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Stakeholder Perspectives: How Participation in a Work-Based Learning Program
Affects Perceptions

A Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the

Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching and Learning Program of
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Education Doctorate

By

Samantha G. Piller

April 1, 2021

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This Dissertation for the Education Doctorate in Transformational Teaching
and Learning Degree

By Samantha G. Piller

as been approved on behalf of the College of Education

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April 1, 2021

ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Stakeholder Perspectives: How Participation in a Work-Based Learning
Program Affects Perceptions

By

Samantha G. Piller

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, 2021

Kutztown, Pennsylvania

Directed by Mark Wolfmeyer, PhD

The concept of disability and how it is perceived varies based on one's own understanding, prior experiences, position, and interactions with others. By adding the variable of employment into the equation, perceptions surrounding disability can have a significant impact on the disabled community. The amount of significance corresponds directly with the level or degree of one's disability and other identities. Currently, the separation between employment rates for disabled adults and their non-disabled counterparts is vast (Sametz, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine some variables that affect employment outcomes for youth with low-incidence disabilities. Guided by theoretical frameworks of Disability Studies (DS) and Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) and drawing on a conceptual framework of phenomenology, this qualitative study utilizes a focus group, interviews, survey, and researcher field notes to elicit the perceptions of those involved in a work-based learning program (WBL). Initial coding and an inter-rater reliability check identified fourteen codes. Three themes emerged during second round coding. Results are indicative of the importance of work preparation programs for all stakeholders, as the concepts of work and disability are perceived in relation to our position, shared experiences, and sense of belonging.

Stakeholder Perspectives

Keywords: Work-Based Learning (WBL), disability, stakeholder perspectives, low-incidence disabilities, Disability Studies (DS), Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit), phenomenology, ableism

Signature of Investigator:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Samantha Keller", is written over a light blue rectangular background. The signature is positioned above a horizontal line.

Date: 4/1/2021

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Without my mom, Sharon, I would not be at this point. My mom has encouraged me in all endeavors throughout my life, given me the choice to pursue whatever it is that makes me happy and safe, and supported me when things around me had a negative impact. She never questioned why I wanted to keep furthering my education, rather she stood by my decision to do so. Thank you for your unwavering support, encouragement, and being a sounding board. I also appreciate your willingness to review (proofread) my dissertation and act as a critical friend. You said you were honored to be asked, but I am the one who is honored to have you as my mother.

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To Cohort 2 (not in any particular order, though I did list my LSC members first) Heather, Dan, Nicole, Brittany, Liz, Richman, Daniel, Cathy, and Denise: I initially inquired about the Ed.D. program at the tail end of the first cohort formation, interviewed for the second cohort, and was deferred to the third cohort as were some of you. All I can say is that I am so glad we ended up in Cohort 2 together. I cannot envision making it to the end without all of you. Just let me know when you are up for another high ropes course!

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“Disability is part of the human experience. We all need to engage in the work to make our world accessible to everyone.” (Girma, 2019, p. 265)

Introduction

Movements toward having all students, including disabled youth, be adequately prepared for post-high school life have been prevalent and on the rise in the educational realm. Spearheaded by federal policy and through requirements specified in transition plans within school-aged students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) (Papay & Bambara, 2014), discourse, programs, and activities have been centering on what is needed to prepare students to be college and career ready (American Institutes for Research, 2019; Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). Despite concerted efforts, current research demonstrates continued gaps between employment rates for disabled adults and their non-disabled counterparts.

Following the definition from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), “disability means a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (Connor et al., 2016, p. 204). However, the meaning and perceptions of what classifies a disability can be altered over time (Cherney, 2019). Classifications and characteristics for what determines a diagnosed disability can vary based on geographical location, national trends, age, and changes in policy. For example, the present study took place in a state where thirteen disability categories are identified for purposes of school-age youth qualifying for an IEP under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and eight disability categories are grouped within the category of low-incidence disabilities. These categories are not consistent throughout the United States. This has a significant impact on how a student may qualify for an IEP.

Thus, affecting how a student receives instruction, support, and preparation for post-high school life.

Current research shows that programs including work-based learning (WBL) and skill instruction (e.g., soft skills such social skills, work-readiness skills, etc.) during high school can have a positive effect on employment outcomes for disabled individuals, increase accessibility, and help to facilitate the transition to post-high school life (Clark, Test, & Konrad, 2019; Inge & Moon, 2006; Ju, Zhang, & Pacha, 2012). The process of transitioning relates to a change from that of one identity or group to another. In special education, it is referred to and viewed as moving from school-aged to adulthood (Alwell & Cobb, 2006). Available research also shows mixed or limited results as to the effectiveness of one's level of self-determination (Wehman, Sima, Ketchum, West, Chan, & Luecking, 2015; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Park, 2008), how challenges faced by disabled students continue to manifest and have an impact despite legislation, and how the range of perceptions of stakeholders (e.g., disabled students, employers, etc.) affects current and future employment experiences. The research surrounding effective components and those with limited results will be further investigated and discussed throughout the present project.

The purpose of this study is to examine some factors, including stakeholder perceptions, reframing the concept of disability, and participation in a WBL program, that has the potential to affect employment outcomes and increase accessibility for youth with low-incidence disabilities after high school. Secondary purposes serve as a method for self-reflection in relation to the design and delivery of a current WBL program and to empower disabled youth.

There is a need to be more intentional in the reporting of the employment outcomes for transitioning youth with low-incidence disabilities (Simonsen and Neubert, 2013). This process would allow for the identification of factors that can influence employment outcomes. Titchkosky (2003) writes, “the unemployment and non-labour force participation rate among disabled people is over 50 percent and rises higher in relation to the perceived severity of disability” (p. 234). The results of the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS-2), as reviewed by Sanford, Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, and Shaver (2011), identify how youth with low-incidence disabilities have low employment statistics when compared to non-disabled peers and is based on disability category. As documented by the National Organization on Disability (2019), there needs to be a focus on improving employment for the disabled community. As available research suggests, the employment outlook and success for the disabled community is not analogous to the employment outcomes of nondisabled people (Bellman, Burgstahler, & Ladner, 2014). The inequity in employment rate between disabled and nondisabled people provides a platform from which to advocate for social justice which includes equitable practices in school, employment, and beyond.

Sametz (2017) and Nario-Redmond (2020) have both documented that disabled people are one of the largest minority groups experiencing limited employment opportunities and participation. Mandates to improve the status of this group have not been effective (Nario-Redmond, 2020). This becomes apparent while members of the disabled community are still in school. Aside from their disabilities, disabled youth face other barriers to achieving success beyond high school. They are more likely to be members of other minoritized or disadvantaged groups that encounter barriers throughout

their lives. Circumstances such as limited resources, living in a single-parent household, living in impoverished conditions, and having parents with limited education also affect disabled youth (Hogan, Shandra, & Msall, 2007; Shandra & Hogan, 2008).

Available research and current employment statistics for disabled individuals, particularly those individuals diagnosed with low-incidence disabilities and from other traditionally marginalized groups, demonstrate a need for more interventions and a focus on what can be done to help increase future employment outcomes for disabled youth prior to entering the workforce. This includes examining how disability is perceived and how WBL programs can affect the perceptions of all stakeholders involved in the process, including the students themselves and the spaces where students can gain meaningful, real-life experiences and potential employment.

Chapter One: Problem of Practice

This chapter highlights my position, identity, and view as a special education teacher, an action researcher, and insider while examining a WBL program I began designing and implementing at my high school eight years ago. This process is still ongoing for me as I consider myself to be a life-long learner and I am continuously reflecting on and changing my craft to meet the needs of my students. This study is part of that reflective process to ensure that I am listening to my students, helping them to find and be supported in their identity(ies), and to include opportunities that are designed with my students' interests in mind, not what I think they like or should become. As Hollins (2011) states, "learning to teach people different from ourselves requires moving beyond a view of the world as an extension of self to an openness to diverse perspectives and to views of knowledge as socially constructed and evolving" (p. 117).

The overarching purpose of the WBL program is to provide instruction relating to getting and keeping a job as well as providing authentic, real-world work experiences for youth with low-incidence disabilities. Herr and Anderson (2015) identify insiders as those who “are researching their own practice or practice setting” (p. 41). To further introduce my dissertation project in this chapter, I first explored my own experiences as an insider and my view of disability. I also acknowledge the perspectives of the other stakeholders involved: students, employers/employees at community job sites, and other current or former WBL teachers within my school district. I follow up with identifying three key research questions and how they play into the significance of the present study and current research that is available. Lastly, key terms are identified to acknowledge their presence, explanations, and relationship to this study.

Research Context

My students attend a large, urban high school which currently has 2800+ students in grades 9-12. As Hollins (2011) notes, “the majority of students in urban schools tend to be from ethnic minority groups and include a higher percentage of low-income students” (p. 105). The entire district in which this high school is situated is classified as Title I due to the family/guardian income level throughout the district. My students participate in the Life Skills Support (LSS) Program, are enrolled in one of my WBL classes and range in ages 14-21. They qualify as the 1% of my district’s population that participate in the alternate state assessment and have been diagnosed with low-incidence disabilities. My students are grouped by age and grade level and rotate between me and two other transition track teachers (in-school work-based learning and independent living) either in the AM or PM session, while participating in functional academic classes during the

other session. Within the transition track, my students rotate between classes based on the day of the week rather than by class period. This structure allows for larger blocks of time to participate in authentic WBL opportunities in the community.

Work-based learning program (WBL). My students either participated in community-based work experience, in-school work experience (coffee shop and book room), or a combination of both. I selected the potential job sites, formed a partnership with local businesses and staff, and selected a variety of businesses within my students' or the school's neighborhood. I feel that laying the groundwork and preparing prior to implementing the WBL program would aid in increasing the comfort level of my students and the employers/employees at the job sites. This research looks to find the connection between perceptions and comfort level when people of differing identities share in a common experience.

The community job sites consisted of two established sites and one that was recently acquired during the 2019-2020 school year. Weekly, my students and I participated in community WBL opportunities at a locally owned and operated sports bar (W), national pharmacy chain (C), and large, internationally known manufacturing plant (N). My students performed actual job tasks, wore safety equipment, and worked in common areas and/or alongside of regular paid employees. When my students were not in the community or completing job tasks in school, they learned about skills and participated in activities necessary to gain and keep employment (e.g., interviewing, dressing appropriately for an interview and while on the job, hygiene, asking for help, behaviors that are appropriate vs not appropriate for the workplace, etc.).

Perspectives. My research plan included using various methods to gather the perspectives of stakeholder groups that were directly involved in the WBL program on a daily and weekly basis. This included observations, a survey, and interviews. The researcher, some of the researcher's students, a few employers/employees at our community job sites that partner with the researcher, and other current or former work experience teachers in the district who have different approaches to and experiences with the WBL program shared their perspectives through this process.

Researcher Positionality

In action research, the “participants themselves that are in control of the research or are participants” in the process (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 1). The authors identify that “feedback should be sought from other stakeholders in the setting or community to ensure a democratic outcome and provide an alternative source of explanations” (p. 4). Going off this premise, I am using my position as an insider while conducting my research to elicit the perspectives of various stakeholders that participate in the WBL program. I want this process to be reflective of my participants' perspectives so as to provide agency and opportunities for self-determination. As Freire (2018) writes:

Teachers and students, co-intent on reality, are both Subjects, not only in the task of unveiling that reality, and thereby coming to know it critically, but in the task of re-creating that knowledge. As they attain this knowledge of reality through common reflection and action, they discover themselves as permanent recreators. In this way, the presence of the oppressed in the struggle for their liberation will be what it should be: not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement (p. 69).

I want my students to have equal say and participation in the process regardless of their position, role, or identity. Often, the voices of disabled students are not sought in the design and implementation of programming. In these instances, their position or perspective as a disabled student is not valued or considered. Positionality, as defined by Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017), “is the concept that our perspectives are based on our place in society, and where you stand in relation to others shapes what you can see and understand” (p. 15). Michalko (2002) explains how “our identities are couched in speech and action and we speak and act with and from them. In a social world, others use our identity to define us and we use it to define ourselves” (p. 5). Connor et al. (2016) elaborates further on how identities help to note differences among groups. The authors stress “a person who is perceived as having a dis/ability is no more or less different from someone who is considered nondisabled than that non-disabled person is different from him/her” (p. 18).

Due to pervasive systemic, historical, and societal barriers, the disability identity is often perceived as one of deficit or difference. My identity has been shaped by my experiences and position in relation to those around me and this is how I have come to view disability identity not from a deficit perspective but to advocate for reducing and dismantling deficit thinking surrounding the concept of disability and the disabled community.

My identity as a white, very short, left-handed, degreed, able-bodied, cisgender female in my early forties is some of what has contributed to my experiences. Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) identify how “when we fit neatly into these binary (either/or groupings) categories, scholars sometimes use the prefix “cis” to describe us. Cis is Latin

for “same” and indicates that one’s gender assignment and identity are the same or in agreement” (p. 38). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) elaborate on the privileges (whether identified or unidentified) those of us are exposed to (intentional or unintentional) who do not fit into one particular or dominant category and “are marginalized by social norms” (p. 82). On one hand, I fit into social norms as white, cisgender, able-bodied, and degreed. From my other lenses as a very short, left-handed female, I view the physical and social world differently. My experiences, though not the same as a person with a diagnosed disability, help me to understand what it is like to navigate one’s surroundings that are not always accessible.

I grew up mostly in a single-parent household in an large, inner city (A), the same city in which I currently work and the research took place, living in various apartments, and eventually found ways to put myself through many post-secondary educational experiences. I was able to accomplish this by taking advantage of several employment opportunities which helped to provide financial support needed to pursue post-secondary education. My experiences have helped to highlight the importance of secure and meaningful employment. During my late teenage years, my mother and stepfather worked for a state-run employment agency designed to provide temporary, supported employment services to disabled individuals until my youngest brother was born. My mother took early retirement to care for my brother, as he is on the autism spectrum. I attended the same large, urban high school (A) situated in a northern state within the United States at which my research was conducted. My experiences while in high school did not mirror the experiences of my students, as I was in the highest, least restricted classes and participated in the general education curriculum, while my students are in one

of the most restrictive programs and participate in a functional curriculum. They all have been diagnosed with low-incidence disabilities and have an IEP. I did not have an IEP in high school. While I was in high school, I did not qualify for the free or reduced lunch program. Currently, all students within my entire district qualify for free breakfast and lunch through the Title 1 Program. Though my students and I share similar obstacles encountered throughout our childhoods, our lived experiences and future outcomes look very different. Through the creation of my research questions, I look to examine why they have different trajectories or outcomes and if the potential exists to interrupt these outcomes.

Research Questions and Puzzle of Practice

Through this study, I explored how participation in a WBL program could ameliorate some of the barriers to post-high school employment for disabled individuals, namely with low-incidence disabilities, and redefine the meaning and understanding of disability for not only my students but also for the surrounding community. I identified and addressed the following questions:

- How do stakeholders (e.g., students, employees/employers, and work-based learning teachers) view and experience a work-based learning program for students with low-incidence disabilities?
- How does participation in a work-based learning program impact the perceptions of employees/employers towards students with low-incidence disabilities?
- What impact does participation in a work-based learning program have on students with low-incidence disabilities?

These questions are in response to reshaping perceptions surrounding disability and the need for further studies that address how to support students in the transition process from high school to work particularly for students with low-incidence disabilities. They also examine how participants from different vantage points view and experience a WBL program.

Disabled students are guaranteed and entitled to special education supports and services while in school. Upon exiting school, these students lose school-age services and now become eligible for services rather than guaranteed, are often placed on waiting lists for community agencies and support, and are often unable to independently navigate the world of work. This adds additional barriers to seeking and achieving employment in adulthood. In July 2019, I viewed a webinar relating to the reduction of services offered by a state-run employment program (the same program my parents worked for prior to their retirement) designed to provide temporary supported employment and training for disabled adults. As of the webinar release, a waiting list has been created for all levels of need due to lack of funding available to provide such services. This has an immediate impact on the students I support and educate, as they were previously placed on or at the top of the list for services prior to exiting high school. My students are in the last level of need category that has been closed as of July 1, 2019. Prior to the closure of this category, open enrollment was available for disabled individuals with low-incidence disabilities. These students are now added to the ever-growing list of individuals applying for employment supports which means the wait time between high school graduation and potential for employment supports has shown an increase. Thus, an

increase in the length of time and the number of disabled individuals that are or will become unemployed.

