

November 2018

## Including children with learning differences: Experiences of independent school teachers

Lisa M. Lockhart

*University of South Florida*, [lisa.lockhart@smeds.org](mailto:lisa.lockhart@smeds.org)

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Including children with learning differences: Experiences of independent school teachers

by

Lisa M. Lockhart

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirement for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis in  
Special Education  
Department of Teaching and Learning  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Major Professor: Ann Cranston Gingras, PhD  
Brenda Walker, PhD, J D  
Jennifer Wolgemuth, PhD  
Linda Raffaele Mendez, PhD

Date of Approval: October 31,2018

Keywords: independent prep schools, instructional tolerance theory, learning differences

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## **DEDICATION**

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my family. First and foremost to my sister, Wendi. You are not just the wind, Wendi, you are my wings. Your encouragement, guidance, hand-holding and belief in me allowed me to finish this work. To my husband, John, who has supported me through every step on this journey, and to my daughter, Jordan. Thank you for being okay with having a mom who was “always doing homework.” And finally to my dearest friend, Dr. Laura Gonzalez, you are my inspiration.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

I would like to acknowledge the time and commitment of my committee members, Drs. Jennifer Wolgemuth, Linda Raffaele Mendez, and Brenda L. Walker, J. D. Your questions and feedback pushed me to think harder and to learn more. And a very special thank you to my Committee Chair, Dr. Ann Cranston-Gingras. My favorite anonymous quote is, “My teacher thought I was smarter than I was, so I was.” That fits perfectly in this situation. The countless hours you spent talking me through this and always believing that I could do this means more than you will ever know.

I also want to thank the teachers who participated in my study. Your love of your students and of teaching was an inspiration. By opening up and sharing your experiences, you have given me great hope for the future of our students with learning differences in independent schools. And finally, to those students with learning differences, this is for you.

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## **ABSTRACT**

There are various types of private schools. This study focused on independent prep schools termed as “British style” (Cooper, 1988 p.19). These select, independent prep schools have a long and distinguished history in the United States. Many, if not all of these schools, have stringent admissions requirements. However, due to special considerations given to certain constituencies (siblings, children of alumni, etc.) there are times when students who are accepted to the schools may display learning or behavioral characteristics that are incongruent with the original mission of the school. In addition, sometimes learning and/or social issues do not present themselves in children until after acceptance. Budgetary issues are always a concern in independent prep schools. Money is raised by tuition and, at times, some requirements may be more flexible than others. Due to these circumstances, some students who are admitted do not fit the mold of what the school may consider an ideal student. Using in-depth interviews and analysis of key artifacts, this study investigated the ways in which teachers interacted with and addressed the needs of these students in one independent prep school. Results revealed six themes that emerged from the data: accommodations, community, fit, time, communication and training. Two of the themes, fit and community align directly with the values of this independent school. The other themes revolved around how the teachers tried to help students with learning differences to be successful in this school. Implications include establishing more formal protocols for teacher discussions about this topic as well as ensuring that communication about

students with learning differences is transparent from the very beginning of the child's journey at the school.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

I begin chapter one with the story of my own experience and interest in this topic. This is followed by information about the story of independent schools and why this study is important. The personal journeys of the teachers are central to the study. Everything we do is colored by our own experiences and understandings of the world around us. The information shared by the teachers is no exception. The lens of their individual and collective understandings have an impact on both their teaching and their attitudes when working with students with learning differences. The conceptual framework of Instructional Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988) is explained as it pertains to this study. The purpose and research questions, as well as definitions of key terms round out this chapter.

**My Experience.** I am beginning my second decade as an educator. I have only worked in independent day schools. For the first two years, I worked with a teacher in her fourth decade of teaching. It became immediately clear to me there were some students who were going to need extra attention from me; they were not going to get it from her. These were students without traditional learning styles. Some needed more time to do things; some needed multiple or varied explanations; some just needed encouragement. I felt somewhat like a rebel making these adjustments. I was not sure if this was a teacher preference or a cultural part of the school, but I was concerned. I left that job after two years.

At the next school, where I still work, I began to understand more about how things work. Again, I was a classroom teacher. This time I worked with someone about my age who had been teaching approximately five years longer than I had. I came across the same attitude from her. I began to branch out and investigate this phenomenon of teacher attitudes.

### **Independent prep schools admissions policies**

The independent prep schools admissions policies stem from their mission statements. Some independent prep schools do have missions that include serving students with learning differences. However, the two where I have served are fashioned more like true prep schools. They accept students based upon their ability to be successful in the environment. Or so it is said.

While teaching 2nd graders in my second school, I finished my Master's Degree in reading. I was finding more and more students in my classroom who needed more than the traditional methods provided. The administration of the school was also becoming more aware of individual student needs. Therefore, I was asked to begin a class for 7th grade students who had either diagnosed or undiagnosed learning and/or attentional needs. It was determined that due to these needs, these students would not take a foreign language class. Instead, I would teach a remedial type of reading skills course. That had never been done in the 50-something year history of the school. I had 10 students, eight boys and two girls. Their parents were understandably concerned. At a school that does not use labels (because supposedly we never had to) their children were suddenly, and publicly, labeled.

That was a difficult class for me to teach. My focus was not on middle school students. It still is not! However, even though I was in only my 4th year as an elementary school teacher, I was the most qualified faculty member available to start the program. That is not because of any

grand skills that I possess. I think it was the combination of my Master's Degree, with my positive attitude about these student about whom for years' teachers had grumbled, "how they got into the school in the first place."

The admissions policy at the school is similar to many other independent schools. There is an admissions "test," for all candidates. Students range in age from 3 1/2 to 14 as the school offers grades Pre-K through 8<sup>th</sup>. Students are evaluated based upon their "readiness for our program." For the littlest ones, we are looking for a combination of academic readiness, social skills and maturity. As students get older, academics is more often the focus.

Our current Parent-Student Handbook lists four criteria for acceptance. They are:

1. A likelihood of success within a challenging environment
2. High moral character
3. Appropriate social adjustment
4. A fun-loving spirit

However, there is always the caveat, "special consideration is given to families who are active and pledging members of the church, legacies and siblings of students currently enrolled at this school and children of faculty and staff." This caveat overlooks the fact that any sort of testing on children of any age is not always a true indicator of abilities or issues.

That one line of the handbook is the foundation of many conversations that begin during the admissions process and can continue for years. The conversation usually begins with something along the lines of: Is this the right school for this child? Can we meet the needs of this child? Will the needs of this child take away from other children having their needs met? Or my favorite: Is it "fair" to give one student so much attention?

Because I am a part of the admissions process and oversee grades PK-2, I am involved in these conversations from their inception. These are conversations that hurt my heart. Sadly, not a day goes by when I am not involved in one of these conversations.

I began to reflect on this situation and it seemed that the problem is multi-faceted. One of the most important things to an independent school is its mission statement. Because independent schools are not generally under the control of state or local mandates, the mission is the guide. The mission statement of my school is: “Inspiring curiosity, kindness and dignity in a caring Christian community.” I love this. But, where do we stand on students with learning differences? Are we looking for excellence? What does excellence mean?

The culture of the independent prep school traditionally seems to promote an attitude among teachers who believe we have “standards,” that we accept only, “a certain type of student.” We “are not the school for everyone.”

The thought of this cultural phenomenon led me to wonder how many of these teachers specifically chose an independent school due to the supposed homogeneous group of students. It also led me to thinking about the attitudes of these teachers as they work with students with learning differences. If teaching only the qualified, the best and the brightest is what the teacher expects, it is easier to understand how he or she could have a less than positive attitude about students who the teachers feel do not fit into this “box.”

Another component that affects attitudes is a teacher’s understanding of his/her efficacy, especially when working with students who have different learning styles or differences. If the teachers’ level of efficacy increases, would it create a difference in the teachers’ motivation to work with these students? Could it actually be a catalyst for change in the culture of the school? Could we actually meet the needs of students we admit, but who do not technically meet our

criteria? Could an honest conversation occur? What does success look like for students with learning differences? If teachers begin to see success, will it affect their attitudes towards these students?

## **Background and Rationale**

Private schools, in their various forms, have been part of the American landscape from its beginnings. Cooper (1988) distinguished five types of private schools, including what he terms “British-style preparatory schools” (p.19). Each of these schools espouses a different focus based upon its individual mission statements. The British-style preparatory schools “provide a strong academic training that focuses on preparation for university and carrying out service in some of the most powerful roles in the community” (Boerema, 2009 p. 187). The mission statements of the prep schools echo these sentiments using various types of wording. The underlying theme in the prep schools’ statements is one of “educational excellence” (Boerema, 2009 p. 188). This focus can make it difficult for these schools and teachers to meet the needs of learners who are not necessarily excellent in the traditional sense. This is directly related to the second part of the research question which deals with the importance of the mission in the day-to-day life of these schools.

In reality, the profile of the private school student has changed (Powell, 1999). Powell (1999) states, “In many respects, prep schools now resemble affluent public schools without vocational education” (p. 42). And although the number of students with exceptionalities peaked in the 2005-2006 school year (Scull & Winkler, 2011) certain categories, such as students with autism, have increased since that time. Because of the spectrum of this exceptionality, the symptoms do not always present themselves in obvious ways and may not be noticed during an admissions screening. If the child is young and has not yet been diagnosed, the parents may not

be aware of it themselves. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) states that young children do not do perform well in speaking students who participate in testing admissions screenings when they are three and a half to four years old do not always exhibit learning or social conditions that may affect them later in life .

A key component of the hiring process in independent school teachers is a teacher's fit with the school culture. Balossi and Hernandez (2016) found that "99% and 96% of respondents rated this as important or extremely important, respectively" (p. 680). This characteristic allows institutional bias to play a larger role in teacher attitude than it might otherwise, because alignment with the school's mission and traditions is perpetuated through this process. This study will highlight the effects, if any, of the institutional bias on teacher attitudes.

In the 2011-2012 school year, more than 30,000 private schools served roughly 5 million students. That is about 10% of the school age population (Broughman & Swain, 2013). This is an increase from the data of Alt, Peter, & National Center for Education Statistics (2002) who found for the 1999-2000 school year that the numbers were 27,000 and 4 million respectively. The population in private schools continues to grow. However, only about 5% of these schools serve students with exceptionalities exclusively (Broughman & Swain, 2013). It is assumed that other students with learning differences are served in the regular classrooms of these schools. Therefore, it is important that these schools begin to properly address the needs of these students and to honor the commitment made to these families upon enrollment in the school.

### **Significance of the Study**

There is a need to understand the complexities in the process of educating students with learning or behavioral differences. In particular, I am interested in understanding the motivation and beliefs of these teachers. For example, did the teachers choose to teach in a private school so



they would have to deal only with “typical” children who fit into a certain mold? If so, are we doing a disservice to a child by having him/her attend our school? I wanted to explore this phenomenon so that ideals, motivations and beliefs are crystallized. Although there is research on public school teachers’ feelings of efficacy when working with students through the inclusion process, it is limited (Sharma, Loreman, & Forlin, 2011). And, I have found that there is a gap in the literature in this area for private schools as well as a gap in how services are delivered in independent prep schools (Eigenbrood, 2004).

### **Conceptual Framework**

In this study, I examined the reflections and interviews of teachers, their shared experiences during Critical Friends sessions, as well as artifacts such as school mission statement and admissions information through the lens of the Instructional Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988). The components of this theory influenced the three research questions:

- Q1. How do selected teachers in independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?
- Q2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes toward students with learning differences?
- Q3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?

The Instructional Tolerance Theory was developed by Michael Gerber in 1988 in response to a report from the National Academy of Sciences Panel on Selection and Placement

of Students in Programs for Students (for the Mentally Retarded) (sic) with Intellectual Disabilities (NAS). Gerber (1988) states:

In specifying the concept of instructional tolerance, it is assumed that children come to be viewed by teachers as extremely difficult to teach or manage as a result of environmental transactions in specific instructional contexts (p. 310).

The Instructional Tolerance Theory is a theoretical framework that underpins the work in my independent school. There are many factors which are a part of the culture in independent prep schools. Some of these factors are reputation, tradition, and rigor. The instructional context is extremely specific due to a selective admissions process. Because of the admissions screening process, the range of students is even more homogenous than what one would find in a public schools. The range, according to Gerber (1988), refers to students who fall within a certain aptitude, and students who do not. The school where the study took place has an over 60-year history of producing students who epitomize academic excellence and leadership. As Gerber (1988) states this is the “historically drifting, somewhat elastic, but roughly universal, tolerance enclosing our expectations and defining those model students whom we will treat as normal” (p. 311). When students are admitted who are outside of a teacher’s tolerance level in this type of environment, the education of the student suffers.

Gerber (1988) also speaks to the “confusion about boundaries” (p. 312) when he asks, “where does regular education end and special education begin?” (p. 312). This is of particular importance in independent prep schools as many of these schools present themselves to *not* be schools for students with special needs. This is seen directly in the allocation of resources. In the school that was studied, there is not a special education teacher, counselor, or psychologist on

staff. All interventions such as speech or language therapy are paid directly by the parent. In order to increase tolerance, Gerber (1988) suggests that there are actions teachers can take. These include: using resources to get more training on working with these students, making accommodations in the environment, or sending these students to special education classrooms. When teachers reach this point in independent prep schools, there is often nowhere at the school to send them. That is when the counseling-out process begins. If teacher efficacy in working with these students was increased and the student was able to make gains in the classroom, perhaps continuing at the school would be a viable option due to the teacher's change of attitude.

Teacher identity and efficacy are key components in a teacher's attitude and ability to work with students with different needs. Due to the many factors already noted, identity and efficacy are in a state of flux. At this school, training in Differentiated Instruction (DI) for the entire faculty was introduced during the time of this study. At its most basic level, DI is tailoring instruction to meet individual needs (Tomlinson & Kalbfleish, 1998). Boyle and Hernandez (2016) specifically mention that training in DI is noted as needed by the public school principals in their study. The training consisted of face-to-face and on-line sessions. Teachers worked with their assistants to develop understanding of their students in terms of assessment performance. They also created lesson plans incorporating the components of DI. The training had four on-line components. The teachers completed two of these. As for the face-to-face sessions, teachers completed two of the four sessions. In these sessions they were able to unpack the data and refine their lesson plans. However, the training was cancelled halfway through ... With the introduction of training for how to better differentiate instruction for all students, as well as the opportunity to participate in Critical Friends' sessions to work through these experiences, it is clear that socialization is a key component in creating and recreating teacher identity. This study

brings together these social elements as put forward by Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). Teachers have the opportunity to grow when they interact and influence and are influenced by others (Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008).

Another building block of teacher identity is emotion. This was described in 2005 when one entire issue of *Teacher and Teacher Education* was dedicated to the topic. Exploring teacher emotions is a powerful part of an evolving teacher identity (Shapiro, 2010). Exploration can be done with interviews and discussions, as in this study. Teaching is an art, not a science. And, art is greatly influenced by emotions. Shapiro (2010) states that our professional self is formed from “our experience in the classroom, both positive and negative” (p.617).

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of the study is to explore the current, everyday experience of independent school teachers when working with students who have learning differences. In her research on teachers working in the framework of the National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS), Mulholland (2011) calls for “a qualitative investigation to better understand the description and concern of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities (sic)” (p. 137). I feel that understanding and documenting the phenomena at one independent school will help to unpack the experience and encourage discussion among many independent schools. In turn, this can be a catalyst for similar independent prep schools should they choose to devise tactics which will improve student outcomes for students with learning differences. My intention is to use the data collected to inform the field. An additional chapter will report the overall data in relation to the research questions.

The research questions that guided this study are:

- Q1. How do selected teachers in independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?
- Q2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes toward students with learning differences?
- Q3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?

