perceptions of my participants, while also making sense
of the meaning they ascribe to their experiences as exceptional students (Larkin et al.,
2006). Given that the purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore
the perceptions of exceptional students receiving special education services, I believe IPA to be a suitable choice for an approach to data analysis.

Additionally, IPA has been described as flexible, accessible, and applicable (Larkin et al., 2006), all of which are important qualities to me, as a beginning researcher. The flexibility of IPA is particularly important to my study, as this allows for me to use my professional knowledge of and experience with teaching special education throughout my differentiated interviews (Smith, 2004). The flexibility which allows for me to use my professional understanding of special education makes IPA accessible to me, because I do not have any field experience with research. The flexibility of IPA also corresponds with my awareness and acceptance of the unique strengths and challenges of my participants, making it applicable to my research. Consequently, I am confident that these characteristics of IPA as an approach to data analysis, combined with the capacity of IPA, have resulted in a powerful research study (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2008; Smith, 2004).

**Data Analysis Procedures**

Data collection in qualitative research typically consists of gathering data in a variety of forms, including through interviews, observations, documents, and digital representations (Creswell, 2014; van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012). The data must next be transcribed, which when done by the researcher themselves, allows the researcher to connect with the data in a rigorous way and to become familiar with it (Mertens, 2015). This data is then reviewed by the researcher, who must make sense of it all (Creswell, 2014; van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012). The researcher
must then organize it by category or theme, prior to analyzing it recursively through both inductive and deductive processes (Creswell, 2014; van Manen, 2016; Mertens, 2015).

My study reflects each of these elements of qualitative research. As described earlier, the diversity of my data sources corresponds with the diversity in the strengths and challenges of my participants. I aimed to design differentiated data sources for each participant, to ensure that each source provided the participant with an authentic opportunity to share their experiences with me during their differentiated interview (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Greig et al., 2012; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). The inductive process entails that I had to try to understand my collected data from the bottom up, without drawing upon my previous understanding of the phenomenon of study (Mertens, 2015; Creswell, 2014). This process involves reducing the data into themes by coding or labelling excerpts that fit together conceptually (Mertens, 2015; Creswell, 2014). In contrast, the deductive process entails that I had to check if my themes were well-supported by the data or if further information was needed (Mertens, 2015; Creswell, 2014). As this is a phenomenology, the ultimate goal of this data analysis is to summarize what the individuals have experienced with the phenomenon, and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). I used these two elements collectively to describe the essence of the common phenomenon for the participating individuals (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). Describing the essence of the phenomenon is the first aim of approaching qualitative data analysis through IPA (Larkin et al., 2006).

Larkin et al. (2006) explain that “[the] second aim of the IPA perspective is to develop a more overtly interpretative analysis, which positions the initial ‘description’ in
relation to a wider social, cultural, and perhaps even theoretical, context” (p. 104). This entails considering the meaning behind the claims of participants given the context at hand (Larkin et al., 2006). For this portion of the data analysis, I was “interested in how [my participants] understand and make sense of their experiences in terms of their relatedness to, and their engagement with, [the] phenomena” (Larkin et al., 2006). That is, I was interested in how each of my participants makes sense of their experiences as an exceptional student, and accordingly, receiving special education services. The specific steps I took in completing this analysis were guided by Smith and Osborn (2008), and are outlined in further detail in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4
DATA ANALYSIS

The purpose of this hermeneutical phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions of exceptional students receiving special education services in the Ontario public education system in Southwestern Ontario. At this stage in the research, I use the term ‘exceptional student’ to refer to any student in grades K-12 who accesses the Ontario curriculum via an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The student need not be formally identified as an exceptional pupil by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to fit this definition of the term ‘exceptional student’ (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016). In the case of this study, two participants, Bryce (grade 11 student) and Murray (grade ten student), have been formally identified as exceptional pupils, both with learning disabilities, while Graham (grade seven student) has not been formally identified as exceptional; all three access the Ontario curriculum via an IEP. Bryce, Graham, and Murray are three white males, each belong to a nuclear family, and all three have attended or currently attend the same elementary school in Southwestern Ontario. I consider this group of participants to represent a homogeneous group, making them appropriate choices for this study (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

Data was collected via a series of three weekly differentiated interviews with each of the participants. Participants were given the opportunity to respond to the open-ended interview questions through conversation, or through authentic documents or tasks, thus catering to each participant’s unique strengths and challenges as an exceptional student receiving special education services. These semi-structured interviews were recorded
using a digital audio recorder and any artifacts created by the participants were captured using a digital camera for further analysis. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim, and all quotes presented here are taken from this raw data.

I have chosen to adopt IPA, interpretative phenomenological analysis, as my approach to data analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2008; Larkin et al., 2006). IPA is idiographic, inductive, and interrogative in nature, which aligns with its strong connections to hermeneutic phenomenology (Smith, 2011), as it “… aims to explore in detail participants’ personal lived experience and how participants make sense of that personal experience” (Smith, 2004, p. 40). In analyzing my collected data, I was required to make sense of how each of my three participants makes sense of their lived experiences with and perceptions of being an exceptional student receiving special education services, putting the claims of each participant into context (Smith, 2004; Larkin et al., 2006). Guided by a step-by-step approach outlined by Smith and Osborn (2008), I created a chart for each participant’s transcript (see Appendix J), which provided a left-hand column for initial annotations while reading and rereading each transcript, and a right-hand column for emerging themes afterwards. I then tried to make sense of these themes, finding some overlap between themes while others emerged as subordinate themes (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Next, I created a graphic organizer which listed each subordinate theme, supported with a list of corresponding themes and key words as identifiers (Smith & Osborn, 2008). I used these subordinate themes as a starting point for my analysis of both subsequent cases, while also remaining conscientious of similarities and differences across cases (Smith & Osborn, 2008).
Finally, I created a master graphic organizer of themes, prioritizing data based both on richness and prevalence (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

The following themes emerged from the data: (1) Help, (2) Difference, (3) Communication, and (4) Growth. The remainder of this chapter will provide textual evidence from the raw data to support each of the four themes, along with my interpretations.

Theme 1: Help

Bryce. Throughout the series of weekly interviews, Bryce discussed the Dell laptop he was provided as part of a special education allowance. Although such devices are purchased to help exceptional students access the curriculum, Bryce has not found his experience with his laptop to be overly helpful, and so, he rarely uses it. Bryce received his laptop when he attended grade school:

And then I brought it over to (my high school). I don’t really use it because they do have Chromebooks and that’s technology’s smaller. I don’t like the huge bulkiness that the computer has. Ya, but when I’m, like, for tech class, um, when I have to, like, print something off I just go in the resource room just print it off that off that computer.

He has found it to be a nuisance due to the outdated device’s size and performance:

It’s real it’s a lot more slower than the Chromebooks. That’s another reason that I don’t use it that often. And it’s also running like Windows 7. Which is, like, the older version. Windows 10 is a lot better. For me at least. It just runs faster, in my opinion.
Bryce compares his device to the Chromebooks available at his high school, which he considers to be of greater value in supporting his learning:

Like, I don’t really know what other, like, if the kid maybe got a Chromebook or something something more smaller and easier to use and more, like, you can transport it easier more easy, um, that’d be a plus cause a lot more kids would bring them home and use them for, like, school or whatever.

Despite rarely using the device to support his learning, Bryce was required to use it while writing the Ontario Secondary School Literacy Test. He was distracted by the lacking ergonomics of the device and the software used to type his responses, commenting:

That was really, like, distracting cause that’s, like, I couldn’t press a button. It’d take forever. And I left like a couple spaces open which makes me have to do it again. I got, like, 295 but you need 300. But, um, this year I have I’m using the same thing but we did use Kurzweil which is, like, I didn’t like at all. But this year we’re using, like, a Google Read and Write.

Bryce felt unprepared to use his device for this testing, and felt it was a disservice having to use it to write the test, placing some blame on the device for his failure:

Mhm. Ya, cause, um, I don’t know. Um, there’s just so many buttons it’s like, “What is this?” And me rarely using the computer didn’t help me out at all so it actually like wasted my time and I could’ve written it and I could’ve gotten done earlier.

Bryce considers his device, which was intended to help him, to be unhelpful.
Bryce has also been accommodated over his years as an exceptional student by being provided with access to a resource teacher in what is referred to as a ‘resource room’, or as he sometimes calls it, “the rec room”. Bryce has found that:

… they sometimes don’t have the insight or the questions or the answers to the questions so, like, it’s like a double-edged sword where, like, you go over to the rec room, you ask for the help but they don’t help you, and then you’re back to square run. And then you lose time in the long run so… Like, it’s they’re not like geniuses or anything, so I don’t blame them, so… Like, most of the English questions they can ask, most of the math and science they… It’s like regular stuff but when it comes to tech, not a lot of people, I’ve only been down there once or twice for tech, they don’t really know what to answer with or ask, or reword, a lot. Also, rewording’s really helpful. That they’re really good at.

Perhaps because this accommodation is unreliable, in combination with the social impact of utilizing it, Bryce tends to avoid going to the resource room:

During class time kinda cause none of my friends are there or none of my friends in my grade my class are there, so if it’s a test I’m not talking to them, so I just go there. It’s not like I want to go there during class time all the time cause it’s usually just, like, a little lesson, I guess, and then we just do the work and that’s kinda easy, I guess, from there, so, um…

Bryce also discusses how, in high school, his access to the resource room is dependent on his teacher that period. Having to be granted permission to leave to the resource room may also deter Bryce from accessing the resource room more frequently:
A lot of teachers are, like, really stingy on letting kids go cause a lot of people just skip. That’s they ask, like, go for a walk or whatever, to go to the washroom, and they don’t come back. That occasionally, like, I ask for the to go to, like, the resource room or, like, there’s 10 minutes left over class there’s, like, an x amount of minutes left and they’re like, “You can stay here,” so… And then I just ask for them to help and they usually help me, but ya.

While Bryce does feel his teachers are able to help him, he alludes to feeling offended that his asking to seek help is seen as a cover for leaving class early.

An additional accommodation to Bryce as an exceptional student has been extra time to complete assessments, including both tests and exams in high school. This sometimes has meant that Bryce must stay in during a break to complete the task, as he is not normally granted additional class time. Sometimes, this accommodation is not provided: “Ya, ya, but, um, coming end of semester they don’t do that cause it’s just you need marks. It just slows things down and everything.” Bryce has been made to feel that requiring help is inconvenient to his teachers. Also, accepting this help of extra time can also become a disservice, setting him up to fall behind in the next unit of study on the rare occasion that he is provided with additional class time to complete a task:

I don’t always need extra time but the times I do need that I usually get it. So, it’s not, like, or they just be, like, they they start another subject. That’s another thing, you don’t want to go on to another subject, which is, like, um, most of the time it’s, like, a review of the last subject from last year which you don’t really want to miss just or depending on what you struggle with you don’t want to miss, but most the time you just go to the rec room and you’re just, like, they’re just, like,
“Okay, you can finish it here,” or there’re just some teachers that just, like, “If you don’t have it done, just hand in what you have in,” and that also happens sometimes.

Again, this accommodation is meant to help Bryce, but its delivery seems to portray it as unhelpful in Bryce’s eyes.

Bryce’s perceptions of his received accommodations are filled with mixed emotions. He feels “there are more positives than negatives,” explaining how:

Like it’s just been good to have, I guess, for, like, honestly benefit from people that don’t have it. Just the computer especially in, like, the when the board didn’t buy any of the Chromebooks, I really that was really good but since the Chromebooks are a thing now, like, it’s just I guess faster, ya, they are a bit faster, they’re easier to use, but, um…

Here Bryce begins to allude to how the novelty of his accommodations has begun to wear off, becoming less helpful as better resources are available outside of special education, namely the school’s recent purchase of Chromebooks. Accordingly, Bryce perceives the help provided by an IEP to become redundant over time:

But I see it probably, like, in a couple more years, I don’t really see any IEP IEPs needed, so it kinda seems like a lack-lustre thing needed right now, I guess… But ya. [coughing]

**Graham.** Similiarly, Graham received an iPad as a piece of assistive technology to help him access the curriculum. Graham speaks of the advantages of using his iPad:

It like it helps me because when we would have to do something writing, um, my teacher would say, “You can do this on an iPad. Type it, we’ll print it out, and
we’ll put it on a piece of paper,” and that helped me a lot because, if it didn’t, no one could read my writing. That’s that’s special education to me. Help helping you doing what you need to do. And also, getting work done.

Graham has access to a variety of apps on his iPad that he perceives as beneficial:

Like, I have some special math apps on my iPad that no one else has to help me with my math, so that works, that helps, and helps my education and helps me not distract other people around me.