For the purposes of this study, I conducted my research using Disability Studies (DS) and Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) conceptual frameworks while incorporating a phenomenological theoretical framework. To accomplish this, I examined the disability experience from the perspective of my disabled students, interrogated the perceptions of employers/employees to which my students have supervised weekly interactions, and gathered input from teachers who have varying levels of experience with a WBL program. I also reflected on my own position as the creator of the WBL program.

I wanted to investigate how the perceptions of various stakeholders are affected by their involvement in and interactions through a structured WBL program. A few questions arose at the onset that influenced my decision to pursue stakeholder perspectives as a key element of my research. Simultaneously, I wanted to self-reflect and analyze the current WBL program I created and offered to my students. I had the responsibility and freedom to design the WBL program, select and arrange the community job sites, and schedule each day how I saw fit. Has my program been designed with my students and their needs in mind? How did my students view the concept of work through participation in such a program? How would individuals at work sites view my students and their ability to perform job tasks? How could participation affect one's view surrounding the concept of disability? Through this study, I hoped to not only answer these questions but ultimately give voice to those who the program was intended for, namely my students and the employers/employees. I

envisioned that the partnership I created would lead to employment opportunities not only for my students but for the disabled community.

Research suggests reasons why employers are not apt to hire qualified workers with disabilities. These reasons center around their perceptions of the disabled person not their qualifications (Berger, 2013). The process of disclosing a disability can be risky because of ableist stereotypes which can impact an otherwise qualified worker at all levels of employment (e.g., interviewing, hiring, and advancement). Wong (2020) emphasizes how, “being visible and claiming a disabled identity brings risks as much as it brings pride” (p. xxii). On the other hand, failing to disclose a disability may prevent one from obtaining an accommodation for which one is qualified. This can also affect an otherwise qualified worker at all levels of employment. Those with less interactions surrounding diversity and people from differing ability levels may be hesitant. These beliefs can also elicit and maintain ableist thoughts and actions (Nario-Redmond, 2020).

From my view, exposing my students to authentic work experiences will not only increase their exposure to work, but it will also help the surrounding community to increase their exposure to differing identities and view my students from a different perspective. Nario-Redmond (2020) states:

Decades of research has now accumulated on what types of interactions and social conditions contribute to meaningful understanding and the promotion of positive attitudes – not only toward those with whom one has had contact, but toward other members of their own group (p. 268).

The ability to listen to others’ perspectives and develop concern for another’s well-being are steps toward reducing prejudice and changing preconceived notions one has

surrounding ability and disability. When people interact with those from differing groups and perspectives, they have the potential to learn from others, see members of the group aside from expectations or preconceived notions, and notice connections rather than differences (Nario-Redmond, 2020).

According to Connor et al. (2016), “DisCrit problematizes the ways that binaries between normal/abnormal and abled/disabled play out in a range of contexts” (p. 17). Titchkosky (2003) identifies how “suspending the need to remedy disability, and to instead learn from it, is premised upon the possibility that we can locate both the experience and the meaning of disability as that which is made between people within environments” (p. 29). Further, Girma (2019) elaborates on how communities designed for a specific type of person or group can cause a greater disconnect and separation.

Michalko (2002) identifies how “nondisabled people are often very uncomfortable in the presence of those of us who are disabled. They patronize, pity, and even ignore us” (p. 95). As Berger (2013) concurs, “nondisabled people are often uncomfortable, even fearful, around people with disabilities, as if the disabling condition might be contagious” (p. 8). The author also addresses how “it is important to understand ‘disability’ as a social phenomenon, it is a product of societal attitudes and the social organization of society” (p. 9). Unemployment is often directly tied to a disabled individual, one’s demeanor, or impairment-related features, but less effort or focus is paid to environmental barriers (Nario-Redmond, 2020). These environmental and other socially created barriers can restrict people from participating in work. As a sight and hearing-impaired individual, Girma (2019) writes, “they designed this environment for people who can see and hear. In this environment, I’m disabled. They place the burden

on me to step out of my world and reach into theirs” (p. 14). Girma (2019) and Nario-Redmond (2020) identify that designing for disability or with disability in mind can have a benefit for everyone and increase accessibility for all.

Following the premise of DS, DisCrit, and phenomenology as highlighted by Berger (2013), Connor et al. (2016) and Titchkosky (2003), respectively, the concepts of disability and ableism and how they manifest in various contexts is socially-driven and based on pre-established perceptions or limited interactions with disabled individuals. Nario-Redmond (2020) writes how increased interactions play a significant role: “the greater the amount of contact experienced between groups; the less prejudice was demonstrated” (p. 270). Changes in attitudes and comfort levels are related to increased opportunities for sustained contact which allows for group members to have a sense of belonging and a voice (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Through this study, I directly examined how one’s perceptions are established based on prior experiences and how they may change based on exposure over time to individuals with differing identities. I also provided an opportunity for agency and collaboration among the participant groups. Annamma (2019) expresses the need to alter perceptions through learning opportunities such as using curriculum, pedagogy, and collective experiences.

Though my research is not specifically focusing on the other identities of my students (e.g., racial, ethnic, gender, economic status, etc.), as my students did not self-identify nor were they directly questioned during the research process, there is a strong connection between their experiences as disabled students and their racial/ethnic identities. Following the work of Nario-Redmond (2020), people have many identities based on group membership and their positions within those groups. The overlapping

and intersection of these identities adds to the complexity, and often difficulty, by which disabled individuals navigate everyday situations. The concept of intersectionality represents a way for analyzing the nature of an individual's identity. Though there is not a singular way to capture interactions of identities and experiences, "intersectionality helps to examine how multiple identity markers are addressed" (Pugach, Gomez-Najarro, & Matewos, 2019, p. 207).

For the purposes of my study, I wanted to focus on my students' experiences from the identity of disability, one which is socially constructed, (Berger, 2013), but I also wanted to make sure that I am alluding to the other identities that have and will impact their future employment outcomes. Scholars have documented how disability and race are interconnected (Artiles, 2013; Bolaki, 2011). Hargreaves and Skerrett (2020) discussed how various identities intersect among race and gender. Disabled people of color are underrepresented even within the disability community (Nario-Redmond, 2020). Therefore, disability, race, and other identities can impact one's experiences, opportunities, and perceptions of others. During this study, I also pulled from research which supports quality WBL programs (e.g., authentic and real-world experiences, stakeholder involvement, and skill instruction), self-determination and sense of belonging, phenomenology, and consideration of teacher and student identities.

Study Significance

The significance of my research goes beyond adding to the existing research in the field of WBL and including the perspectives of stakeholders. Existing research in the field of special education does not include the perspectives of those with low-incidence disabilities. Research that includes students with a low-incidence disability are

often narrow in scope and relate to instructional strategies that are typically only used with this population. This means available research is limited not only in scope but also in its applicability. Therefore, it is important to apply conceptual and theoretical frameworks traditionally used with nondisabled individuals or disabled individuals with high incidence disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, emotional disturbance, and physical disabilities) to studies involving individuals with low-incidence disabilities. Further significance alludes to how few studies have examined the importance of empowering disabled individuals, particularly those with low-incidence disabilities, or including their feelings and perceptions (Nario-Redmond, 2020).

Researching powerless or vulnerable people, “those who are unable to protect their own interests and who may suffer from negative labeling, stigmatization, exclusion, or discrimination,” is necessary to interrupt the cycle, actively promote empowerment, and provides a means by which to do so (Cohen, Manion, and Morrison, 2018, p. 240). In his writing, Freire (2018) further elaborates that “any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression” (p. 55). Thus, it is imperative to interrupt this cycle and to eliminate the perpetuation and maintenance of ableism. Girma (2019) affirms the presence of ableism and the need to challenge it as she writes, “lots of places are like this, refusing to accommodate people with disabilities because they don’t want to think about disability. They treat serving people with disabilities as optional, charity work” (p. 160).

This research also looks to empower individuals with low-incidence disabilities, create a sense of belonging, and increase the participants’ level of understanding surrounding disability particularly in relation to employment. Those who have a strong

connection to disability identity tend to have a stronger sense of self-worth (Nario-Redmond, 2020). By empowering disabled individuals through various means of gathering their input and acknowledging their experiences is a step toward increasing one's self-worth and creating a sense of belonging within the disability community and beyond.

Sametz (2017) documented that disabled individuals face limited workforce participation. Disabled youth continue to experience poor post-school outcomes when compared with non-disabled peers in all facets of life (Morningstar, Hirano, Roberts-Dahn, Teo, & Kleinhammer-Tramill, 2018; Newman, Wagner, Knokey, Marder, Nagle, Shaver, & Wei, 2011). Disabled youth are also more often members of racial, ethnic, and disadvantaged economic groups.

As Brown (2016) explains, “underserved students, including those of color, those from low-income families, those whose first language is not English, and those identified as having special needs, experience a pattern of inequitable opportunities to learn in their schooling” (p. 4). Connor et al. (2016), reports that “students with low-incidence disabilities are less likely to graduate high school, graduate with a diploma, and go on to postsecondary education than their non-disabled counterparts” (pp. 91-92). As highlighted in Berger (2013), individuals with low-incidence disabilities have the lowest hourly earning wage amongst all groups. Unemployment and underemployment continue to impact disabled high school graduates (Mamun, Carter, Fraker, & Timmins, 2018). Berger (2013) writes: “people with disabilities often experience prejudice and discrimination comparable to what is experienced by people of color and other minority groups” (p. 7). Therefore, they are socially marginalized and disadvantaged in similar

ways (Gordon & Rosenblum, 2001; Hahn, 1988; Siebers, 2008). Discrimination has direct negative consequences in all facets of life (Nario-Redmond, 2020). These overarching and pervasive examples highlight the need to remedy ableism and reshape the concept of disability.

Marginalization also occurs when the perspectives and experiences of disabled people are not considered or valued as decisions are often made on behalf of this group rather than with this group. According to Connor et al. (2016), “DisCrit focuses on the ways race and dis/ability have been used in tandem to marginalize particular groups in society” (p. 19). By examining the significance of narratives of disability, attention is focused on the experience of disability (Titchkosky, 2003). The author discusses how “disabled people exist in a culture in which little space is given for the experience or articulation of disability from the standpoint of being disabled and moving through the world” (Titchkosky, 2003, p. 86). Recognizing this and accounting for the disability experience is a way to address the historical and societal marginalization of the disabled identity. Nancy Mairs (1996) writes:

Postmodern criticism makes a good deal of the concept of wall-hugging, or marginality, regardless of the way it is conceived, it is never taken to mean that those on the margin occupy a physical space literally outside the field of vision of those in the center, so that the latter trip unawares and fall into laps of those they have banished from consciousness unless these scoot safely out of the way.

‘Marginality’ is not a metaphor for the power relations between one group of human beings and another but a literal description of where I stand (figuratively speaking): over here, on the edge, out of bounds, beneath your notice (p. 59).

Michalko (2002) acknowledges “if disabled people are to be included in society, their disability must be viewed as something other than an essentializing feature of their identity” (p. 153). The author further elaborates “unlike other minority groups, disabled people are still viewed as people with a condition” (p. 161). If a disabled person has a problem within the area of employment, it is often viewed as a result of the disability (Nario-Redmond, 2020; Patterson and Witten, 1987), not as a result of their surroundings or the perceptions of others. In the words of Freire (2018),

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing, and are incapable of learning anything—that they are sick, lazy, and unproductive—that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness. (p. 63)

This socially constructed view of disability and the perceptions imposed on the disabled community have an impact not only on their future outcomes, but it also affects how they perceive themselves in the moment as viable employees and their sense of self-worth.

This study looks to interrupt the intentional and unintentional beliefs that exist surrounding the disability identity to transform the lives and experiences for all.

Definition of Terms:

Work-Based Learning (WBL). In this study, WBL is defined as a program at my building designed to provide real-world job experiences for students with low-incidence disabilities. It combines in-class instruction on skills necessary to gain and keep employment with weekly, supervised work sessions at established businesses in the

community. The same teacher presents the in-class instruction and accompanies the students into the community.

Low-Incidence Disabilities. For the purposes of this study, low-incidence disabilities as defined by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 are defined as visual impairment, hearing loss, deaf-blindness, significant cognitive impairment/intellectual disability, autism, traumatic brain injury, multiple disabilities, and orthopedic impairments which require individualized intervention supports and services. These categories of disability comprise a small percentage of the population. These students participate in a functional curriculum, participate in the state alternate assessment, and follow the alternate state standards.

Ableism. For the purposes of this study, ableism is defined as disability discrimination, prejudice, and oppression which privileges the nondisabled perspective, is socially constructed, and promotes unequal treatment of individuals with disabilities (Berger, 2013; Nario-Redmond, 2020). It is the intentional or inadvertent exclusion of the disability perspective and making decisions for, not with, the disabled community. Ableism views disability from a deficit perspective.

Intersectionality. The term intersectionality in this study follows the definition coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw. It examines how race, class, gender, disability, and other identities intersect, interact, and overlap (Crenshaw, 1989). These layers add to the complexity of one's identity and experiences and how these individuals are perceived by others.

Phenomenology. Phenomenology is a concept used to “seek to understand the lived experiences of a small number of people” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 81). It is

utilized in this study to examine how stakeholders experience and view their participation in the WBL program. The framework of phenomenology is also applied to this study to account for how disability is perceived by the participants based on their pre-established beliefs and experiences.

Chapter Two: Perspective on the Problem of Practice

This chapter discusses the conceptual frameworks of Disability Studies (DS) and Critical Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory (DisCrit) and the theoretical framework of phenomenology as they are applied to the current study. The premise behind incorporating these frameworks is to ensure that the lived experiences and voices of the disabled community are considered, included, and valued. In other words, the narrative of disability is about and from someone with a disability identity, rather than simply relying on historical and societal judgements surrounding disability. Often, the disabled community experiences multiple layers of oppression as they are also members of other identity groups. Including these frameworks ensures that decisions are inclusive of the views and interests of the disabled identity and its many layers. As Titchkosky (2003) states “attending to disability experience brings what for many people is part of the background features of life, typically unnoticed and unthought, into the foreground” (p. 19). Upon reflecting on my own position and that of others, I subsequently address the dichotomy and debate surrounding the use of language and disability rhetoric that exists. The concepts of person-first and disability- (identity) first language are analyzed in relation to this study, disability, ableism, and empowering the disabled community. At the conclusion of this chapter, the connection to other work and disciplines is also explored.

Disability Studies

Disability Studies (DS) is an “interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary field of study that disrupts the idea that disabled people should be defined primarily through their disabilities and retains instead the right for disabled people to define their own relationships with disability” (Dolmage, 2017, p. 5). This field of study “identifies a source of oppression, ableism, which is comparable to racism and sexism and it constitutes how people are exposed and subjected to political, economic, educational, cultural, or social degradation” (Berger, 2013, p. 14). Sensoy and DiAngelo (2017) also identify this oppression of people with disabilities as ableism. Due to one’s ability level or appearance, ableism assumes that some people are normal and superior while other people are abnormal and inferior, and it creates and maintains discrimination (Berger, 2013; Cherney, 2019; Linton, 1998; Papadimitriou, 2001). This widely understood premise perpetuates the “deficit-based understanding of difference” (Annamma, Ferri, & Connor, 2018, p. 48). Following this premise of ableism, the more severe a disability is or is perceived to be, the greater the level of discrimination. Scholars in disability studies explore the impact of ableism in social oppression, marginalization, and discrimination against disabled people. Tobin Siebers, a leading disability studies scholar, wrote “undoubtedly the central purpose of disability studies is to reverse the negative connotations of disability” (Cherney, 2019, p. 3). Disability assumptions can become self-fulfilling as disabled people are less likely to become self-determined and achieve independence in various areas of adulthood (Nario-Redmond, 2020). To challenge inequities in this sense would require universal recognition that ableism does exist

(Cherney, 2019). Critical disability theory identifies a version of this acknowledgement and social model based on the premise that:

- (1) disability is a social construct, not the inevitable consequence of impairment,
- (2) disability is best characterized as a complex interrelationship between impairment, individual response to impairment, and the social environment, and
- (3) the social disadvantage experienced by disabled people is caused by the physical, institutional and attitudinal environment which fails to meet the needs of people who do not match the social expectation of normalcy” (Hosking, 2008, p. 7; Reaume, 2014).