### **Delimitations**

The data gathered from teachers in the study presented a clear, rich description of the phenomenon. I have an interesting connection to the students and teachers in this study as I am the only resource person in the school. That means that when teachers have questions about how to help students with learning differences, I am the one they come to for help. I observe students, give advice, work with small remedial groups and try to interpret test results and recommendations that we receive from outside therapists and doctors. As the Primary Division Head, I work specifically with students, teachers and parents in grades Pre-Kindergarten through second grade. However, I assist teachers in all grade levels with strategies or questions they might have when working with children who are having academic or social/emotional issues. My role created an interesting perspective in this study. However, there may be some concern that the teachers involved in the study may not be as forthcoming knowing that, technically, their superior is in charge of the study. I did my best to alleviate this concern by inviting only teachers from the other two divisions to participate in the study. Although, teachers in all divisions come

to me for support when they have a student they are having trouble teaching or reaching; it is more of a collaborative effort when trying to help these students than it is a top-down solution to the concern.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Independent and private school** are terms which are used interchangeably in this study. Cooper (1988) found that there are five types of private schools. This school falls in line most closely with what he termed “British-style prep schools” (p.19). Boerma (2006) further defines these schools as focusing on academics and encouraging a strong connection to community leaders. A combination of these attributes describes the independent school in this study.

**Teacher attitudes:** the consistent way teachers feel about students with learning differences and how that is displayed in their interactions with these students and how they reflect on those interactions.

**Learning differences:** children in the classroom who do not respond well to the conventional forms of instruction currently used at the school. These differences are generally mild and may be diagnosed or undiagnosed.

**Boundary confusion:** when teachers are unclear about their responsibility in meeting the learning needs of a student in their classroom and feel that another environment may serve the child better.

**Critical friend group:** “a school professional community aimed at fostering member’s capacities to undertake instructional improvement in school-wide reform.” (Curry, 2008, p. 735). Critical friend protocol: a structured conversation guide.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

In order to ground this study in literature and contextualize the information shared, this chapter provides literature related to the seminal work of Gerber (1988), more specifically to his work around Instructional Theory. Current literature regarding independent/private schools as well as a focus on information regarding teacher attitudes when working with students with learning differences was explored. This literature review utilized the University of South Florida Library Data Base. The advanced search feature was helpful and I used terms such as: Instructional Tolerance Theory, Gerber, inclusion, teacher attitudes, independent schools, private schools and qualitative research study methods. These terms were searched for by themselves as well as searched for in various combinations. There were only two studies which focused on attitudes of teachers in independent school when working with students with learning differences. This study will add to the lack of information on this topic.

### **Independent schools**

Many independent schools pride themselves on academic excellence, successful alumni and a rigorous curriculum (Schuermann & McGovern, 2016). In fact, Mulholland (2011) states, “the reputation of independent prep schools is that only those who are academically able are admitted” (p. 127). Every educational institution has its own identity and culture. “The culture determines what is “normal”, what matters most, and who “fits” into the environment” (Coleman, 2010, p.108). In independent schools, the mission statement of the school, “arises

from a set of values that answer fundamental questions about the purpose of education and how the education program should be carried out,” (Boerema, 2006, p. 182). Teacher identity is multi-faceted and Gee (2001) suggests that one of the four identities which he recognizes as part of teacher identity is institution-identity. This can clearly be derived from the mission of the school. Mission statements are so crucial to independent schools that an entire volume of *Independent School* was devoted to this subject in the fall of 2009. The mission of the school is central to the philosophy and day-to-day operations, curriculum and purpose. The mission of many independent schools continues to include either the stated or unstated objective of ensuring that its students have a place in society and make connections; there is not a focus on social equalization (Boerema, 2006). It is this message in the mission that sets the identity and culture of the school as, “private schools are distinguished by their school mission” (Boerema, 2006, p. 183).

There have been reforms in independent prep schools, especially as they are being called upon to demonstrate a public purpose in order to maintain their tax-exempt status (Bassett, 2008). However, these reforms are focused on core technology, organization, and governance and not on mission statement reform (Boerema, 2006), which has the potential to transform the culture of the school. In an analysis of mission statements, Boerema (2006) also found that tradition is a common theme in the mission statements of prep schools. One of these traditions is to, “provide a strong academic training that focuses on preparation for university training and carrying our service in some of the most powerful roles in the community” (Boerema, 2006, p. 187). This can make it more challenging to make the changes necessary to address the ever-increasingly diverse needs of students.



In theory, mission statements should have a direct impact on all decisions made at the school. However, mission statements have been under scrutiny. Gow (2009) questions the ability of mission statements to encapsulate what is really going on at the school. Furthermore, he asserts that mission statements have been watered down in an effort to utilize the buzz words of national accrediting bodies. Yet, mission statements are a touchstone in independent schools where government oversight is not part of the system.

Teachers who work in independent schools do so for myriad reasons. Smaller school size could be one of those reasons. Data from the 1999-2000 school year (Alt, et al., 2002) show that independent schools had smaller enrollment and smaller class sizes than did the public schools. Small size in these areas is believed to promote, “teachers’ commitment to collaborative work and to support the development of a community of professional learners” (Alt et al., 2002, p. 5). In addition, in the survey, independent school teachers were, “more likely than public school teachers to report having a lot of influence on several teaching practices and school policies” (Alt et al., 2002, p. 12). According to Alt et al. (2002), all of this data suggests that, “private school teachers are more likely than public school teachers to report being satisfied with teaching at their school” (p. 16). One of the main areas of dissatisfaction for independent school teachers is similar to many public school teachers, they do not feel qualified to teach students with exceptionalities and wish for more training on how to best do this (Gaad & Khan, 2007).

This dissatisfaction is understandable if it is examined through the lens of competitive admissions which are a part of the independent school process. Kohn (2012) points out the fact that having an admissions office creates the culture that there are students who independent prep schools want to admit and students that they do not want to admit. However, even with admissions testing, in a meta-analysis, Kim and Suen (2003) found that admissions tests given to

students entering Pre-kindergarten and Kindergarten did not go a good job of predicting later school achievement. This can mean that these students will have learning differences that were not evident in the initial testing. Teachers may be relying upon these admissions tests in hopes that this does not occur. A feeling of not being involved in the admissions process to find students who will “fit” can cause a negative attitude in teachers when working with students with learning differences (Mulholland, 2011). Kohn (2012) suggests that teachers evaluate admissions, core values and the reason that the teacher became an educator to see if there is a fit. If the culture of the school is changing- will that teacher still be a fit?

When students with diagnosed or undiagnosed learning differences are part of the population in independent schools, it begins to take the form of inclusive education that is commonly seen in public education. However, in public schools, the learning difference must be diagnosed and labeled, as there is a funding component at play. That is not the case in independent schools (Magnusson, Goransson & Nilholm, 2015). When learning differences are not diagnosed, that can leave the teacher perplexed on the most efficient way to help students learn best. The definition of inclusion for this proposal is borrowed from Cook (2001) who defines it as, “the physical placements of students with disabilities in general education classes” (p. 203). This statement is not in keeping with the spirit of the reason for the placement of these students, but becomes something much more pedestrian. Because, these teachers may not be properly prepared to teach these students. This is reflected in the findings of Gaad and Khan (2007) who state that, “attitude barriers exist amongst the mainstream teachers because they do not feel prepared to work in an inclusive setting” (p. 100). This can become even more pronounced in independent school settings where serving students with learning differences is not part of the mission of the school. Teachers in independent prep schools are often conflicted

when working with students with learning differences as they feel that their schools are known for preparing students for college (Bello, 2006). They may feel that making accommodations comprises the curriculum they are trying to deliver (Bello, 2006). However, for the reasons discussed above, there are some students with mild exceptionalities who attend these schools and are a part of these classrooms.

Parents in independent prep schools are part of the reason that the category of learning differences even exists. When independent prep schools were founded, the concept of learning differences or disabilities did not yet exist. In his work, Hale (2010) relates, through the journey of one family, how learning differences are a component of a disability and a reason that a child may not be succeeding in school. Before this theory, if a child was shown to be intelligent, yet failing, the thought was that the child was not trying, perhaps even lazy. Ong-Dean (2009) found that parents of privilege pushed forward the notion of LD so that the stigma of not trying would be removed from their child. Sleeter (1987) in her seminal work, explains that this new category was created as these parents did not wish for their children to be associated with what was then termed, “mental retardation.” Sleeter (1987) also found that these high-incidence disabilities were separated from the current special education system because this system was operating for the benefit of low-income and minority children. Bello (2006) found that most schools reported that the majority of learning differences in their schools were in the high-incidence category. The privileged parents also wanted a separation for this reason. The separation continues today as these privileged children make up a good percentage of independent prep schools. The origins of this concept support the notion of students with learning differences to become a part of the mainstream in many independent prep schools. One can see how Instructional Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988) comes into play in this environment.

Students in independent schools are entitled to receive special education services under Part B. However, options and services are often not as available as in public schools. (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004b). This is because independent schools do not generally accept funding to assist students with learning differences (Eigenbrood, 2004).

### **Instructional Tolerance Theory**

Gerber (1988) states, in part: "...there exists for human judges, laboring under the cognitive burden imposed by child variance, and instructional tolerance, a band of permissible error around teachers' perceptions of what they regard to be the teachable, modal range of students in their classes." And further, "...children come to be viewed as intolerably unresponsive to instruction by a specific teacher in a specific classroom setting," (p.310). These conclusions illustrate the difficulty created when there are students who do not conform to standards within the specific teacher's "band of tolerance" (Gerber, 1988). Such students may be viewed as unteachable by the teacher, creating a situation where learning does not easily occur. Training of teachers to recognize these situations may increase the band of tolerance and increase success in the classroom for such students.

In independent prep schools, presumably the variation in students' abilities are not as great as one would find in public schools due to the admissions screening process. However, when students are admitted who do not meet these standards, or when the standards fail to identify students who might struggle in this environment, the variance in their learning characteristics would logically fall even further outside of the teachers' instructional tolerance.

Therefore, if students with "hidden disabilities" (Cook, 2001, p. 205) are to be properly served in independent schools, certain traditions must be addressed. These schools must recognize the fact that in spite of the admissions process and, "whom would we rather admit than

the best?” (Kohn, 2012, p. 92) students who are outside the norm of these populations are now part of this population. “Independent prep schools know how to increase the performance of average students through a combination of personal attention and strong work expectations. But they have no comparable success in instilling a love of learning in students who are not especially talented” (Powell, 1999, p.46). It is this cultural and historical context of independent prep schools which must be considered when inclusive practices are being put into place.

Several studies have been done using Instructional Tolerance Theory as the framework. Cook (2001) found that “students with mild or hidden disabilities are violating expectations and are rejected because they fall outside of teacher’ instructional tolerance” (p. 209). Cook, Tankersley, Cook and Landrum (2000) found similar results in their study noting that, “teachers hold different attitudes towards their included students with disabilities in comparison to non-disabled classmates” (p.127). In another study, using Instructional Tolerance Theory, Cook (2004) found that the SES level of the child also affected teachers’ attitudes. The higher the SES the higher the expectation for students with hidden disabilities. Another finding when using Teacher Tolerance as a framework comes from Gerber (2005). He found that resources were allocated by the school in set patterns and that teachers felt a “resource scarcity” (p. 516) when working with students with learning differences. Landon and Mesinger (1989) also used Teacher Tolerance as a framework in their study and found that even the “best among regular educators” (p. 248) have a limited tolerance when working with students with learning differences. Teacher Tolerance is a useful framework for this study as all of the findings in the studies above lend themselves to the current climate at independent schools.

## **Teacher Attitudes**

Teacher attitudes towards the inclusion process have been studied for many years. In fact, Cook, Tankersley, Cook & Landrum (2000) found that research on teacher attitudes are one of the most studied phenomena in the area of inclusion. However, in the United States, research on special education in independent schools is limited. Mulholland (2011) found this gap as it relates to teachers in independent schools. Her dissertation is the only one of two studies in the United States that specifically deals with teachers of students with learning differences in non-Catholic private schools. The other U. S. study was done by Taylor (2005) for the state of Tennessee. In the abstract, Taylor notes the lack of research in this area. She makes similar points to what is brought up in the context of this study. Taylor (2005) notes that, “Moving to the successful inclusion of children with disabilities in a general education setting is clearly a complex process of change in an educational system. As private schools implement services for children with special needs, they will need to go through this process of system change as already documented in public school systems.” (p. 283).

This is also dealt with by Mulholland (2011). Her findings deal with teachers in the National Association of Independent schools (NAIS). These include: not being included in the admissions decisions, as well as concerns with ensuring that students are mission-appropriate. As mentioned, Catholic studies from Bello (2006) and Boyle & Hernandez (2016) touch on teacher attitudes when working with students with learning differences, from the Catholic point of view.

Berry (2010) states that, “if inclusive classrooms are to be effective, teachers must accept inclusion as necessary and beneficial” (p. 90). That is the crux of the matter in this study. In the public school sector, teachers do not have a choice regarding inclusion of students with exceptionalities in their classrooms. It is the law. That is not the case in independent schools. I

believe that is why in all of the research regarding teacher attitudes, there are few articles which address this issue. One was a study conducted by Gaad and Khan in 2007 and focused on private school teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. However, this study was a perspective from Dubai.

Communication is a common concern in all schools. In independent schools, Mulholland (2011) found that more administrators than teachers thought that there were students with learning differences in the classrooms. This stems from a communication issue. Administrators assumed that teachers were reviewing official testing and files to find this information. Teachers relied more upon discussions with other teachers to understand the needs of their students. Mulholland (2011) also found communication to be a more useful way for teachers to get assistance to help students with learning differences. Teachers tended to utilize each other much more than administrators thought they were. Administrators' data shows that they believe teachers are consulting with outside professionals much more than they are actually doing. Teachers also felt less likely to have access to the curriculum needed to meet the needs of students with learning differences. Administrators rated this as 68 percent of teachers had access to these materials, while teachers only rated this at 58 percent. Mulholland (2011) also showed that half of each group of teachers and administrators agreed that the service delivery model for students with learning differences in their schools was inclusion without the assistance of a special education teacher. This is most likely due to the many roles that all personnel play in independent schools due to lack of resources. A key finding in the Mulholland (2011) study is that teachers felt that accommodations that required additional work on their part were much more unfavorable as accommodations to teachers than they were to the administrators. This begs the question of how effective these accommodations might be if the teacher attitude is not

positive. Teacher attitudes were less favorable, overall, than administrator attitudes when asked about the inclusion of students with learning differences in the mainstream classroom. The factors in this study are many of the factors which the public school addressed when it first began working with the concept of inclusion.

While the findings in the study by Mulholland (2011) are useful as represent a large sample (N = 440 teachers and 82 administrators), they are based on a survey. This qualitative study contributes to the knowledge in the field by painting a rich, descriptive picture of what is happening in an independent school, from the teachers' point of view. By creating this picture, it brings to light how the attitudes of the teachers, as well as the stated mission of the school, work in concert to either help, or hinder, the education of students with learning differences in these schools. As this study helps to bring a clear picture into view, schools can decide how to best proceed in educating these students.

Catholic schools are similar to independent schools in that they have a similar population and demographics. Teacher attitudes in Catholic schools were investigated by Bello (2006) and Boyle and Hernandez (2016). Bello (2006) found that high-incidence disabilities were the most common. Her findings also indicate that teachers need additional training in how to meet the needs of students with learning differences that will allow them to meet the strict curricular requirements found in these college-prep schools. Another concern voiced by teachers in the study is that they did not understand how the accommodations were "fair" to students who were not receiving the accommodations (Bello, 2006). Supporting this statement, Boyle & Hernandez (2016) found that administrators felt that teachers need training specifically in differentiated instruction. Teacher attitudes when working with students with learning differences can either hinder or facilitate the process (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).



In their seminal meta-analysis of many of these studies Scruggs & Mastropieri (1996) found many similarities in teacher attitudes in studies that spanned 1958-1995. Their analysis found that many of the teacher surveyed reported that they felt that students with learning differences would take away from the instructional time for their typical students. This is similar to discourse I have heard at the school before and during this study. I particularly hear this from teachers in our middle school (grades 6-8). This belief is similar to the findings in the studies of Gickling and Theobald, (1975) and Larivee and Cook, (1979) who all concluded that elementary teachers were more likely to be more positive about students with learning differences than teachers in older grade levels. Teacher support is an area that is of great importance when these teachers are working with students with learning differences. Support at the school in the study has increased over the years with the addition of assistants in each classroom for grades Pre-Kindergarten through second. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) concluded that more support, in the form of smaller class sizes, is necessary for successful inclusion.