Additionally, Graham has found his iPad helpful in supporting his developing organizational skills, as he is able to access the Google Classroom platform more easily and is notified in real-time of any announcements and assignments posted by his teachers:

Yes, grade seven, now I can have a calculator and Classroom they post, um, well, you know, they post stuff on Classroom and so they, like, if I ever, if I’m ever not at school, I can keep up with my schoolwork because of Classroom, although sometimes I don’t do that, because I’m sick and stuff and then the expectations are I have to keep up, but when you’re not feeling good you don’t really want to do schoolwork.

Graham perceives his experience with using his iPad as a support as monumental:

“Knowing that I could just type it and they’ll print it out for me, it helps me a lot, and receiving it, it’s like one of the best things that’s happened to me during at school.”

Graham also has negative perceptions of his experience with using his iPad, noting that typing can sometimes slow down his thought process, while also expressing
that some tasks are made more difficult by using his iPad to complete them, so for some units of study he opts not to use it:

Well, I think just drawing on the iPad is generally harder than drawing on paper so, like, the volume unit, that it would have sucked because I would have had to put and then and then and then like that.

Mainly, however, these negative perceptions stem from his device aging. Graham explains:

Ya, um, my iPad’s so old, uh, uh, I have this joke where I say, “My iPad’s so old, I betcha dinosaurs know how to operate it.” And you you’d, like, type and type and type and you wait five minutes for the whole thing to pop up and then you hold the button, it will copy your whole thing and just delete it on you. And one time that took me ten times and then I don’t get work turned in.

Graham, who has become well-accustomed to providing technology support to his peers after becoming highly familiar with his own iPad over the years, emphasizes how his iPad is becoming obsolete, as it can no longer receive software updates or support newer apps:

Sometimes, ya, like, ya, some kids come up to me and ask, “What does this app do? How can I get it?” So, like, I tell them, “Go into your App Catalogue,” I tell them. They’re like, “Now what do I do?” I say, “I don’t know, I don’t have that. I can’t get it, my iPad’s too old,” cause since grade four the expected life year is three years.

Graham regularly faces difficulties in the classroom with submitting digital tasks via Google Classroom. He is painfully familiar with the process of troubleshooting:
I do it again. It takes, like, 30 seconds and then I go off, I double tap, swipe it up, double tap. When I double tap, I wait 10 seconds, slide it up, hold it, power off, and, um, because it’s so old, it’s kind of old, it takes it longer to power back up, so then it’s another, then it wasted... Sometimes, I don’t turn it in because of that.

Graham, who struggles with organization, often forgets to attempt to submit these tasks later and faces academic penalty in return. He feels his struggles are not heard as he reiterates his thoughts on the matter throughout our series of interviews:

Um, I think it’s because just age on it and everything, like, because they don’t want to give me a new one because they think they don’t seem to think that anything’s wrong but really there is and they just don’t notice it and it bugs me. So, like some of it, sometimes I can’t hand in my work, it’s that bad, and I have to close out the app and shut my iPad down. It’s just…

Access to his iPad is becoming increasingly less helpful for Graham.

As an additional accommodation to Graham, he has been granted access to a resource teacher and scribing at times. In the past, Graham would stay in the regular classroom for a lesson and then complete his practice work in the resource room:

I came down, like, some days I could go down there and I did do that. But she’d explain it, stuff like that and then I’d ask if I could go down to (the resource teacher’s room) and, if she’d let me, I would then if she had something else then I’d come down.

Graham also received this support during the Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) testing:
Since I couldn’t write very well for my, um, EQAO, I had somebody help me with that and I got down to go down to (the resource teacher’s) room and then split up and go to a different room and then I’d have someone writing for me. He was thankful for this accommodation as he believed hearing the questions read to him was helpful. Recently, however, Graham has lost access to the resource teacher and the resource room. With the exception of speaking to the resource teacher about his iPad troubles, Graham has not been to the resource room for additional help this school year. Having had this accommodation in the past, Graham believes it would be a benefit to receive this help again:

Um, it would be a lot helpful cause then I can I can go down to her room, get it taught a different way cause there’s one certain way apparently, but my way, I like it differently. I like to tackle the easiest, the medium, and then the hardest, cause you go from easy and then you go medium, which is harder, and you go hardest, and then, but you usually do hard, medium, and then easy. So…

His disappointment in this change is clear: “Well, knowing that they used to be able to go it I thought, ‘Oh, grade seven, I can just go, that would be helpful,’ and now, nope. Sucks.”

Graham is filled with mixed emotions in regards to how he has been accommodated, or helped, in his experience with special education. On one hand, Graham views his accommodations as expediters, which help with task completion and simply making tasks more attainable:
… and I think it’s, like, it’s gives you time and stuff to focus on, like, stuff you like. Like, if you like riding a bike you can finish your work and then go and do stuff that you want, but some sometimes you walk along and then I forget.

Graham explains further:

Um, it pretty much helps you with all the stuff that you, on a day to day basis, you can’t do by yourself or with… So, like, it helps you on a day to day basis which I find is much more helpful than writing on a piece of paper. Using your iPad sometimes and using it all the time is much more efficient for me because I don’t have to just type it, I I mean write it, I can type it and they can print it off for me.

He has adapted well to using his iPad as a learning resource:

… it’s just so normal. It’s just so normal for me to walk into the classroom without my binder and paper. Just have, uh, my two iPads and headphones, in case we’re doing something with listening, and a charger. It’s just so normal. It’s so easy to remember.

On the other hand, Graham views his accommodations as hindrances that are hard to ignore:

And I guess there’s a lot more negative than positive. I you think more about the negative than the positive… The negative stick sticks you more. Like glue and paper? Ya, they stick really well together. Glue sticks well to anything, we all know that. Say glue’s the negative and then that water’s the positive; some water will stuck to the glue, but most of it will just slide right off.

This analogy vividly reflects Graham’s perceptions of his aging iPad and limited access to his resource teacher, as he repeatedly emphasizes his charged emotions regarding both,
and over the course of the interviews, he finds himself struggling more and more to find benefits, or helpfulness, in his accommodations.

**Murray.** Throughout our series of interviews together, Murray provides a variety of ways he has been accommodated, and thus helped, throughout his years as an exceptional student, beginning in grade one:

Um, I believe it was grade one. I think it was, like, the start for for that because, um, like, I had problems, like, hearing and stuff like that before with, um, like knowing what the teacher was saying so they got a, like, a headset in and, like, um, like, an amplifier so they can talk through the mic and it was louder so I could hear it better. And I think then I got tested again in grade four, I think, and it was then it was just, like, I got more accommodations and stuff like that with, you know, getting extra time and, ya, and going to resource and stuff like that. Ya.

The additional accommodations Murray has received include extra time, access to a resource teacher and a resource room, as well as access to computers. Murray views these resources as helpful in his learning journey, and in regards to the resource teacher and resource room, believes that he could better use this accommodation to benefit himself at times. Murray has also discovered how to make the most out of this accommodation:

Um, most of the times, ya, because, like, I just knew that it was just a quiet place just to get work done and, like, it was helpful, so at most times, ya. And then there was sometimes which, like, I just, like, didn’t want to go because, you know, like some some assignments maybe were, like, so small, like, that I thought it wasn’t really worth the trouble just going over from one room to the other just to do something that will just take me a few minutes so you know.
Despite viewing his accommodations as helpful when received, Murray has perceived his access to these resources as fluctuating, and thus their helpfulness has become dependent on whether or not he has access to them. Murray explains:

Um, like, I mean it’s been, like, off and on, uh, with, like, teachers. Like, some teachers are good at accommodating, like, good with accommodating and, um, like, um, you know, providing more resources or, like, um, just, like, overall, like, knowing and, like, saying that, you know, reminding that you that you can always go to, like, the resource room to get more help and stuff like that, or for extra time, you know, that’s ya and ya…

In grade school, Murray felt that his access to certain accommodations, such as going to the resource room for support from the resource teacher, was gated by his classroom teacher; he spoke of having to remind some teachers of what accommodations were available to help him as an exceptional student. He has found that his access to accommodations has been more consistent in high school, while the accommodations themselves have not changed:

I’d maybe just have to say high school was just more helpful with, like, getting resources and the resource room and stuff like that and you know, um, extra time and stuff like that and and ya, that’s ya… Um, but ya, I don’t ya, no, I don’t don’t really see anything different so…

At times, Murray has felt that his accommodations, particularly when received within the resource room, were not beneficial to his learning:

I mean, cause usually you go to resource room for a quieter space and you get help there and, you know, extra time and stuff like that and, like, I mean
sometimes it won’t be quiet and, like, you will get extra time but it’s just kinda
doesn’t help, like, you know, not all teachers are the same with, you know, what
they might be teaching in. They don’t won’t always be the best. Um, so, ya…

Murray further explains:

… but I just want to point out, like, um, especially, uh, in grade seven, while, uh, I
had this, um, teacher for math and the, um, they wouldn’t, um, like, they would
send me to resource and, you know, um, just, like, the, you know, helpers and
people there helping with stuff at the resource room wouldn’t really know, you
know, what to do and stuff like that and in the, like, would question, “How do you
do this?” and stuff like that, so, ya…

In grade school, Murray felt hindered by these instances:

Uh, at times, I just found, like, resource room useless and and like… And, like, it
just made me think, like, like, like, it’s just, like, I kind of shut down and I just
didn’t want to do work cause I just… Sometimes all these things were useless or
just not much of help so… And I didn’t know what to do at the time so…

In high school, Murray has found the resource environment more “organized” and
“progressive”, but he still finds himself in similar situations when seeking help there with
some of his specialized courses:

Um, like, I mean it’s it’s been pretty good in the past but has been times where,
um, you know, the teachers would send me down there or I would I would choose
to go down there as well and, um, to the, uh, resource room and, um, uh,
sometimes the sometimes the helpers there wouldn’t really know how to help with
certain, you know, work and stuff like that and that’s still kinda present these
days, especially with, like, computer class I took, like, last semester. And, um, they didn’t really how to help with that so, um, and so it can be, you know, not always the best but, you know, and, um, so, and ya, that’s that’s pretty much it. Sometimes can it can be hit or miss with that. It can sometimes they can be helpful but other times, you know, for certain things, it’s just not really the best so ya…

Ultimately, however, Murray views his experience with special education as a beneficial one. He felt that he has received accommodations that have helped him achieve success:

Um, I think, like, just as I said before, like, you just basically just means that it’s just you’re getting extra help for things that you’re not necessarily have strengths on. So, um, ya, you just you’re just getting extra help and, you know, you’re getting, you know, the needs that, you know, that stuff that you need in order to be successful, so… I think that’s that’s what it means to me.

Murray further expresses his perception of his received accommodations as beneficial by claiming that these resources would have further helped him had he received them sooner:

Okay. Well, um, I think it went, like, good at the times when I, like, got tested and, like, start receiving the extra help and I think, like, like, beforehand, like, it would’ve probably made it easier if I had, like, would have had it back then, like grade, like, one, two, three.
**Theme 2: Difference**

**Bryce.** Bryce’s understanding of special education is heavily laden with the notion of difference. He suggests that others do not share his perspective, but he understands himself as a unique individual with specific learning needs that can be met through special education:

But, um, just people painted a bad picture over special education and what I just hear from it. I just think, like, people, learn different… Like, I learn different from everyone. Everyone has their different styles for learning. That’s why I think that I have some some people have a harder time to learn if they’re, like, and everything which is, like, fine and everything cause obviously it’s working fine for me, so… I’m passing, you know…

Bryce also alludes to receiving differentiated instruction, where his learning needs are met through individualized teaching strategies which take into account his strengths as a learner:

Think just… Special education’s just people that have difficulties that need the main, like, strategized learning, I guess. You usually, like, in English or whatever they have, like, a huge lecture and then they write a note down one for, like, one paragraph. Uh, I think for special education it’s more or less like you need different ways of learn via writing it down when you’re hearing it, so taking notes or having a conversation with your teacher so you get more understanding which you when you don’t get what she’s talking about you talk it to her which is the communication part and…
The notion of difference is also apparent in Bryce’s frequent comparison of himself to others. This comparison began in grade school:

Like, I would always look at my friends and be, like, “I’m the only one going to this room. Like, why should I be going here?” And that’s another thing, I think kids should be taught or, like, said or, like, their teacher should say, “If you need to go to this room, it’s fine.”