Nario-Redmond (2020) writes, “whether disabled or not, people need to feel good about themselves, to have a sense of belonging, and to exercise control over their environment” (p. 345).

In the United States, the Disability Rights Movement (DRM) formed in conjunction with other movements of the 1960s. This combined effort was in support of marginalized and underrepresented groups (Berger, 2013; Mansbridge & Morris, 2001). Disabled people started to use language surrounding civil rights. This led to social change for the disabled community (Nario-Redmond, 2020). As activism increased, the US Congress passed landmark federal disability legislation, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This act mandated basic accommodations in the public sector, required public institutions to make structural reforms, and made it illegal for any institution receiving federal funding to discriminate based on disability. In 1990, the ADA followed suit, requiring disability accommodations in the workplace, and further prohibiting discrimination based only on disability. Overall, the DRM was essential to creating changes that made more

equitable contact and experiences between disabled and nondisabled people possible. However, in the decade following the passage of the ADA, unemployment among disabled people increased (Cherney, 2019). Though enacting laws increased accessibility to facilities and institutions, flaws or loopholes in the laws favored employers over the disabled employee. Such examples included how ADA accommodations were not mandated in certain businesses based on the size of the organization (e.g., number of employees) or how employers were fearful of potential litigation so disabled individuals were not even considered for employment opportunities.

Despite overcoming historical oppression, increased advocacy, and the passage of laws, disabled people continue to be “overrepresented among the ranks of the poor and unemployed, with an employment rate of less than 40 percent of the general adult population” (Berger, 2013, p. 128). When employed, disabled people are mostly represented within lower paying jobs and under-represented in management or professional positions. Overall, disabled women and disabled persons of color have even lower job opportunities and experiences (Berger, 2013; Wilson-Kovacs, Ryan, Haslam, & Rabinovich, 2008).

Critical Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory

The framework of DisCrit explores the ways in which race and ability are interconnected and are derived within society. Connor et al. (2016, p. 14) identifies “DisCrit in education as a framework that theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, dis/ability and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than White students with dis/abilities” (Crenshaw, 1993; Solorzano & Yasso,

2001). The authors report how “a DisCrit analysis would also consider what happens when a layer of race is added to the complexity of having a disability and how disability also adds complexity to the experience of race” (Connor et al., 2016, p. 147). This interaction of identities has opened pathways for identifying and interrupting cycles of oppression (Crenshaw, 1989; Annamma, et al., 2018). Pugach et al. (2019) continue this exploration of intersectionality:

An intersectionality lens allows us to conceptualize the structure of society as based on multiple social categories that form an individual’s units of identity—revealing the emerging positionalities of individuals based on the perceptions, experiences, and power-negotiated relations that result from multiple group memberships (p. 207).

The seven tenets of DisCrit align with this intersection of identities: “racism and ableism circulate interdependently, values identities, socially constructed, privileges the populations traditionally not acknowledged in research, considers legal and historical aspects, recognizes Whiteness and Ability as Property based on interest convergence, and activism is essential” (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013, p. 19).

Existing work exploring the intersections of race and disability in education has focused on highlighting the problem of students of color being disproportionately placed in special education, particularly in the disability categories that are subject to the most interpretation and bias (Annamma et al., 2018). By advocating for approaches to the study of race and disability, DisCrit encourages a variety of perspectives and theories. When using DisCrit as a framework, scholars identified how racism and ableism are related (Annamma et al., 2018). Annamma et al. (2013) note how “scholars outside

Dis/ability Studies might see an article about dis/ability and think, ‘This is a special education issue, so I do not have to concern myself.’ However, issues of perceived dis/ability constitute issues of equity that involve all people” (p. 13).

Outside of special education, scholars have recognized that “race and disability are socially constructed categories of difference and exclusion” (Connor et al., 2016, p. 52). Ableism, along with other group prejudices, is historically, socially, and systemically rooted. Therefore, the potential to internalize these ableist beliefs exists. Additionally, DisCrit refutes portraying the life and experiences of disabled people without including their perspective (Connor et al, 2016). This is imperative as current research utilizing a DS or DisCrit framework has not been applied to areas of transition planning, WBL programs or seeking direct input from individuals with a low-incidence disability.

Phenomenology and Lived Experiences

Drawing on a phenomenological approach, this study examined the disability experience from the perspective of those who have a low-incidence disability (Berger, 2013). The intent “is to describe the meaning of the experience--both in terms of what was experienced and how it was experienced” (Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019, p. 91). As suggested in Wong (2020), the goal is not to hide or eliminate the perspective that comes from an experience, but to give agency to it. Rossman and Rallis (2017) identify phenomenology as a way to “seek to understand the lived experiences of a small number of people” (p. 81). Phenomenology requires the researcher to forego attitudes, beliefs, prior experiences, and perceptions in order to focus on those of the participants (Neubauer et al., 2019). It also requires self-reflection on the researcher’s part by

ensuring and focusing on the meaning that is constructed from the participants' experiences and perspectives. This is accomplished over prolonged periods of time, by incorporating in-depth interviews, and engaging directly with the people whose experiences are being gathered. It focuses on the meaning of an experience or aspect for the participants, not just the actual experience.

By focusing on the meaning, the lived experience is at the forefront of navigating and making sense of disability (Neubauer et al., 2019). The stigma or perceptions that surround disabled individuals has a significant impact on their employability rates. Employers often have reservations or lowered expectations about the ability of disabled employees regarding productivity, work ethic, and career advancement. An existing perception is that individuals with disabilities are “more prone to absenteeism” and “less capable of getting along with others” (Berger, 2013, p. 129). Additionally, employers are often more concerned about the rising cost of benefits and making work environments accessible (Berger, 2013; Wilson-Kovacs et al., 2008). Nario-Redmond (2020) writes, “the scientific study of ableism and its undoing will continue to be limited if the voices of those inside the disability experience remain underrepresented” (p. 25). This study further interrogated the perspectives of employers/employees at several community WBL sites to determine if their participation in a WBL program designed for disabled youth affected pre-established concepts of disability and reshaped perceptions surrounding the hiring of and working with disabled workers.

Disability Language and Rhetoric

Language and rhetoric are often used to disrupt and replace dominant and traditional discourses. Discourse “designates how language represents meanings,

conventions, and codes in specific socio-cultural, temporal and historical contexts” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 686). This includes changing the terminology used in relation to disability. The passage of ADA was no exception and introduced the concept of person-first language. Person-first language was a way to acknowledge individuality and humanity, not collective impairments or disability (Cherney, 2019; Connor et al, 2016). Proponents of person-first language argue that identifying the person before the disability or adjective used to describe a person brings their status as a person to the forefront, rather than identifying the person initially on the basis or level of disability. It intends to interrupt ableist discussions, beliefs, and references to disability by using language and rhetoric that changes the presentation of wording surrounding how disability is discussed. Person-first language looks to display a level of “sensitivity to disability issues” and address political correctness (Cherney, 2019, p. 25).

In the attempt to challenge past wrongdoings and create a bias-free environment, the use of person-first language may have missed the mark. A decision to utilize person-first language does not actually convey the feelings, intents, or beliefs of the very population it serves to support. Therefore, “many activists and disability studies scholars now prefer to be called Disabled People—privileging disability identity first” (Linton, 1998; Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 104; Shapiro, 2011). Nario-Redmond (2020) further supports the intent and use of disability-first language: “people on the inside of the disability experience have argued that they are the ones who should get to decide what they are called instead of those in government and healthcare bureaucracies designed to speak on their behalf” (p. 104). By honoring people in the way they want to be recognized or how they identify, disability (identity)-first language privileges this often marginalized group. Additionally, person-first language may inadvertently “displace

attention from the ableist social oppression that it seeks to challenge” (Cherney, 2019, 24). Person-first language has been criticized for only aligning disability with impairment while ignoring the discrimination that is still faced by this population. It is based on the premise that disability is something negative and should be cured or ignored. The changing of wording detracts from how the disabled community is typically perceived and may inadvertently reinforce ableist beliefs surrounding the inferiority of a disabled person and the disability community. If identifying the person before the disability in language and rhetoric signify the importance of the person over the disability, then writing it as such will continue to reinforce how having a disability lessens a person, as it is written more as an after-thought. This perpetuates the historical, structural, and systemic belief that disability identity is inferior. Person-first language has not interrupted or ended the oppression of the disabled community, rather it just highlighted how the concept of disability is viewed with a negative connotation and therefore, is allocated to the end to lessen the perceived impact.

The dichotomy between the use of person-first language and disability (identity)-first language is evident and prevalent throughout educational language and rhetoric. As Hollins (2011) references, “teaching and learning are cultural constructs influenced by social norms, values, and practices that are evident in the curriculum and everyday social discourse in formal education from preschool through graduate school” (p. 105). During my post-secondary opportunities, which continue to the present day, the concept of disability has been presented to me and guided using person-first language and rhetoric. Throughout this research journey, I have self-reflected on my current perceptions surrounding the concept of disability identity and how my actions either can perpetuate ableist views of disability or help to dismantle the socially constructed perceptions and

assumptions of what disability is and what a disabled person can and cannot do. As I started analyzing the data from the participants and further reviewed existing literature in relation to DS, DisCrit, and phenomenology, it became apparent that my use of person-first language was based on the belief of what I thought represented the disabled community and would sound better when stated aloud during the study interviews. Therefore, the interview protocols included in this study are not representative of the shift in my language, rhetoric, and understanding as they were created and implemented prior to this change.

I feel it is important to highlight and recognize disability as its own identity by using disability- or identity-first language rather than person-first language. This transformation in my thinking and approach to supporting my students, the WBL program, and the local community is a step toward honoring the experiences and views of the disabled community. Disability is not something that should be relegated to the end, ignored, minimized, or viewed as something negative. This new approach has led me to other research that corroborates the components of successful and structured WBL programs, collaboration amongst stakeholders, and empowering individuals of differing, and often marginalized, identities through examining their experiences and providing opportunities for them to be heard and included. Utilizing identity-first language embraces the identity of disability rather than disguising or conflating it amongst one's other identities. This becomes essential when seeking employment and the quandaries that surround it: to disclose or not disclose, receive necessary accommodations or not, and be afforded general protections against unfair treatment or termination. In order to

disclose appropriately and effectively, one has to provide an acknowledgement of and be comfortable with one's own disability.

Connection to Other Work

Research suggests that one of the key elements to increasing employment statistics for disabled individuals is participation in WBL and work experience programs in high school. Pacha (2013) conducted a study which utilized a quasi-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design and involved thirty-seven high school students with disabilities. The students' work-readiness skills were assessed prior to and after the study to see if participation in a structured work experience program improved their skills. Pacha (2013) noted that high school work experience is a strong predictor of future employment (Bates, Cuvo, Miner, & Korabek, 2001; Benz, Lindstrom & Yovanoff, 2000; Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997; Carter, Ditchman, Sun, Trainor, Swedeen, & Owens, 2010; Kohler & Field, 2003). The study identified the importance of structured and quality work experiences that are linked to in-school learning, individualized to student strengths and preferences, use community connections, and occur in real-world environments.

Another key component to quality WBL programs is ensuring stakeholder involvement, including students, teachers, and community members. Park (2008) conducted a qualitative study to examine the perspectives of special education teachers in Winnipeg. Transition services for youth with disabilities are not mandated to the same extent in Canada as they are in the United States. The researcher wanted to identify what, if anything, was being done to support youth with disabilities. In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with special education teachers in various public-school

settings. Six themes emerged as a result of the interviews: the importance of schools and teachers, student-family involvement in the transition process, inclusive placements and programs, extended high school experiences, functional and comprehensive instruction (including work experience), and networking/collaborating with stakeholders.

As noted in the study, the teachers indicated that they were mainly responsible for providing transition experiences and they attempted to involve their students and parents in all decisions that were made (Park, 2008). By including their students in real experiences outside of school, the teachers exposed them to what life could be like after school. The students who remained in school until aging out had more time to receive instruction and experiences. The teachers incorporated academic and functional skill instruction into the school day to help prepare their students for post-high school life. Collaborating appears to be essential. Everyone is on the same page and no one is solely responsible for all components. The study also highlights the link between self-determination and successful transition outcomes (Park, 2008; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003).

In a 2003 brief, Luecking and Gramlich examined the benefits of WBL, components that constituted a quality WBL program, and evidence-based models of effective WBL programs that help to create successful transition outcomes for disabled youth. The authors identified how “research has consistently demonstrated that education and employment outcomes for youth with disabilities can be significantly improved by frequent and systematic exposure to a variety of real work experiences” (Luecking & Gramlich, 2003, p. 3). The brief identified program characteristics such as clear goals, clear roles of all stakeholders involved, assessments of sites and stakeholder needs,

feedback, and a link between students, schools, and employers. Students need to see the clear path from school to the world of work. Experiences from work need to be reviewed and debriefed in school. The authors suggest that the connection between school and work needs to be constantly reinforced and integrated.

A qualitative study conducted by Bernard Cooney (2002) examined the viewpoints of various stakeholders involved in the transition process for disabled youth: youth, parents, and professionals. Data collection methods such as informal and taped open-ended interviews and observations were conducted. The students involved in the study were diagnosed with severe disabilities. They were transitioning out of high school and were able to articulate their plans. However, they did not have any means by which to achieve their plans. The parents involved in the study indicated that they were unfamiliar with transition terms and procedures, were not knowledgeable about the system, experienced unexpected barriers, were uncertain about outcomes for their children, and viewed their children from the perspective of their abilities and interests. The professionals viewed the students from the perspective of their disabilities, what they were not able to do, and identified programs that would match their current level of achievement and functioning.

The study identified that transition systems promote “clienthood” rather than adulthood (Cooney, 2002, p. 425). They foster dependency not full adult status. Results indicated that the diverse perspectives of the students were ignored. Transition was done to the students involved in the study, not with the students. Research indicates there is a “causal link between positive adult outcomes and self-determination” (Cooney, 2002, p. 433; Schloss, Alper, & Jayne, 1993). Yet, the students were being recommended for

supported programs based on their diagnosis and deficits rather than their expressed interests and abilities. Ferguson, Ferguson, Jeanchild, Olson, and Lucyshyn (1993) examined relationships among planning team members and concluded that the stakeholders were not in agreement. Cooney (2002) identified similar findings, as the stakeholders involved in the study did not have a shared meaning or vision of transition. Using similar methods such as interviews and observations, I want to ensure that I address not only the historical lack of inclusion of youth diagnosed with low-incidence disabilities but also the exclusion of their perspectives and lived experiences throughout prior research.

Hyman (2013) conducted a teacher-research dissertation, which identified positionality and accounted for it. This study reflected the researcher in relation to a program that he developed and subsequently examined. Using a qualitative, action research method allows for folding action research back into a program for professional or organizational development. This also provides a means by which to “co-create with my students” (Hyman, 2013, p. 8). I find parallels in this study in relation to my experiences and intentions of my current study. My goals for conducting action research are to analyze a program I have developed, utilize the new information I create to improve my practice and carry out this process with my students.

The work of Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio (2019) utilized a phenomenological approach. The authors identified how “by examining an experience as it is subjectively lived, new meanings and appreciations can be developed to inform, or even re-orient, how we understand that experience” (p. 92). This study mirrors the research process of the current study not only by incorporating the lived experiences of others, but also by utilizing such methods as reflective writing. Neubauer et al. (2019) explain “beyond

maintaining fidelity between research question, paradigm, and selected methodology, robust phenomenological research involves deep engagement with the data via reading, reflective writing, re-reading and re-writing” (p. 95).