Teacher attitudes are positively affected by improvement in self-efficacy (Urton, Wilbert, & Hennemann, 2014). That is an area that will be a small part of this study. Even with support and training, teachers often feel that the bulk of the work is on them to make inclusion work (Macfarlane & Woolfson, 2013). This can cause teachers to have a more negative attitude to inclusion than the people responsible for simply putting the policies into place (Horne, 1983). The “ivory tower” syndrome is not a phenomenon just found in colleges and universities. An interesting finding in the meta-analysis of Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) is that in the years studied of 1958-1995 there was little variation in teacher attitudes when working with students with learning differences.

Not only are teacher attitudes shown to be stable over time, they are also stable in the individual teachers. Attitudes are seen as relatively stable constructs which govern the teachers' interactions and planning process in the classroom (Bizer, Barden, & Petty, 2003). It is noted that teacher identity is a complicated and convoluted construct; and that the idea of identity can vary based upon grade level, content or experience (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In the independent school environment, the exceptionalities seen in the classroom are considered mild, or possibly even invisible. This can be frustrating to teachers and peers because teachers and peers hold these students to the same standards as the other students, yet these students seem unable to meet these expectations. Cook and Semmel (1999) found this to be especially true when the child's issues stemmed from behavior problems or poor social interactions. Behavior problems and poor social interactions are a hallmark of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) which is one of the most common exceptionalities both in the general population as well as in independent schools. Gal, Schreur and Engel-Yeger (2010) contend that children with emotional disabilities, such as ADHD, pose problems for the educator in a typical classroom. This is because of their inability to meet the behavioral expectations and the teacher feeling frustration (McMullen, Shippen & Dangel, 2007). However, findings do show that even short-term training can positively affect teacher attitudes (Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003).

A major concern teachers have when dealing with a student with learning differences is the amount of time and attention that student may require to be successful. Teachers feel concern over the other students in the class not receiving the time and attention they need (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007). Lopes, Monteiro, Sil, Rutherford and Quinn (2004) state that, "teachers with lower personal efficacy believe that students with disabilities hinder the learning of general education students" (p. 397). Of particular interest to me is the work by Cook (2004) who

contends that teachers in schools with high socio-economic characteristics were less accepting of students with disabilities. Again, this could be because these teachers feel that they are getting in the way of other students being able to meet the high expectation levels as well as the fact that these students themselves have trouble meeting these expectations (Ehrenpreis, 2013).

In order to improve efficacy when working with these students teachers feel that they need training and resources (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Training can include how to accommodate these students with effective strategies in the classroom. Resources can include anything from additional personnel to additional time to adapt instructional materials (Hughes & Valle-Riestra, 2007). Collaboration time is also important to teachers (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). Smaller class size is also a suggestion teachers have made in order to better assist students with exceptionalities (Gal, Schreur, & Engel Yeger, 2010). It is important to note that the focus of this study is teacher attitude changes when there is a perception of improved efficacy. Teaching is a very personal endeavor. The proposal offered by Cook, et al. (2000) supports this notion. They contend that teachers' attitudes are best measured by their attitudes towards students with learning differences who they actually teach, rather than the abstract concept of inclusion. Ehrenpreis (2013) found this to be true as well. Principals found that teacher attitudes are one of the greatest facilitators to inclusion in their schools and conversely, that attitudes can also serve as the greatest barrier to working with students with learning differences (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016). It is the personal and daily interactions of teachers with these students that best predict how successful the student will be. In fact, Balossi & Hernandez (2016) found that when administrators at independent schools were asked about important criteria for hiring successful teachers, relationships with students was at the top of the list. That is the first job of teachers in independent schools. Connection is essential.

Of course, along with this deep personal knowledge of students, it is not surprising that teachers form particular attitudes about all students. Silberman (1971) coined the four basic categories of these attitudes as: attachment, concern, indifference and rejection. Students who fall into the acceptance category are the best and the brightest. They make good progress without much effort on the part of the teacher (Cook et al. 2000). It would be expected that students who fall into this category might be greater at this school than at many other schools due to the stringent admissions policy and testing that is done. Students in the concern category are placed there because they are having academic rather than behavioral issues. The teachers feel that they can make a difference by supporting these students (Willis & Brophy, 1974). The teachers make a great personal investment in these students and do not give up on them (Silberman, 1971) Indifference is a category that encompasses students who do not connect well with teacher and teacher perception is that these students do not add much, positive or negative, to the class (Brophy & Good, 1974) would agree with this definition. The final category is rejection. Good & Brophy (1974) found that these students were similar to students in the concern category in that they required a lot of teacher interventions. However, these interventions were not often successful. These students also had behavioral concerns which the teachers were not able to help with either. The teachers feel that, even with teacher support, the student is not making acceptable progress.

The research on this specific issue is not exhaustive. The available studies are limited in both number and scope. The study by Gaad and Khan (2007) was done in Dubai. The definition of independent or private schools in Dubai is effectively different from the definition used in this study. Taylor (2005) wrote her dissertation on the state of special education and private schools in Tennessee. Another dissertation (Mulholland, 2011) analyzes the attitudes of teachers and

administrators when working with student with learning differences in schools associated with the National Association of Independent schools (NAIS). The final study, a dissertation, (Ehreprhis, 2013) looked at independent school teacher perceptions when working with students with learning differences. All four of these studies are quantitative. It is important to fill the gap in this area. Looking at this information from the perspective of teachers and collecting stories that illustrate the real experiences of these teachers will allow us to better understand the experiences behind the numbers and that understanding can lead to better serving students with learning differences who attend independent schools.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methods**

In this chapter I discuss the research paradigm, quality indicators, design, timeline, setting, participants, and data collection and analysis. The interpretivist paradigm is the lens through which this study is framed. The relativist ontology is fitting as the reality of the experiences was built by the participants through their personal interactions as well as their interactions with each other. According to Cohen and Crabtree (2006) in guidelines prepared in conjunction with the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, a transactional epistemology “assumes that we cannot separate ourselves from what we know.” This definition aligns with the idea that people cannot be separated from their attitudes. This paradigm also states that all interpretations are negotiable. This allowance for chance lends itself to this study as change of attitude due to experience and dialogue are part of the research questions.

### **Quality Indicators**

As outlined by Tracy (2010), this study met criteria for qualitative research. Tracy (2010) discusses eight quality indicators but notes that not all indicators will be appropriate for all studies. Her first indicator is a “worthy topic” (p. 840). This topic is worthy in both aspects that she mentions- personal and societal. There is not a day that goes by that a discussion of how to meet the needs of students with learning differences is not a topic of conversation for me. It seems that each year there are more and more children who are in need of teachers who need to think differently about their teaching abilities. It is bigger than just this particular school helping these students. Overall, we must do a better job of meeting the needs of these children in

independent prep schools. It is my hope that this study will help to increase the “level of awareness” (p. 840) that surrounds this issue so that conversations can occur.

The next indicator that this study meets is rich rigor (Tracy, 2010). One of the hallmarks of this criteria is that the study paints a vibrant picture of the phenomena being studied. By interviewing the teachers using the three interview series (Seidman, 1998) I was able to facilitate this process. “Member reflections” (Tracy, 2010 p. 844) were also utilized. This allowed each participant to make meaning of the data in their own way. It helped to increase the resonance (Tracy, 2010) of the information by showing more than one truth. The analysis of data was made transparent to the reader by sharing the process in the methods section.

The findings of the study also helped to meet another criteria proposed by Tracy (2010), in that the study was significant. The significance was heuristic because helped to open a dialogue on the experiences of teachers in independent schools when working with students with learning differences and therefore lead to future research (Abbott, 2004).

Sincerity is another criteria suggested by Tracy (2010). This was strengthened by my close connection to the participants, time in the field and the context. Students with learning differences are a natural part of the life of the school. Another part of sincerity is to be self-reflective. I feel this study meets that criteria because one of the main reasons for this study is my self-reflection, for years, on this topic. I know that I am part of the process of the teachers and students when talking about learning differences in this school.

As previously mentioned, thick description is a key component to the data collected. The data was analyzed using triangulation of the participants, the researcher and the responses to similar questions at different points in time. Both of these areas are important to the criteria of credibility (Tracy, 2010).

## **Research Design**

The research design for this study was qualitative and incorporated the use of in-depth interviews, teacher observations, teacher journal entries as well as artifacts such as the school mission statement and admissions criteria. I also shared my thoughts and reflections. In her TED talk, Brene Brown shares these words, “stories are data with a soul.” (Brown, B. 2010, personal communication). In that vein, Holman Jones (2015) acknowledges that the role of the storyteller is a critical component of the story being told. The data shared by these teachers provided rich details of their day-to-day interactions with students, parents and administration as they work to ensure the success of their students with learning differences. Artifacts such as school mission statement, admissions policy, and teacher journal entries, further helped to illustrate the culture of the school. The end result is a thick description of the lived experience of these teachers in this particular setting as well my particular experience.

Training on differentiated learning occurred during the course of the study. All teachers, including me, participated in the training and topics covered included: defining differentiation, assessing student needs and interests, opportunities for differentiation, creating a differentiated classroom and lesson plans, as well as applying and assessing differentiation. This process allowed me to gain real-time insight on the effect of this training to improve the perception of efficacy and therefore attitudes, of the teachers, when working with students with learning differences. The Headmaster of the school has turned his focus to this area. In fact, one of his goals presented to the Board of Directors stated in part, “We have done a good job providing support for students with learning differences. I believe we can do much more, without compromising our identity as a traditional independent school with rigorous academic programming.” That statement highlighted the dichotomy of this topic in an independent school.



The training was to consist of eight modules, delivered in a hybrid of on-line and face-to-face sessions. Unfortunately, the training was cancelled after four sessions as it was decided by administration that it was not meeting the needs of the teachers.

When researching teacher attitudes Macfarlane and Woolfson (2013) found that the principal's attitude toward students with learning differences has a large impact on teachers' attitudes when working with these students. Indeed, teachers' and principal's attitudes are a factor in the success of students with learning differences (Loremann, Earle, Sharma & Forlin, 2007). The qualitative approach is the most effective for this study as there is relatively little data on this phenomena in independent schools and this is a base for future research and perhaps, interventions.

## **Participants**

The participants for this study were selected purposively. I explored the “phenomenon embedded in a single social setting” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014, p. 31). One of the criteria for participation in the study is that teachers who participated could speak to currently working with students with learning differences.

“When researchers pursue straightforward research questions to resolve problems in local practice in applied fields, a small number of interviews may be done,” ( Baker & Edwards, 2012, p. 21). The goal was between four and six participants to participate in the study. Ideally, three academic teachers and an enrichment teacher (art, music, technology, foreign language) would volunteer. This would help to create “typical cases” (Devers & Frankel, 2000, p. 265). Fortunately, this balance of participants was reached as this study of five teachers contained one enrichment teacher and three academic teachers.

The school is organized by division by grade level in the following manner: Prek-2<sup>nd</sup> grade, 3<sup>rd</sup> grade-5<sup>th</sup> grade, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade through 8<sup>th</sup> grade. As I am the Primary Division Head, teachers from this division were not allowed to participate in the study. This should help to allay concerns that teachers in the primary division might be compromised by the fact that I am their direct boss. Five participants helped to ensure that I devoted the proper amount of time to interviewing, listening and analyzing the information that was gathered.

Six participants initially signed consent forms. One participant had to drop out before the interviews began due to health reasons. Below is the demographic information of the five participants in the study. I did not include the race of the participants. It should be noted that they are all Caucasian.

### **Setting**

The study took place in an independent school in a mid-sized city. The tuition for the year is \$14,300. About 5% of students receive some sort of financial assistance. Therefore, the SES of the students is extremely high. About 95% of students live within a five-mile radius of the school. Less than 5% of the students are from diverse backgrounds. The school is a mission of the Episcopal Church so formality is a part of the structure of the school. The school has about 450 students of students from Pre-Kindergarten through the eighth grade. There are two sections of each grade level with between 20-25 students each. There are 63 faculty members and various staff at the school. All teachers in grades Pre-Kindergarten through second grade have full-time assistants in the class. In grades three and four there is one assistant for each grade level. The school has site-based management and all decisions are made either by the Headmaster of the school or the Rector of the church. There are seven members of the administration. There is not a

special education teacher nor a guidance counselor on staff. However, for the upcoming school year of 2018-2019, the school has hired a Learning Resource Coordinator.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Demographic Information	Number of participants
Participants Age	
29-39	2
39-49	0
49-59	3
Gender	
Male	1
Female	4
Highest Education Level	
Bachelor's Degree	1
Master's Degree	4
Race/Ethnicity	
Caucasian	5
Length of Time Teaching	
5-15	5
16-25	1
26-35	2

## **Role and Background of Researcher**

My familiarity with this topic began over 20 years ago. I have worked with students with learning differences from the time I was a classroom teacher and continue to do so in my role as an administrator. Therefore, I have personal experience with both the teacher and administrator perspective when working with students with learning differences in an independent school setting. I know, from a personal perspective that helping students with learning differences can be difficult for teachers in independent prep schools due to a lack of information, training and resources. My own bias in this area became evident as I analyzed the transcripts. There were participant in this study with whom I have a personal, meaningful relationships. This may have clouded my overall perception of the teachers. However, I have actively worked to be transparent in this regard.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

After approval by the IRB and consent from participants demographic information was collected in writing from each participant (see appendix A). Then, I began the research process, utilizing the three interview process (Seidman, 1998). Interviews were conducted using the romantic interview style (Alvesson, 2003), which emphasizes rapport and encourages deep, honest conversation. This style is optimal for qualitative research and my existing relationships with the participants made this the logical choice. All interviews were taped and then uploaded to my Youtube channel. There is no video, just the audio information. By using the option that allows for transcription, I received a written version of the interview. I then went through and replayed the interviews as I followed the transcript to check for any errors as well as to add punctuation and to identify the participant. Once this was completed, I printed out a copy of each interview. The transcripts were given to each participant to verify authenticity as soon as

possible. As Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) suggest beginning analysis of data at the same time new data is collected. Using member checks is a part of the triangulation process. This process allowed me to collect data while constructing the stories and experiences that are a part of the history of the participants.

The first interview allowed me to collect life history and information on his or her journey to becoming a teacher including professional development and their experiences working with students with learning differences. In the second interview, I focused on the current experience that these teachers are having in an independent school when working with students with learning differences. In the final interview, we discussed the experiences of the teachers, how they will make meaning of these experiences and where they will go from here. These interactive interviews were conducted using specific questions generated by me. Interactive interviews allowed me to ask open-ended questions where the participants were able to describe their feelings and experiences (Seidman, 1998). Interviews were conducted at a neutral location to help improve the authenticity of the answers of the participants and it also contributed to the “privacy, confidentiality and anonymity” (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 62) of the participants.

Due to the fact that that these interviews followed a semi-structured format, I was able to change the order of the questions and ask the teacher to expound upon his/her answers as needed. The initial interview took place before the training sessions begin. I had planned to conduct the next two interviews half-way through the training and when the training was complete, respectively. As the training was cancelled half-way through, my schedule could not follow these guidelines. The first interviews were done as the training began. The second interviews were

done three sessions into the training. The final interviews were done after the training was cancelled. See Appendix B for interview questions.

After the training sessions begin, Critical Friends' protocols were utilized to facilitate discussion and gain additional insight into the teachers' journeys and teacher identity. The sessions were between 60-90 minutes long. These sessions were also taped and transcribed through my Youtube channel as described above. In the first session, about a month after training began, I utilized the Inspired Image Protocol (SRI). This protocol allowed teachers to think about their attitudes when teaching all students. I customized the prompts so that they reflected working with students with learning or behavior differences. Teachers created a cover to a journal they used when processing information about these students after our Critical Friends sessions. This journal was also used for teachers to write about thoughts and feelings when working with the various types of students in their classrooms. I facilitated a discussion using Quinn's Six Questions (appendix C) to get a general picture of the teachers' thoughts on his/her students. This particular session included some questions about their thoughts on the mission statement of the school; and if it does or does not have an effect on the education of these students. Teachers were asked to reflect on this discussion and share their thoughts in their journals. These journals will become part of the artifacts investigated for this study.