This excerpt suggests that Bryce was feeling like an outsider and would have benefited from some reassurance that his unique learning needs were both valid and accepted in his learning community. In high school, Bryce continues to search for understanding by making comparisons between himself and others:

Um, the main thing that I just really appreciate from the IEP is more time for tests. Cause that’s really, like, even my literacy test, like, I probably used, I didn’t use all of it which was my downfall cause, um, one of the guidance teacher’s like, “You need to use more time,” cause I didn’t. I was just in a rush cause I just heard everyone leave and I was like, “Oh God.” I had, like, two, like, I had a half I had the first booklet done and be, like, halfway through the second. I don’t know how many booklets there are, I forget. But I would just, like, freak out: “I’m supposed to be done this part now.”

Bryce, who takes applied courses, also perceives a division between himself and his friends in the academic stream, even those who also have an IEP:

Cause they’re, like, some of the kids are in academic so that’s the only reason they just get, um, the extra time. I don’t know if they ask you if you’re doing applied or whatever so they know just, like… If you’re more smarter, I guess
you’re in the academic. Applied is easier, so if you’re doing something harder then you don’t you shouldn’t really have the laptop or you should learn how to not have it, I guess. I guess, but…

It is evident that Bryce feels lesser for taking courses in the applied stream, despite thriving in his technology and construction courses:

I don’t think I’m, like, dumb. I think I’m smart for an applied kid. Like, I get my average is, like, a 70 or, like, I don’t really put a whole lot of effort in, if I’m going to be honest.

This feeling is being carried outside of the school environment and into Bryce’s perception of his future opportunities as an adult in society:

Um, but, like, just a lot of office jobs and a lot more there’re a lot more job potentials in academic. Like, obviously if you’re doing applied and you wanna be a doctor, like, there’s a reason why they’re doing academic… They’re harder. On a more positive note, Bryce feels that his identification as an exceptional student has granted him access to accommodations that others do not have access to:

Like, the good thing is, like, you get the stuff that some people don’t get. Like computers, it’s a big one. Like like, the computer no one, not a lot of people, have, I guess. In grade nine, like, every class didn’t and they still don’t, you have to, like, rent them out but you can, like, occasionally go down to, like, the computer lab or in grade school to the library and now and write the stuff, but in the earlier grades, that was a lot, that’s a big factor of having an IEP in really benefited. But I think now that, like, every class er near every class, has an iPad or, um, Chromebook.
A downside to this assistive technology, however, is that the technology is aging, making it seem inconvenient to transport in comparison to newer, lighter, and sleeker technologies, and again making Bryce feel different in a negative way:

I think if they were to just give the same computers everyone has, there wouldn’t be a problem. But…

Bryce’s experience with special education has been riddled with labelling and bullying, making Bryce less inclined to exercise his use of the accommodations he is entitled to as an exceptional student for fear of being seen as different:

Um, I think the IEP is, um… A lot of people underuse it, in my opinion, or they don’t tell, like, their teachers that they don’t have it cause they’re embarrassed, um, cause they’re just that one kid that has an IEP. Um, that’s…

Beginning in grade school, Bryce faced other students making him feel inferior for requiring accommodations, such as access to the resource room:

Mhm. Um, ya, like, when I think of special education I think, like, um, just, like, in the younger age when you hear special education you just hear, like, “This kid’s dumb,” or “This kid’s like autism,” or something like that, but, um, that’s, like, a lot of the kids especially in grade seven and eight range they kinda get you at that cause if you’re going down to like the rec room they’re just gonna to chirp you for that, like, “Oh, you’re stupid,” or whatever. Like, honestly, like, I just ignored it. I just kids being kids and everything but um…

Now in high school, Bryce perceives such comments as “chirping” rather than bullying, but acknowledges that he is not being treated with the respect or dignity he deserves:
Um, sometimes, like, my friends throws chirps around, or past friends, cause I’m not really… different group, I guess that I hang out with now, they’d say like, “You, go get your retard computer,” or something like…

Fear of being labelled or “judged differently” has led Bryce to remain quiet about his needs as an exceptional student, as well as the needs of others, not even knowing if his new friends in high school have an IEP or not:

… but I’m not too sure if he ever got asked for an IEP but I’m pretty sure he doesn’t have one cause he doesn’t get asked for extra time or anything or doesn’t have a computer so…

This feeling of other is also apparent in Bryce’s understanding of his experiences with the identification process:

At the time cause I was, like, I didn’t know what was going on, I didn’t really think anything of it but, like, getting older I just really, like, it kinda felt like I was, like, a their, like, like, I was, like, in a, like, test field or something or, like, I don’t know how to describe it. I wouldn’t do it again. I wouldn’t take my kids there cause I didn’t… Thinking back at that, I didn’t really like it at all that much, cause I don’t know…

Bryce found this experience difficult to put into words but, after further reflection, clarifies by explaining:

Kinda felt like they’re, like, were, like, test subject or, like, a kinda that kinda thing, like, not, like, an animal but seemed like they kinda just made it feel like we’re different and not, like, the best way, I guess… But I don’t know. I don’t
really care now. I really didn’t care in general but just thinking about it thinking it over, I guess…

Having realized his feelings on this experience, Bryce began to question why he was put through the testing at all: “Unless my parents just wanted to know and I wasn’t, like, I don’t know…” Here Bryce seemed to suggest that he viewed the testing as his parents’ way of checking that there was not something wrong with him.

**Graham.** Graham also understands special education as way of addressing diversity in learning:

Um, special education to me is people who, um, know how to, uh, learn this they learn in different ways and they can learn in the same ways and they can learn in the same ways they just, like, I get distracted easily, so other people might get distracted easily, or a whole bunch of different things people could do.

Graham seems to suggest that his experience has involved recognizing these differences in order to better develop understanding of the learning process itself, as well as of a particular concept:

Just you learn in a different way than everyone else. Like, somebody learns this way, somebody learns that way, eventually one person’s, the person that learns a different way, is going to try to fold into the other person’s way and then they’ll get they’ll meet in the middle and think of another way. Like, that happens to everybody. But sometimes, like, special education, like, teacher wants to learn another way, students will just follow that, sometimes there’s always one student that just stays still and doesn’t follow the teacher because, uh, they wanna do something else and they, like, so they learn, um, in their head more. Most people
can’t do do that, some people just draw and use the mental math. I like to use blocks and drawing blocks because they that’s [yawning] the most helpful thing to me.

Graham’s tone here suggests he views diversity in learning as something to celebrate, saying: “I thought my learning skills like everyone else’s but it’s not. No way. No one learns the same!”

In other instances, however, Graham compares himself to his peers in a negative manner, saying that he “can’t write as well as some kids” and how he has received support in math because he “wasn’t doing good in the math that we were keeping people were keeping up with.” Graham understands such differences from his peers to be the basis for his needing special education services:

Like, they gave me an iPad and then they told me, because I had an IEP and stuff, so I think would be I did know before I got my iPad they sent a thing that home because they said, um, uh, “We’ve noticed that (Graham’s) writing isn’t as good as the other kids and stuff so we’re gonna give him an iPad and he can type everything out and do more things on that,” then, um, and they, um or than the paper and stuff.

It follows that Graham’s initial understanding of special education aligns with the deficit model: “Um, when I first got it I thought it was something horrible, like, uh, there’s something wrong with me and I couldn’t write and stuff, but turns out it there wasn’t.”

In contrast to his earlier perceptions, Graham now views himself as advantaged over his peers in a variety of ways, beginning with when he received his assistive technology iPad: “… other kids were kinda jealous cause we got iPads from the school
and they didn’t, so the teachers told them, ‘You’ll get one in grade seven and grade eight. You’re fine, don’t worry.’” Graham emphasizes enjoying his peers being jealous of him, explaining: “Cause being jealous and knowing people are is the best.” Graham believes that his experience with his iPad has made him better equipped to troubleshoot issues on the device in comparison to his peers, who have only recently received iPads through a technology-enriched learning plan implemented by their school board. Graham believes that he has access to the “paid version, like the better version” of certain apps. Finally, Graham also views his access to the resource room as an advantage over his peers, explaining that his peers do not enjoy working in the regular classroom environment, and further, by saying: “Um, I can get help on my stuff when nobody else can’t.”

Murray. Murray’s understanding of special education also alludes to this notion of difference. Murray explains:

Um, well, I think from my view, special education is where people need more accommodations than usual in order to get by with doing work and like completing tasks and stuff like that, so that’s what I think.

Murray’s explanation suggests difference by his use of the word ‘more’. This idea of additional support, or “more accommodations”, to facilitate learning sets one apart from their peers. Murray further explains:

Um… Um, I think at first, when you, like, the feelings that you hear the feelings that you think or come to mind when you hear “special education” for, like, the first time, you sometimes think, like, uh, there must be something wrong with that person or something like that and, you know, that or something like that, like, you know, like, they’re not something’s not right with them or something, so… Um,
at first, but, you know, then when you, like, just get used to it and, like, you know that it’s just you’re getting extra help and stuff like that and accommodations for for certain things that you may have that you may have weaknesses on. Then, um, like, it it’s not bad at all when you hear “special special education.” So, ya…

Again, Murray reiterates that his understanding of special education is that one requires additional support compared to the average student.

This notion of difference also appears when Murray discusses his fears throughout his experiences with special education:

Um, I think I was just mainly afraid of, you know, having to speak up and stuff like that, and thinking that, you know, um, you know, maybe other kids might say something like, “Hey, why does that kid get to, you know, go someplace quiet?” or something like that, so I think that can be one of the parts that go into it, um…

Murray expresses his concern for being noticed as different by his peers in grade school, and while he has never found his peers to comment on his accommodations, it appears that Murray feels these differences are noticed:

Um, I don’t think really any kids really compared them themselves, or say, “I’m smarter than you,” or something and, like, say something like that. Um, but, ya, no… Not not really anyone kind of compared their self or questioned my accommodations or anything, so it kinda just just kinda went there to resource room and got extra help without people asking me, like, “Why are you going there?” and stuff like that, so ya…

At times, Murray has also felt that his accommodations were embarrassing, as they set him apart from his peers:
Ya, in a certain know that, like, knowing that there’s, like, that you’re getting help and stuff like that but, like, again, like, sometimes it can, like, be an embarrassment or, like, you just kinda think, like, at the time, like, that you’re different and stuff like that, so, ya…

Many of Murray’s responses align with the deficit model of disability, or the perspective that a disability suggests there is something wrong with the individual. While Murray, as an individual, does not view disability through this lens, some of his experiences as an individual with a learning disability do suggest that he was made to feel he had a deficit, perhaps by society or the classroom or school culture. Murray describes his initial thoughts when he discovered his learning disability:

Oh, ya, definitely ya. I think, at first I kind of I kind of viewed it as that there’s something wrong with me specifically, uh, but over the years, it got better and I just started to realize that, you know, again, it just extra help for things that I have weaknesses on for, so, ya…

Murray’s understanding of special education, which has since developed from his first-hand experiences with special education, suggests Murray perceives society to view disability through a deficit lens:

Um… Um, I think at first, when you, like, the feelings that you hear the feelings that you think or come to mind when you hear “special education” for, like, the first time, you sometimes think, like, uh, there must be something wrong with that person or something like that and, you know, that or something like that, like, you know, like, they’re not something’s not right with them or something, so…
Murray feels that his perspective is unique, again suggesting he perceives society as viewing disability as a deficit:

Not a lot of people would have the same view on that. Um, they’d probably, like, think, again, there’s something wrong with you or something like that, so probably probably different, so, ya…

Murray also describes times when going to the resource room made him feel as though it were impossible to overcome his challenges:

Um… Like, it just just, like, made me feel, like, that, like, there’s not much, like, help out there. Like, they no one was really helping me at the moment and the, at the time, I would just kind of shut down and just not do the work because, like, honestly if they don’t know, like, how to help me then you know, like, what’s the point of trying you know, so, ya…

Additionally, Murray’s recount of his identification process also has an underlying notion of difference. Murray describes being aware of his challenges prior to this testing, and the identification process itself emphasized these challenges, making him feel embarrassed that his struggles were apparent to others:

Um… I mean. Um… I think, like, when they’re doing the testing, like, you could tell that, you know, like it almost seemed like you’d, like, knew what was, like, it would almost seem different from like everyone else and, like, with me being able to, like, express myself with words, like, I, like, I could tell that I had troubles with certain things and that’s what they’re trying to get out from, like, from testing, so, um… But, ya, like, I dunno, I I’m not really sure, like, it might sometimes, like, embarrass you because, like, you might think at the time like
you’re different and stuff like that but, you know, but ya but I’m just being able to get, like, extra like accommodations and getting, like, help, stuff like that, like, made me happy for that fact that I can get help from with certain stuff and if I need, like, extra help and stuff like that, like, it would be provided because uh because I would need it, so, ya…

Murray has since been able to overlook this embarrassment as it provided him with access to resources that help with his learning needs.