This study pulled from the work of Broer, Doyle, and Giangreco (2005) by eliciting responses, perspectives, and input directly from students identified with low-incidence disabilities. Broer et al. (2005) conducted a study relating to disabled youth and their experiences with paraprofessional support. This aligns with the work in the present study in that a phenomenological approach was utilized and student experiences were at the center of the research design. Rather than make assumptions about the feelings, perspectives, and wishes of individuals with low-incidence disabilities, their opinions were gathered, considered, and included.

Through this current study, the various identities of stakeholders were identified in addition to disability identity. In the work of Sleeter and Milner IV (2011), the need for and importance of diversity within the teacher workforce was emphasized. The authors highlight that “diversifying the teaching force is a critical component to student success and the current rate and consistency of the diversification remains a serious problem” (Sleeter & Milner IV, 2011, p. 81). Teachers in teacher education programs need to be prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners, and teacher education programs need to be more attuned to selecting, recruiting, and maintaining a more diverse teaching force (Sleeter & Milner IV, 2011). From an intersectionality standpoint, the same holds true with the introduction of disability in combination to the diversity of students and the recruitment of diverse teachers. As referenced in Sleeter and Milner IV (2011, p. 83):

If children do not see adults of color in professional roles in schools and instead see them overrepresented in the ranks of non-professional workers, they are taught implicitly that white people are better suited than racial/ethnic minorities

to hold positions of authority in our society. (Villegas and Clewell, 1998, p. 121)

This research can be generalized to other professions and has a connection to the work in the present study. Upon examining the identities of the community and teacher stakeholder groups, every participant identified as White except for one and he did not hold a professional position, leadership role, or position of authority within his company.

Existing research surrounding the inclusion of authentic work experiences and stakeholder involvement in high school has shown to have an increase in post-high school employment outcomes for youth with low-incidence disabilities not only nationally, but also internationally. Existing research also identifies the importance of hearing directly from those directly impacted by programmatic decisions and how teacher identity can shape and influence student identity. These components can play a vital role in the development of an effective WBL program, help to redefine disability, and promote self-determination for disabled youth.

Chapter Three: Clear Design of Contextualized Inquiry

This chapter focuses on the research process, methodology, and data collection procedures used within this study while preserving anonymity for the participants and ensuring validity and reliability of the study. This qualitative, action research study utilizes various data collection methods such as researcher observations, memoing and field notes, iterative and semi-structured employer/employee interviews, an online teacher survey, and a student focus group to secure the perspectives of various stakeholders that participate in the WBL program. Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, and Richardson (2005) note the importance of providing “descriptive information from qualitative studies as it can lead to an understanding of disabled people, their families, and those who work with them” (p. 196).

Following the premise of action research, this study incorporates my position as

the researcher and the teacher who coordinates the WBL program for students with low-incidence disabilities. This study acts a process of self-reflection not only on the current WBL program but also on the stakeholders involved. According to Herr and Anderson (2015), “action research is best done in collaboration with others who have a stake in the problem under investigation. The authors identify action research as the design and methodology of the research” (pp. 1-4). The authors add “action research is inquiry that is done by or with insiders to an organization or community, but never to or on them” (p. 3). This understanding is in direct alignment with the frameworks selected for analyses and application throughout this study. I also consider myself to be a practitioner researcher as I am drawn to studying my own environment because I want my research to make a difference in my own setting and for my students. Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) highlight how teacher research plays a role in creating new information. Rossman and Rallis (2017) further elaborate on this premise by identifying how “knowledge is obtained by direct experience” (p. 5).

Research Methodology and Process

Following the intent of conducting qualitative research identified by Rossman and Rallis (2017) and Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993), I am looking to seek answers to my questions in-real world, natural situations and construct new meaning from the experiences of those involved in the WBL program. Conducting qualitative research in my environment is essential as this type of research method “represents a small percentage of disseminated special education research” (Trainor & Leko, 2014, p. 263). My work at the local level also has the potential to transfer to other environments within my district and beyond.

Observations. As part of the WBL program, I observed my students daily, both in the classroom and while on job sites. My observations helped to guide my instruction,

identify when and how to intervene if necessary, and to progress monitor for purposes of my students' IEP goals. During the research study, my observations served an additional purpose. I looked for actions, interactions, and verbal/nonverbal responses from my participants as they related to my research questions and frameworks. I specifically keyed in on instances of how disability was perceived in the workplace by all participants and if there were any indications of ableism.

Memoing. Herr and Anderson (2015) identify the need for an “ongoing documentation process and putting methods in place to capture it” (p. 91). To do this, I used a method of self-reflection (memoing) to account for my observations, insights, interpretations, assumptions, and bias. For this study, memoing is defined as short narratives about “emergent insights, potential themes, methodological questions, and links between themes and theoretical notions” (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 249). It also incorporates “a description of some specific aspect of a setting or phenomenon” (Dana and Yendol-Hoppey, 2014, p. 166). Following this purpose of memoing, I thought critically about my perceptions of employers/employees' feelings towards working with my students who have been diagnosed with low-incidence disabilities. It is important to identify my view and potential bias prior to conducting actual interviews and surveys with various stakeholders. I need to recognize that just as I view the work experience program and my students with disabilities from my lens and position, so do others. This method also allows for ongoing thinking, decision-making, and action. During the memoing process, I revisited my notes multiple times and they were included in the coding process.

In relation to this study, I used memoing to record events that occurred at our job sites. These memos, or field notes, were holistic in nature as I recorded field notes during the duration of specific work shifts. These related to how my students were perceived by others (positive or negative), how they were given opportunities to perform tasks such as those performed by nondisabled workers, or how employers/employees approached me or my students to present new tasks. I also wanted to document my students' responses

during these situations. Similar events have occurred previously, and I wanted to capture future occurrences of these events for inclusion in this study.

Interviews. I conducted iterative, semi-structured interviews with 1-2 employers/employees at two job sites in February 2020 and June 2020, respectively. The questions were semi-structured in that they required more than a “yes/no” response, they gave the participants the freedom to provide their own response, and they were geared toward my research questions (see Appendix A). I asked on-the-spot, follow up questions to clarify a given response or to probe a little further if the participants were unable to provide details. This method was only used as a follow up to a response provided by a participant to gather more details, not to lead or ensure a particular response. All three jobs sites that my students and I participated at were either fast-paced, busy, or crowded environments. Therefore, the overall length of the interviews was limited to no more than five questions. There was not a designated timeframe for completion of the interviews, as the participants were given the opportunity to speak freely and elaborate. However, I needed to be aware of and account for my participants’ job duties (e.g. prepping to open, customer needs, etc.), the amount of time I removed myself from my students, and the possibility that my students would need support. These are situations that are out of my immediate control but needed to be planned for in advance to ensure that the interviews would be conducted with fidelity and uninterrupted. One of my participants was familiar with this process as he had previously participated in a pilot study.

Questionnaire. In conjunction with conducting employee interviews, I utilized an online anonymous questionnaire consisting of 4-5 questions with three teachers within my district who have had or currently have experience with a WBL program (see Appendix B). At the time of the study, I did not have in-person contact with two of the teachers. Therefore, an online questionnaire was ideal for gathering input from these participants. I believe it was important to include the perspectives of other teachers to truly reflect on my program. This information may help me to identify new opportunities and ways of approaching my WBL program. An online, anonymous questionnaire gave

the participants the opportunity to participate on their own time and respond candidly. Additionally, these participants were familiar with the type of questionnaire I used as my district has previously used similar questionnaires and I conducted a pilot study using the same type of data collection method. Thus, my participants already had some understanding of this data collection method.

Focus group. Another method of data collection that I used was to conduct a focus group with those students who have been identified for participation in the study (see Appendix C). Dana and Yendel-Hoppey (2014), highlight how the “focus-group discussion can serve as a tool for understanding students’ perceptions’ (p. 105). Eight students were selected for participation in the focus group. The same questions were utilized during all instances. Due to the nature of my students’ disabilities, they all experience difficulties with processing and retaining information. Keeping this in mind, I created only one small set of questions. I wanted to analyze if and how my students’ responses changed through several months of participation in the WBL program. Additionally, not all student participants were available during each focus group session. Most students previously participated in a pilot focus group with me, so they had some familiarity with the process and were accustomed to being asked questions about the job sites, their experiences, and their feelings about a particular situation. I also reviewed the process with the students at the beginning of each focus group session.

Some of my students are more verbal than others and some of my students only participate in conversations rather than initiate them. I choose to use a focus group as a method of gathering and including my students’ perceptions and perspectives as way to help support my students’ social/emotional abilities and needs. Therefore, I decided to personally run the focus group and present the questions to my students. They are very comfortable with me and will often talk freely to me rather than to their other teachers. If I selected someone else to deliver the questions, my students may not have responded openly or may have given brief responses. I am also able to interpret my students’ nonverbal communication (e.g., gestures, expressions, etc.). I know when my students

may be confused or uncomfortable. When this occurs during our daily interactions, I intervene appropriately. My students are accustomed to this. These nonverbal cues may be missed by someone else who is not as familiar to them, which could lead to further frustration, increased anxiety, or nonresponses from my students. If a student did not initiate providing a response to a question, I would say their name, indicate that I would repeat the question, repeat the question, and then state “would you like to share something or do you want to add anything?” This process provided opportunities for all students to be heard. It also allowed for a way to build in support or an accommodation. Another way that I provided support during this process was to define or explain the meaning of a question or a particular word when a student asked. By running the focus group directly, I also helped to preserve anonymity. Only the students involved in the focus group and I knew who responded and how they responded. To further ensure anonymity of my students’ responses, each student was only identified by a letter that I assigned prior to beginning the focus group.

Anonymity

To report on my students’ responses collectively, I coded their responses and group them into categories with other data sets. Student names and other identifying characteristics were not used. To ensure all students involved in the study had a voice, each student was identified only with a letter and each student was given the opportunity to provide a response to each question. These letters were written down below each focus group question prior to each session. This helped me to identify who, if anyone, did not have the opportunity to provide a response to a particular group question. This approach was also used for identifying each site and each employer/employee who was interviewed. I selected the letter, which will not be known to anyone else. The responses through the online questionnaire will also be coded and then added to categories collectively.

All hard copies of materials, data, and instruments were locked in a cabinet either in my classroom at school or at my home. I am the only person who has a key to these

cabinets. Any information that was saved electronically was stored on my home computer or iPad, which are both password-protected. Upon completion of the research and analyzing of the data, all hardcopies were shredded. Any information that was saved electronically was subsequently deleted.

Data Analysis Process

Prior to destroying and deleting the data that had been collected, I needed to review and analyze it. To make my memos and notes from things that I observed and heard at the work sites usable, I needed to input my handwritten notes onto a computer, expand on what occurred and add commentary or background information as necessary. Timeliness was key. Rossman and Rallis (2017) write “we have to be sure that we capture what we witness. The sooner we can complete the notes, the fresher our memories are and, thus, the richer and more accurate the field notes” (p. 187). The observations were sorted into codes along with the other data sets. I looked for comparisons and connections in the data relating to the perceptions of my students as they navigated the work environment, and how staff at the work sites interacted with and perceived my students in relation to their disabilities and the job environment.

Capturing and analyzing the perceptions of the employers/employees at our job sites through the semi-structured, iterative interviews was of utmost importance. I wanted to examine their views towards disabled individuals and how they may shift based on opportunities for interactions with those who have differing identities. What words did they use in describing my students and their abilities to participate at the job site? Did they have a greater sense of understanding surrounding the concept of disability and how it can vary based on one’s perceptions and experiences? Was this experience perpetuating ableist views or redefining disability for them?

Perceptions and experiences played a role in the data gleaned from the online questionnaire. The WBL program that my students and I participate in is extensive compared to those of the other current or former WBL teachers within my district. Based on this arrangement, I believed that the perceptions of the three teachers selected to

complete the online questionnaire would deviate drastically from the belief I hold about quality WBL programs, the effectiveness of WBL programs, and beliefs surrounding disability. I looked for this when analyzing the data to demonstrate and support my stance to remove any potential bias I have due to my positionality and to acknowledge others' views based on their experiences.

While analyzing my notes and student responses from the focus group sessions, I wanted to include direct quotes from my students whenever possible. Including my students' actual words ensured the lived experiences of my students are present and at the forefront of my study. Their responses are how they viewed their experiences and identity as a disabled person navigating an able-bodied dominant world up to that point. Could their understanding and sense of self change throughout the experience and was there a difference in how they responded to the focus group questions over the course of the focus group session? Did they view employment as a viable option as a result of their participation in a WBL program? Did they view participation in the WBL program as a valuable experience or benefit? Rather than make assumptions surrounding my students' beliefs, it was imperative that I heard directly from my students and provided a forum from which to do so.

My researcher field notes elicited some data points that were not as evident in the other methods of data collection. They were directly in line with the research that identifies ableism as not only existing but being a barrier to including the disabled identity and perspective in all facets of life. These notes also demonstrated how disabled individuals are often viewed and positioned as being incapable, detrimental, and negative to the work environment and to the nondisabled community. These comments and actions occurred within earshot or in the immediate presence of my students. The specifics will be explored in more detail in the results section of this study.

Validity

Following the meaning and intention of validity, this study aligns interpretations of the data with the conceptual and theoretical frameworks, research questions, and

evidence (Cohen et al., 2018). The study measurement tools measure what they intended to measure, the direct perspectives of disabled and nondisabled stakeholders, and the meaning and interpretation of the data results connects to the research questions and theories utilized. Cohen et al. (2018) identifies validity in qualitative research as being “sought through utilizing the natural setting as the source of data, a thick description, incorporating the researcher as part of the research process, and giving meaning and agency to the participants” (p. 247).

Internal validity. The concept of internal validity relates to confidence in the data, authenticity of data, soundness of research design, and triangulation of sources. My research study addresses this by utilizing various qualitative methods for collecting data (e.g., focus group, survey, field notes, and interviews) and utilizing coding processes to synthesize the data and identify themes that emerged across the data collection methods and data points.

Construct validity. Following the premise of construct validity, this type of validity is “meaningful to participants themselves, seen through their eyes, and are played out and construed as they intended” (Cohen et al., 2018, p. 257). The understanding and processing of such constructs as ableism, disability, WBL, phenomenology, and intersectionality was delineated throughout the study and how they were viewed by the disabled and nondisabled participants.

Content validity. According to Cohen et al. (2018), content validity covers the domain of the construct(s), all relevant parts, and it is representative of what it aims to measure. The instruments and methods selected are utilized “fairly and comprehensively” in order to be representative of the study premise and its participants (p. 257). This study asked the same questions during all the employer/employee interviews (see Appendix A). All three teachers were given the opportunity to answer the same questions on the online survey (see Appendix B). The same questions were used during each focus group session with the student participants (see Appendix C). Overall, the questions to all stakeholders were very similar, and they were tied to the three research

questions and the study frameworks.

Triangulation

Triangulation, specifically instrument triangulation, or using a variety of methods and multiple perspectives to gather and interpret data, was used. This aligned directly with my conceptual frameworks of DS and DisCrit and theoretical framework of phenomenology by including perspectives and lived experiences from various sources. I also used a variety of methods to gather the data. By utilizing the process of triangulation, I was able to look for commonalities or outliers in the data across all participants and instruments.

Reliability

Qualitative studies utilize the reliability principles of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. One way to increase reliability, particularly during a data collection method such as interviewing, is to limit bias. Cohen et al. (2018) suggests the importance of establishing rapport between the interviewer and participants, presenting the exact same questions within each participant group and avoiding leading questions as the key to reducing bias and increasing reliability. As the researcher, I previously established rapport with all participants as I worked with and/or supported them on a daily or weekly basis. On average, my student participants have been enrolled in my work-based learning program for two years. I partnered with N for eight years and C for six years prior to the study. I feel this contributed to the participants' willingness to participate in the study, answer all questions presented, even those surrounding differing identities, and to answer candidly. Providing an opportunity at the end of each data collection session through an open-ended type question allowed for participants to provide additional information or elaborate on a previous response. This process allowed for confirmation of my participants' intentions and perspectives as elicited during earlier questions. When participants decided to speak freely, they reaffirmed their stance on the concept of disability, the benefits of a WBL program, or employment for the disabled community.