In the second meeting, the Continuum Dialogue protocol was utilized. I used the statements from the Sentiments Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education (SACIE) scale (Loreman et al., 2007) as the statements for teachers to rank. These statements concern teacher attitudes when working with students with learning differences. This scale helped teachers to process their attitudes regarding working with students with learning/behavioral differences. I encouraged discussion of each of the 15 points as to where teachers are on the scale. This Critical

Friends' session was the longest and most meaningful discussion of the three. At the end, teachers were given time to write about it in their journals. This Critical Friends' session was held after the third (and what turned out to be the second to the last) training.

For the third Critical Friends' session I also used the Continuum Dialogue protocol and revisited the SACIE (Loremen et al., 2007) to help teachers understand how they have or have not changed in their attitudes when working with students with learning/behavioral differences. This led to discussion and time was given for journal reflection. At this last session, I also planned to talk to the teachers about the training and what they did or did not gain from it. This took an unexpected turn as the training was cancelled as the school decided to pursue learning about meeting the needs of students with learning differences in a different way.

In addition to the interviews, I have and will continue to advise teachers regarding their students with learning differences. This relationship continued to build better rapport between me and the teachers as the teachers know that I have first-hand knowledge of the students and the classroom.

Once collected, all data were analyzed by using interpretational analysis to identify themes and patterns which emerge from the data. The specific experiences and background of the participants, as well as my personal background and history with the participants, influenced this process. The journeys of the participants were a key component in my analysis. That is why understanding these journeys was crucial to the study. Data were transcribed and coded in two cycles first utilizing in-vivo coding, followed by the use of descriptive coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014). In-vivo coding allowed me to focus in on actual words or phrases that were shared during the interviews. Using descriptive coding helped me to summarize what these words or phrases actually mean in relation to the framework. This has some similarity to the

grounded theory approach as the data determined the themes that developed. The Teacher Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988) was utilized to see how these experiences fit into this framework. Each interview was read as a whole twice. Next, I reread the interviews and began the in-vivo coding. Themes were detected by commonalities among experiences and answers to the questions. I also utilized “jottings” (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014 p. 93) to help to summarize my reflections of the data during the descriptive coding process. The experiences of each participant encompass a short summary in chapter four of the final document. The final part of chapter four discusses the themes that emerged from the data. See data table below for how questions will relate to each research question.

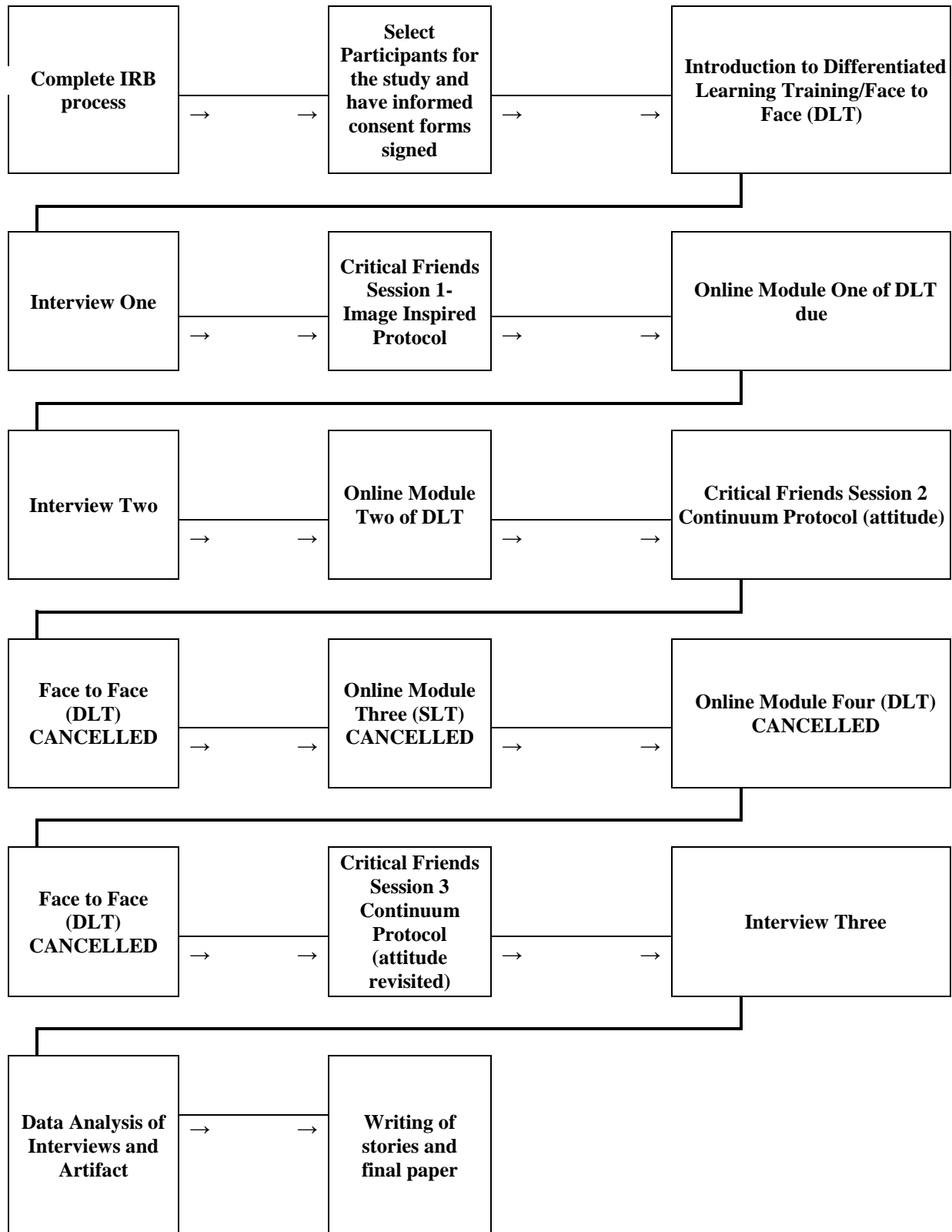
Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014) encourage researchers to reflect on several ethical issues that can arise when doing qualitative studies. I will address those concerns here. Worthiness of project is first on the list and this project is worthy based upon their criteria of the importance of the research to me and the teachers who will be involved. As for competency, the teachers in the study have sufficient experience working with students with learning differences in independent prep schools to ensure good quality to the study. As for me being a novice researcher, I relied on the strength of my committee to guide me. Informed consent was a part of this study. To ensure that no participants felt coerced, I did not ask any teachers who I directly supervise to participate. As for benefits and costs, I did not pay teachers for the time they gave to the study. Teachers who participated did so because they found value in the study. I did my best to minimize harm and risk by ensuring that privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are preserved. Honesty and trust exist between the researcher and the participants as I have worked with and known these teachers for many years



Table 2

Research Questions/Sources of Evidence

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Sources of Evidence</b>
1. How do selected teachers in Independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?	Interview One: Questions 1, 2, 4, 7, 8, 9 Interview Two: Questions 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10 Critical Friends Session One (including journal notes)
2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes toward students with learning differences?	Interview One: Questions 8, 9 Interview Two: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 9, 10, Interview Three: Questions 1, 2, 3, 6 Mission Statement Admissions Policy
3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?	Interview One: Questions 4, 8 Interview Two: Questions 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 Interview Three: Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6 All Critical Friends Sessions



**Figure 1. Timeline of study**

I have shared the results with the teachers in the study. They were in agreement with my interpretation of the findings. They also confirmed the accuracy of their individual journeys. It is my plan to disseminate to the administrators at the school. And, finally, I would like to share the information, first in small groups, then perhaps present at the Florida Council of Independent schools conference and then possibly the National Association of Independent School conference. It is important to get the information out there. Working with students with learning differences is not something that is widely talked about in independent school circles. Creating awareness is a first step. Perhaps further research on possible interventions can be done to ensure that all students who are admitted to independent school receive an education which allows them to live up to their potential.

The structure of the study, along with the collection and analysis of data helped me to capture a picture of various teachers' experiences when working with students with learning differences. Using in-depth interviews and Critical Friends sessions along with other means of data collection brought to life the day-to-day interaction of teachers with students who learn differently in a school where we are just beginning to learn how enriching and rewarding it is to teach these students as well as to have them as a part of our school.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Chapter Four is divided into four sections. In section one I reintroduce the purpose and research questions guiding this study. I describe the overall context of this independent school, which was the focus of this study, in section two. In section three I provide a synopsis of each teacher's background and journey into teaching and how each one understood his or her role when working with students with learning differences. Finally, in section four, I share themes that became apparent from my analysis of the data through multiple readings followed by *invivo* and descriptive coding.

### **Section One: Purpose and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to explore the current, everyday experiences of independent school teachers when working with students who seem to be outside the norm in the academic band (Gerber, 1988). The research questions that guided this study are the following:

1. How do selected teachers in independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?
2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes towards students with learning differences?
3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?

## **Section Two: Context of the study**

Context is an important feature of qualitative research (Bryman, Stephens & Campo, 1996). Due to the intimate nature of this research, it is important for the reader to understand the context. Sharing specific information on the context according to Janesick (1994) increases the, “understanding of the participants’ worlds and the meaning of shared experience between the researcher and participants in a given social context.” (p.209). Influential aspects of the school culture and context are discussed below, with particular attention to how they impacted on teachers’ work with students with learning differences.

**School Mission.** The five teachers in this study could each recite the motto of their independent school, “Learn-Love-Lead.” However, only two of them could share the mission statement of the school verbatim. That statement is, “Inspiring curiosity, kindness and dignity in a caring, Christian community.” I found this to be of interest as mission statements are the cornerstone of independent schools. As referenced in chapter two, an entire volume of *Independent School* was devoted to this very subject. Independent schools are not regulated by government oversight. The mission statement is the umbrella under which all school-based decisions are made. Independent schools live and die by the words of their mission statements (Boerma, 2006).

Despite this, lack of verbatim knowledge, teachers did share ways in which they lived the the mission within their own classrooms. The terms “whole child” and “entire child” came up several times as teachers were discussing how they meet each child’s particular needs. I have personally seen these teachers inspire curiosity, kindness and dignity. One teacher stated that the mission is “serving every child and making sure that all their needs are met individually”. In fact, the term “individually” came up in some form or another from all teachers. In my understanding

of the words in the mission statement, there is no implication that individual needs will be served. Perhaps the word, dignity, implies this to these teachers. In any case, there is an inherent understanding of the mission statement even though the teachers have not committed the wording to memory. However, the mission statement does not specifically meeting the needs of all learners. The mission connects to the study because it is the interpretation of the mission which allows these teachers to meet the needs of students with learning differences.

**Admission Procedures.** When asked about the school's admissions procedures, answers were not as consistent. These teachers recognize that admissions procedures are in place, but their understanding of the details of the process are less clear. Each participant specifically mentioned that the admissions procedures are in place to ensure a "good fit" academically and socially for students who are accepted to the school. The word "competitive" was used to describe the admissions procedures. Procedures in the primary grades were described by one teacher as the administration working, "very, very hard to select students that will be successful at our school. Two more were able to articulate the process of the individual testing. As well as group "playdates" for young students and "shadowing" for the older students. However, there seemed to be some confusion, especially regarding admissions procedures to the middle school. One teacher did not realize that testing was done. Another stated that at times it appears that, "if they can pay the tuition, they will generally get in". When teachers were asked about culture and traditions that might influence the admissions process teachers correctly answered that, as being a church member, sibling, legacy or faculty member will give the applicant special consideration. This is the written policy that is shared with all prospective families and it reads as follows, "...special consideration will be given to qualified applicants who are siblings of children currently enrolled at this school, and to children of active church members. Special consideration

may also be given to qualified applicants whose parents are alumni of the school or to children of faculty members”. One teacher said it this way, “Special consideration that’s based on, if all things being equal, we would accept this child over that child”.

**Existing Supports for Students with Learning Differences.** Even after a comprehensive admissions process, there are times when students are admitted who are not academically successful in the program. As one participant shared, “there has not been one child that we’ve counseled out for behavior issues.” Teachers discussed their strategies for supporting students with learning differences in their classrooms. They shared that when students have learning differences, some of these are diagnosed learning differences. There are some, albeit fewer, where the teachers assume and accommodate for a learning difference without documentation. For example, one teacher shared that, “we’re better at seeing things- most of us have been working here together, often over 20 years, working things out.” In my 24 years of teaching, I have observed that most teachers are adept at recognizing the symptoms of a learning difference and then making accommodations such as giving additional time on tests or allowing students the ability to move around during a lesson. Accommodations may include modified testing parameters or flexibility in student movement. These accommodations are based on teacher experience and knowledge not necessarily recommendation from an evaluation. Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and dyslexia are the most commonly diagnosed learning differences at this school.

Teaching students with learning differences at this school is complicated by a combination of the school’s mission statement, the admissions process and the reality of the needs of students with learning differences. This research explores the level to which these factors affect teachers’ instructional tolerance levels.

### **Section Three: Teacher's Journeys**

Information from each participant was collected individually during three separate interviews. The first interview asked the participant to share his or her journey to becoming a teacher. During the second interview, each participant shared thoughts about their current situation and in the final interview, participants shared their thoughts on their future in teaching. Participants also participated in three separate Critical Friends sessions. During these sessions, discussion regarding the teaching profession, teaching at an independent school, and teaching students with learning differences was explicitly shared. A synopsis of each participant's journey collected from transcripts of individual interviews and Critical Friends sessions as well as journals and the personal slant I have of these teachers is shared below in order to create context and understanding of each participant's perspective. Participant stories are shared in the order of least to most teaching experience. This is because when conducting the interviews, the information shared by the participants became more vivid as their years of experience increased.

Understanding the journey of each teacher is important to the study because understanding the why and how of each teacher's experiences allows us to better understand how the teachers make meaning of working with students with learning differences in this independent school. How and why they became teachers helps us to understand the underlying passion for what they do each day. Information about their life experiences is relevant to how each of them came to choose to work in an independent school setting. The life experiences of these teachers also intersect with the teachers' perspectives on their instructional tolerance levels. This is meaningful as this is the conceptual framework of this research. Pseudonyms were used throughout this study to protect all participant identities.



**Susan.** School has been a second home to Susan. Her mother was, and still is, a teacher, and for six years, she attended the independent school where her mother still teaches. This just happens to be the school in this study. During that time, Susan was a “faculty brat”; the school community became almost like her family. This feeling continues to the present day, as Susan stated, “there is a true feeling of family (at school)”. Susan’s parents divorced when she was little. Susan was able to find male role models in the school community. This was significant because she did not have a lot of contact with her father. When she left this school, she attended the local public high school. She felt that she was very prepared for this high school program and she excelled, both academically and socially. Susan is a “pleaser”. These are her words, as well as the words of anyone who knows her. She got along well with her teachers and, in particular, her guidance counselor. In fact, she enjoyed going through the college application process with her counselor so much, she decided that would be her career path. When Susan finished her undergraduate degree in psychology, her choice was firm. She knew that she wanted to work in a school. However, instead of pursuing her Master’s degree in school counseling, she decided to pursue teaching. This was after volunteering and observing at her mother’s school. Like her mother, she decided that teaching was the path meant for her.

Susan got her Master’s degree in one year. During that time, she spent internships in area public schools. She said that these experiences helped her to realize that she wanted to teach in an independent school. She shared, “I didn’t even apply to any public schools”. Susan realized that while she could make more money in the public sector. She craved the parent involvement, creativity, and autonomy that she had witnessed in an independent school. She also felt that there were less behavioral issues in the independent setting.

Susan did not have much formal training on how to work with students with learning differences. Her most powerful learning experiences came from her mentor teachers during her internships. These experiences varied based upon the interest and investment of the teacher. Susan had one teacher who tended to do things whole group without much planning for differentiation and one who did try to incorporate differentiation. However, she shared that neither teacher mentioned differentiation as a strategy. Rather, it seemed that the teachers were just doing what they each thought was best at the time. As for Susan, this time was both energizing and unsettling as she shared that, “I guess I didn’t really know what I was doing”. She feels that she does know more now and that each year, “there’s been at least one student who I’ve learned things from”.