**Theme 3: Communication**

**Bryce.** Having been identified as having a learning disability, it follows that Bryce’s faces some difficulty in communicating. Bryce struggles to absorb textual information, while finding aural explanations to be slightly more valuable, and most valuable when combined with kinesthetic activities, as in his technological-based courses:

So, um, like, I just kind of zone out when I’m trying to like read something. Words just go through my head and then I just, like, I miss something and then that’s for, like, reading and then when there’s, like, a lecture I get most of it but there just, like, times that I just, like, don’t I just zone out again and I don’t know. Most of my classes are hands on, that’s why I wanted to get into trades but for, like, law class I had last semester my, um, teacher who’s really, like, he wasn’t, like, super, like, he was serious about it but he was, like, add humour to it so it helped me, like, be, like, involved with the class and want to listen cause he’d always add funny comments or whatever but for, like, English lectures I just,
like, just get super bored and I usually put my head down. I don’t listen for, like, half the block.

Bryce has discovered conversation to be the most reliable avenue of communication for sharing his ideas and explaining his thinking:

Um, there I think conversation’s the best because there’re just things that I just, like, I think in my head that make sense but I can’t put it on the paper cause I just, like, I don’t know how it works but I guess that’s the brain for ya. But, um, ya, just just conversations cause, like, grade nine we had to do something about, like, the Great Depression and I would write down, like, my thoughts but my teacher wouldn’t really, like, know where I was getting at but when I’ve talked to her she would be, like, “I know where you’re coming from,” so that’s just the best way I, um, write down, show my work, or whatever. Because even in math class I’m just, like, I have something I have to do, like, an equation or, like, a graph or something, um, graphs I’m pretty easy with cause it’s an image a drawing it’s pretty easy for me to figure that out, but when it comes to when it comes to equations and everything if I tell my teacher, “Oh, I have to do this first and then this and then this and this,” and then she would be, like, “Okay,” and then she’d write it down for me and I’d figure out the answer by that way. So, that’s my best way.

Communication with his teachers has also played in a role in Bryce’s experiences with special education. Bryce feels that his teachers are aware of his needs and, at times, guide him to make use of his accommodations:
Um, they usually have a list of people with IEPs or they can just tell they have an IEP, not in, like, in, like, a bad way but they can just tell that they’re not learning this kind of way and they’re like, “Do you want to go to resource room?” or “Do you want to get your computer or a computer?” And then they’re or, ya, they they usually have a list most of the times. Like English teachers and then, um, when you get called for like the exams your teachers are just going through room, “Do you want extra time?” That pretty much everyone people who have IEPs but, um, for, like, math teachers I’ve had I’ve had, like, two and I’ve told the one that I’ve had the past two years that I have one and I do get extra time but it runs onto a break so that…

This communication between Bryce and his teachers seems to heighten at times of evaluation, such as tests and exams, as Bryce mentions being reminded of his accommodations at these times:

Not really. Um, they do talk about it during the literacy test, I’m pretty sure. They said they, um, they bring you down, they just through Kurzweil and then they be like, “You have extra time and everything,” and they go through specifics and everything, I don’t really…

Outside of these times, Bryce does not perceive his accommodations being emphasized by his teachers:

No, not really. They don’t don’t ask. Like, only time they do is when you’re doing literacy test or an exam, they’re like, “Do you want to use your computer?” I say, “Yes,” and they don’t really ask anything else of it.
In regards to his resource teacher in high school, Bryce has a positive working relationship with her:

Whenever I go down for help, I get the help I need. And they’re always always asking that: “Do you want to come down?” and everything. And, um, I usually just, when I just need a question just expanded on or worded differently, they do that so that’s good good, I guess, so…

Bryce does not feel, however, that his resource teachers is aware of his post-secondary goals: “But ya, she doesn’t really know what I want to do. She just knows, like, I use double time and I use my computer sometimes.” This excerpt suggests Bryce feels he could benefit from further communication with his resource teacher, who may be able to support him in choosing courses that suit both his learning style and his plans for after high school.

Bryce views the roles of teachers, resource teachers, and guidance counsellors as separate. When discussing how he goes about choosing courses, Bryce explained that he does not ask his teachers or resource teacher for advice:

No, that’s more or less what the guidance has to do. And even then, I went to guidance last year and I’d be like, “I want to do this,” and then they’re like, “I’ll set you up for this.” They didn’t even really probably for time restraints but, like, they didn’t even look at like what the prerequisites are so I was just, like, doing something I didn’t really need to do for to get me into the college I want to get into and I was really mad about that because I told them what I wanted to do and they were like, “Okay, you can do this and get in,” but actually I kinda want more than that two prerequisites, but I don’t know. And I think the guidance teachers
the guidance counsellors can do more can help kids out more. Um, they also have a lot they have to do, so I don’t blame them for just doing the easy way out. Us kids don’t really tell them what they want to do, that’s more or less like what they say to the teacher.

Bryce has not developed a relationship with the guidance counsellors at his high school, which may contribute to why he has opted to discuss his future plans with his teachers, who have gotten to know him as an individual, rather than with a guidance counsellor. This has left Bryce feeling confused and uncertain about his choices:

I wish there was just more information on, like, prerequisites and just stuff you really want to, like, pursue instead of just doing, um, what the board says you have to do and laws or the government says you have to teach it’s…

Bryce also shows signs of confusion about the IEP process itself, as well as his experience accessing the curriculum via an IEP. Bryce, who has never seen his IEP document and does not know what it says, finds his lack of awareness comical: “I think, um, I honestly didn’t know I had it in grade four. I didn’t like that’s kind of at a that’s kind of crazy, I guess. [laughter] Um…” Bryce has since discovered that he does indeed have an IEP, and has tried to recall his earliest experiences with special education:

Ya, like, I don’t really think a single person came down in grade four just, like, “Can you come with me into this, like, room?” or, “This just something here, sign here,” without saying. Maybe once or twice someone come down and be like, “Can you read this?” Or maybe the teacher is, like, “I think the kid’s having learning difficulties” or something. But, I don’t think that’s really fair to judge someone by what they’re doing in grade four.
Bryce’s memories suggest a lack of communication as he is not sure why he was even given an IEP in the first place and wishes he had been better informed:

Um, I just wanna know how they determine who gets an IEP, but you don’t even know that so… So…. I dunno know, just saying, I think they should just be more upfront with the kids, but kids probably won’t care, so I don’t blame them for not doing it, but…

As an additional resource, Bryce has received a Dell laptop as a piece of assistive technology, but he is unsure how it was decided that he would benefit from this device, as well as why this particular device was selected for him:

I’m not entirely sure. I’m all I remember is bringing the form back and they’re like, “We’ll put you in and you’ll have your laptop in a couple weeks,” and then that happened, I guess. I’m not too sure on the deciding factors. I’m pretty sure every kid or mostly every kid got a laptop with an IEP that I know of.

Bryce’s recollection of his experiences with the identification process, or his psycho-educational assessment, also suggest a lack of communication as he remains confused about it. Bryce recalls his parents being responsible for organizing this testing, but is unsure of the school’s role in deciding whether the testing was necessary: “Ya. The school didn’t. They were trying to say we should or we shouldn’t. I’m not entirely sure.” He remembers: “Ya, I was probably 10 or 11 when I did the test and I didn’t really know I was there. They just brought me took me out of school and I was happy. [laughter]” Bryce he believes there was no definite outcome:

The outcome, my parents didn’t really say. Um, like, I still would have been on an IEP but I think they just wanted to see like how I learned, I guess, and my thought
process. They didn’t, like, diagnose me with anything, which, like, there you shouldn’t be labelling kids, especially at that age, cause kids are just kids. But it seemed like it was just, like, they asked me questions and that was about it so.

Um…

Bryce later discusses his learning disability, which he was indeed identified with, confirming his confusion. He is unsure of how this identification came to be, and also felt uninformed of the accommodations he received in school thereafter:

I don’t know how they determine, like, if I have a learning disability, unless they just pull it out of a hat and they’re like, “Oh ya, you have this.” I don’t know it works out, then when I got my IEP, I just got my computer and they didn’t really say anything really or, like, the past year but when it came to, like, grade seven or eight they’re, like, asking me, the teacher’s like, “Go down to the resource room and or go see teacher for help cause I know you’re stuck or whatever,” but I don’t know.

Bryce remains uncertain about the need for testing, believing he would have had an IEP even without the identification of having a learning disability.

Bryce seems to perceive his parents as also feeling left out of the conversation, as he feels like he would benefit from having his parents receiving information and then re-explaining it to him in an appropriate way:

Ya. Not, like, I don’t really, like, if a kid in like grade six got an IEP and he’s like, “Why do I need this?” then your parent can be like, “Okay, you went here. This is how they determined, like, you’re whatever,” and then the kid would, I don’t know what their reaction would be, but er just, like, a later grade, I guess, so more
mature and that can handle the the answer, I guess. Cause a lot of kids can be emotional or whatever but, I don’t know.

Despite setting up the psycho-educational assessment for Bryce, Bryce’s parents did not inform him of the result, suggesting either that they were not clearly informed themselves or that they do not have an open line of communication with Bryce regarding his learning needs:

No, they didn’t tell me. Um, I kinda just figured it out when by myself. Maybe the resource room might of said something like, “You have an IEP or learning differently and that’s why you have it,” cause I’m pretty sure, like, in whatever grade I was like, “Why do I have this? Why am I here?” And then they told me. But didn’t tell me up front, because obviously kids would react differently.

Bryce is unaware of his parents’ understanding of his educational situation with his IEP and identification, another suggestion that he does not openly communicate with them about his experience with special education:

Um, I’m probably I’m guessing my parents have a little more, like, they have a little more understanding why I’m doing this, but even then it was like we had to do it. It wasn’t like the board gave us a time and place. Like we had to do it ourselves, so like…

Bryce’s tone here suggests his family may feel some animosity towards their school board regarding the testing process; it is possible these negative feelings may cause the family to avoid discussing Bryce’s experience with special education.

Graham. Graham provides mixed reviews regarding his communication with his teachers over the years. In some regards, Graham provides evidence of some open
communication with his teachers, as he is able to clearly explain when and why he received differentiated instruction from his regular classroom teacher via Google Classroom:

… last year some of the work she was finding was too difficult for me because I couldn’t do it so then she made another Classroom for me and couple other kids so that I can, um, do get, uh, like, if it’s sometimes she thinks the work’s too easy she’ll put me in the other Classroom.

More recently, Graham has found himself to disagree with his grade and comments on his report card. This suggests a lack of communication between Graham and his teachers, since he does not understand how he received a poor mark in geometry, as he perceives his skills in this strand as a strength: “Um, my report card said geometry, but I don’t think so. I think I know geometry pretty well.”

Another area where Graham’s responses suggest a lack of communication is in regards to his IEP. Now in grade seven, Graham cannot recall when he first received an IEP: “Um, I think it was from grade four, I think, that’s when I got my iPad, but I don’t know if I had an IEP before that.” Graham, who has not been formally identified as exceptional and, thus, has not been through the psycho-educational assessment process, relates much of his understanding of his experience with special education to receiving his piece of assistive technology, his iPad:

Like, they gave me an iPad and then they told me, because I had an IEP and stuff, so I think would be I did know before I got my iPad. They sent a thing that home because they said, um, uh, “We’ve noticed that (Graham’s) writing isn’t as good as the other kids and stuff so we’re gonna give him an iPad and he can type
everything out and do more things on that,” then, um, and they, um or than the paper and stuff.

Graham is not aware of receiving any other accommodations, considering his resource teacher only as his contact person for issues with his iPad, rather than as an accommodation to his learning. Graham has never seen his IEP document, which is only mentioned at home when a copy is sent home to be signed by his parents. Graham remains highly unaware regarding his IEP and his received accommodations, apart from knowing it has granted him access to his piece of assistive technology.

Graham perceives a positive relationship with his resource teacher and reiterates that he feels his voice is heard by her in regards to his current dilemma, his aging iPad:

Um, we talk about having… I don’t know. I don’t know. Like we talk about my iPad and stuff. How it’s working and she’s trying to get them to get me a new iOS update or get me a new iPad. So…

Graham suggests that he is kept informed by his resource teacher on their seeking approval from their school board for a new iPad:

They keep shooting us down for new iPads because they say this is their excuse, excuse I’d say it’s an excuse, “Oh, well, we won’t give out iPads for every iOS update,” but an iPad takes twelve and we’re already at twelve. It started on seven iOS seven; can you imagine being stuck on that? I don’t even think it takes Apple like three minutes to find my iOS update cause it’s so old and ya. And I think they’re gonna try to put an iOS update on my iPad but you can’t do that. You have to call Apple, get my iPad in to put new stuff on it, might as Apple. I bet you
they just probably take the iPad switch it for another one, uh, put stuff in it and just send it back.