Chapter 4: Analysis, Interpretation, and Results

In this chapter, I summarize the data collected, how it was collected, and who it was collected from during the research process. I discuss the coding process, what methods were selected, and what emerged as a result. By providing a thick description of the process, “this deep description generates insights that lead to identifying patterns and can suggest or hint at intentions and meaning” surrounding the study’s purpose (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 233). The codes and themes that arose are discussed in terms of what data fits into each of them and examples are included from the participant data. Results are discussed in relation to the study frameworks and answering the following three research questions:

- How do stakeholders (e.g., students, employees/employers, and work-based learning teachers) view and experience a work-based learning program for students with low-incidence disabilities?
- How does participation in a work-based learning program impact the perceptions of employees/employers towards students with low-incidence disabilities?
- What impact does participation in a work-based learning program have on students with low-incidence disabilities?

Student mini profiles are included to further highlight and elevate the importance for including the disabled student experience and perspective. Data that speaks directly to the student perspective is further delineated. I intentionally placed my student profiles at the end of this chapter in order to keep them in alignment with the order of my research questions and to end with the intentions of this study, giving voice to students with low-incidence disabilities.

Data Collection

Eight students were initially selected for participation in the study. Due to emergency school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and state guidelines, six students ultimately participated in the focus group. During the one in-person session

in February 2020, two of the originally identified students were absent from school. One of these students was not accessible during the emergency school closure beginning in March 2020, and the same student decided to graduate earlier than intended at the start of the 2020-2021 school year. The other student originally selected for participation did not have a computer, internet access, or the ability to access Zoom until after the September 2020 focus group meeting. Six students participated in February 2020, four students participated in the May 2020 Zoom session, and three students participated in the September 2020 Zoom breakout room session. Racial and ethnic identities for the student participants were not included for purposes of this study, as they did not self-identify, a question surrounding race or ethnic identity was not included in the focus group protocol, and the information was not readily available in any of the students' paperwork. To ensure confidentiality of my student participants, I also did not reach out to their IEP case managers to gather this information.

Three teachers participated in the online, anonymous survey through Survey Monkey over three nonconsecutive days in late April 2020. One of the teachers works in the same building as I and she provides school-based work experience with limited instruction outside of the duties and tasks related to the in-school job. The other two teachers work at another high school within my district, one provides limited school-based work experience opportunities and the other no longer has direct involvement in WBL experiences. As reported in the survey responses, the following table is included to depict the makeup of the teacher participant identities and information they provided surrounding how their students identify. The student information is accessible through the students' IEPs and the district's online data management system. As a special education teacher, I have direct access to this information. However, the teacher participants shared this information directly with me in their survey responses. It should be noted that this process of sharing information via the survey helped to preserve the anonymity of the participants and their students as I was unable to identify or match students to a particular teacher.

Table 4.1:

Teacher Participants

Teacher	Age Range	Race/Ethnicity	Student Race/Ethnicity	Teacher Language(s) Spoken	Student Language(s)
1	25-34	White/Caucasian	Many students are Hispanic	English	English and Spanish (3 students only speak Spanish)
2	35-44	White/Caucasian and Asian	Hispanic (31), Caucasian (5), and African American (3)	English	English and Spanish (8 students only speak Spanish)
3	45-64	White/Caucasian	Spanish heritage, African American, Caucasian, others are unknown	English	English and Spanish (at least 5 students only speak Spanish)

*Teachers did not self-disclose a disability. All students represented in this table have an IEP.

The teacher participant table highlights the difference in teacher and student identity and primary language which exists in my district. Though this is a single snapshot of teacher-student dynamics, it is representative of my district overall. Pugach et al. (2019) discusses that “at the core of social justice lies the students and teachers themselves—how teachers understand who their students are and how they view and respond to their students—in all of their complexity—to foster learning and growth” (p. 206). Respect for all social, racial, gender, ability, and cultural groups is the central idea. All people have multiple identities suggesting that it is not just students whose identities we need to hone in on but teachers’ identities and experiences as well. Otherwise, the result is “deficit thinking” and a cultural mismatch between teacher perceptions and

expectations of students, poor student-teacher relationships, mislabeling, over- or under-identification, and misinterpretation of behaviors (Scott and Ford, 2011, p. 201). Sleeter and Milner IV (2011) write, “we also see teacher race and ethnicity as an indicator of the worldviews available within any school’s professional teaching corps” (p. 83). When worldviews and experiences are narrowed, there is often not an alignment to those of the students. Absent from this analysis of teacher-student identity is discussion surrounding disability. All students in the study have one or more disabilities, while no other stakeholders self-identified in relation to disability.

Prior to the COVID-19 school and business closure, three employees from N (two managers), two employees from C (one manager), and two employees from W were identified for participation in the employer/employee interview process. One person in upper management at W was asked, but the offer to participate was declined on the premise that this person feels nervous during interviews. This person also wanted staff who worked directly with my students to answer the interview questions. I was granted full permission to interview anyone else who was interested in participating and to conduct the interviews on the company property and during company time. Days before the state-wide closure, on March 9, 2020 and March 12, 2020, two employers encompassing N and C participated in an audio-recorded interview. One employee from N participated in the interview via phone and text message in late May and early June 2020. No personal contact information was available for the identified participants at W.

Due to the limited number of interviews being conducted at the WBL job sites, my researcher field notes played a vital role in examining the perceptions that are present surrounding disability in the work environment, viewing my students as potential employees, and gathering data representative of all job sites. I recorded field notes on four occasions (one from N, one from C, and two from W).

Coding Process

As defined by Dana and Yendel-Hoppey (2014), “coding is a procedure that disaggregates the data, breaks it down into manageable segments and identifies or names those segments” (p. 166). To select the appropriate method for coding my data, I further reviewed and reflected on my research questions. The three research questions are “epistemological in nature and address theories of knowing, understanding of the phenomenon of interest, and exploring participant actions/processes and perceptions” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 70).

First round coding. During the first round, initial, or open coding process, I broke the qualitative data into parts, line by line, and wrote notes and ideas that emerged. Then I compared them to one another looking for commonalities within each data set and across data sets. This allowed me to be open to possibilities suggested in my interpretations of the data, as I did not identify potential codes prior to examining the data. Commonalities were grouped together and assigned a code which tied them together. I also looked for any outliers in the data that did not fit into the identified codes. During initial coding, thirteen codes were identified and assigned to similar data across all participants and data sets. All thirteen codes appeared at least two times within a single data set or they appeared across more than one data set. I also utilized in vivo coding, or my participants’ direct words, to “prioritize and honor participants’ voice” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 106).

Interrater reliability. After initial round coding, data from the employer interview (N) and the initial codebook with thirteen codes were shared with three members of my doctoral cohort. The four of us worked as a Leader Scholar Community (LSC), or group, to progress through the writing process and proposal defense under the direction of the same dissertation chair. One additional code, “disability,” emerged

because of the interrater reliability check. All four raters unanimously identified examples in the data sample relating to the code of “ableism.” On a separate occasion, the data from the online, anonymous teacher survey and the second-round codebook were shared with one of the members from the LSC. I used the method of enlisting a critical friend to review this data set, as I wanted to make sure that my interpretations were sound. One of the fourteen codes was only present in this data set and it speaks to my findings between level of involvement and view surrounding the WBL program. Handal (1999) offers suggestions surrounding the intent of a critical friend such as a method of consultation, someone to rely on, someone to “hold a critical mirror,” and an obligation to analyze and criticize (p. 63). Not only did my critical friend identify the code without any prior discussion or mention of it, he identified it multiple times within the data set. This reinforced and supported my thinking surrounding how disability is typically viewed from a deficit perspective or as a barrier. I also employed a different critical friend to read my work to ensure that I was conveying the true intent of my study through my descriptions, explanations, and word choice.

Second round coding. According to Saldaña (2016), “the primary goal of second cycle coding is to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization from the array of first cycle codes” (p. 234). During this process, I utilized pattern coding to group the data into smaller numbers of categories and then themes. According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), this process in coding is appropriate for breaking down large amounts of data into smaller parts, eliciting major themes, and examining relationships among the data. During the second round of coding and reviewing the data with the assigned codes, four categories and three themes emerged. The three themes can be directly aligned to the study frameworks and research questions. Table 4.2 reflects the codebook after the completion of second round coding.

All columns are representative of data from all samples.

Table 4.2:

Codebook

Codes	Description of Codes	Definition	Examples	Category	Theme
Identity	Where a participant voluntarily identifies or responds when asked directly	Race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability	"Caucasian, Asian, female"	Identity	Socially constructed position
Perceptions/ interactions	Where a participant gives opinion	Beliefs, verbal or physical interactions, feelings	"I believe," "they seem to enjoy," "I think"	Perceptions	Lens from which we view experiences
Learning process	When participants experience something new	Shown new skills and tasks, taught, instruction, coaching	"I was teaching..." "to be able to work safely"	Knowledge	Lens from which we view experiences
Benefits	Positive outcomes	Helps in the future, gained	"Self-esteem, experiences, and skills"	Perceptions	Lens from which we view experiences
Community	Interactions amongst participants	Working with others	"Community," "with my friends"	Community	Sense of belonging
Positionality	Standing within company, job title	Role, experiences, position	HR Manager, training manager	Identity	Socially constructed position
Prior knowledge	What the participants already know	What is already known, experienced, or familiar	"Working at..." "I know..."	Knowledge	Lens from which we view experiences
Limited resources	Barriers to work-based learning	Not having what is needed	"Lack of funding/staff"	Knowledge	Lens from which we view

Success	Program or tasks, what worked	Continuation of program, achieving desired outcomes	"training" "Hope this program continues"	Perceptions	experiences Lens from which we view experiences
Required tasks	Job duties that need to be completed at any site	Work that needs to be done	"Shelving, helping customers, and work that needs to be done..."	Knowledge	Lens from which we view experiences
Community experiences	Out of school building experiences, experiences with the public	Outside of school, local businesses	"It's good going out of school," "being with the public"	Community	Sense of belonging
Work experience	Completing real job tasks	Working at a community site	"Work experience"	Community	Sense of belonging
Ableism	Judgements, comparisons, or restrictions made to or about people with disabilities	Oppression of people with disabilities	"To almost look like us," "these students," "she doesn't look like there is something wrong with her," "interacted with them," "better watch out or you will lose your job to them," "can they do this job" (stated to researcher in presence of students but not directed at them)	Perceptions	Lens from which we view experiences

Disability	Socially constructed, reference to how someone is physically or mentally different from the norm	A physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities, a disadvantage or handicap, especially one imposed or recognized by the law (socially constructed)	“I was playing with them,” “do you think they can..?”	Identity	Socially constructed position
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Themes and Codes

The three themes that arose during the coding process consist of socially constructed position, lens from which we view experiences, and sense of belonging. The codes of identity, perceptions/interactions, learning process, benefits, community, positionality, prior knowledge, limited resources, success, required tasks, community experiences, work experience, ableism, and disability are divided amongst each theme. Explanations regarding the types of data that fit into each code and actual examples follow. Responses are included directly as they were written or spoken during the data collection process.

The process of identifying themes included looking at each code, defining and selecting examples that represented each code, and grouping the codes into broader categories. At this point, I began to refer to my research questions and study frameworks. I reflected on how these four categories demonstrated a theme that related to the essence of what the WBL program, DS, DisCrit, and phenomenology convey.

Socially constructed position. The theme of socially constructed position

encompasses the codes of disability, identity, and positionality. It was derived from data that specifically noted one's belonging to a group, whether self-imposed, stated by others, or assigned on behalf of another. These codes demonstrate how everyone is placed in one or more social groups based on appearance, preconceived notions, and historical or systemic decisions.

Disability. This code was applied to data that referenced how someone is physically or mentally different from the norm, could or could not do something as another person could, or the questioning of one's ability. This word was not specifically used during the student focus group sessions and the participants did not use this word in their responses. Some data within this code were coded as disability and/or ableism depending upon how the responses were framed within the context of the interview and survey questions. Examples from this code are included below. I denoted responses with an * the responses that were coded both as disability and ableism during the coding process.

Me: Describe your current involvement and interactions with students from the Work-Based Learning Program. Do you provide job skill instruction, academic instruction, job coaching on site, etc.?

Teacher 2: They are lower functioning so they need more individualized attention.*

Me: What type of benefit do you believe the Work-Based Learning Program has for students with disabilities? What type of benefit do you see the Work-Based Learning Program having for companies that partner with our program?

Teacher 1: Companies that partner and hire individuals with disabilities will gain employees that have already had some training with regard to working in the

community, based on their community volunteer opportunities and their participation in work-based classrooms.* These students have had hands on practice with working and performing real skills, interacting with their peers in a work environment and also interacting with adults in a professional manner.

Me: Prior to working with students from A, what interactions have you had with people with disabilities? Have you worked with people with disabilities?

J from N: Many years ago when I was living in my native country I used to go to an institution where there were children with disabilities. I never worked with people with disabilities before until I started this program.

Identity. The word identity was used only when a participant specifically stated one's gender, race, ethnicity, diagnosed disability, and age, or the information was listed in a student's records. A question in the employer/employee interview and teacher survey related directly to identity. All participants in the interview and online survey answered this question. They did not self-identify as having a disability. This question was not directly asked to the student participants. The student participants did not mention their disability(ies), race(s), or ethnicity(ies) during the focus group sessions. Students' ages, gender, and disability(ies) were identified in their school records. Examples from the employer/employee interviews and the teacher survey are noted below:

Me: Can you tell me what your ethnic background is or how you identify? What is your age?

J from N: My age is 61 years old, and I am Hispanic.

G from N: I am white or Caucasian.

R from C: Caucasian.

Teacher 1, 3, and 2: Caucasian/white, Caucasian/white, Caucasian/white and Asian

Positionality. A positionality code was applied when a participant specifically identified one's position, job title, role, standing within the company, or level of experience. A question relating to positionality was not asked to the student participants and they did not self-identify as being a "student" during the focus group sessions.

Samples of results are outlined below:

Me: Please describe your position and/or experiences within your company.

G from N: I am the Human Resources Manager here for the A factory. I've been with the company for 30 years, 15 or 16 in this position.

J from N: I work at the warehouse at the mixing center. My job duties are completing orders from clients meaning loading trucks, and secure stock in the warehouse. Also, I unload company's trucks with company products. I also used to be part of the safety committee at the plant.

R from C: I am a training store manager for the LV (county anonymized). It is the training and development for all new hires and any employee prior to promotion.

Lens from which we view experiences. The codes of perceptions/interactions, learning process, benefits, prior knowledge, limited resources, success, required tasks, and ableism encompass the theme of lens from which we view experiences. This theme highlights the presence of bias, preconceived notions, and perceptions.

Perceptions/Interactions. The words perceptions/interactions were assigned to data when a participant gave an opinion, belief, feeling, or verbal or physical response toward another person in the environment. This code was present across participant groups. The presence of student data and other participant data coded as perceptions/

interactions are included to note the difference in perspectives and level of interactions amongst and across participant groups.

Me: Tell me about your interactions and conversations that you have with customers in the Coffee Shop, at our job sites, or with workers.

I: I didn't talk to any of the workers at W (restaurant). I only talked to my work partner.

D: I talk to J (employee at N). He is good and nice. I show him things on my phone.

A: Yes they are friendly. I can see the looks on their faces. They are good and positive.

J: being friendly, not disrespectful

J from N: My interactions with the students from A's program were greetings them when they arrived at the mixing center.

Me: Did you talk to or interact with anyone on Coffee Shop deliveries?

I: I went to one person 2x. She was so excited to get her food. She was happy, I think both times.

Me: If you go to a community job site, do you believe that you are treated like the employees that work there?

I: Yes, fairness and equal rights.

E: Yes

D: Yes

T: I do believe I am being treated like other people do. Because like any other job, I believe that we should be treated equally, and the equal amount of jobs we do.