Currently, Susan teaches fourth grade at the independent school where she spent many of her formative years. She continues to find that the best way for her to help students with learning differences is to lean on the community of teachers and administrators at the school. She goes so far as to say that the, “feeling of family” is one of the most important motivators for her. Susan understands that the school has an admissions policy, however, she is not certain as to the exact procedures. She feels that the procedures help the school to accept students who will be the best fit for the program. Since she herself went through this program, she feels that she understands its rigor and expectations. When asked to recall students in her classes, she does not recall but one or two students who needed additional support in their learning. Students in her class generally meet these expectations and the majority of students earn A’s and B’s. Occasionally, Susan has some students who require outside tutoring to maintain these grades. Rarely does Susan have a student who is an academic outlier. However, she recently did. Since the school is small and a close-knit community, Susan was aware of the needs of this student before he

entered her class. She was able to work with the administrator, parents, tutors and therapists to identify differentiated instructional learning opportunities for this student. Helping this student was made easier because it was, “discussion based”. She feels that communication was the key to making this a positive experience for the student. The student did make progress and had a good attitude. These benchmarks are important to Susan. She shared that she wished that she had more formal training on how to reach students with learning differences, as she feels a definite lack of knowledge in this area. But, she also noted that in a school this small, teachers have to wear many hats and that, with experience, she would be able to be more helpful in meeting the needs of students with learning differences.

Susan is looking forward to working closely with the newly appointed Learning Resource Coordinator. This position will become a reality in the next school year. Susan feels that the creation of this position, as well as the Differentiated Learning Course delivered by a local university to all faculty, is a signal to faculty that the school needs to recognize that, perhaps, the demographics of the student population is changing. Susan recounted that when she attended the school, perhaps one student out of 24 in a class was on medication for ADHD, whereas now, it is not unusual to find five or six students on medication in a class. She also feels that the continuum of students with learning differences is larger as well. Susan feels that the school is encouraging all teachers to, “get on board”. She is excited to see where this next chapter takes her, and her students.

**Jim.** Jim knew that he wanted to be a teacher almost from day one. Family members including his mom, stepdad, aunts, and uncles were all teachers. Jim, and his brother, are both teachers. This goal was not one that was originally supported by his family. They were eager for him to experience something else. Ever the dutiful son, Jim began college as an undeclared

major at a large university not known for its teaching program. This lasted two years. Jim shared that one day while sitting in macroeconomics at 8am, he came to the realization that he needed to pursue his dream. He transferred to a university with a recognized teaching program and immediately felt the satisfaction of a choice well-made. Jim felt a pull toward 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade. His personal experience was a contributing factor. Jim had an amazing teacher in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, whose name he cannot remember, but who he wanted to emulate. He had a “wretched 4<sup>th</sup> grade teacher, “killer Miller”, who he did not.

Jim attended public schools from elementary school through college. He began teaching at a rural public elementary school. After one year, his position was eliminated. He received two job offers. One was from a public school. The other from an independent school. His family taught at public schools, always had, always will. They tried to encourage him to take the position at the public school using words like tenure and pensions. Jim took a leap of faith and chose the independent school. He believes it is the best move he could have made. He will never go back to teaching in a public school. Speaking quite plainly, Jim shared that, “money was not a motivating factor”. What is motivating is the freedom to choose what is best for the students in an independent school. He also loves the idea that everyone is working towards, and focused around, a common mission. “When you have tens of thousands of children and a thousand teachers, it’s hard to have a common mission”.

At the first independent school where Jim worked, the mission was, “success for every child”. That is what sold him on this opportunity instead of the public school position. Therefore, this school accepted almost anyone who applied, unless there was a significant learning difference. There was not a large range in the ability of the students. However, the bell curve was

much more typical than the bell curve at his current school. Jim was not completely cognizant of this difference when he accepted his current position.

Jim was able to state the mission of his current school verbatim. The mission is stated as, “Learn. Love. Lead. Inspiring curiosity, kindness and dignity in a caring Christian community.” Jim recited this perfectly. He does feel that the school is able to meet this mission except in one area. The curriculum is not flexible enough to meet the needs of students who learn differently. Jim realizes that this is because there is an admissions procedure where the school is looking for students who will fit into the culture. He feels that fit encompasses everything from what the parents want, to what the child is interested in, to the child’s academic ability. As a teacher, as well as an administrator, Jim is familiar with the admissions procedures. He does feel that, at times, students are accepted with the hope that they will be a “good fit”. This does not always play out and coming to the realization of what is best for the child, staying at the school or leaving, can take years. This is a painful process for Jim. He feels that once the school makes a commitment to a student, and a family, “we need to follow through and honor that commitment”. However, the reality of the logistics involved can make this impossible to provide.

One of the issues that Jim has seen that has contributed to the problem is that some of the teachers at this school have an expectation of a certain type of student. They may feel that the learning differences of some students are outside their purview. Jim does not fault the teachers for this. He notes that the school talks a lot about its rigorous program and high expectations to teachers, yet rarely do they speak to them about how the realization that there will be students who have learning differences.

Jim does feel that the school is making strides in this area. He feels that it is just a matter of time before the culture of the school begins to accept the fact that there are students with

learning differences whose needs need to be met. He is heartened by the first-time presence of the Learning Resource Coordinator (LRC) in the next school year. He also feels that even though the DI training through the local university, though not technically a success, did start an important conversation about this topic.

Jim feels that the LRC will help to better track and quantify the accommodations that are made for students with learning differences. The presence of the LRC will make the needs of these students legitimate to all teachers. Jim can continue to be an advocate for these students in a culture that is learning how to accept them and to be more reflective of their needs. He feels that awareness of serving students with learning differences in a more efficient manner has been raised and he feels optimistic about the direction the school is moving in this area.

**Donna.** Donna became a teacher, “in spite of myself.” She shared this sentiment first and with some chagrin. Her acceptance of her calling as an intermediate/middle school Spanish teacher was a circuitous journey. Donna earned her undergraduate degree in English without a clear idea of what kind of career she wanted. Her first job post, post-graduation, was in advertising. Soon after that she was a concierge. Donna learned many people skills during this time which she has found useful when working with parents at this independent school. After this experience, she was ready to begin graduate school with an eye toward teaching at the university level either in literature or Spanish. Fate, however, intervened. One night in class Donna’s professor announced an immediate opening for a Spanish teacher at a local independent school. This particular school happened to be one where Donna had family members who were currently attending, and so she was intrigued.

Donna was hired for the position. At this time, the school was in a time of “transition”. While the classes were small, the needs of the children were demanding. With the support of her

administrator, Donna powered through this and found that teaching was her passion and her calling. That was back in 1994.

Twenty-four years and two children later, Donna was still at this school. She came because of the connection to her family, her understanding of the rigorous curriculum and what she had heard about the relationships between the faculty and students. She stays because each day is different. She is thrilled when she, “sees the light go on”. But the most important part of her choice to stay is part of what brought her to begin with, the relationships. These relationships extend far beyond faculty and students. In the community she has found here, she has also found some of her best friends.

During Donna’s formal education, both undergraduate and graduate, she did not have any classes on how to work with students with learning differences. Before becoming a teacher, Donna counts herself fortunate to have had the experience of observing students during diagnostic testing with her aunt and uncle who were speech pathologists. She also credits her conversations with them as helping her to understand how to meet the needs of students with learning differences. Donna’s two children have ADHD and she has gained insight on how to help her students from learning how to help her own children. All of the formal training she has had on working with students with learning differences has been through trainings given by the school; and there have not been many of those in the last twenty-four years, although she does feel that, “lately this topic has been more of a focus area”.

Donna feels that in her position as the middle school Spanish teacher, she has had a greater percentage of students with learning differences than the other foreign language class that is offered, Latin. Latin was seen as the language that the “smart” students studied while others who are less capable took Spanish. Donna feels that this is changing. Because of this perception,

she has learned how to accommodate students with learning differences and is more willing to make accommodations for these students than some of the other teachers at the school.

This willingness is mirrored in Donna's reflections on the school's mission. She easily spoke the mission statement verbatim, but then also wanted to share the mission in her own words. Donna expounds upon the words of the mission to mean that the school will help, "each child to be the best version of him or herself ...so that he is prepared for what's next". She feels that she has gotten better at this over the years because in the early days of her teaching she was less able to determine that a student might have a learning difference. Experience has helped her hone this skill. However, Donna does not credit the success of students with learning differences solely to accommodations that are made. She circles back once again to the relationships that are formed at this independent school. She feels that each student knows that they have at least one teacher who understands and will stand up for him or her. This is helpful not only to the success of the student, but in Donna's experience, that teachers are able to articulate the strengths of that student, and how to build up that student's weaknesses, to teachers who might otherwise not understand.

Donna feels that the admissions procedures are, in part, a "mystery" to her; and she likes it that way. She feels that they are in place to find the right fit of student and determine who gets to come to this school. Donna realizes that certain populations get more consideration than others during the testing. She agrees that keeping families together is important and understands that being a church-affiliated school, those families get precedence as well. This can lead to students being accepted who are not able to be successful; either on an academic or behavioral level. When this happens, Donna knows that there are some students who do not return. She is hopeful that this decision is made jointly by the administration and the parents. When this does occur,



she is reflective on what she has done or not done to help this student. She is always looking to improve in this area.

Given that, Donna is excited about the positive direction in which the school is moving to better understand and assist students with learning differences. Through the training from the local university on this topic, Donna was able to feel a sense of connection with her colleagues in this area. In the past, there were times where she felt somewhat alone in her struggle to understand these students and in making accommodations. The training helped to open honest discussions about how to reach students with learning differences, as well as how it might be difficult and/or frustrating- and how that is okay.

Personally, Donna feels, more empowered to advocate for students with learning differences”; and that can make all the difference.

**Kate.** Kate’s journey into teaching initially grew out of practicality. After a K-12<sup>th</sup> grade public school experience, Kate decided that a private college would be the next educational step for her. Her father told her that he would pay for her to go to college, but only if she, “majored in something that guaranteed her a job upon graduation and did not require a Master’s degree”. At first, Kate made the most of her new environment, enjoying all of the college experiences, and even getting married! In her second year, she flipped through a catalog and found that the courses required for an elementary education degree appealed to her the most due to the variety they offered. She said that was an excellent precursor for her career as the constant variety in teaching is something that she appreciates most to this day. Teaching also helped Kate to use her natural leadership abilities which had been honed for years as the big sister to two brothers 10 years and 12 years younger than she. Kate’s husband is also a teacher and, due to the relatively low salaries of teachers, financial issues were often a concern. Kate looked into other fields, she

even went so far as to earn her Realtor license. However, selling property did not offer her the same satisfaction, as what she calls her, “day to day enjoyment of life” that she felt on a daily basis when teaching students. In order to be true to her passion, while creating an opportunity to increase her income, eventually Kate began tutoring students one-on-one after the school day was over.

Kate began her teaching career at a public school teaching a Kindergarten class. She lasted only three months. She was overcome with feelings of anxiety and stress. She had physical manifestations of these emotions in the form of chest pains and the beginning of an ulcer. She felt that being with people so young took all of her strength. She had to “be on” all the time. Clearly, this was not the age-group for her. Her unexpected departure from that position led to her finding her true age group, middle school.

Kate’s husband was teaching at a local independent school. In the middle of the year, this school found themselves in need of a middle school teacher to teach two periods of sixth grade per day. Kate filled that role. The next year this led to a full-time position for her.

This was not her first foray into this age group. During her student teaching, Kate had an internship at the university’s partner school. It was a school organized for, and run by, the psychology department. Kate enjoyed the age group immensely. However, she found that the curriculum appeared to be more of suggestion and she did not feel that there was enough accountability of the learning for students in these grades.

At this independent school, Kate found a great deal of autonomy; and also the accountability she thought was needed. The school mission was focused around meeting children where they were and using active learning to help meet curricular goals. During her twenty-year tenure at this school, Kate was immersed in constant professional development as this was the

signature of the headmaster of this school. The professional development focused primarily on cooperative learning. For the most part, Kate enjoyed these trainings as they fit into her philosophy of how children learn. She credits this training with helping her to hone her skills and become the kind of teacher that she aspired to be. However, in all of her years of training there, specific training on differentiated instruction, or how to make accommodations for students with learning differences, was not offered. Always the eager learner, Kate began to research these areas herself. This was especially important as she continued tutoring students, many of whom had learning differences. Kate was able to empathize with these students, not because she has a learning difference, per se, but because she characterizes herself as a “slow reader”. She feels that it takes her longer to accomplish many tasks that other teachers seem to breeze through. This, in part, was the impetus that led to her finding ways to reach all the learners in her classroom.

When Kate decided it was time for a change of schools, it was a complicated decision. She loved her students but felt that she needed a change of environment. When she made the change, she knew that it would be to another independent school. There were a few reasons for this choice. Kate’s husband teaches at a public high school. He teaches some of the very same students that Kate had in middle school. He feels the same love and bond with his students that Kate feels. However, his days are also filled with test preparation, unproductive meetings and a maze of paperwork. Kate did not want to take that route. She wanted to continue to teach who she calls the “future leaders”. She wanted to be able to continue to impress upon these students the responsibility that they will have as adults.

Kate is able to recount the mission statement of her current school verbatim. She was especially drawn to the motto of “Learn-Love-Lead”. Those three verbs encapsulate what she

tries to model to her students each day. Kate is a world traveler. She has led conferences for students in other countries. She has taken students on trips around the world. She helps students to understand their place in the world, and how to make the world a better place. She recognizes that differences, either in customs or learning styles, are a good thing.

However, Kate knows there are admissions procedures at the school where she works. But she is not quite sure what these procedures entail. Furthermore, she feels that, “we’re not the very best school for all students”. This is because she feels that not all students are the right “fit” because the school is “skewed on the high end” in both teaching methods and the ability of the students. When there are students who are “more than one letter grade off the norm”, Kate makes accommodations to help that student be more successful. Sometimes the accommodations are recommendations from a therapist after a student receives a diagnosis of a learning difference. Sometimes the accommodations are made based on trial and error from Kate’s own experiences. She also feels that consulting with her colleagues is extremely beneficial in helping these students. Kate feels pulled in several directions when working with students with learning differences when they seem to fall far outside the norm. She wants the best for the child and she also wants the best for all the other children. She feels that sometimes these two things are in conflict with one another. Kate also feels that the school has a certain reputation that she needs to respect. Her personal experience at her prior school was that the school went overboard in accommodating students with learning differences, and thus became known as the school to attend if you had learning differences. She does not want that to be case here. This is definitely not a black and white issue for Kate. Each student and situation is different and she plans to continue to do all she can to help students with learning differences. Even for student who do

make A's and B's it is important to "make progress" and to create "self-awareness." To Kate, this is the definition of success in the classroom for all students.

As the school moves forward into the next year, Kate is feeling hopeful that the addition of the Learning Resource Teacher (LRC) will help to guide her in better meeting the needs of all of her students. She will continue to work with her colleagues and administration on finding even more ways to reach students. Kate does feel that the culture of the school has come to openly accept that not all of the students that are admitted to the school are a good "fit." She is pleased that there are more options available to help students with learning differences. This is a discussion that will benefit all students. As Kate says, "everyone has learning differences, it's just that sometimes people's learning differences show up a lot more than others." She relishes the chance to continue moving these students forward in a school culture that recognizes this as well.

**Mary.** From when she was eight years old to present day, in all situations, Mary thinks of herself as a teacher. When she was little, she would play school, teaching all of her stuffed animals, and her little sister if she could catch her. When she began college, she was one of the only ones in her friend group that knew exactly what she wanted to do with her life. She was raised to know that college was not a choice, it was expected of her. Neither of her parents went to college and Mary was proud to be the first generation of her family to do so. Her parents had conflicting thoughts about her career choice. Her father said that he would not pay for her college unless she majored in something where she could make money when she graduated- a lawyer, perhaps. Her mother wanted Mary to follow her dream. This was the last straw for her parent's marriage. Mary's parents divorced and her mother paid for Mary to attend college.