Outside of conversing with his resource teacher about his iPad and during the occasional math lesson when she pops in as a support to the entire class, Graham does not communicate with his resource teacher: “Then once math’s done, don’t see her. I only see her in the halls and that.” Access to this resource teacher was an accommodation Graham has received in previous grades, and he is unsure why he no longer visits the resource room as this was not communicated to him; however, he does not raise his concerns to his resource teacher: “There’s really no point. It’s not that it doesn’t bug me as much, like, sometimes it really bugs me other times it doesn’t. So…”

Murray. Murray was identified with a learning disability in grade four, but has experienced difficulty with communicating for nearly as long as he can remember:

Um, I believe it was grade one. I think it was, like, the start for for that because, um, like I had problems, like, hearing and stuff like that before with, um, like knowing what the teacher was saying so they got a, like, a headset in and, like, um, like, an amplifier so they can talk through the mic and it was louder so I could hear it better. And I think then I got tested again in grade four, I think, and it was then it was just, like, I got more accommodations and stuff like that with, you know, getting extra time and, ya, and going to resource and stuff like that. Ya. Murray struggles with expressing his ideas to others, which is an important preface to understanding the other aspects of communication prevalent in Murray’s experience as an exceptional student:
Um, I think it would just mainly be, like, um, you know, um, I have a hard time, like again, like, expressing myself verbally, like, I could think what I’m thinking but I just can’t really say it at, like, maybe the speed that or can consistency that I wanted and also like, um, also I have I have troubles with, um, what is it again, I have troubles with, like, starting things and also finishing things and, ya, those are sort of my weaknesses, but, ya…

Murray’s challenges with communication, which often discourage him from completing tasks, follow him outside of the classroom, which is apparent as he describes his extracurricular involvement in high school:

Um, the only club I have, um, been with for just a little while was the robotics club at (my high school) and, um, only for a little while though, but, um, ya we just pretty much there like design robots and stuff like that and they they’d have, like, one specific day that they go to, like, an event and have to complete a whole bunch of tasks with what they created and stuff like that, so, um, but ya, I only did that for maybe a few weeks, but that’s that’s about it, so, ya…

Murray further explains why he only participated in the robotics club for a short time:

Um, probably because it was just, like, lack of information and, like, what you’re supposed to do there. Cause a few times I just sat there just not knowing what to do cause they didn’t really say what was going on or what what they’re doing, so, you know. I didn’t really think there was any point of going anymore if they didn’t really tell you what’s happening, so, ya…

Murray faced similar situations in other extracurricular activities, including basketball in elementary and track in high school.
Um, well, I mean as far as, like, basketball goes, I mean for track, I wouldn’t mind doing it again but, like, basketball the, um, again, like, sort of the same, like, I just felt lost when I was playing and when they actually, like, were they had games and I just, you know, and like half the time it was the coach but, um, ya, I was just sort of, like, I just didn’t like it. Just not, [laughter] I guess, just not much information, just seemed lost, so, ya. And track, I would probably do it again, but same with that, like, there can times where there’s you know not the best information given out or not enough to know what’s really going on, so, ya…

While Murray enjoyed track as an activity, his learning needs, namely his challenges with communication, were not acknowledged or met by his coach, which led to him feeling uninformed and out of place.

Murray has a strong relationship with his parents and openly communicates with them regarding his educational experiences and learning needs. He frequently uses appropriate terminology, such as ‘accommodation’ and ‘self-advocacy’, when describing his experiences, explaining how: “It just kind of, like, kind of accumulated over the years. Like, I know what it is cause I’ve, like, I’ve I’ve heard it multiple times and I just kind of know it from my mind now.” This accumulation arose from his open communication with his parents, including his mother, who has a background in education. Murray describes his parents as encouraging and supportive:

Um, uh, they would just, you know, remind me of certain things and, you know, add to ask to help and stuff like that, you know, don’t be afraid and stuff like that um. And and, ya, and they would, you know, go to teachers and just remind them as well that, you know, that these resources are available. Um, stuff like that, so…
Murray views this communication with his parents as benefiting in his experience with special education, as he was empowered by them to seek the resources he was entitled as per his IEP.

Murray also discusses communicating his needs to his teachers, which his parents encouraged him to do when necessary, while at other times his teachers were proactive about addressing his accommodations:

Um, like some teachers would, like, um, would help remind me to use resource room, um, for like tests or just, like, just to go there, like every time, like all the time. Um, like, you know, my parents helped me, like told me that I need to self-advocate for myself and it kinda grew through the years, so, um, ya… Murray was not always comfortable with self-advocating for himself, which suggests some fluctuation in communication with some teachers, depending on how he perceived their relationship:

Um, like, I mean sometimes when I ask, like, sometimes back then I would think that, you know, it was, like, I’d feel like a nuisance for asking all these questions and stuff like that because, you know, I know they have their own work that they have to do and stuff like that, like, I just didn’t want to get in the way or just seem annoying or something like that, so, ya…

Overall, however, Murray perceives his relationship with his teachers as positive ones, which implies open communication in regards to his needs:

Um, I’d have to say it’s pretty good, ya. Um, there weren’t really any problems between us or anything, so… Um, but, ya, it was pretty good, um… Like they helped me and and, ya, like, it was it was pretty good, so…
A final area of communication Murray recognizes in his experience with special education is communication, or lack thereof, amongst teachers. Murray recalls many instances where he exercised his use of accessing the resource room, only to find that the resource teacher was not equipped to support him:

Ya. Well, like, I mean having, you know, these accommodations and, you know, more resources to help you there, like, sometimes it does help, like, well, most of the time it does help, but there are times where, you know, again, where the teacher, like, you’re either sent there or you go there for help and it’s for quiet space and it’s maybe it’s not so quiet in there or maybe, like, they don’t know really how to help and so you kind of of kind of, like, puts you on the spot, like, you know, what do you do, but... I usually go back to the teacher and, you know, tell them that, you know, ask them, like, “How do you do this? Cause I I’m not really sure how to do that.” And, you know, finish finish these tasks so, ya...

In such a situation, Murray was often sent back to his regular classroom to seek clarification before returning to the resource room, while other times, the resource teacher would seek clarification from the teacher. Murray describes these situations as a lot of “back and forth,” and implies that his teachers and resource teachers did not communicate with one another. He recognizes that a resource teacher may not have expertise in all subject areas, but he seems to suggest that these situations could be avoided by opening conversation between teachers and resource teachers so that they can collaborate on how to support Murray more effectively.
Theme 4: Growth

Bryce. Bryce’s experiences with special education have permitted him to experience growth in a variety of ways. At the forefront, Bryce has grown to accept both his needs as well as offers of help to address those needs. Bryce explains that he is just “more okay” with accepting these resources as he requires them:

Um, I think my job is just to use what’s given to me at the appropriate time, um, and just not to, like, if I need help, not to put it off and to use my computer when needed cause that’s they’re putting money into it you I use my computer when I need it. And honestly, a lot of kids do everything on the computer but I can kind of, like, some stuff I find it easier to write than type it out and it’s just faster than longer… But, um, just, like, using it when it’s needed and, ya, I don’t know, that’s…

Bryce is no longer ashamed to admit he requires accommodations, such as going down to the resource room, as he maturely explains: “Not really now, but in the earlier grades, I was kinda embarrassed to go down but like now I just don’t really think of anything other than I don’t want to disrupt anyone.”

Another area of growth Bryce has experienced has been discovering his strengths. Bryce has recently found enjoyment in his technology and construction courses, and attributes his success to his kinaesthetic strengths: “I think my strengths are to be using to, like, I learn best with my hands.” He describes this further:

Um, the people that learn the same way are in the tech classes if I see or they take a lot of tech classes cause that’s the the best, like, that’s the easy that’s the, like, that’s the best way I get marks, that I can show my work by with, like, metal or,
like, all that kind of, like, wood, like, that’s the best way I learn. I like working with my hands. And that’s just where my highest marks are. My lowest marks are just, like, the lectures and, like, the math. I’m not I’ve never been good with math but they never hands-on learning and I just get distracted or I just, like, zone out and that’s my lowest marks. So, that’s my thinking of…

Bryce’s confidence has grown since discovering his strengths, and he now views part of his role as using these strengths to assist others when they are struggling:

Um, well, just like to help kids I guess if they need help with something. I help them, like, in my tech class if they need something I help them or if I like doing it, I do it for them, which isn’t some people don’t like tech courses and I do, so I just do it for them. Um, and just, hmm… not really make a big deal out of it, not be, like, cocky or anything.

Bryce’s offer to support others may reflect the value he attributes to the accommodations he has received as an exceptional student.

Bryce’s understanding of how he learns has also developed, and he views this as the purpose of his IEP:

I think having an IEP is, um, just, like, it’s to help people learn how they learn and have like the resources to use, like, the ways they learn that’s, like, if it’s by a scribe or a computer, um, and most kids usually take the whole time on everything on everything but most big tests they use the double time.

Bryce explains this growth, and how he’s benefited from it, further:

That’s what I think cause a lot of kids in primary school don’t realize they learn differently and if they don’t have the IEP they’ll be, like, struggling for the rest of
their life that they’re, like, until they take something that’s like, “Oh, I realize this,” or even it doesn’t even hit them that, “I’m good with working with my hands,” and then they’re just, like, struggling for the rest of high school and college and all that. I think when kids learn that early on, it’s just help them out tremendously.

What Bryce has found most helpful in better understanding how he learns is a learning strategies course he took in grade nine in replacement of French:

Ya, so this course, it was it ran all semester. Um, they basically, for the first two, it felt like two months, they just went over learning styles and how you can learn from them and to, like, help yourself, I guess, and then, um, the last couple, the last two or three months, it was more or less studying…

Bryce has grown to accept his differences in learning: “I’m not alone. That’s what I’ve gotten from this. Like, I know that people learn different.”

Bryce’s journey with special education has also made him more aware of his needs as a learner. In elementary school, Bryce did not understand where he struggled, and found himself asking questions about his accommodations:

Like, in grade five I’d be like, “Why I am doing? Why am I going down to this room?” Cause, like, the teacher’d be like, “They’d help you with writing skills.” I’m like, “Why am I doing this?” Then, like, when I went to high school, I’d be like, “I know why I’m going down there,” and, like, I see why and everything, but other than that, I don’t think it’s really changed that much.

Now in high school, Bryce is now aware of how access to the resource room addresses his needs as a learner and he uses it as needed. He has also found himself to be sensitive
to noise levels in the classroom, often asking to work in the hall, separate from distracting friends:

… But also, another thing that’s helped me was, um, the, like, silence in the room can be, like, really, like, it can be almost it can almost distract you so, like, music can help drain out it can help you and not help you at the same time cause if you’re listening to it pretty loud you just hear the lyric and you write that lyric down but, like, that’s also helped um me out for, um, for, like, English and everything I just have a song in the earbud and it helped me out.

Bryce has grown to seek help, or accept accommodations, to meet his needs when he recognizes he is struggling: “I’m choosing to go when I need to. That’s pretty much the gist of it.”

One last way that Bryce demonstrates growth in his perception of his experiences with special education is his view that he is able to overcome challenges. He views an IEP as something for students to benefit from in some way; however, what is unique here is Bryce’s belief that an IEP, or its associated accommodations, is something to be outgrown:

A lot of it, ya. Just, like… just ya, just, like, a lot of the stuff’s common sense and I think kids will learn it over time but, um, a lot of kids will learn how to, like, write tests better and efficiently and eventually not needing double time, I guess. Like, if teachers were to take that opportunity to teach kids earlier in grade school, how to how to write a test, how to, like, study, I guess when it comes to high school I don’t really see an IEP needed. But that’s still, like, a long times away for
teachers who’re have to teach it or it probably won’t come in for a long time for when they have to.