Learning process. This code includes when a participant specifically identified learning a new skill or task, experiencing something new, and gave or received instruction. This code was present across participant groups. All participants viewed the learning process from that of a teaching and learning perspective. Examples from the data include:

Me: Do you assign and/or prepare jobs for them?

J from N: I was teaching them the safety rules at the plant, and I was explaining how to do the job.

G from N: ...and be able to work safely...when they are out in the warehouse

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

I: I get to learn about working.

D: I am helpful to other people. I learn different stuff.

E: It helps you learn how to get a job.

T: It helps me learn how to grow, learn, and being independent.

J: follow the instructions, do what you are asked to do, teaching us how to get jobs when we leave school

Benefits. Data referring to positive outcomes were coded using the word benefits.

This code also refers to something gained or that helps in the future. This code was present across all participant groups.

Me: What type of benefit do you believe the Work-Based Learning Program has for students with disabilities? What type of benefit do you see the Work-Based Learning Program having for companies that partner with our program?

Teacher 1: Students in the Work-Based Learning Program benefit greatly as the

skills taught and learned in the work-based classrooms can assist in securing work post graduation.

Teacher 2: I believe it helps the students with disabilities gain employability skills and also helps form relationships between employees at an establishment and the students for mentoring.

Teacher 3: Students learn job and employability skills that cannot be replicated in a classroom setting.

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop Or going to job sites in the community?

D: I am helpful to other people.

Prior knowledge. This code refers to something that is already known, familiar to the participant or has been previously experienced. This code was present in data across participant groups. The teachers referenced prior experience with the disabled community, one of the employers spoke about prior experiences with a work program, and a student referenced what she already knows about establishments that are like A's coffee shop. Participants' responses are noted below:

Me: Prior to participating in the Work-Based Learning Program, what experiences or interactions have you had with individuals with disabilities?

Teacher 1: I have a daughter who is physically and intellectually disabled from birth. I am familiar with this community from interacting with other parents of disabled individuals through school, therapy visits, etc.

Teacher 3: I had taught students with disabilities for 4 years before I became a WBL teacher. I haven't taught WBL for about 6 years.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you

are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

I: Working at Starbucks doesn't deliver, like at a drive thru say what you want.

Me: What type of benefit do you believe this work-based learning program has for the students that come here or students with disabilities?

G from N: So, I am going to speak to what I know from when my niece and nephew were in a program such as this. Um, they really gained a lot of experience that made them want to go out and find a job, and both of them were very successful.

Limited resources. Data relating to barriers to WBL, not having what is needed, lack of funding, lack of staff, and limited or no training were identified as examples relating to limited resources. This code arose from the online anonymous survey. Only the teacher participants identified limited resources as an aspect of the WBL program. It should be noted that at the time of the study, the three participants were not currently engaged in community WBL or any form of WBL. They all identified limited resources as the barrier to participation in a WBL program or why WBL cannot exist in their context. Though a limitation was noted in the two employer interviews, they were countered with an explanation of why it was not viewed as such by the employer/employee or how it was adjusted and is no longer a barrier. The following are examples viewed as limited resources:

Me: Please describe your experience with the Work-Based Learning Program either previously or currently. Do your experiences involve in-school or community work experience opportunities? If so, what does this look like?

Teacher 2: My past experiences included community work experience. Often the

businesses wouldn't have enough work for us to do. It makes it difficult with a whole class to have enough to do and provide enough supports.

Me: Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with the Work-Based Learning Program or working with individuals with disabilities?

Teacher 2: I hope that one day the work-based learning program that I helped develop can go back out into the community. We currently don't have enough staff or funding to even go into the community.

Me: Please describe your experiences with the work-based learning program?

G from N: I know that we have had some ups and downs as far as transportation and things like that, but I think for the last couple of years we've had that completely resolved.

Me: Is there a task that you have not assigned because you believed the students could not do it or they would do it incorrectly? Is there a task that the students did not perform correctly as you had wanted them to?

R from C: There are tasks that I've never assigned, um, just for the shear training part. Um, there are some things like my earlier comment dealing with the public, um, the customer service side that may be more difficult without help or a oversee. With enough training, time, and development, anyone can get there.

Success. This code is representative of the WBL program as a whole or individual components. The term success is viewed as what worked or is working, specific responses relating to having the WBL program continue and achieving desired outcomes. Results are indicative of identified successes from all participants' perspectives.

Me: Is there a task that you have not assigned because you believed the students could not do it or they would do it incorrectly? Is there a task that the students did not perform correctly as you had wanted them to?

R from C: I think anybody can do anything.

Me: I was hoping that the partnership with not only me but with my students is still a possibility for future years.

R from C: Absolutely.

Me: Is there anything else that you would like to share about the work-based learning program or individuals with disabilities? Any other thoughts you would like to share?

G from N: No, but I do hope this program will continue. I am retiring this summer, but I will pass all of your contact information onto the next HR director. I can still be available if you need more information from me.

J from N: I think that the program is being well prepared and I hope that N met the expectation that the program was looking for the students.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

T: When I go to my classes, I feel like I finally got the work experience, and it's helping learn to interact with people and doing small jobs that I can do and work at.

Required tasks. The code of required tasks relates to job tasks or work that needs to be done at a specific site. A question surrounding work tasks that the students complete as part of the WBL Program was presented to all participant groups.

The data indicates that students completed real job tasks that had been or are currently completed by paid employees. Tasks were not created just for the student workers nor were they simulated just to provide an experience for them.

Me: Please describe your experiences with the work-based learning program?

G from N: They come on site, they help us get some work done that we need done or that we need accomplished.

Me: Describe the tasks that you described the program does or your involvement, do you yourself or anybody that you are aware of perform the same exact tasks that the students are asked to perform? Or, were they specially created for the students?

G from N: It was created just for the students. This is work that would need to be done no matter.

Me: What have your interactions been like with the students from A's (school name anonymized) work program? Do you assign and/or prepare the jobs for them? Do you ever do the same type of work that they do?

J from N: I was in charge of preparing and assigning their job. Yes, I do and I did the job that they were doing.

Ableism. The term ableism is being used to code data that intentionally or unintentionally demonstrates judgements, comparisons, or restrictions made to or about disability and disabled individuals. This code was assigned to any data that identified a disabled participant as being perceived as limited, not capable, or different from others. This code was also applied to data that attributed a participant's abilities or needs in relation to their disability, not because of the environment, the way a task was presented, or due to limited exposure/instruction. The student participants did not identify their

inability to do something or acknowledge that their experiences were limited by their environment. Examples throughout the data reflect the unintentional ableism, beliefs and actions surrounding disability, that exists.

Me: Describe your current involvement and interactions with students from the Work-Based Learning Program. Do you provide job skill instruction, academic instruction, job coaching on site, etc.?

Teacher 2: In the first class, we mostly sort mail, do laundry and mass mailings. They are lower functioning so they need more individualized attention.

Me: Please describe your experiences with the work-based learning program?

G from N: And so we've had these students going on site and it's been great.

Me: So on the flip side, what kind of benefit do you think, so you explained that the students do some jobs that need to get done, so do you see any other benefits to participating in this program on behalf of like the company or your employees?

G from N: So, none of our employees see that work that the students are doing as taking away from anyone ...and be able to work safely and to almost look like us when they are out in the factory with their PPE and things like that.

Me: Prior to working with students from A, what interactions have you had with people with disabilities? Have you worked with people with disabilities?

J from N: I used to go to an institution where there were children with disabilities and I was playing with them.

Me: How does the work program help students from A? How does it help N?

J from N: Also the program helps N on getting back to the community giving people with less opportunities to success new skills that will be useful in the

future.

Field Notes from W: Owner looks to me and asks if any of my students could clean the glass of fingerprints on the front door. He commented that none of his employees could do it. One student was standing next to me and two other students were in earshot. I turned to my student and asked her if she wanted to perform that task.

Field Notes from W: Customer entered and was seated immediately at opening. The bartender/waitress did not immediately approach her despite being the only customer in the restaurant. One of my students was sweeping nearby and two students were cleaning tables. When the worker approached, the customer replied, “you better watch out or they will take your job.”

Field Notes from C: Worker approached me and inquired about one of my students, “what is wrong with her?” “She doesn’t look like she has a disability.”

Sense of belonging. Codes that were grouped together under the theme of sense of belonging were community, community experiences, and work experience. This theme and corresponding codes were assigned to any references to being part of a group, being in the community, feeling like one belongs with those in the environment, and interacting with people outside of school.

Community. Having a sense of community refers to data that identified interactions with the public, working with others, and interactions amongst participants in the study. For this code, data that discusses the emotional responses and feelings of the participants were included.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

I: I like delivery with friends.

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

D: I am helpful to other people.

T: Not only is it helping me, but for many others.

J: feel safe around people who care and staff are available when I need help

Me: What have the students from this program or similar programs been able to contribute to your company? Is there something that they are contributing? Does it make it easier for your employees to complete the tasks because they are doing a portion of it, or is it relieving you so that you can go do something else? How does this arrangement help you and your company? On a side note, have you heard from any of your current employees in any capacity about their response to the student workers?

R from C: Everybody loves them, loves their personalities. Um, every Monday and Wednesday the morning crew says “the kids are coming today, I can’t wait until the kids come today.”

Community experiences. Out of the school building, experiences with the public, and going to local businesses were grouped together using this code. This code refers to in person interactions with others.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

E: It's good going out of school.

Me: What type of benefit do you believe this type of work-based learning program has for students with disabilities? So, I am flipping it to not only how could they help you but now what do you think this could do for them?

R from C: Ah, this helps them, I believe even dealing with the public, ah working with the public, um just being with the public. Um, the real world.

Work experience. Data from participants that related to completing real job tasks and working at community sites were coded as work experience. This code also identified any data that discussed job experiences within the school building.

Me: And my last question, is there anything else that you want to share about your experiences with this program?

R from C: Um, most high school kids don't get an opportunity like this. I am a big believer of street smarts on top of it. So, you've got these honors students graduating schools and getting their first job and they have no clue what they are doing, what it's like, or what the real world is even like. Um, how all these kids are playing video games now, they don't go out into the public and deal with the public as much as they did in the past. Um, just the fact that they are in the building, you know, they won't ignore customers in the store. They will find the help if they need the help. If they do know how to answer customers' questions, they do it. But they will find the help when they need it.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

T: I feel like I finally got the work experience.

Interpretations

The process of interpretation serves many purposes: attaching meaning, drawing conclusions, identifying significance, offering explanations, inferring, and making sense of the findings from data that was gathered (Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Throughout the process of interpreting the data, I incorporated DS and DisCrit conceptual frameworks and a phenomenological theoretical framework. I kept the underpinnings of these frameworks at the forefront as I looked for how disability was perceived, how the WBL program was viewed, how one's position and/or identity(ies) influenced responses, and how participants expressed their perspectives.

Results

This section details how the results of the qualitative study inform, address, and answer the research questions. This is accomplished by examining the qualitative data, codes, and themes that emerged and their alignment to the theoretical and conceptual frameworks applied in this research study. When phenomenological interview data is used, "the focus is always on the development of themes" (Rossman & Rallis, 2017, p. 253). Each research question is reviewed and aligned with examples from the data. Student mini profiles are subsequently outlined to further highlight the student perspective and elevate the importance of giving agency to disabled youth.

View of and experiences with WBL program (Q1). Examples of how stakeholders view, perceive, and experience a WBL program are evident throughout each data set. The perceived benefits outweigh any barriers and the participants view the WBL program as beneficial not only to themselves as individuals but also to the group to which they belong and to those of differing identities. Thus, reinforcing the importance of establishing a sense of belonging and community within a WBL program. The data

suggests that when different stakeholders are involved in a program or process together, they are more likely to view the experience as meaningful for all. The stakeholders that did not have direct, active participation in the WBL program identified barriers preventing their involvement. The other stakeholder groups did not identify barriers nor negative experiences with the WBL program. Individuals not directly involved in the study and those who were observed via researcher field notes and memoing demonstrated apprehension or an unwillingness to share their perspectives. It is important to note that the three sites utilized for WBL agreed to partner with me and my students prior to implementation of the study. Therefore, the participants at the sites may be more apt to view the WBL program and disabled youth in a favorable light. It is also imperative that I acknowledge ableism continues to exist in the workplace despite my attempts to create partnerships. For several years, I have been trying to get a foot in the door at a local office supply store to no avail. I have been told that “we can’t take work away from paid employees,” “it needs to go through HR,” “can I call back at another time,” etc. Some of the data at the established work sites speaks to this as well. I can clearly remember after greeting each other one day at C, one of the workers in our area said to me “what does she have (after one of my students said “hi” and made a joke), nothing is wrong with her.” My student was walking away at the time and the potential existed for her to hear the comment. This statement identifies how people not only have preconceived notions about how a disability is supposed to look, but the notions surrounding disability also point to disability being perceived as something different and negative.

Employer/Employee perceptions (Q2). When directly questioned through the interview process, the employer/employee participants described or referred to the disabled youth that participated in the WBL program positively and capable of performing required or essential job tasks at the sites. Thus, viewing them as they would

their paid employees not just as a disabled person. These participants identified that the students were given the same type of job tasks as other individuals and as they have performed themselves. It can be inferred that the students were treated as valued employees by the other participants in the study. Different or specific jobs were not just created for them, rather they were working on actual work tasks and working around actual employees. The students in the WBL program were afforded the chance to have real experiences, with real employers/employees, and perform real tasks that would be completed if these students would be hired in the same or a similar organization. It is important to note the potential for participant bias in this instance as the employers/employees who participated in the interviews did so on their own and agreed to participate. There were two potential participants identified for participation in the research study that either declined participation or did not respond to inquiries surrounding inclusion of their perspectives. Researcher field notes are indicative of the presence of ableism at our established work sites and are not reflective of the study participants' actions or comments directed toward my students. Since I have previously established rapport and a working relationship with the staff at the various WBL sites, this may have contributed to their willingness to participate in the study and to view my students in a positive light.

Student perceptions (Q3). Throughout the student focus group sessions, the students identified the WBL program as giving them opportunities to learn how to work and learn skills. They did not attribute their experiences or interactions with others to disability, nor did they question why they were assigned various tasks. Several reasons exist for this separation of disability from my students' perspectives. At the time of the study, all student participants had limited and varying levels of understanding of self in relation to their disability. This limited self-awareness affects their understanding and

perception of disability, how it manifests itself on the individual level, and how it can influence those around them. They were unable to locate or discuss instances of ableism at the job sites. At all three job sites, the students worked in common areas where either paid employees worked in conjunction with them or were completing other tasks within the same environment. It can be concluded that in these instances, my students were comfortable and believed they were treated as real workers. Lastly, I worked alongside my students to help them complete the assigned tasks, provide instruction, and provide immediate feedback. This also helped to legitimize the process and their participation. My students did not question or acknowledge hearing ableist-type comments. When my students asked for clarification about something that was said in their presence, none of the comments related to disability or ableism.

Glimpse of Student Participants

E. One of E's greatest assets is his demeanor. E can be serious when needed, is quite calm and understands and uses humor. He can understand and relate to different people and different situations, and he can adjust when needed based on his environment. This student was twenty years old at the time when the focus group was conducted. E is scheduled to age out of public school in June 2021. He participated in four years of WBL experience, including community WBL at three job sites. E has been diagnosed with intellectual disability. E has always demonstrated a positive view of working, is socially aware of his surroundings and attempts all work tasks presented. E speaks English. Regardless of his mood, what was on his mind, or how he was feeling, E would always be prepared to go in the community as scheduled. E would like to work after high school, but he does not have experience in his area of interest, and he is not aware of the steps to become employed within the field he is interested in. Some Focus Group #1 responses from E are as follows:

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

E: It helps you learn how to get a job.

Me: If you go to a community job site, do you believe that you are treated like the employees that work there?

E: Yes.