Mary's dedication to her dream led her on a very different college path than her sister. While her sister's path to becoming a nurse at a far-away university was funded by her father, Mary lived at home, worked full time and was a true "commuter" student. The first two years of classes were not fulfilling for Mary; however, when she entered the College of Education in her junior year, she felt that it was a "dream come true". She felt that she was in the right place, and once she began her internships, she realized that she loved this job more than she thought possible. Mary has been teaching for over 34 years. She has never lost her enthusiasm for her profession. She admits that there are careers where she might earn more money and prestige but this is the one where she still thinks that the summers are too long. As she puts it, "I just love being around kids, they make me happy."

Mary's career began in the public school system. She taught elementary school students as well as mentoring many college students during their internships. Having so many college students allowed her to share her love of teaching, as well as earn college credits that she could use towards her Master's degree. After five years of teaching and mentoring, Mary earned her degree, at no cost, in Educational Leadership. Mary spent 15 more years in public school. The impetus that caused her to leave the public school system came at her from two separate angles, one professional and one personal. Mary realized as she went through the years in the public system that accountability testing was becoming more and more common. Her exact words were, "They were testing children to death." An episode with a student, who had to take a test to pass the fifth grade for the fourth time and failed, was more than she could bear. At about the same time, her daughter was ready to begin Pre-K. Like most parents, Mary thought that her daughter was quite bright. She wanted her to be challenged, to be a partner in her learning and to be encouraged along. Mary's supervisor had just been to a training about teaching to the "middle".

The thought being that the lower students took up too much time and that the brighter students could learn on their own. Mary did not want that for her daughter. Indeed, she did not want that for any child so she left the public sector.

Mary has been teaching at this independent school for over 14 years. What struck her as most different when she first began working here, and still does, is the sense of true community- of truly knowing each student and family. She feels that teachers are able to know the “whole child” which makes it easier to reach and teach these students. Also, because there is an admissions process, the students should fit a certain set of criteria as far as academic ability and behavior are concerned, however, she has not always found this to be the case. When students who are outside of the typical norms are admitted, teachers do their best to meet the needs of these students. Mary has found that talking through concerns with her peers has been the most helpful. There is not a formal process in place; teachers have the autonomy to make accommodations for students with, or without, a diagnosis of a learning difference. Mary did not find that this was the case in public schools and she appreciates it at her school.

In all of her years of schooling and teaching, Mary has not had formal training in how to teach students with learning disabilities that has been helpful. The trainings during her public school days and for her recertification certificates have focused more on the rights of students instead of how to teach students; so other than peer problem-solving discussions, Mary has had to rely on her own personal experiences in helping students with learning differences. Mary has three children of her own. Only one of her children attended the independent school where she currently teaches. The other two were not a good “fit.” Her oldest had intellectual and physical needs that this school simply could not meet. Her youngest has a severe form of autism. Her needs could not be met at this school either. Each day of her oldest child’s life was full of

choices that she hoped would help to make him happy. Her youngest daughter can attend public school until she is 22. Then Mary and her husband will need to make some difficult choices. Learning differences are not something that Mary takes lightly. She wants the best for all children. She knows, from personal experience, that this independent school is not always the right choice. Mary once told me that she was glad that her daughter's diagnosis was so extreme. It left her no reason to think that she should attend this school, no false hope. Mary knows the choice is not that clear for all parents.

This gray area is a battle that Mary fights every day. She fights for the child. She makes accommodations. She counsels parents. She measures success as progress, but she also questions when the limit of what is good for the student has been reached- and what might now be damaging the student in terms of self-esteem. She feels that, sometimes, the students' lives are harder than they have to be. Mary is protective of her students. At the same time, she tries to teach them tough life lessons. She shares with them that things are not always easy. When she shares the story of her son's death, she uses it to help them realize that even when things are darkest, the sun will shine again. This resonates particularly well with students with learning differences who might have some sort of struggle on a daily basis at school. Mary will continue to do her best to meet the needs of her students, and her best to help their parents understand that learning differences are just a small part in the overall picture of a child's life.

The data confirm that the journeys of these teachers are central to how they interact, support and advocate for students with learning differences in this independent school. Each of these teachers makes sense of their experiences in different ways which is evident in their answers to questions as well as how they work with students with learning differences in their



own classrooms. Connecting and understanding these journeys is meaningful in the context of these teachers' instructional tolerance.

After reading and rereading these journeys, I find myself to be biased in the ways in which I am sharing their stories. I can see my own personal prejudice clearly. For example, I have known Donna longer than the other teachers in the study. We connect on a different level than I do with, for example, Susan who is a fairly new teacher. I feel that Donna comes across as more likeable than Susan. Kate is someone with whom I have literally traveled the world. My respect for her global outlook, and how she applies that to teaching, is the lens through which I analyzed her responses. Mary is one of my best friends. I sat by her and held her hand when her son died. Her reaction to reading her journey was, "I sound like Mother Theresa." She does not believe this to be the case, but it seems that I do. Jim is one of the only men that I trust. I reviewed his responses through the lens of kindness and loyalty. Clearly my personal connection to the participants has slanted my understanding of who they are as teachers, especially as teachers trying to meet the needs of students with learning differences. I am not stating that this is a negative thing. I just wanted to be transparent about my reflections on the data regarding the journey of these teachers.

#### **Section Four: Themes**

In this study I asked five independent school teachers to explore and share their experiences when working with students with learning differences. This occurred through one-on-one interviews and Critical Friends sessions. By exploring the phenomena of independent school teachers working with students with learning differences through the lens of the Instructional Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988) various themes became apparent through data

analysis. Data analysis included in-vivo and descriptive coding through several iterations. Six themes, some with sub-themes, were identified through this analysis. These themes are:

1. I Get By... Accommodations;
2. With a Little Help from My Friends... Community;
3. If the Shoe... Fit;
4. Ticking, Ticking Away... Time;
5. I Heard It Through the Grapevine... Communication; and
6. Show Me the Way... Training.

For the purpose of this study, these are the working definitions of the themes.

**Accommodations:** Things teachers try to help students with learning differences. These things are based on personal experience or intuition.

**Community:** How the teachers learn from and gain support from each other.

**Fit:** References to the school's culture and/or student characteristics.

**Time:** The extra time needed to meet the needs of students with learning differences or time taken away from typical students to meet the needs of students with learning differences. Also, time needed for additional planning and communication.

**Communication:** The lack of communication regarding students with learning differences at this school.

**Training:** Formal instruction in teaching students with learning differences.

These themes are detailed in this chapter and supported by quotes from the participants.

### **Theme One: I get by...accommodations**

The participants felt that intuition or instinct is an important part of teaching. They mentioned it consistently when asked about working with students with learning differences. They felt that they knew what their students needed based upon something they felt rather than something that was taught or recommended. This school has an unofficial motto- where every student is known. Teachers take this to heart. They know their students. They know who has had a bad night or if a family is going through a tough time. They know whose parents are out of town and whose brother or sister may have just left for college. They use this information to make changes for their students. They feel that training is not all that useful when they can rely on this understanding of the whole child to make changes that can make things better. For example, even though training is available through various courses, online training or the local university and will be paid for by the school, teachers pick things up through their own experiences.

Kate: Training is helpful, but you pick up a lot of things instinctively.

Donna: Informal training through family conversations have added to my arsenal. Furthermore, like all life-long learners, the teachers are not afraid to try and fail. Teaching is a vocation that calls for this type of dedication. The teachers understand that not all students learn the same way. They understand that sometimes recommendations from specialists may not be useful because the specialist may not understand the culture of the school and its limitations on personnel. This is exemplified in the following exchange from Critical Friends Session One:

Donna: There is a lot of trial and error in choosing teaching methods.

Mary: We all teach in a variety of ways to figure out what is best for the students.

Donna: We just have to try out methods and see what works.

Jim: Even with suggestions, we tend to do what works for us.

Mary: We don't care about IEPs (individual education plans), we are going to meet the child's needs as soon as we know what they need.

In some instances, they talked about how they let the students lead them. Teachers in this Episcopal school seemed to espouse to the words of the Bible from Isaiah 11:6, "and a little child shall lead them." Children can be their own problem solvers if teachers trust them enough to support this endeavor. These teachers realized that engaging children in solving their learning difficulties is beneficial for all.

Mary: I let students do whatever they need to get those little fidgets out.

Susan: Each year I learn from different students what they need to be accommodated.

Jim: We try something and either it works or it doesn't, they let us know.

Donna: We had to figure out what was going to work for her.

From the newest teacher to the veteran teachers, each one shared how they learn from their students and use that information in successive years. These responses focused on individual, personal methods that were not prescribed by professionals or part of a formal training process. A couple of teachers shared that the longer they taught the more they learned.

Mary: ESE training was not helpful for teaching methods, it is mostly about how the law applies. Experience and trying different things helped, the old three modalities. The last 25 plus years of my life have been adapting to different. You know my three children, handicapped. There was nothing typical about that. So, for 25 years I've had to do things outside the box. Think of different ways to make them successful. And in my classroom it's second nature. It's part of my life skills as a teacher. It really is a matter of transferring that thinking outside the box from my home life back into my classroom.

Critical Friends Session 2 (Donna): I did all the stuff to help a student with learning differences, yet I had no formal training.

Independent schools are known for the autonomy teachers are given. At this school, several teachers noted this when discussing their methods to meet the needs of students with learning differences. They felt supported and encouraged in these endeavors. Because there are no special education teachers on staff, the division heads meet with teachers to discuss student concerns and ways to help these students to be successful. Grade level meetings which include the teachers, teaching assistants and division head are held each week in grades PK-5. Teachers shared that they felt that the division heads were supportive of any ideas they proposed. The division heads also work in collaboration with these teachers to guide them. In the middle school grades, 6-8, the division head meets with teachers as needed to discuss ways to help students with learning differences have success in this rigorous program.

Kate: Division heads trust us as professionals... mine is willing to let me try whatever I can to help the kids.

### **Theme Two: With a little help from my friends...community**

The teachers felt that the school community was a source of support and guidance when working with students with learning differences. The community at this independent school is one of their hallmarks. Feeling of the community of teachers is palpable. Many teachers at the school have been there over 10 years. Some have been there over 20 years. After all these years, social and emotional connections are strong. And, like many small communities, they like to stick with who they know, or who someone else knows when admitting new members. This phenomenon occurs with students due to the priority given to siblings and legacy children. We also have legacy teachers. Currently, there are five teachers on the faculty who attended the

school as students. It occurs at the teacher level through the official policy of a bonus paid to current teachers when they refer someone they know as a possible hire. It occurs unofficially in the form of nepotism. Although the word nepotism has negative connotations, it has proven to be a successful practice at this school. The school currently has three sets of mother/daughters, as well as one husband and wife team, and three daughters –in-laws of current faculty who are teaching at the school. The total number of faculty member is 53. The number of teachers who have known each other for many years, knew each other before coming to the school, and/or are officially related is remarkably high. Therefore, it is not surprising that these teachers rely on each other when they need advice on how to help students with learning differences. The data show this support and guidance in the form of teacher-to-teacher interactions, as well as teacher-to administrator interactions. One of the teachers extends her definition of community even further by stating:

Susan: It feels just like home (at school).

Teachers helping teachers was the most prevalent theme in this area. These teachers recognize that the experience of others is a helpful resource when working with students with learning differences. Younger teachers rely on veteran teachers to make them better at helping students with learning differences.

Susan: It's helpful for me to be around teachers who have taught longer than I have. I've only been teaching six years, so seeing how they are open to changing things has been helpful.

Donna: Just in general, I learned more from the internships than the actual classes.

Although this school does not have what could be technically termed as a Professional Learning Community (PLC), it is clear that these teacher rely on each other for help in meeting the needs of students with learning differences. These conversations are sometimes intentional,

and sometimes even casual conversation can lead to helpful problem-solving. Division meetings are held bi-weekly and student concerns are officially discussed and strategized. It is a part of standard operating procedure of the school.

Jim: I think that's how teachers learn best, having conversations with like-minded professionals.

Donna: Our biggest resources are each other.

Jim: I use colleagues to get advice on students with learning differences.

Mary: When we see there's a problem, we talk to the other teachers, we problem-solve, saying, what have you tried?

Mary: I think we have become our own resources.

Kate: I am reassured that there is a big commitment here. If I don't have something in my bag of tricks, I'm going to keep seeking out others.

Donna: After hearing my peers talk, it helped me dig deeper (to help students with learning differences).

Susan: The amount of discussion we can have is important.

Mary: Talking about it (learning differences) takes a great burden off individual teachers' shoulders. When we as a group are dealing with this situation together.

Donna: In division meetings we bring up kids and talk about what works well in one class and I'll try that. It's a lot of open dialogue.

Teachers at this independent school feel a partnership with their administration when it comes to helping students with learning differences. They often go to them for advice.

Administrators often have experience in helping these students throughout the years and are able to offer a more complete picture of the child's learning needs. Each division head is in charge of

students for the entire time he or she is in that division. As the primary division head, I work with students for four years in PK-2<sup>nd</sup> grade. The intermediate division head does the same with students in 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> grade and the middle school head helps with students in grades 6-8. Because the division heads are involved with students for three or four years, we often can provide history of these students in a more cohesive manner than having to go from teacher to teacher and ask.

Donna: I talk with the division head to see what works.

Kate: I think my colleagues and my administration are excellent ones to bounce ideas off of.

Susan: Continue to have open communication with administrators, even if they are not in our division, regarding students with learning differences.

Jim: I can go see Lisa Lockhart (the researcher), she can help me understand things that I don't really understand.

This school community has been strengthened by both the university training and the Critical Friends Sessions in that there is a common understanding that this school does effectively teach students with learning differences. Each of these experiences helped to create a school-wide open dialogue on acknowledging that students with learning differences are not an anomaly at this school and that all teachers are responsible for helping these students. The university training was a big step for the school in terms of culture. It helped to get the message out there that teachers need to examine their own beliefs about students with learning differences. It gave a voice to the teachers who were already working hard to meet the needs of these students and an ultimatum to those who were not.

Donna: I feel empowered by the discussion because of the designated time to talk and reflect.



Kate: Because of the training and CF sessions, we are more relaxed and know that everyone sees the same thing, maybe through a different lens. We are all trying to do what is best for these children.

Jim: Because of our recent month's discussions on students with learning differences, I am more in tune to them.

There is also consensus that all teachers need to share their successes when working with students with learning differences. These teachers want information to be shared so that all teachers can put helpful practices into play so that student learning will be more rewarding.

Susan: When somebody does something that works, we all need to know about it.

### **Theme Three: If the shoe... fit**

The idea of fit is central to the idea of independent schools. These schools echo, one after another, that they are not right for every child. This is completely counter to the central idea of public school, which is education for all. Any discussion of a school not being the right fit for a child is met with derision by those in the public system. And, rightfully so. The public system exists to educate all children. Various types of programs and personnel help to make this a reality. In the independent schools, this is not the case. Each independent school bases its decisions on the mission statement of the school. They do this proudly and with a thought process that is foreign to most public school educators.

As mentioned, the mission of this particular independent school is: Inspiring curiosity, kindness and dignity in a caring, Christian community. This is generally preceded by their motto of: Learn-Love-Lead. Curiosity, kindness and dignity are three characteristics that help to make up a very special community. However, nowhere in the mission statement does it mention

meeting the needs of all students. The verbs in the motto are on constant display in the school community. But, again, success for all is not the end game.

The existence of an admissions process in an independent school leads to expectations that all students will possess the characteristics to succeed at that school. In the independent school world, this is called, “The portrait of a graduate.” The admissions packet that is given to prospective parents contains a plethora of information about the school; and about what the school expects of its students. The first bulleted piece of information is that, “the school seeks to admit students who demonstrate: a likelihood of success within a challenging academic environment.” This is closely followed by, students who demonstrate, “appropriate social and emotional development.” Neither of these statements point to the school accommodating students who do not meet this criteria. Teachers clearly had this portrait in mind when discussing the students at their school. A binary theme emerged here; students who fit into this culture and students who do not.

Jim: We have competitive admissions, we are looking for a good fit for our program.

Mary: The admissions department works very hard to accept students who will be successful here, who are a good fit.