Bryce seems to believe that he has reaped the benefits of his IEP, fulfilling the goal of learning how he best learns, and seems uncertain if he still requires it to be successful:

Just, like, it was good to have in the younger grades but I don’t think a lot of kids that have them now, don’t really need them, I guess. Um… Ya, like I don’t see like really benefit to have, like, for me at least, cause I don’t, like, really go down to the resource room, like, every day. I don’t really see myself needing it anymore, but it’s also not, like, a bad thing to have, I guess. So… Mmm…

Graham. Graham has demonstrated growth throughout his perceptions of his experiences with special education. His initial understanding of special education was as follows:

Um, I’m just gonna go right off the hop here: people who have issues in learning and stuff. Like, if they don’t like it they’ll just or, like, rage throw a fit and then they’ll be upset and throw stuff across the room. That’s what I hear. But once you get to actually knowing what you get it, it’s a lot better than just you hearing “special education” and you jump off the bat and think about that.

Graham now understands special education as a way of addressing diversity across learners: “Just you learn in a different way than everyone else.” Graham recognizes his experiences with special education to be the key in developing his perspective:

Um, well, since I’ve got it, I’ve noticed that it’s been much easier for me than to, like, um, think about it that way because of it that way I I wouldn’t I wouldn’t be
too happy. But it’s changed my idea on it has changed. Um, I have it now and it it, like, puts it in a different point of view so that you understand.

Graham demonstrates growth by identifying various learning needs and preferences he has discovered. Graham has found that he tends to get distracted easily and has also found himself sensitive to volume level:

Um, maybe distractions and sometimes the classroom class is too loud, sometimes it’s too quiet. Like, I don’t like to work in pitch quiet… It’s bugs me.

He has attempted to address this preference himself:

Ya. Ya, like, sometimes I find it if I put on headphones and listen to music it’s better, right, because it distracts everything else and I can just listen and then I can think and nobody else is bugging or talking to me. Just working and it’s a lot a heck lot more helpful.

Graham has also discovered that he tends to fidget in class, sometimes with his piece of assistive technology:

Maybe the school had some, if the school would give you some stuff to fidget with. Like, if you needed if you, like, when I’m learning I do stuff with my iPad: touch it, spin it, do whatever, cause I don’t like sitting still and if I move one thing I, like…

Graham is beginning to become more aware, however, that although he finds this fidgeting enjoyable, it is actually further distracting himself and the people around him. This thought process is made evident by Graham’s hesitation and tone in this excerpt, and the realization that he was able to better concentrate in our differentiated interviews when he abstained from using the Lego, playdough, or whiteboard provided:
I actually I don’t I think [coughing] helps me concentrate, maybe other people thinks it makes me more distracted. But I I think it helps me concentrate…

Graham has also discovered that he benefits from differentiated instruction delivered by his resource teacher outside of the regular classroom, as he prefers a lesson format different than what is delivered in the regular classroom:

Um, it would be a lot helpful cause then I can I can go down to her room, get it taught a different way cause there’s one certain way apparently, but my way, I like it differently. I like to tackle the easiest, the medium, and then the hardest, cause you go from easy and then you go medium, which is harder, and you go hardest, and then, but you usually do hard, medium, and then easy. So…

Finally, Graham shows evidence of growth when he demonstrates his belief in his ability to improve. Here Graham describes his growth in comfortability with using his iPad, as he created a flower out of the playdough provided:

Ya, like, when you when I first got it I was, like, uh, uh, cause I’m making a flower, I’ll use an example, I’ll use a flower example, I was like a flower, um, not blooming yet, but you know how roses hide and then, like, do that, I think I was like scared a little bit.

He clarifies by what means by “do that”:

I I feel like I, that I before I knew what I was doin, I feel like I was hiding very, like, I used my hands to hide my head because that’s what I felt like… When I first got my iPad I was very nervous that I would do something drop it or break it. Thank goodness I didn’t do that or I wouldn’t have it… And then, like, over time, I, uh, got better and better and better. When I first started it cause, going back to
the flower example, um, I wasn’t blooming yet. Once you hit that point where you

can bloom you take advantage of it because you can you know what to do, you

can get your… When someone came in to teach us about the Read and Write stuff

I was, like, half a step higher faster ahead of them. I was just I was way ahead of

them so it’s it would, um, like hiding my head, like, I feel like I was hiding

because you know I didn’t know what to do, I didn’t want to ask.

Once accustomed to using his iPad as a resource, Graham describes being able to use it to

help him improve his literacy skills:

Well, it’s, like, cause, I used to make a sentence like, “Oh, I was doing this,” and

then it’d be like, I don’t know how to explain that… Um, um… [whispering to

self] Um, so, if I would say I know how to speak full sentences, I just didn’t know

how to write them. That also helped me because I had I had a Read and Write and

it would read it over and if it didn’t sound right, I could go back and change it and

I would know what I want. And I learned when you say it I would make a

sentence that would be two lines long and period on the third line second line and

I would have to read, read, read, read, and eventually you’d run out of breath and

be [sigh] and then continue on and that’s where a comma should have been.

Graham also suggests that his role as a student receiving special education services is to

become more efficient, thus improving his skills:

My job, I think, would be to keep my work up doing well in every sub, like, um,

like, so that it could be hmm…So that I can get my work done more efficiently.

My role. I view my role in it, like, I have to get certain work done before I have to

get something done I think it’s that I get my work done and it’s from today and
then work on my stuff from yesterday or a week ago. That’s not good having stuff from a week ago but still work on it.

In contrast, Graham often refers to his challenges with printing, or “writing” as he calls it. While Graham presents a growth mindset in other areas of his experience with special education, he seems to perceive his ability to print as a stagnant skill:

That’s how big I wrote in grade four. Grade three was even worse. It was super big. And then grade five my writing got a little better, like, it was still messy and I had really spaced out so if I would write, “I was walking to…” it would be like super close together. And grade, um, six I think it would it got a lot better I was I was in grade three and four I was taught to make sure I had a finger width of space so, like, if I wrote I I would have my finger and then wrote, “was.” But, see, it’s still messy, and grade six and seven didn’t really change. Some words I can get better than others but… Uh oh.

Since Graham perceives the purpose of his IEP to address his poor printing skills by providing him with an iPad, his perception may be influenced by the fact that he still has the iPad as a support, suggesting to him that he is not improving.

Murray. Over time, Murray’s understanding of special education has developed based on his experiences as an exceptional student receiving special education services. Murray’s initial understanding of special education aligned with the deficit model of disability:

Um… Um, I think at first, when you, like, the feelings that you hear the feelings that you think or come to mind when you hear “special education” for, like, the first time, you sometimes think, like, uh, there must be something wrong with that
person or something like that and, you know, that or something like that, like, you
know, like, they’re not something’s not right with them or something, so… Um,
at first, but, you know, then when you, like, just get used to it and, like, you know
that it’s just you’re getting extra help and stuff like that and accommodations for
for certain things that you may have that you may have weaknesses on. Then, um,
like, it it’s not bad at all when you hear “special special education.” So, ya…

Murray describes how his perspective on special education has changed to reflect his
view that receiving special education services means receiving help to address one’s
challenges:

Um, I think, like, just as I said before, like, you just basically just means that it’s
just you’re getting extra help for things that you’re not necessarily have strengths
on. So, um, ya, you just you’re just getting extra help and, you know, you’re
getting, you know, the needs that, you know, that stuff that you need in order to
be successful, so… I think that’s that’s what it means to me.

Murray’s growth in perspective has led him to accept himself as an individual.

Murray’s perception of the value he attributes to his received accommodations
also reflects growth, as his perception of these accommodations changes with respect to
his needs as a learner. Murray first required a frequency modulated (FM) system in grade
one to compensate for his difficulty hearing; an FM system involves a microphone for the
speaker to wear and a transmitter unit to project the sound to the listener. He now reports
that he longer requires this accommodation. In elementary school, Murray was
encouraged to use a computer to share his ideas and complete tasks, but he no longer
finds this beneficial:
Uh, ya, for a little bit, ya, and then, like, I think they kind of recommended it, like, beforehand and I tried it and, like, sometimes I would choose to use it but other times it just, like, better to write it, sometimes actually actually just write it down. Additionally, Murray’s view of his access to the resource room has changed with time:

Uh, at times, I just found, like, resource room useless and and, like… And, like, it just made me think, like, like, like, it’s just, like, I kind of shut down and I just didn’t want to do work cause I just… Sometimes all these things were useless or just not much of help so… And I didn’t know what to do at the time so… But, that’s changed over the years so, um, now I’m just able to, like, um, use my own words and stuff like that and, you know, use my voice and, you know, ask for help and stuff like that that’s ya… So…

As Murray has come to better understand his needs and preferences as a learner, he has come to view his access to the resource room with higher esteem.

Finally, a cornerstone of Murray’s experience as an exceptional student receiving special education services has been the development of his self-advocacy skills. Murray was first encouraged to speak up for himself in grade school, when he was finding that he was not always provided with the accommodations he was entitled to according to his IEP:

I think it’s just, like, been through grade school, um, like, elementary, I think it’s just been, like, off and on, like, some teachers would be, like, a hit or miss when it comes to, like, accommodations and now with, like, high school it seems to be, like, more, like, um, like, they show you all the options and stuff like that. Like, you also have to accommodate for yourself as well, so ya…
Murray recognizes his parents as being influential in the development of his self-advocacy skills:

   Um, from my parents just kind of reminding me that, you know, as I got older, I just need to start using my own words and just, you know, start asking for help and stuff like that and asking to use resource room and, you know, go there yourself instead of having, like, teachers, you know, tell you, remind you, anything like that, so…

He values self-advocacy and perceives an increasing need to self-advocate as he matures, as he is now required to recognize his needs and to ask for the resources needed to address these needs:

   Um, as in, like, self-advocating, stuff like that. Like ya, definitely, like, yes self-advocating, uh, like, plays more of a role these days in high school because, you know, you need to be able to do things for your own and more than in elementary school because they kind of just point you towards things and stuff like that, you know, kind of guide you there but you kinda have to, you know, do yourself and stuff like that. I think that changed quite a quite a bit from elementary to high school where I started to self-advocate for myself and whatever and, um, told myself that I need use these resources more and stuff like that so.
CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This thesis provides a detailed overview of a hermeneutical phenomenological study analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which I believe begins to address a dearth in the literature, as the manifold experiences of exceptional students remain unexplored in the literature (Whitley et al., 2009). The voices of both elementary and secondary students have been called upon in order to describe the essence of what they have experienced as identified exceptional students receiving special education services, and how they have experienced it (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 2016). Exploring the essence of the educational perceptions of such students may provide policymakers, administrators, teachers, paraprofessionals, and parents with suggestions for areas of improvement in order to effectively improve the experiences of and support for exceptional students in Ontario public schools.

The use of IPA allows for the claims of the participating students to be contextualized, positioning their accounts in regards to various aspects of their individual identities, while making sense of how they each make sense of their lived experiences with special education (Connor, 2009; Mertens, 2015). It is recommended in IPA that a homogeneous group of participants is recruited (Creswell, 2013; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013). Three participants were successfully recruited for this study. Two participants, Bryce (grade 11 student) and Murray (grade ten student), have been formally identified as exceptional pupils by an IPRC, both with learning disabilities, while Graham (grade seven student) has not been formally identified as exceptional. Bryce, Graham,
and Murray are three white males who each belong to a nuclear family and have attended or currently attending the same elementary school in Southwestern Ontario. It is my assumption that attending the same elementary school provides the three participants with some similarity in educational experiences. I consider this group of participants to represent a homogeneous group, making them appropriate choices for this study (Creswell, 2013; Mertens, 2015; Maxwell, 2012; Ritchie et al., 2013).

The remainder of this chapter addresses the research questions, the limitations of this study, a description of the implications for practice, suggestions for future research, and a conclusion.

**Addressing the Research Questions**

In the following sections, I outline the key findings of the study by first addressing the three associated sub-questions, and then providing a description of the essence of the perceived experiences of a group of exceptional students receiving special education series in the Ontario public education system, thus addressing the central research question of the study. The following findings are based on my interpretation of the perceptions provided to me by my three participants of their lived experiences with special education. These findings are not to be generalized, but should be considered as a starting point in eliminating a gap in the literature in regards to the voices of exceptional students.

**Inside the classroom.** My first associated sub-question asks: how do exceptional students perceive their experiences inside the classroom? While each of my three participants has a unique experience with special education, I have discovered some commonalities between their experiences as exceptional students inside the classroom.
Each participant discussed the role their classroom teachers have played in their experiences with special education, viewing their teacher as proactive in predicting struggles and providing resources, a guide in recommending use of appropriate resources, and at times, a gatekeeper to resources, either providing or denying access to them. The perceptions of my participants suggest that effective communication with their teacher leads them to being better accommodated for their learning needs. Each participant also alludes to their perception of difference in their classroom. Throughout their experiences, my participants have been made to feel different in their classroom, sometimes in a positive way, as they feel advantaged by their access to resources, but other times, in a negative way for requiring this additional support over their peers and being noticed, and sometimes ridiculed, for it. An additional commonality across my three participants’ perceived experiences inside the classroom is a lack of awareness in regards to their experience with special education; each participant experiences some confusion over why and how they obtained an IEP and the IEP document itself.