D. D is a very generous person. He is always willing to help me when I ask for help or need a volunteer. He shares his snacks with others, and he has bought items for his good friends and girlfriend. He was eighteen years old when the focus group met. He had about six months of WBL prior to school closure, including community WBL at two job sites. Due to the closure and change in programming, he graduated earlier than anticipated and stopped participating in virtual instruction. This student is very social with adults and peers but is unable to demonstrate socially appropriate interactions (e.g., personal space, topics of conversation, etc.) or understand nonverbal communication from others. D has been diagnosed with intellectual disability and speech-language impairment. D speaks English, but he is not always understood by his intended audience because he speaks rapidly and does not enunciate all words. I also talk rather quickly, and I think this has helped to form a connection with him. D is able to complete various job tasks and demonstrates initiative. He often rushes through completion of tasks and is not always aware of following safety measures. D did not have an employment plan prior to graduation. Some of D's responses during Focus Group #1 are noted below:

Me: Tell me about your interactions and conversations that you have with customers in the Coffee Shop or at our job sites.

D. I talk to J (employee from N). He is good and nice. I show him things on my phone.

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

D: I am helpful to other people, I learn different stuff.

T. One of the first things that comes to mind when thinking about T is how extremely artistic and talented she is. T keeps to herself most of the time and chooses to work alone when given the option. I distinctly remember a few years ago when she performed in our program's inaugural talent show, which came as a surprise to most in attendance. She has a beautiful voice and shared her talent for singing on this occasion. She has continued to share her voice in the van ride to N on many occasions. This student was nineteen years old during the focus group sessions. She has been participating in WBL learning opportunities for three years, including at two community WBL sites. She reports having a positive view of working and the concept of work overall, but she is unable to recognize how her actions do or do not demonstrate that view. T is a conscientious worker and pays attention to detail. This is often at the expense of timeliness and task completion. She reports wanting and recognizing the importance of working with others and having a sense of belonging. T is not socially aware of her surroundings and she reported that social interactions are overwhelming for her. T speaks English. T has been diagnosed with autism. T's perceptions of the WBL program and her expanding self-awareness are identified through some of her responses during the first focus group.

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

T: When I go to my classes, I feel like I finally got the work experience, and it's helping learn to interact with people and doing small jobs that I can do and work at.

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

T: It helps me to learn how to grow, learn, and being independent. Not only is it helping me, but for many others.

I. I has a closer connection to me than other students do and her journey through LSS and WBL looks different than that of her peers. She did not enter the school district in which the study took place until 9th grade. Prior to entering the district, she received her education at a private school for students with learning disabilities. In 9th grade, I began high school receiving in-home instruction. She slowly transitioned to the school building throughout 10th and 11th grades. Her teachers were hand-picked, and she had daily check-ins with me. She has told me that she would not have come to school if “I wasn't there to help her get through everything.” I has been participating in school-based WBL for two years and around three months at one community job site. She is social only with preferred peers and staff, some of this is in direct relation to the length of public schooling experience she has had. I speaks English. I's interest in working is not for traditional reasons such as buying things, paying bills, and earning money, as she does not have a concept of money and its value. Her beliefs surrounding getting a job are also inconsistent. This is due to her limited experiences and disability. I has been educationally diagnosed with intellectual disability. She has self- and parent-reported medical conditions which affect her health, daily performance, access to opportunities, belief of self, and belief of others. Nario-Redmond (2020) identifies this belief of self and view of others in relation to self as the “Self-Fulfilling Prophecy” (p. 199).

Nario-Redmond (2020) discusses how “biased expectations not only affect how one person treats another, but they can actually provoke the very behaviors expected” (p. 199). Over time, some disabled people may even develop learned helplessness or “internalized ableism” where they internalize the comments and actions of others that are directed at them and reinforced (Slice, 2020, p. 130; Arielle, 2020, p. 144). This is indicative of a self-fulfilling prophecy, a cycle, in which an individual’s beliefs about oneself and others lead to actions and expectations toward others. These actions either reinforce or alter the preconceived notions and beliefs about an individual or group the individual belongs to. Regardless if the beliefs are supported or denounced, another’s actions are in direct result. Figure 4.1 demonstrates this cycle.

Figure 4.1. Self-Fulfilling Prophecy Cycle



Figure 4.1. Cycle of how our actions, expectations, and beliefs of self can influence and are influenced by the actions, beliefs, and expectations of others. Adapted from “Ableism: The Causes and Consequences of Disability Prejudice,” by M. R. Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 217.

A glimpse of I’s responses during the first focus group are noted to demonstrate her limited view of work and her own perceptions of self:

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

I: Working at Starbucks doesn't deliver, like at a drive thru say what you want, don't like working, I like delivery with friends.

Me: What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

I: I get to learn about working.

A. This student was twenty years old during his participation in the focus group.

A has been participating in WBL for two years and he had the opportunity to participate at two community sites. A is not socially aware of his surroundings and has experienced difficulties with initiating conversations with peers. Because of this, not many students engage him in conversation. I helped to arrange social opportunities for A in which someone will say something about football. A capitalizes on these experiences as he is very passionate about football. This provides a way for A to participate with his peers and experience a sense of belonging. A speaks English and he can understand some Spanish. A has been diagnosed with autism and other health impairment (OHI). A is not able to initiate job tasks but he has demonstrated that he knows how to perform routine tasks. He performs best with single step tasks and repetition. A has shown interest in WBL as it related to his daily routine and his school schedule. Some of A's responses from Focus Group #3 are noted below. A did not initiate a response. He required an additional prompt and/or question to respond. These are identified below.

Me: Tell me about your interactions and conversations that you have with customers in the Coffee Shop or at our job sites. Did you talk to or interact with anyone on Coffee Shop deliveries? How do you know?

A: Yes. They are friendly, looks on their faces, good, positive.

Me: If you go to a community job site, do you believe that you are treated like the employees that work there?

A: Help me out.

J. J and I have a running game that we play during down time, when he is nervous about a new situation, or when we need a laugh. We also played while I drove him and his peers to N each week. It is unofficially called “What/Why Shouldn’t You Do...” We select an up and coming event and think about all the extreme things that a person should not do in the situation and we talk about why it would not be okay to do that. This helps to ease J’s anxiety as I create extreme or funny options. J has been participating in WBL opportunities at three community sites for three years. He was twenty years old during the focus group sessions and will age out of public school in June 2021. J is very social and initiates talking to anyone he encounters. J speaks English. His interactions are not always socially appropriate as he seeks out people of interest repetitively and during inopportune times, is repetitive in his speech and topic selection, and displays age-inappropriate behaviors when he does not get what he wants. He cannot pick up on nonverbal cues from others. J has expressed that he wants to be accepted by others, particularly adults. J has been diagnosed with autism. J demonstrates overall initiative with completing job tasks. As reported by J, he takes pride in getting his job(s) done and likes to be recognized. J has not expressed interest in working after high school, but he does want to be around people. J was the most vocal and involved student throughout the two focus group sessions that he participated in. Some of his responses are as follows:

Me: Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program?

What do you not like about the program?

J: Follow the instructions, do what you are asked, teaching us how to get jobs when we leave school, talking to the people who work at W and N. I like making my teacher crazy during the drive to N. I hate doing work because I miss Best Buddies sometimes. I don't like the smell of the nasty stuff at N.

Me: If you go to a community job site, do you believe that you are treated like the employees that work there?

J: Feel safe around people who care.

Chapter 5: Discussion of Results, Findings, and Implications

This chapter summarizes the results of the study, the findings and significance of the work, limitations, and implications for practice and policy. Results are reviewed from all participant groups collectively and with consideration given to individual responses.

Summary of Study

My research was based on and reflective of a problem of practice I saw in my teaching environment and through review of available research. Disabled students, particularly those with a low-incidence disability, either have not been adequately prepared for post-high school outcomes or they experience barriers to employment after high school. This study reviewed research relating to the need for quality WBL programs that include real-world experiences, stakeholder input, and targeted skill instruction. Preparation also includes empowering disabled students, working to change the perception of the concept of disability, further examining the identities of teachers and their students, and forming a partnership between the disabled community and the nondisabled community. This was accomplished using the qualitative methods of researcher memoing and observations, a student focus group, an online teacher survey, and employer/employee interviews. Existing research in the areas of education, special

education, work-based learning, DS, DisCrit, and phenomenology are limited in their inclusion of the disability identity, particularly those with low-incidences disabilities, or honoring the voices of disabled individuals.

To honor the voices of my students and challenge the presence of ableism, I included my students' words and actions throughout this study. I also positioned the disability identity front and center. In the words of Haben Girma (2019), "ableism continues to haunt people with disabilities, rendering exclusion the norm around the world" (p. 275). This self-fulfilling prophecy leads many members of the disability community to internalize existing ableist attitudes and beliefs. Thus, potentially impacting the pursuit of employment after high school. Therefore, contact with other groups is vital to an expanded view that recognizes others for their differences not because of their differences.

Nario-Redmond (2020) identifies how changes can bring people from differing groups together and this can be accomplished with more exposure, interaction, and cooperation. Disability supports and solutions can benefit the entire community. Universal Design principles of presenting information auditorily, tactually, and visually, elevators installed in multi-level buildings and curb cuts in sidewalks are just a few ways that disabled and nondisabled individuals can equally access, utilize, and benefit from resources and facilities. Dolmage (2017) "recognizes the importance of universally designing for all aspects and identities through his five levels of accessibility: movement, sense, architecture, communication, and agency. This strategy creates equitable use in that it recognizes diverse abilities" (p. 120). As Girma (2019) suggests, people with disabilities succeed when communities choose to be inclusive. In an interview conducted on July 20, 2020 as part of the ADA 30th Anniversary series, Haben Girma stated "my disability was never my barrier. It was ableism that kept getting in the way. Stop

framing disability as a barrier...disabled people are successful because communities chose to remove barriers.” Employment needs to be framed as available to all, regardless of ability or disability. Nario-Redmond (2020) concurs regarding the presence of ableism and the difficulty with challenging it as she writes:

We may not think of being able-bodied as a group identity, but such individuals may experience a kind of social identity threat when their group’s superior status is challenged. This may motivate them to push back against social change efforts driven by disabled people and their allies (p. 251).

Following the premise of the works included in Wong, (2020), it is important to “emphasize the power of conversations and action in the face of inequality, ableism, and oppression” in order to become a movement for social change (p. xviii).

Limitations

Several limitations with the present study are worth noting either as considerations for future research or implications for the findings within this study. These relate to how disability was viewed within this study, the selection of participants, COVID-19, sample size used, participant perspectives, and self-reflection of the WBL program.

Disability is a “moving target” (Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 4). The way in which people view the concept disability affects how they come to understand and ultimately interact with the disabled community. This study did not examine all models of disability (e.g., moral, biomedical, etc.) and how disability is viewed in terms of those existing models. This study approached the concepts of disability and ableism from the socially constructed view of disability and one’s beliefs of disability being aligned with prior exposure and experiences. The socially constructed view, or socio-political model of disability, identifies societal belief systems as creating a barrier or limitation for disabled individuals not brought on by their own doing. Other models and views

of disability look to remedy or cure disability to provide increased access and opportunity, to alter one's self not the surroundings, or to cast blame and doubt onto the disabled individual. These approaches are not identified or supported in the present study.

One stakeholder group was not included in the present study. The researcher did not elicit parental/guardian input beyond seeking initial permission for their son/daughter to participate in the research and explaining the premise of the study and intention of student participation. Parents or guardians did not initiate requesting involvement, sharing input, inquiring about the study's status, or pursuit of information surrounding their son's/daughter's involvement. Parents or guardians were not easily accessible during the study, and involvement with this group was intentionally limited to reduce violating confidentiality. All student participants but one were not on my IEP caseload and the case managers of these participants were not notified of their participation. As a result, this also limited direct contact with the families of the student participants.

From the data-gathering stage through the dissertation defense, the COVID-19 pandemic was present and impacted the researcher's ability to access participants and gather some data. Four employer/employee interviews, encompassing all three job sites, participation from two students in the focus group, and potential researcher field notes were affected and excluded. The district in which the study took place closed for in-person instruction as of March 12, 2020.

Since the district in which the study took place operated virtually for much of the study, a smaller sample size than anticipated was utilized. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the district provided instruction virtually during part of the data collection period and businesses temporarily closed or restricted access. Two students, one manager, and three employees originally selected for participation in the study were not

available nor accessible through a virtual format during the school and business closures. They had graduated earlier than previously planned, there was limited or no contact information available, or they no longer worked for the company. Though the students were similar in age (just turned 18 and 20), their involvement in the WBL program varied significantly, as one student was in the first year of WBL and the other student was in the third year of WBL. Therefore, analyzing the students' perspective in relation to years of involvement in the WBL program was not possible and no interviews were conducted at one of the three established job sites. The researcher was only able to gather field notes and student input in relation to this site for inclusion in the study.

In conjunction with the participant perspectives that were gathered, these perspectives were only gathered at specific points in time and in specific locations. A pre- and post-interview method was not utilized to compare the perspectives of participants at the onset and ending of participation in the WBL program. No interview data is available for the most recently acquired job site. Therefore, an overall shift in perspectives surrounding disability and view of employment for disabled individuals can only be based on interpretations of available data, self-reflection, or additional comments made by participants.

One intention of this study was to examine and reflect on a current WBL program by giving agency and voice to the various stakeholders involved. This study did not examine the structure of other WBL programs in surrounding school districts from which to provide a comparison. The presence of WBL programs for students with low-incidence disabilities is almost nonexistent not only within the other high schools in the local district but also in nearby districts. Therefore, there would have been a limited pool from which to draw comparisons. It should be noted that though this could be a limitation, it also adds to an implication for practice and future research.

Implications for Practice

The implications for practice have a direct affect on my teaching environment, which is one of the purposes for this study. Through inclusion of stakeholder input, examining the current WBL program, and reframing the disability identity, I generated new knowledge and understanding for all participants including myself. I provided a venue to bring the voices of a traditionally marginalized population to the forefront. This journey has helped to show the importance of giving agency to my students and empowering them to recognize their ability to be self-determined individuals and pursue meaningful employment as a viable option post-high school.

Site-Based meaning/significance. Data gathered from all participants demonstrated the value in a structured WBL program for all stakeholders. There were identified benefits for each stakeholder group, not only for themselves but for the other stakeholders within the WBL program. As the researcher, I wanted to ensure that I was including all key components identified in the research and that I was listening to my participants. I did not want to design a program solely based on how I thought it should be designed or what I think the disabled community needs. Stakeholder input was essential in ensuring how significant a WBL program can be for the disabled and nondisabled community. Results not only support me in the work to provide a quality WBL program to my students, but it encourages my continued advocacy for such a program and towards a more socially just world.

Throughout this study, I also highlighted the importance of preparing disabled students for employment after high school through targeted skill instruction. In conjunction with real-world work experience, skills necessary to gain and keep a job are essential so disabled individuals can work independently, have a true sense of belonging, achieve a sense of self-worth and self-determination, and counter ableism in all aspects of

life. The results are indicative of how a WBL program can have the potential to empower disabled individuals to make decisions for themselves, view available options as achievable and have a voice.

Input from a traditionally marginalized and excluded population. This study elicited direct input from some students who participate in the WBL program. By including their voices and perspectives, agency is being given to a group that has been traditionally marginalized and left out of discussions surrounding supports and programming for disabled students. This is significant in that decisions are traditionally made without hearing from those who would be impacted directly. Previous researchers may have been reluctant to include disabled individuals with low-incidence disabilities for fear or apprehension of working with a vulnerable population, not being able to remove bias or influence, not being able to get true input or consent, or for other reasons. The results from the present study pinpoint the need for and sense of urgency surrounding inclusion of the disabled perspective.