Jim: Our fit is sold as students who will get into any high school they want because they have completed our rigorous accelerated program to the entire community.

Teachers in this study had consistent characteristics in mind when discussing students who would be a good fit. These characteristics included motivated students who can succeed in a rigorous academic setting.

Susan: Independent schools tend to be more family-oriented, the kids are held more accountable because people know them.

Mary: I assumed that students in independent prep schools would take their learning seriously.

Critical Friends Session Two (Donna): Good grades are a currency to these students.

Mary: They all want the A's that you know, seem to be the core of success here.

Kate: Our school is skewed on the high end for student ability.

There was a general consensus that it can be difficult to meet the needs of students with learning differences at this independent school. This is due to its focus on accelerated academics as well as its small size. These two factors are intentional and are the primary characteristics of the school. Over the years, the school has reevaluated its curriculum offerings. Most recently, the school added geometry, as a high school level course, to the eighth grade curriculum. Other eighth grade classes that count for high school credit include: physical science, algebra 1 and Latin. These results are not simply because of a push in middle school. All grades, beginning in Pre-K, work ahead of grade level expectations in most subjects. Students are expected to come in with a solid academic foundation, even at the age of four. They are expected to learn quickly and deeply. When they cannot, that is when questions such as, "Is this the right school for this child?" begin to be asked.

Jim: We are accelerated academics, we are this rigorous program and that's great and you can have that. But, you're always going to have students who don't perfectly match whether it's a diagnosed learning difference or whether it's just not a precise fit for other parts of the program.

Jim: We may accept students without knowing the full picture of what their learning issues may be.

Kate: We have had students who have walked into impossible situations.

Jim: Being a small school it can be difficult to be everything to everybody.

Jim: We mention to teachers that our pace is accelerated, yet we never state to them that they are going to have students who can't keep pace.

Kate: Students may fit into a norm, but they are low for the independent school fit.

Susan: I don't think our school is a good fit for every style.

Given the admissions criteria, it is understandable that teachers might feel that they would see a smaller variance in student abilities. After reviewing the admissions criteria it is understandable that teachers might feel that student academic abilities might skew on the high end. Teachers did express this concern. This created what is referred to in the conceptual framework as "boundary confusion." Boundary confusion, according to Gerber occurs when teachers believe that they are no longer accountable for student learning outcomes. These teachers believe that these students need additional help that is outside of their purview. When this occurs, students often end up in the category classified by Silberman (1971) as the rejection category. This occurs when teachers attempt unsuccessful interventions.

Kate: I don't think our school really specializes in kids who are on the low end.

Mary: I did not think I would have challenged learners.

In spite of admissions testing, special considerations are often made at independent prep schools. These include siblings, legacy, church members or students of teachers. Also, budgets must be met. The teachers appear to understand that not all candidates will be equally successful.

Kate: I don't think this is the best school for every single kid. Sometimes we accept kids that we shouldn't or keep kids that we shouldn't.

Mary: The school is making great effort to accommodate children, which technically we don't have to because we are a private school. But, we have to morally.

Jim: We have taken children with the hope that with additional support early on, they could become a better fit.

Kate: We do a better than average job of making sure the child and the school setting fit, but there is room for improvement.

Mary: If they can pay the tuition, they generally will get in regardless of abilities, regardless of difficulties, regardless of what the prior school has told us.

Teachers do understand the realities of admission considerations as well as budget needs. This is where the irony of accepting students with learning differences can become crystallized. If students who are accepted with learning differences make up a large number in a certain grade or grades that can also have an impact on the teachers' abilities to meet the needs of these students.

Critical Friends Session 2 (Susan): I don't dread individual students with learning differences, but I can dread having severe learning differences or high numbers.

A painful truth in independent prep schools is that there are times when students are accepted into a school, and then must be counseled out. This process is long and can be detrimental to the student, the family and the teacher. The student has suffered because he or she has not been able to learn at the same rate or from the same method as his/her peers. This can be damaging not only to the child's academic path, but to their identity as well. The family is often angry, disheartened or confused. The general profile of these families is successful people who are used to overcoming obstacles. The teacher is affected negatively because he or she may count him or herself as a failure when trying to meet the needs of a particular student. And this is the

very reason that the students at this school are counseled out. The teacher is unable to meet their needs. At this independent school, reasons revolved around the fact that the accommodations made by teachers to help students with learning differences were unsuccessful.

Jim: The only thing that gets you through (counseling out students), in the end, that's what's best for the child, is that a different educational setting is necessary for them to be successful at school.

Kate: When the school was not a good fit for a faculty child, we counseled that child out.

Mary: When it's truly detrimental for the child to remain, that's when the school says that it's not a good place for you.

#### **Theme Four: Ticking, ticking away... time.**

When discussing barriers to meeting the needs of students with learning differences, time was an overarching theme. Class periods in the middle school at this particular school are 42 minutes long. This school prides itself on a well-rounded education. In addition to the accelerated academic curriculum all students are also enrolled in the following classes: art, music, technology, foreign language, library, sacred studies and physical education. All of these classes must be worked into the middle school eight periods a day schedule. In the younger grades, students have all of these classes as well, and many of them are scheduled for two or three times a week. All students attend whole school chapel twice a week and whole school assemblies are held about twice a month. Recess is part of each student's day, each day. Students in the youngest grades, Pre-K and Kindergarten have it twice a day. The school year includes 170 instructional days. This is typical in independent schools. For reference, most local public schools include 180 instructional days.

And then, of course, there is the time that is lost to typical student issues such as: I don't have my book, I forgot my lunch, can I go see the nurse? These situations directly impact one child at a time. However, the disruption caused by these requests can indirectly disrupt the learning going on in the classroom. Anyone who has taught can attest to the shortage of time needed to get things done and the various ways in which it can be lost. Time can be "lost" when having to reteach a lesson. When this occurs to the whole class, teachers do it. When it is something that has to be retaught to one or two students, it becomes more of a concern regarding loss of time. The teachers in this study remarked upon this phenomenon. This concern manifested in extra time needed for students with learning differences as well as time lost for typical students.

Mary: We don't have enough time. If I could, I would spend 40 minutes with that child with a learning disability.

Jim: Even without an IEP we devote extra time to students who need it.

Donna: We also agree that it is important to meet every child's needs in the classroom even when the learning differences of a few can be demanding.

Many responses revolved around the extra time that teachers felt they needed to spend to meet the needs of students with learning differences. The time increase was seen as a component both in the planning of the lesson as well as the delivery of the lesson. The teachers want to meet the needs of all of their students, including those with learning differences. However, boundary confusion can come into play here when teachers feel that their time is disproportionately spent on students with learning differences.

Donna: My biggest obstacle is time. I spend 4-5 hours a week writing lesson plans for one student.

Jim: Presenting information in different ways is time-consuming.

Susan: We need to be proactive, not reactive. This takes planning time.

As previously mentioned, this independent school does not have any teachers whose sole job it is to work with students with learning differences. All of the students with learning differences are, what public school would term as, mainstreamed. The teachers are responsible for making accommodations whether that involves curriculum and/or personnel. Sometimes accommodation recommendations are given to teachers if the child sees an outside professional. Some of these accommodations are not possible in this environment due to a lack of personnel. Sometimes, the teacher is on their own to figure out what might work for a particular student.

Critical Friends One (Kate): There is a lack of specialized personnel to help with multiple learning differences and multiple students.

Jim: Providing a child with someone who can read with them one on one is not possible in my division.

Teachers in the middle school are expected to offer extra help session for all students on a weekly basis. Many students with learning differences choose not to attend these sessions. This could be because they are embarrassed, or perhaps they do not find this group atmosphere any more helpful than the classroom. In any case, the teachers must spend additional time one-on-one to reach many of the students with learning differences.

Critical Friends Session 2 (Donna): Time is an issue because the student with the learning difference has to come back at a different time for more instruction.

Another theme regarding time revolved around how the time needed to meet the needs of students with learning differences was a cause of less time available for typical students during the lessons. Teachers felt that students with learning differences required more support to



understand many of the concepts. This can cause students who struggle, but do not technically have learning differences, to fall through the cracks. This is because teachers felt they were focused on these students to the detriment of others who might flourish with a bit of additional attention and time from the teacher.

Donna: In class, students with learning differences take up a disproportionate amount of time.

Kate: Stopping and helping students who are two letters away from the norm takes time away from the other students.

Teachers also voiced concerns regarding having multiple students with learning differences. They felt that they could work with small numbers of students with learning differences. However, when there were several, they felt that having to meet the various needs of these students was disruptive to typical students in their class as the teachers were called upon to focus on multiple students with learning differences, and they felt that each one is time-consuming in their own way.

Kate: When there are several students with learning differences in one class, it interrupts the learning process for other students.

Critical Friends 2 (Susan): Having multiple students with learning differences does take time away from other students. They can be distracting and slow the other students down.

### **Theme five: I heard it through the grapevine...communication**

Due to the aforementioned sense of community, the “grapevine” form of communication is alive and well at this independent school. However, teachers felt that they did not always receive all pertinent information regarding incoming students. Teachers in the middle school voiced this concern many times, in many different ways. They felt that information from the

admissions office was not always as robust as it could be. Furthermore, even when it was, there seemed to be information that was not shared from the prior school.

Susan: I do not receive any test results from the admissions process or testing information from prior schools.

Kate: When we do have testing from prior schools, it is difficult for teachers to see it.

Teachers also discussed what they considered the secretive nature of admissions testing at this school. Admissions tests are proctored by the admissions director and division head. There was some disagreement as to how these tests are scored. Some teachers shared concerns regarding rigor of the items that are on the admissions tests. They are not privy to these tests and have no input on the quality of the content. Communication of the practices and procedures regarding admissions testing is not transparent to all parties.

Susan: I'm not sure what is on the admissions tests and if it is commensurate with what is happening in that grade level.

Communication is a theme that can be put into two categories. The first is the lack of communication. Teachers shared that they do not receive all pertinent information about the learning differences of their students. Parents and administrators each contribute to the communication deficit. This deficit can lead to delayed or ineffective accommodations for students with learning differences. Parents did not always share information due to a fear that their child would be "labeled" as noted from Critical Friends Session two by Jim. As previously mentioned, for the most part, this is a closed community. Parents seemed to have a fear that word of their child's learning difference would become common knowledge in the community.

Kate: Community connections can cause embarrassment in parents asking for help or sharing test results.

Kate: Parents do not always share testing information.

The second aspect teachers shared is that parents of students with learning differences at this school have high expectations regarding communications. In independent schools, communication with parents is critical to enhancing a child's education. It is also crucial to satisfying the customer. At the basest level, parents are the clients in independent schools. Children are the customers. Teachers work to make their experiences positive. But, parents pay the tuition. Teachers work to satisfy their demands.

Mary: Getting parents on board can take time, so it makes my job harder because I have to figure out how to accommodate the child rather than receiving the doctor's recommendations.

Jim: Parents have high expectations of accommodations and communications.

Another area that teachers discussed regarding communication was a lack of standard protocol when working with students with learning differences. At times, the process leading into testing can be so convoluted that it is difficult to follow in the child's file. Once a diagnosis is given, information regarding exactly how to proceed can be difficult to track from year to year. Teachers must communicate in order to ensure that they have all pertinent information need to meet a child's needs.

Susan: Word of mouth and observations of students is how I get information on students rather than a formal paper trail.

Jim: I hope we will have more concrete protocol when it comes to tracking student progress and accommodations.

### **Theme Six: Show me the way...training**

In the context of this study, training covers any formal or informal instruction or discussion in the area of teaching students with learning differences. This includes any training

in meeting the needs of students with learning differences, the training given by a local university during the study, and participation in this study.

This school has a fund to facilitate teacher training. Teachers who are interested are encouraged to apply for funding to anything from graduate school to day trips to museums during summer vacation. The school recognizes the importance of outside experiences on a teacher's ability to teach. Some of this training is recognized through the state of Florida as qualification hours towards recertification. If it is not, that is fine. This independent school does not require that teachers be certified by the state of Florida. This is a completely opposite stance of public schools in the state of Florida. This difference speaks to the very core of the difference that teachers at this school feel when going through training. To these teachers, training should be meaningful and voluntary. Anything that is mandated might be valuable, however, getting teachers to realize this can be fraught with difficulty.

Mary: training through the county and training for certification was not particularly helpful in understanding students' needs and learning differences- mostly give them less work and more time.

Donna: Collectively, teachers did not feel that the university training was a good fit.

Generally speaking, the participants have not received much formal training in accommodating students with learning differences. In the past, school-wide professional development days have focused on topics such as social and emotional learning, digital citizenship and cooperative learning initiatives. Left to their own devices, the teachers tend to attend trainings that focus on particular content areas or grade levels.

Jim: I don't have a whole lot of training in special education or learning differences.

The teachers did not feel that the formal training they have received through the local university has been especially helpful in helping them meet the needs of students with learning differences. This could be due to the fact that this mandatory, all faculty training was cancelled after only half of the sessions were held. The teachers felt that the trainers did not understand the context of the school or the teachers' experiences and teaching journeys. These factors were not taken into consideration when the planning was done. Some of the teachers felt it ironic that, from their perspective, that the training on differentiated instruction was not differentiated.

Donna: (the university training) stop doing what you're doing so we can tell you what to do, which is exactly what we're doing. Analogy- a patient comes in and the doctor says, wake up and take your sleeping pills.

Kate - (regarding the university training) I kind of felt like they were training beginning teachers. And we weren't beginning teachers. We're very well-seasoned.

Donna - the university training would have helped my 25 year old self for sure.

As previously mentioned, this is a school community that relies on ongoing dialogue with other teachers and administrators to improve their craft. The university training was a catalyst for these conversations as they related to students with learning differences. Prior to the school-wide training, conversations about this topic were centered more around a need to know basis- ie how can I help this child? Whereas now, the idea of students with learning differences being accepted and assisted became a formal expectation. The discussions became more global and positive in nature.

Mary: formal (university) training did not go well, but it did start a conversation about learning differences.

Mary: The university training allowed us to accept learning differences. It's out there open and people are working to not normalize, but to stabilize and make it an even playing field for all these kids.

Mary: The university training was not as successful as it could have been, okay. I'm actually energized by it. It's like the elephant in the room is no longer the elephant in the room.

The participants felt that the Critical Friends sessions helped to open an honest dialogue in this teaching community about students with learning differences. The sessions were held three times. Each session allowed teachers to become uncomfortable and share this discomfort with others. The discomfort was caused by teachers discussing a subject that was not generally acknowledged in this community before. It helped the teachers to face their own personal biases as well. It was also caused by teachers asking questions to which they did not know the answers. The teachers became a support group for each other as they navigated the topic of reaching and teaching students with learning differences in their independent school community.

Susan: After hearing my peers talk, it helped me dig deeper (to help students with learning differences).

Mary: I enjoyed sitting and talking with this group (Critical Friends) and felt I learned a lot along the way.

Jim: Thank you for giving me the opportunity to participate in this process. I enjoyed the conversation and reflection.

Donna: I am emboldened now to say, we can do something about this and this child can learn.

## **Summary**

The purpose of the study was to explore the current, everyday experience of independent school teachers when working with students with learning differences. I used a qualitative interview approach utilizing Seidman's three interviews process as well as three Critical Friends sessions to investigate this phenomenon. The journeys and personal experiences of the teachers are integral to the analysis as these concepts are central to how the teachers made meaning of this phenomenon. Six themes, some with sub-themes, were identified through data analysis.

In Chapter Five I discuss the themes in relation to the conceptual framework of Instructional Tolerance Theory (Gerber, 1988). I also interpret the findings in light of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two and speak to the research questions that guided my study. Implications of my study for independent schools as well as suggested areas for future research are discussed. Finally my reflexivity as the researcher is provided.

## CHAPTER FIVE

My purpose in the study was to explore the current, everyday experience of independent school teachers when working with students who have learning differences. In her research on teachers working in the framework of the National Association of Independent schools (NAIS), Mulholland (2011) called for “a qualitative investigation to better understand the description and concern of teachers regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities” (p. 137). Understanding and documenting the phenomena at one independent school helps to unpack the experience and start a dialogue from which other independent schools can work. In turn, this can be a starting point for similar independent schools should they choose to develop actions to address concerns similar to those uncovered in this study and improve student outcomes. The research questions that guided this study were:

- Q1. How do selected teachers in independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?
- Q2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes toward students with learning differences?
- Q3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?