**Outside the classroom.** My second associated sub-question asks: how do exceptional students perceive their experiences outside the classroom? A commonality across my participants in regards to their perceptions outside the classroom is that each participant perceives society to view disability through a deficit lens. This is made evident by their initial understandings of special education and feeling that there was something wrong with them, and reports of bullying and fear of being labelled. This leads to a second commonality, which is comparison. Each participant has provided evidence of comparing themselves to their peers in some way, sometimes viewing themselves as someone who needs additional support over their peers, while other times viewing
themselves as less able to achieve or with less potential. Finally, each participant has experienced a sense of growth as an individual. Through their experiences as an exceptional student receiving special education services, each participant has experienced a deepened understanding of how they perceive special education, their strengths and challenges as an individual, as well as their learning needs and preferences.

**Supports, accommodations, and modifications.** My final associated sub-question asks: how do exceptional students perceive their received supports, accommodations, and modifications? Each participant views themselves advantaged, at times, over their peers for having access to resources which support their learning when their peers do not have access to these resources, including newer technologies, extra time to complete assessments, and access to a resource teacher and resource room. At other times, my participants have viewed these resources as embarrassing or a nuisance, as their use of them sets them apart from their peers and emphasizes difference. Finally, the most apparent commonality across participants in regards to their perceptions of their received supports, accommodations, and modifications was the lack of reliability of them. In some cases, this means aging technology, which no longer supports learning but, rather, is a distraction or hindrance, and in others, fluctuation in access to or the delivery of these resources. Each participant voices their concern over the helpfulness, or lack thereof, of their received resources.

**Essence.** van Manen (2016) explains essence as the aspects, properties, and qualities that make up something such that, in their absence, that something would no longer be considered to be that particular something. Essence is complex and multifaceted (van Manen, 2016). In the context of this study, I describe the essence of a
phenomenon, with the phenomenon being the human experience of being an exceptional student receiving special education services in the Ontario public education system within Southwestern Ontario. Despite recruiting a fairly homogenous group of participants, I have found their experiences to be diverse, and so, I believe the essence of the given phenomenon to be best understood by considering the four themes which emerged from the data: (1) Help, (2) Difference, (3) Communication, and (4) Growth. The following statement is my description of the essence of the phenomenon at hand: Being an exceptional student receiving special education services in the Ontario public education system within Southwestern Ontario entails experiencing attempts to help support one’s challenges in learning, discovering differences between oneself and one’s peers, facing challenges in communication, and growing in understanding of how one perceives special education, one’s strengths and challenges as an individual, as well as one’s learning needs and preferences.

**Delimitations and Limitations of this Study**

A delimitation refers to “… a systematic bias intentionally introduced into the study design… by the researcher” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p. 66). Based on this definition, the delimitations that I am aware of include the young age of my participants, and also the location of my data collection. I consider these elements of the study to be delimitations because it was my conscious decision to select only Intermediate and Senior division student participants receiving special education services within the Ontario public education system in Southwestern Ontario. In contrast to a delimitation, a limitation can be defined as “… the systematic bias that the researcher did not or could not control and which could inappropriately affect the results” (Price & Murnan, 2004, p.
One limitation is that the results cannot be generalized, as this is a phenomenological study (van Manen, 2016). Additionally, I have brought a personal bias with me to the study, as an educator passionate about special education; I believe this bias, however, to be addressed by my use of IPA in interpreting the data, as IPA allows the researcher to use their understanding of the world to then interpret their participants’ understanding (Mertens, 2015; Larkin et al., 2006). Another limitation I discovered during the recruitment phase is that I was unable to recruit a completely homogenous group, as not all participants had been formally identified as exceptional by an IPRC. I also view this as a delimitation as I consciously decided only to require participants to have an IEP (see Appendix A) due to time constraints and fear of not recruiting the minimum of three participants to successfully run the study.

**Implications for Practice**

This study calls upon the voices of both elementary and secondary students in an attempt to describe the essence of their perceived experiences as identified exceptional students receiving special education services. It is my hope that these claims and concerns reveal to all readers within the field of education that there is room for improvement when it comes to the delivery of special education services. Please consider the following practical implications derived from the claims and concerns of the students who participated in this study.

First, consider increasing communication with exceptional students and their parent(s) and/or guardian(s). The participants in this study reveal facing challenges with communication and, as a result, have experienced confusion and lack of awareness in regards to their experiences with special education. Exceptional students and their
families may benefit from being better informed as to why special education may be required for the student and how it may benefit the student’s learning. A deeper understanding of the student’s learning challenges and their formal identification, if applicable, may help families better support the student as a learner and encourage a healthy working relationship between home and school.

Second, consider increasing communication between all school stakeholders who play a role in an exceptional student’s educational experience to ensure that the student is being supported appropriately. Open communication between school stakeholders, including administration, resource teachers, regular classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, and guidance counsellors, may make all stakeholders better aware of the resources available to support the student. These professionals should maintain awareness of the student’s current challenges and pool their own professional strengths to best support the student. For example, consider my participant Bryce, who may benefit from selecting high school courses alongside his guidance counsellor and the rest of his school-based team, as together they will be better aware of his strengths and challenges as a learner and his goals as an individual.

A final suggestion for a practical implication is this: at the classroom level, cultivate a culture where diversity, in all regards, is respected and celebrated. Students must feel safe in order to learn, and this is not possible if our students are made to feel ‘less than’ or ‘other’, just as my participants have revealed they have been made to feel. If students feel safe, respected and celebrated as they are, they may become more comfortable in sharing their successes and struggles and may better support each other as they grow as learners.
Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis provides a detailed overview of a hermeneutical phenomenological study, analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which only begins to address a dearth in the literature. Future research is required in this area, as the manifold experiences of exceptional students remain virtually unexplored in the literature (Whitley et al., 2009). First, I would recommend conducting this study with another group, preferably one with more homogeneity, as my participants differed in age and in formal identification. For example, adjusting the inclusion criteria and including only students who have been formally identified by an IPRC may be a worthwhile study. Conducting a comparative study which explores the perceptions of exceptional elementary students versus the perceptions of exceptional secondary students in regards to their experiences with special education may also be worthwhile. Another suggestion, which I began to consider after conversing with my participants’ parents at length outside of the interviews, would be to explore the similarities and differences between the perceptions of exceptional students and their parent(s) and/or guardian(s).

Conclusion

This exploration of the perceptions of exceptional students in regards to their educational experiences as exceptional students receiving special education services begins to address a gap in the literature. Four themes emerged from the data: (1) Help, (2) Difference, (3) Communication, and (4) Growth. Together, these themes provide the foundation for the essence of what is experienced by exceptional students and how they experience it. Analyzing the collected data through IPA has allowed me to interpret these themes and to better understand how each plays a role in the phenomenon of being an
exceptional student receiving special education services. It is recommended that the following practical implications be considered: increase communication with exceptional students and their families, increase communication between school stakeholders, and cultivate a classroom culture where diversity is respected and celebrated.
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Poster

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED

Do you know a child who has an Individual Education Plan (IEP)? We are currently recruiting for a research study exploring how exceptional students perceive their educational experiences. Participants will be asked to take part in three short interviews, and will be compensated for their time with a $50 Amazon gift card.

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible to participate, the child must:

(a) Be an Intermediate or Senior student (grades 7-12)
(b) Be enrolled in a publicly-funded elementary or secondary school in Southwestern Ontario
(c) Have an IEP

CONTACT

For further information or to inquire about participation, please contact:

Bailey Regts, Researcher
regts@uwindsor.ca
or
Dr. Geri Salinitri, Faculty Supervisor
sgeri@uwindsor.ca
519-253-3000 EXT. 3961

University of Windsor
Faculty of Education
Faculty of Education Graduate Programs
401 Sunset Avenue, Windsor, ON N9B 3P4

THIS RESEARCH HAS BEEN CLEARED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF WINDSOR RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD
Appendix B: Inclusion Criteria Confirmation Script

INCLUSION CRITERIA CONFIRMATION SCRIPT

The following email script will be used to reply to a parent or guardian upon receipt of an email from a parent or guardian inquiring about participation of their child in the study:

Hello ____________________,

Thank you for your email and for your interest in having your child, ____________________, participate in my research study.

Before booking a time for a first interview with _____________________, I would like to take this time to confirm that ___________________ does indeed meet all the inclusion criteria for my study. What grade is ____________________ in? What school does ____________________ attend? Does ____________________ have an Individual Education Plan (IEP)?

or

Thank you for the information you have provided. Before booking a time for a first interview with ____________________. I would like to confirm that __________________ does indeed meet all of the inclusion criteria for my study. [Ask remaining questions from paragraph above to address any information not provided in initial email.]

I am attaching a Letter of Information for you to look over. This letter outlines the intent of my study and what you and your child can expect from participation. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns.

I look forward to hearing back from you,

Bailey Regts
Appendix C: Letter of Information

LETTER OF INFORMATION

Title of Study: Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students

Your child is asked to participate in a researcher study conducted by Bailey Regts, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the researcher, Bailey Regts, at regts@uwindsor.ca, or her supervisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri, at 519-253-3000 EXT. 3961.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study will be to explore the perceptions of exceptional Intermediate and Senior students in Southwestern Ontario. At this stage in the research, I use the term “exceptional student” to refer to any student in grades K-12 who accesses the Ontario curriculum via an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The student need not be formally identified as an exceptional pupil by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to fit this definition of the term “exceptional student”.

PROCEDURES

If you provide consent for your child to volunteer to participate in this study, your child will be asked to provide assent to:

• Attend three individual interviews (up to 30 minutes each) in a private area of your home
• Respond to up to two questions in each interview, either through conversation or through a task or method most comfortable to them (i.e. drawing a picture or building a Lego creation to demonstrate their ideas)

These interviews are considered to be differentiated, meaning that they will cater to the strengths and challenges of each participant such that they can successfully share their ideas with me, as the researcher. These interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and anything created by your child (i.e. drawing or Lego creation) will be captured using a digital camera.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is a possibility that the interview questions may cause your child to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, anxious or upset depending on their experiences with special education. The use of differentiated interviews is meant to make your child feel comfortable and successful, which should minimize any discomfort. As a certified teacher who works with elementary school-aged children on a regular basis, the researcher anticipates being able to develop a positive rapport with your child which should also ease any discomfort.

1
Although you, as the parent(s) and/or guardian(s), provide consent for your child to volunteer to participate, your child must provide assent, which means that they must agree to participate. If the possibility of loss of status, privacy and/or reputation is of great concern to your child, they may choose not to provide assent, or to withdraw their assent at any time and withdraw from the study. For any afterhours concerns, please contact Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Your child may gain useful knowledge about themselves and the meaning special education has in their life. Your child may become better aware of the role special education plays in their mental health and academic successes. Additionally, this study will begin to address a gap in research, as there is a lack of studies which explore the educational experiences of exceptional students.

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

Your child will be compensated for their participation with a $50 Amazon gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Interviews will be conducted in a private area of your home. A pseudonym will be assigned to your child to maintain confidentiality in data collection and in any written reporting.

As a member of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), it is the researcher’s duty under the Child and Family Services Act to report any reasonable grounds to suspect that a child under her care is at risk of harm, abuse, neglect, etc. If your child reveals to her that they are at risk or have been at risk, the researcher must report this, thus limiting the protection of the confidentiality of the your child. In this event, the researcher will report this to her supervisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri.

Interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder and a digital camera will be used to capture still photographs of any artifacts created by your child. Your child will not be able to review and/or edit any digital audio recordings or photographs.