Disrupted/Confronted vs reinforcement of ableism. To disrupt or confront ableism, disability identity needs to be acknowledged, supported, and included in all facets of daily life by those inside and outside of the disabled community. By highlighting the importance of WBL programs, engaging stakeholders in discussions surrounding disability, and giving agency to disabled youth, I have taken steps to interrupt the historical, systemic, and societal barriers that reinforce ableism. I challenged the traditional belief that disability should be pushed aside or not directly accounted for in planning and programming. I placed the disability identity front and center throughout my work. Regarding the concept of self-fulfilling prophecy, “few studies have tested this idea in the context of disability” (Nario-Redmond, 2020, p. 200). By empowering a group of disabled youth to self-reflect on their experiences and speak

freely about their perceptions, I am helping to improve their ability to become self-determined individuals and confront beliefs about what they can and cannot do. The results from the student focus group identified ways in which my students feel they are treated equally in the workplace and why they should be treated as such. An example from Focus Group #1, Question #4 and #5 are included below to demonstrate my students' perceptions:

Me (Question #4): If you go to a community job site, do you feel that you are treated like the employees that work there?

I: Yes, fairness and equal rights.

E: Yes.

D: Yes.

T: I do believe I am being treated like other people do.

Me (Question #5): Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with the work-based learning program?

T: Because like any other job, I believe that we should be treated equally, and the equal amounts of jobs we do.

The partnership with community businesses (e.g., employers/employees) and my intentional confronting of their beliefs surrounding the abilities of my disabled students in the work environment has also helped to disrupt ableist beliefs, draw attention to how disabled individuals are viewed, and create a sense of community. An example from one of the employee interviews is included to further demonstrate how exposure to a differing identity can influence one's understanding:

Me (Question #4): Prior to working with students from A, what interactions have you had with people with disabilities? Have you worked with people with

disabilities?

J: Many years ago, when I was living in my native country, I used to go to an institution where there were children with disabilities, and I was playing with them, but I never worked with people with disabilities until I started this program.

Continuation/Expansion of the program. This study helps to provide a platform from which to advocate for continued community WBL opportunities for students in the LSS program at my high school and to develop it at the other high school within my district. Unfortunately, this WBL program has been limited to students in the LSS program. I have been approached by teachers in learning support and emotional support for suggestions on how to advocate for and begin a WBL program for their students. My district is currently in corrective-action status regarding our students' transition plans within their IEPs. I have recently been asked to join the grant-funded Transition Planning Committee to help improve the transition plans for all our 14+ year old students within my district.

Implications for Policy

Since this study was conducted on a small scale, the ability to generalize it to other districts or with other populations is limited. Therefore, implications for policy look more at transferability and how the themes identified in this study can be expanded, not necessarily replicated, in various ways at the building, district, community, and state level. Implications also center around educating and empowering staff to better approach, support, instruct, and prepare disabled students for post-school life.

Teacher professional development. To account for my position as the researcher, insider, and creator of the WBL program, I acknowledge my level of awareness, understanding, and view of disability in relation to others. Due to this

acknowledgement, I also must recognize and account for others' views and experiences with understanding the disability experience. Limited experiences may account for the differences in how other current and former WBL teachers within my district perceive a WBL program, its benefits, and barriers. I view the program from that of opportunity for all stakeholders, while others view it from a deficit perspective, what is preventing it from occurring as they had envisioned, or as a benefit to only one group of stakeholders. If the opportunity would present itself for professional development (PD) in relation to the importance of WBL programs for disabled youth and/or disability advocacy, other teachers throughout my district would benefit. As a teacher who often works autonomously, there are things that I have been doing to sustain and expand the WBL program at my high school and increase my students' self-advocacy skills. These are strategies and ideas that I would like to share with others, but I need a venue in which to do so. As collective advocates of our students, we have the potential to expand the WBL program within our district, thus, servicing and supporting more disabled youth and the community. There is a significant number of disabled students throughout the district, "students with disabilities" is a category identified within the building's and district's ATSI plans, and our students move frequently within and out of the district. This reinforces the need for collective participation in the same types of PD at the building level and across the district.

Prior to my involvement in the LSS program, I led PD on several occasions in relation to supporting disabled students in the general education classroom and strategies for supporting students diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. This was done through a building level, teacher-led PD program which provided avenues for choice on behalf of the participants. I would like to resurrect this opportunity for building level PD and run a session specifically around the presence of ableism in schools. I envision

entitling my session “Recognizing and Working Through Ableism in the School Setting.”

If given this opportunity, I would propose to include the building paraprofessionals in addition to the teachers. Teachers and paraprofessionals alike frequently vocalize their frustrations over PD that is not chosen, relevant, or novel. The timeframe for this type of PD is undetermined at this point and would be outlined by building or district administration. I want to secure participant buy-in and encourage participants to choose my session. Therefore, my proposed agenda for the session would need to be applicable and concise in conveying my message of disability advocacy, presence of ableism, and strategies for countering deficit thinking surrounding the disability identity. As part of the session, participants would be presented with various phrases and actions that are prevalent in our classrooms which do and do not demonstrate ableist beliefs. They will have the opportunity to explore, distinguish between, and dialogue with peers about how transforming language and actions can challenge and dismantle the barriers that exist for our disabled students. Participants will leave the session with options for replacing ableist comments and actions in everyday classroom and school-based scenarios.

Book club/Professional learning community (PLC). I recently became aware of a book club that my building level administrators were participating in, but it had not been widely discussed or opened to the teaching staff. If the book could be secured for everyone, the plan was to distribute it, though there was no plan to involve the teaching staff within the structured book club discussions. The initial reading highlighted racial diversity within schools, which is pertinent to all staff within my school and aligns with the school’s ATSI plan. A book club, such as that for the administrators, has the potential to incorporate other identities of our students as well as educational theories and research. I did receive approval from my building principal to

organize a book club on my own and he will support me in my endeavor if I choose to pursue it. I believe it would be beneficial to have all interested parties at my school participate together, regardless of their role, rather than as separate entities or through separate book clubs. All staff have the collective responsibility to support and educate our students in some capacity. To begin implementation effectively and efficiently, I do recognize that my plan may have to begin small and expand as need arises or interest increases. Therefore, I would propose to begin a book club with the teaching staff at my school building. Since my knowledge, interest, and experiences are in the areas of special education, disability, WBL, advocacy, lived experiences, and ableism, I would be intentional in the selection of the initial book. By beginning with a book such as *Haben: The Deafblind Woman Who Conquered Harvard Law* (Girma, 2019), I can highlight the significance of these areas. To encourage buy-in from the beginning and continued participation throughout the duration of the book club, I believe it is important to choose an initial book that clearly introduces the purpose of and goals for the book club. This novel is written from the perspective of a disabled individual and discusses how she has navigated a world in which disability is not viewed as the norm, is socially constructed, and presents societal barriers based on these premises. I also do not want to begin with a heavy reading that overwhelms the reader conceptually or in length; therefore, I selected this memoir as it is divided into short chapters. Lastly, I want to show the potential book club members that I have considered and value their time, input, and commitment. The initial reading and design of the book club framework speaks to these key areas (e.g., timeframe, purpose, etc.). Future books may be chosen based on the participants' interest in continuing the book club and their willingness to participate in the selection of future books. Figure 5.1 below identifies the book club framework including purpose and logistics.

Table 5.1:

Book Club Framework

When?	What?	Where?	How long?	Why?
Initial Meeting (specific date TBA)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Participant introductions, reason for interest -Introduce book and purpose, read introduction aloud -General discussion questions 	Zoom	30-60 minutes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lay groundwork for book club purpose. -Provide a starting point from which the concept of disability is situated.
2 nd Meeting (two weeks later)	Chapters 1-7	Zoom	30-60 minutes	-Discuss how Haben navigated childhood based on cultural and societal norms. How does this help you to understand lived experiences?
3 rd Meeting (two weeks later)	Chapters 8-14	Zoom	30-60 minutes	-Discuss how Haben's drive paved the way for experiences and opportunities not readily available to her. How does Haben view disability?
4 th Meeting (two weeks later)	Chapters 15-21	Zoom	30-60 minutes	-Discuss how Haben challenges the status quo. Why is this so important?
5 th Meeting (two week later)	Chapters 22-end	Zoom	30-60 minutes	Discuss how Haben's view of disability,

				<p>experiences, and advocacy both nationally and internationally paved the way for other individuals with disabilities. How does disability, experience, and advocacy relate to experiences at our local level?</p>
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Disseminating information and discussing perspectives surrounding disability, ableism, and the disability experience would align well with the diversity and social justice themes already in place. Not only is my high school racially and ethnically diverse but there is also significant diversity amongst the ability levels of our students. Disabled students at my high school make up approximately 1/5 of the population, or 750+ students. As part of my building’s Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI) designation, the following subgroups have been identified for supplemental support, intervention, and focusing of resources: Black Students, Economically Disadvantaged, English Learners, Hispanic, and Students with Disabilities. The ATSI designation for multiple subgroups identifies a sense of urgency in relation to adequately supporting and instructing students of differing identities and reinforces the need for an intersectional approach.

DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) suggest a strategy for long-term and meaningful school improvement by inspiring school personnel to function as a PLC. PLCs use a collaborative and shared approach to continuous improvement with a focus on results for both staff and students. However, Hollins (2011) cautions the imple-

mentation of teacher professional communities under its original design and intent. There are questions surrounding the “potential of interventions for disrupting, redirecting, and transforming dysfunctional communities of practice that do not support student learning in urban schools” (Hollins, 2011, p. 123). The intent of PLC implementation needs to be addressed to construct authentic and effective new knowledge which supports the learning of all students. The premise behind PLCs ties in with the book club strategy mentioned initially.

Since a drastic, district-wide personnel cut over six years ago, not only has my district been short-staffed and has not recovered, there are no longer opportunities during the school day to allow for scheduled PLC time. Teacher work time is filled with teaching 7/8 class periods or an administrative assigned building duty. Teacher prep periods are no longer aligned based on grade level, a team approach, or a content area as students come to school on a staggered schedule to accommodate for all students and limited staffing. This current structure is counterintuitive to the benefit of PLCs in enabling students to learn at high levels and elevating the teaching profession. Under the current structure, beginning with the implementation of a book club may be a way to begin having structured discussions surrounding disability and programming. As it becomes established and expanded, the opportunity to resurrect PLCs at my school may arise as another way to collaborate.

District and state programs. Despite federal and state mandates relating to preparing students to be college and career ready and transition planning in IEPs (American Institutes for Research, 2019; Connor et al., 2016), there are no district or state mandates on how to carry this out. Every school and district acts in isolation when it comes to addressing these components. Not only does this approach lead to inconsis-

tency, it also does not ensure that equitable or adequate preparation and support is being provided to disabled youth. One way to approach the inconsistency within my district is to provide some required transition planning and optional activities. Though a one size fits all approach or a drop-down menu from which to select items are not valid ways to individualize or personalize, mandated and optional activities would provide a starting point and ensure that the basic components are being included. This approach may also help to strengthen the importance of real-world work experiences and how it can be applied to students in various special education programs, not just LSS.

Diverse teaching staff. Who teachers are in terms of their identity(ies) is important for many reasons. Diversity in teaching staff encourages other perspectives and experiences, enhances a worldview, and provides opportunities for students from all backgrounds to make connections to their teachers. Sleeter and Milner IV (2011) call for teachers to be prepared to meet diversity amongst their learners and recognition that programs need to be more intentional in selecting, recruiting, and retaining a diverse teaching force. To this I add, school districts need to be more persistent in their recruitment of diverse teachers, including diversity in relation to disability.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine some factors that can affect post-high school employment outcomes for youth with low-incidence disabilities. Through review of research, I identified the importance of real-world work experiences and stakeholder involvement for disabled individuals and the surrounding community by providing authentic and prolonged opportunities, intergroup cooperation and shared experiences, and a sense of belonging. These variables can have a direct impact on the disability experience and how the concept of disability is framed and perceived by others, including disabled youth themselves. As highlighted in Nario-Redmond (2020), disability attitudes

improve based on the amount of contact one has and the length of the interactions. The concept of disability and the language used to discuss it continue to be interpreted, understood, and evaluated in a negative way, much of which is unnoticed or minimized (Cherney, 2019).

By incorporating Disability Studies and Disability Studies and Critical Race Theory into this study, these frameworks were applied to an identity (low-incidence disabilities) and the lived experiences of a group that has often been unnoticed, minimized, or excluded historically in research. Addressing these themes while students are still in high school has shown to increase employment outcomes for disabled youth not only nationally, but also internationally (Park, 2008; Heymann, Stein, & Moreno, 2014; Winn & Hay, 2009). It encourages viewing the concepts of disability, disability identity, and intersectionality from a different perspective other than that of social construction and as a condition needing to be cured, minimized, or ignored. Ultimately, these themes play a vital role in the development of an effective transition program for disabled youth.

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Appendix A

Appendix A identifies the interview protocol and interview questions for the semi-structured, iterative interviews that will be conducted with 2-3 employees at each work-based learning job site. The questions identified with an * indicate possible probing questions that may be used in order to have a participant elaborate on a response if necessary.

Interview Protocol

“The purpose of this interview is to gather employee perceptions of the work-based learning program and experiences with individuals with disabilities. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be grouped together with other similar employee responses. You have the right to remove yourself from the process at any time, either to only answer some of the questions or to not have your responses included in the study. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the purpose of this interview or your contribution?”

Employee Interview Questions

1. Please describe your role within this company. Include your position and general responsibilities you have.
2. Describe your current involvement and interactions with students from the work-based learning program.
 - *Are you responsible for assigning job tasks to the students? If so, please explain what this looks like or how you do this?
 - *Are you responsible for completing the same type of job tasks as the students? If so, do you complete them simultaneously or prior to/after the students are present?
3. Prior to participating in the work-based learning program, what experiences or interactions have you had with individuals with disabilities?

*Have you ever worked with an individual with a disability?

4. What type of benefit do you believe the work-based learning program has for students with disabilities? What type of benefit do you see the work-based learning program having for this company?
5. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with the work-based learning program?

Appendix B

Appendix B identifies the interview protocol and questions for the online anonymous questionnaire that will be conducted with three teachers in my district. The questions identified with an * indicate possible probing questions that may be used to have a participant elaborate on a response if necessary.

Interview Protocol

“The purpose of these questions is to gather your perceptions of and experiences with the work-based learning program. Your responses will remain anonymous and will be grouped together with other similar responses. You have the right to remove yourself from the process at any time, either to only answer some of the questions or to not have your responses included in the study. Before you begin the questionnaire, contact me via email if you have any questions about the purpose of the questionnaire or your contribution.”

Teacher Interview Questions

1. Please describe your experience with the work-based learning program either previously or currently.

*Do your experiences involve in-school or community work experience opportunities? If so, what does this look like?
2. Describe your current involvement and interactions with students from the work-based learning program. Do you provide job skill instruction, academic instruction, job coaching on site, etc.?
3. Prior to participating in the work-based learning program, what experiences or interactions have you had with individuals with disabilities?
4. What type of benefit do you believe the work-based learning program has for students with disabilities? What type of benefit do you see the work-based learning program having for companies that partner with our work-based learning program?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with the work-based learning program?

Appendix C

Appendix C identifies the interview protocol and interview questions for the student focus group. More details are included in the protocol so as to explain some of the words that will be used. This will help to increase my students' understanding of the focus group and their involvement. The questions identified with an * indicate possible probing questions that may be used in order to have a participant elaborate on a response if necessary.

Focus Group Protocol

“The purpose of this group is to gather your thoughts of the work-based learning program that you are part of when you are in my class or in the community with me. Your answers to my questions will remain anonymous, which means no one outside of this room will hear or know what you said. What you tell me will be put together with other similar answers from the group. You have the right to remove yourself from this group at any time, either to only answer some of the questions or to not have your answers included at all. If you want to be part of this group or if you do not want to be part of it, your class grade with me will not change. This is your choice to join the group. Before we begin, do you have any questions about the purpose of this group or what you are being asked to do?”

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe what you do as part of the work-based learning program while you are in class or the community with me. What do you like about the program? What do you not like about the program?
2. What do you believe is good or helpful about being part of the Coffee Shop or going to job sites in the community?

3. Tell me about your interactions and conversations that you have with customers in the Coffee Shop or at our job sites.
4. If you go to a community job site, do you believe that you are treated like the employees that work there? Remember, as part of this program, you are not allowed to get paid.

*If so, can you tell me why you think this? If you do not, what do you believe is different?

5. Is there anything else that you would like to share about your experiences with the work-based learning program?