Written records, digital data, and artifacts will be secured in a locked filing cabinet/desk drawer in the researcher’s private office. Any of such data stored digitally will be kept on the researcher’s password-protected personal laptop. Data will be accessible only to the researcher and to her thesis committee, made up of professors at the University of Windsor, in the event that the researcher needs advice in regards to data analysis. The final draft of the researcher’s M.Ed. thesis will be accessible on an academic site for academic purposes.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your child may withdraw from the study at any time through the data collection stage, prior to the completion of the third and final interview. All data collected prior to withdrawal will be kept for data analysis. The researcher will ask your child at the beginning of each interview if they still wish to participate. There will be no consequences for withdrawal.
FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Research findings will be available to participants. Information on how to access the research findings will be provided upon completion of the final interview.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000 EXT. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca
Appendix D: Participant Information Form

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION FORM

Participant Background

Name of Participant: ________________________________

Name of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________

Contact Information of Parent or Guardian: ________________________________

Grade of Participant: ________________________________

School of Participant: ________________________________

IEP Confirmation:  □

Interview Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
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Correspondence Record

Inclusion Criteria Confirmation (email)  □
Letter of Information (email attachment)  □

Consent, Assent, and Interview Booking (email)  □
Consent Form (email attachment)  □
Assent Form (email attachment)  □

Consent Form (signed document)  □
Assent Form (signed document)  □

Post-Study Letter and $50 Amazon gift card  □
Appendix E: Consent, Assent, and Interview Booking Script

CONSENT, ASSENT, AND INTERVIEW BOOKING SCRIPT

The following email script will be used to reply to a parent or guardian who has confirmed that their child meets the inclusion criteria:

Hello ________________,

Thank you for your email confirming that ________________ meets the inclusion criteria.

I am attaching a Consent Form for you to review. I am also attaching an Assent Form for ________________ to review. Prior to beginning the first interview, I will provide you with the opportunity to ask any questions and voice any concerns you have before signing the forms. I will then gather the forms for my records. ________________ and I will revisit the Assent Form at the beginning of both consecutive interviews.

At this point, it is time to book our first interview! Which weekdays and times are most convenient for you and ________________? The location of the interview will be your home. Can you please provide me with your address?

I look forward to hearing back from you,

Bailey Regts

The following email script will be used to reply to a parent or guardian if their child does not meet the inclusion criteria:

Hello ________________,

Thank you for your interest in my study. Unfortunately, ________________ does not meet the inclusion criteria, and therefore, is not eligible to participate.

I appreciate your time and interest,

Bailey Regts
Appendix F: Consent to Participate in Research

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

Title of Study: Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students

Your child is asked to participate in a researcher study conducted by Bailey Regts, from the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor.

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the researcher, Bailey Regts, at regts@uwindsor.ca, or her supervisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri, at 519-253-3000 EXT. 3961.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study will be to explore the perceptions of exceptional Intermediate and Senior students in Southwestern Ontario. At this stage in the research, I use the term “exceptional student” to refer to any student in grades K-12 who accesses the Ontario curriculum via an Individual Education Plan (IEP). The student need not be formally identified as an exceptional pupil by an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) to fit this definition of the term “exceptional student”.

PROCEDURES

If you provide consent for your child to volunteer to participate in this study, your child will be asked to provide assent to:

- Attend three individual interviews (up to 30 minutes each) in a private area of your home
- Respond to up to two questions in each interview, either through conversation or through a task or method most comfortable to them (i.e. drawing a picture or building a Lego creation to demonstrate their ideas)

These interviews are considered to be differentiated, meaning that they will cater to the strengths and challenges of each participant such that they can successfully share their ideas with me, as the researcher. These interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder, and anything created by your child (i.e. drawing or Lego creation) will be captured using a digital camera.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There is a possibility that the interview questions may cause your child to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, anxious or upset depending on their experiences with special education. The use of differentiated interviews is meant to make your child feel comfortable and successful, which should minimize any discomfort. As a certified teacher who works with elementary school-aged children on a regular basis, the researcher anticipates being able to develop a positive rapport with your child which should also ease any discomfort.
Although you, as the parent(s) and/or guardian(s), provide consent for your child to volunteer to participate, your child must provide assent, which means that they must agree to participate. If the possibility of loss of status, privacy and/or reputation is of great concern to your child, they may choose not to provide assent, or to withdraw their assent at any time and withdraw from the study. For any afterhours concerns, please contact Kids Help Phone at 1-800-668-6868.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Your child may gain useful knowledge about themselves and the meaning special education has in their life. Your child may become better aware of the role special education plays in their mental health and academic successes. Additionally, this study will begin to address a gap in research, as there is a lack of studies which explore the educational experiences of exceptional students

COMPENSATION FOR PARTICIPATION

Your child will be compensated for their participation with a $50 Amazon gift card.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with your child will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Interviews will be conducted in a private area of either your home. A pseudonym will be assigned to your child to maintain confidentiality in data collection and in any written reporting.

As a member of the Elementary Teachers’ Federation of Ontario (ETFO), it is the researcher’s duty under the Child and Family Services Act to report any reasonable grounds to suspect that a child under her care is at risk of harm, abuse, neglect, etc. If your child reveals to her that they are at risk or have been at risk, the researcher must report this, thus limiting the protection of the confidentiality of the your child. In this event, the researcher will report this to her supervisor, Dr. Geri Salinitri.

Interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder and a digital camera will be used to capture still photographs of any artifacts created by your child. Your child will not be able to review and/or edit any digital audio recordings or photographs.

Written records, digital data, and artifacts will be secured in a locked filing cabinet/desk drawer in the researcher’s private office. Any of such data stored digitally will be kept on the researcher’s password-protected personal laptop. Data will be accessible only to the researcher and to her thesis committee, made up of professors at the University of Windsor, in the event that the researcher needs advice in regards to data analysis. The final draft of the researcher’s M.Ed. thesis will be accessible on an academic site for academic purposes.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Your child may withdraw from the study at any time through the data collection stage, prior to the completion of the third and final interview. All data collected prior to withdrawal will be kept for data analysis. The researcher will ask your child at the beginning of each interview if they still wish to participate. There will be no consequences for withdrawal.
FEEDBACK OF THE RESULTS OF THIS STUDY TO THE PARTICIPANTS

Research findings will be available to participants. Information on how to access the research findings will be provided upon completion of the final interview.

SUBSEQUENT USE OF DATA

These data may be used in subsequent studies, in publications and in presentations.

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

If you have questions regarding your child’s rights as a research participant, contact: Research Ethics Coordinator, University of Windsor, Windsor, Ontario N9B 3P4; Telephone: 519-253-3000 EXT. 3948; e-mail: ethics@uwindsor.ca

SIGNATURE LEGAL REPRESENTATIVE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT

I understand the information provided for the study *Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students* as described herein. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to allow my child to participate in this study. I have kept a copy of this form for my records.

Name of Participant

Name of Legal Representative

Signature of Legal Representative   Date

SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR

These are the terms under which I will conduct research.

Signature of Investigator   Date
Appendix G: Assent Form

Title of the Project: Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students

You are invited to take part in a study about special education. This study is happening because there has not been a lot of research about what students think about their experiences with special education.

If you agree to be in the study, you will be asked some questions about your experiences with special education. You will be able to share your ideas in a way that is most comfortable to you (i.e. by talking about it, by drawing a picture, by building a Lego creation, etc.). We will meet in a private area of your home for up to half an hour each time. This will happen once a week for up to three weeks. Our conversations will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. If you make something (i.e. a picture or a Lego creation), it will be photographed using a digital camera.

You can ask questions about this study at any time. If you decide at any time not to finish the interview, you can ask the researcher to stop.

The questions you will be asked are only about what you think. There are no right or wrong answers because this is not a test.

If you sign this paper, it means that you have read this, or that it has been read to you, and that you want to be in the study. If you do not want to be in the study, do not sign this paper. Being in the study is up to you, and no one will be upset if you do not sign this paper or if you change your mind later. You are allowed to change your mind and you will be asked at the beginning of every interview if you have changed your mind.

Name of Participant

Signature of Participant    Date
Appendix H: Interview Schedule

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

*Interview questions will be available to participants visually, printed on a piece of paper and displayed in a frame, for reference throughout the interview.*

**Day 1:**

- **Interview Question**
  - What is special education?

- **Goals for Day 1**
  - Become acquainted
  - Learn about the participant’s learning strengths and challenges
  - Describe the differentiated interview format
  - Provide (and demonstrate) a non-exhaustive list of options for materials for authentic tasks (i.e., tangible manipulatives such as clay and/or Lego, paper and writing utensils, assigned assistive technology, etc.)
  - Explain that these options will be available at each interview for the participant to use to respond to the given interview question
  - Obtain a definition of special education from participant

- **Guiding Statements and Questions**
  - Each time that we meet we will have two goals for the interview. Today’s first goal is to get to know each other and to make a list.
  - Tell me about yourself (i.e., age, grade, interests, hobbies, family and friends, strengths, challenges, etc.).
  - I have designed this study to involve “differentiated interviews”. What I mean by this is that each participant’s interview will be a little bit different, allowing everyone to answer my questions in a way that is most comfortable to them and allows them to be most successful. Our first goal for today is to come up with a list of ways that you can answer the interview questions best.
  - Do you have a piece of technology assigned to you for you to use at school (i.e., iPad, laptop, Chromebook, etc.)?
  - In what ways do you show your best work (i.e., through conversation, artwork, use of technology, tangibly, etc.)?
  - Each week, I will have the materials on our list available for you. We will meet for up to half an hour, and I will usually ask you two questions that you may respond to using the materials from our list. I will record our interviews and may also take pictures of your final product, if you create something to represent your ideas.
  - Do you have any questions for me about how the interviews will work?
  - Today’s second goal is for you to define special education.
  - Define means to explain what a word or a term means.
  - Describe what the term “special education” means.
  - Can you provide some examples to back up your definition?
Day 2:

- **Interview Questions**
  - What is your experience with special education and how do you view your role in it?
  - How would you describe being a student receiving special education services?

- **Goals for Day 2**
  - Obtain a description of the participant’s experience with special education and how they view their role in it.
  - Obtain a description from the participant of being a student receiving special education services.

- **Guiding Statements and Questions**
  - Today’s first goal is for you to describe your experience with special education and to tell me about how you view your role in it.
  - Tell me about your involvement with special education.
  - Tell me about how you view your role or job in your experience with special education.
  - Today’s second goal is for you to describe what it’s like to be a student who receives special education services.
  - Tell me what it has been like for you to be a student who receives special education services.

Day 3:

- **Interview Questions**
  - What feelings come to mind when you hear “special education”?
  - What meaning does special education have in your life?

- **Goals for Day 3**
  - Obtain a description of the feelings that come to the participant’s mind when they hear “special education”.
  - Obtain a description of the meaning special education has in the participant’s life.

- **Guiding Statements and Questions**
  - Today’s first goal is for you to describe what feelings come to mind when you hear “special education”.
  - Tell me about the feelings you have.
  - Can you give me some examples to back up these feelings?
  - Today’s second goal is for you to describe what meaning special education has in your life.
  - Tell me about what special education means to you.
Appendix I: Post-Study Letter

POST-STUDY LETTER

Dear Parent(s) and/or Guardian(s),

This letter is to inform you that I have completed collecting data for my study, *Exploring the Perceptions of Exceptional Students*. No further data will be collected from your child.

As the researcher, my next steps with the study are to analyze the data, to report this data in my M.Ed. thesis, and to defend my thesis in front of my M.Ed. thesis committee, made up from professors from the University of Windsor. Once these steps are complete, a summary of the study results will be available to you on the University of Windsor Research Ethics Board’s website ([https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/](https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/research-result-summaries/)). These results will be made available no later than September 2018.

I cannot thank you and your child enough for your cooperation and participation. Please pass along this $50 Amazon gift card to your child as a token of my appreciation.

Sincerely,

Bailey Regts
*M.Ed. Candidate*
*B.Math, B.Ed., OCT*
*Faculty of Education*
*University of Windsor*
# Data Analysis

**Interviewee Pseudonym:** Graham (G)  
**Interviwer:** Bailey Regts (BR)

## Initial Notes

**Interview 1: February 16, 2018, 4PM**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial Notes</th>
<th>Original Transcript</th>
<th>Emerging Themes</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>BR: Nice to see you today.</td>
<td>BR: Nice to see you today.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G: Yes.</td>
<td>G: Yes.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>BR: Um, so the first thing that we’re going to look at here is something called the Assent Form. Your mom has given you permission to participate in the study but it’s up to you to actually give yourself that permission, okay? So this letter here, it just says that I’ve invited you to take part in this study. It’s happening because there hasn’t been a lot of research about what students think about their experiences with special education. If you agree to be in the study you’ll be asked some questions about your experiences with special education. You’ll be able to share your ideas in a way that is most comfortable to you so and we’re going to talk about that a little bit; um, so it might be through conversation, you can draw me a picture, you can</td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
VITA AUCTORIS

NAME: Bailey Andrea Regts

PLACE OF BIRTH: Chatham, ON

YEAR OF BIRTH: 1993

EDUCATION:
- John McGregor Secondary School, Chatham, ON, 2011
- University of Windsor, B.Math, Windsor, ON, 2014
- University of Windsor, B.Ed., Windsor, ON, 2015
- University of Windsor, M.Ed., Windsor, ON, 2018