As noted in the previous chapter, six themes emerged from the data.

1. I get by: Accommodations
2. With a little help from my friends: Community
3. If the shoe: Fit
4. Ticking, ticking away: Time
5. I heard it through the grapevine: Communication
6. Show Me the Way: Training

Based on my review of the literature of students with learning differences in independent schools, the emergence of most of these themes was not surprising. The one exception was the theme of accommodations, which is addressed further in this chapter.

This study allowed a glimpse into the thoughts of independent school teachers regarding their work with students with learning differences. From my perspective working there, teachers share a great sense of community in their school, and that was made clear from the remarks they made. This feeling of community among teachers was expressed in many ways. They feel they gain understanding about how to help students by learning from each other.

While teachers felt that their most significant learning experiences regarding students with learning differences came from their peers, it was clear they did not have a great deal of confidence in formal professional development training, either currently with the local university, or in other classes or trainings. Additionally, they preferred to rely on their own personal experiences to help students with learning differences.

Some barriers to helping these students included time and a lack of information. Extra time was needed to help plan for and accommodate these students. Teachers also felt time was

lost to typical students due to meeting the needs of students with learning differences. Lack of information was the result of either parents or administrators not sharing important data regarding student learning needs with the teachers.

Each teacher specifically used the word “fit” when discussing the needs of students with learning differences. With the use of an admissions process in mind, teachers have voiced certain expectations of the students they believed they would be teaching. The setting of the independent day school can make meeting the needs of all students difficult to achieve due to the accelerated curriculum and the need for additional qualified personnel. Despite this, these teachers are committed to helping all the students in their care.

### **Study Findings in Relation to the Research Questions and Literature**

Q1. How do selected teachers in independent prep schools reflect on their behaviors associated with Instructional Tolerance Theory?

A definition of Instructional Tolerance Theory comes from Gerber (1988) and is used by Cook et al. in their research (2007). They interpret the theory in the following manner, “this theory posits that given finite instructional resources (e.g., time, experience, support) and significant variance in student learning characteristics, it is not possible for teachers to concurrently provide optimal instruction to all students” (p. 231). Several themes specifically addressed these areas. Time was noted as a concern by the teachers in this study when working with students with learning differences. Graham and Slee (2008) had similar results as well. One reason noted in the data indicated that teachers felt extra time was needed for planning for students with learning differences. This is a key finding from a study done by Steele (2008). Data from my study also indicated that additional time is needed for communication about students

with learning differences. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) in their meta-analysis found that work by Gans (1985) yielded results similar to these.

If an independent school is operating under the premise of mainstreaming because there are no special education classes, schools need to factor in additional planning time for all teachers. This time can be used to research specific accommodations and modify curriculum. This time can also be used for formal and informal meetings between teachers to discuss how to best meet the needs of shared students. Consistent with the findings and in my own experience, parents of students with learning differences also take up a larger percentage of teacher time than parents of typical students. This time is needed to discuss the student's learning differences with the family and create a partnership. Time is also needed to keep the parent current on the child's progress and to discuss the various accommodations that can be made. Data from Ong-Dean (2009) supports this data. There are times when a professional evaluation suggests accommodations that are not feasible in an independent school setting, such as individual support. This requires additional time to discuss with parents as well.

Findings from this work indicate that additional support persons would be needed in order to properly meet the needs of students with learning differences. This data concurs with the findings of McNally, Cole and Waugh (2001) as explored in the public school setting. Magnusson, Goransson, and Nilholm (2015), which highlights independent day schools also confirms this finding. Universally, teachers felt that additional support is needed in order to give students with learning differences the individual attention they need to be successful. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) in their meta-analysis also suggest that there is evidence to support the need for additional personnel to ensure the success of students with learning differences in the mainstream classroom. Teachers shared the need to do a better job of working one-on-one with

students with learning differences. However, when there are upwards of 20 other students in the class who have mastered content, teachers are expected to move the lessons forward. This has the potential to leave students with learning differences behind.

Another resource that can be used to better help teachers meet the needs of students with learning differences is training (Larivee & Cook, 1979). Yet, neither the concept of training in this area, nor the actual training itself was well-received by the teachers. Neither the life experience of the teachers, nor the experience the teachers had with students with learning differences was taken into account making the training ineffective. Downing and Peckham (2007) found this to be true as well.

Analysis of the transcripts also indicated that teachers felt that the trainers did not understand the independent school community and how it works. All schools have individual cultures, and in his work, Coleman (2010) indicated that independent prep schools are sometimes closed cultures and opposed to the new ways of doing things that training suggests. Boerma (2006) explains that is because of the importance placed on the mission statement of the school that underscores how the mission of the school is put into practice. If a trainer does not understand the fundamental values of the school in which they are training teachers, this can make it challenging to understand and meet the particular needs of teachers in that school. In this study, teachers directly discussed the idea of “fit” as it applied to students. The students in this independent school were expected to fit into certain academic criteria. Therefore, the training did not align with the expected student population.

Another finding is that teachers at this school found informal communication with colleagues regarding the needs of students with learning differences to be the most effective way

to prepare to help these students. Again, there is not a lot of data on independent schools in general, particularly in this area. Mulholland (2011) found this to be the case as well.

In this study teachers relied on both personal and professional experiences to better meet the needs of students with learning differences. This work supports the notion that instructional tolerance was increased when teachers have more experience working with students with learning differences. To summarize, teachers with less classroom experience had fewer strategies available to them for teaching students with learning differences as opposed to teachers with more classroom experience who had several successful strategies for working with students with learning differences. This finding is not novel, as research has confirmed that teachers with greater classroom experience are more successful in teaching students with learning differences. As expected, teachers with less classroom experience may struggle to meet these needs (Clotfelder, Ladd & Vigdor, 2005; Gagnon & Mattingly, 2012).

Findings from my study also indicate that instructional tolerance levels were broadened by the personal life experiences of the teachers. In looking to validate these findings, I searched three data bases, ERIC, Google Scholar and Education Data Base from the USF library. Key words included: teacher previous experience/teaching students with learning disabilities (LD), teacher life experience/teaching students with LD, teacher/personal experiences/teaching students with LD. My cursory search yielded no results, which suggests this may be a new area of inquiry.

Based on these findings, one can surmise that in order for teacher training to work with students with learning differences, the training must take into account the specific learning environment of the school as well as the various levels of prior teaching and life experience that the teachers have coming into the training. Just like students, teachers are not all beginning in the

same place when learning. Trainers must take this into account and build it into their lesson plans. This embodies the seminal work of Malcolm Knowles (1978) in what he termed, andragogy.

Q2. Given the institutional culture of independent prep schools, how, if at all, does boundary confusion play a role in teachers' attitudes toward students with learning differences?

According to Gerber (1988), boundary confusion is defined as “that is, where what might be considered regular leaves off and what might be considered special begins” (p. 313). This particular phenomenon showed up in this study under the theme of fit. Teachers shared that they know independent schools have admissions procedures to help identify those characteristics that are typical of successful students in their school. Kohn, (2012) speaks to this in his summary of “whom we admit, what we deny” (p. 90). One of these characteristics teachers pointed to is the academic ability to succeed in an accelerated, rigorous curriculum. Research by Bello (2006) on Catholic schools supports this point. The teachers in my study have a very clear “portrait of a graduate” in mind. Again, tradition dictates certain academic characteristics be present. Teachers expressed concerns that the students with learning differences did not necessarily meet these characteristics. Kohn (2012) goes on to say that selective admissions help to make the school seem more desirable. Students with learning differences typically do not perform well in the selection process. James Moffett has been quoted as saying, “send us winners and we’ll make winners out of them.” That sentiment is prevalent among independent prep schools. However, it is contradicted by the research of Taylor (2005) who found that the rate of acceptance of children with learning differences in independent schools is close to the national average of public schools. In my experience, teachers felt that some students with learning differences need to have

their learning needs met by someone other than the classroom teacher. That moves their needs into the “special” realm as discussed above by Gerber.

Teachers readily admitted that it can be easier, in many ways, to teach students who do not need accommodations. The culture of this independent prep school is demonstrated through the admissions process, the general reputation of the school and the school’s own marketing materials, which do not support the notion of serving students with learning differences.

Teachers hear and see the rhetoric and are torn between meeting the needs of these students or buying into the rhetoric of the traditional norms and expectations of the school.

Teachers like to be in control of as many classroom variables as possible because anyone who has ever taught knows that inevitably something will go wrong. This finding was also seen in the research of McLaughlin and Talbert (2001). That can become even more complex when trying to meet the needs of students with learning differences. When those needs are unable to be met, boundary confusion is not a surprising result. Indeed, boundary confusion is sometimes validated when students are counseled out of the school. This contradiction is the crux of the matter for these teachers. Tradition and elitism promote one idea of the school, whereas reality is different requiring teachers to straddle these dual worlds.

Q3. How do teachers in independent prep schools make meaning of professional development in differentiated instruction in relation to their instructional tolerance boundaries?

Of the six themes, three of them are related to the question above. They are accommodations, community, and training. An overarching finding in the study is that teachers relied upon their personal network of teachers in order to make better decisions when working with students with learning differences. Community was cited by each participant in the study as a way to get answers to their questions. One community that was specifically mentioned was the

Critical Friends groups. Those conversations led to helpful solutions for members. That is supported by “Members’ desires to help solve their colleagues’ problems of practice...” (Curry, 2008, p. 767). Another finding from the data was that teachers no longer felt alone in trying to meet the needs of students with learning differences. They realized they were not unique in that struggle. They want to do right by these children, but are conflicted on the best ways to do it. Talking through situations with other caring educators made solutions easier to find (Curry, 2008).

Outside of the Critical Friends Groups (Curry, 2008), the teachers said casual conversations with other teachers or division meeting discussions were useful in giving teachers ideas on how to help students with learning differences. In this environment, where a majority of the students are known from the age of four, collective teacher wisdom on how to help students is invaluable. As previously mentioned, teachers have personal, long-standing relationships with each other. These relationships, which generally are in place before the student enters the school, until after he or she leaves, makes discussion of how to help these students a natural and dynamic topic.

The answers to these three questions open a window into the essence of the prevailing attitude of teachers regarding working with students with learning differences in this independent school. Silberman (1971) coined four categories into which all students fall. These categories are attachment, concern, indifference and rejection. The students who do not fit into the “portrait of the graduate” would fall into the rejection category and are eventually counseled out of the school. This phenomenon is illustrated by Gerber’s Instructional Tolerance Theory (1988) and, more specifically, becomes an issue of boundary confusion for the teachers. If the students’ needs are unable to be met with specific accommodations and the teachers’ sweat and tears, the



teachers develop negative feelings regarding that students' legitimacy for being at the school. Training, or even discussion regarding meeting the needs of students with learning differences, have not been a focus of the administration of the school in the past. The culture of most independent prep schools is about acceleration and enrichment, rather than accommodations.

### **Implications of Findings for Independent Schools**

Based on this study, there are several implications for how independent schools could better serve students with learning differences. Critical Friends groups have the potential to be a valuable resource in helping teachers to meet the needs of students with learning differences. Currently, discussions about this topic occur on a daily basis in an informal way in the faculty lounge or recess field. However, the conversations are not always focused on outcomes and, at times can take a negative turn. For instance, when teachers make accommodations that are not effective, the result can be that students fall into the rejection category. The results of this study indicate that the introduction of Critical Friends groups would allow a formal protocol to be put into place. That would help to ensure that discussions were consistent and open to all. Critical Friend sessions could allow teachers in independent schools to focus on the needs of their students in a structured and open format. As the Critical Friend Group would be comprised of members of the school community, issues regarding trainers not understanding the culture or respecting the experiences and journeys of the teachers would not be a concern.

Another implication of this research is that improved communication regarding students with learning differences is essential. This begins even before the admissions department gets involved. Parents and referring schools need to share pertinent information regarding a child's learning differences, accommodations and strengths. Failure to share this information causes the

initial process of meeting and evaluating the student to be flawed. This leads directly to the inability of teachers to meet the needs of these students in the classroom.

Data from all of the participants in my study showed that it is of particular significance that the admission department be transparent when students with learning differences are admitted to the school. They must be forthcoming with prior teacher recommendations as well as the school's own admissions testing results. The admissions department must also be more forthright with the parents of students with learning differences. They need to share what the test results showed and advise parents on the best ways to ensure that these students will be ready for the accelerated academic program to which they have been admitted. An open bidirectional communication flow is paramount for all students, and especially those with students with learning differences.

The final implication of my study is that teachers must be included in the dialogue regarding students with learning differences. All of the teachers in the study spoke to this point with great passion. When teachers in this school are aware of the needs of students who are entering their classrooms, they want to do what they can to meet those needs. If they have the information from the prior school, parents and admissions department, that eliminates the fact finding aspect when trying to meet the needs of these students. This can help to empower teachers thereby increasing their autonomy and instructional tolerance.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Overall, there is a paucity of research on independent schools. In my review of the literature, finding research that occurred in, or focused on, independent schools proved difficult. Literature searches in the area of independent schools did not generate many hits. While most research has been done within lower SES and Title I schools, all students, regardless of SES,

deserve evidence-based strategies to overcome learning differences. While independent schools have their own particular cultures, this does not suggest that these students are any less deserving of evidence-based strategies that would be effective in their particular circumstance. Given the structure and culture of independent schools, research on how to empower teachers would be valuable in teaching students with learning differences.

A specific area in which to focus independent school research is how teachers can better meet the needs of students with learning differences. Depending upon the type of independent prep school, there may be some schools that do not consider this to be a part of their school's mission. However, as seen in the data on this particular independent prep school, students with learning differences are a part of the population; even in schools who model themselves after British prep schools. Therefore, it is our moral obligation to meet the needs of these students.

In my experience, many independent prep schools are accepting students who exhibit learning differences. In the past, these students may have been students with "hidden disabilities" (Cook, 2001). These students tend to have learning differences that are not immediately evident. They tend to blend into the current student population. This research concludes that there are students accepted into independent prep schools who do not blend into the typical student profile. Teachers want to know how to meet the needs of these students. They are beginning to accept that even if students do not fit the typical profile, they are responsible for these students and academic success.

Another topic for future study is how teachers' personal life experiences influences their instructional tolerance levels when working with students with learning differences. Work in this area can help teachers be mindful of inherent biases regarding how they approach teaching students with learning differences. As part of this research, an additional facet to explore is how

teachers with learning differences themselves interact and advocate for students with learning differences. It is often said that when a woman has a child it adds something to her teaching. It would be interesting to see if having a learning difference makes a difference in how teachers approach students with learning differences.

A final area to consider in future research is to look into the diversity of both participants and students. This study consisted of only Caucasian teachers in a predominately Caucasian population of students. This demographic is limited in its scope.

## **Conclusion**

This study examined the perspectives of teachers in an independent prep school when working with students with learning differences. Data indicated that there are challenges and when students are not a good fit, this is more evident. Teachers sometimes reach their instructional tolerance threshold and are not successfully able to help students with learning differences. The data also contends that there is a lack of professional development in this particular area. When independent schools consider training, it is important that they take the setting and culture of their particular school into account. Training out of context, no matter how well-intentioned, was not successful at this school.

I do not believe that teachers in independent prep schools value the abilities of students without learning differences over students with learning differences. However, these teachers are more equipped to meet the needs of students without learning differences. This is due to the traditions and expectations of the school. This has become evident from this qualitative study.

Teachers in independent prep schools need to be able to identify, understand and assist in the needs of students with learning differences. Results of this study indicate that teachers are motivated to meet the needs of these students. Yet, tradition and reputation can sometimes

interfere in their ability for this to occur. That is unfortunate. Children in independent prep schools deserve the same opportunities that all children receive in public education. Lack of institutional resources, teacher training, and mutual understanding can affect the ability of students with learning differences to succeed in these situations.

Overall, the students who attend independent prep schools have many of the characteristics that result in students being successful in school, and life. However, some of these students have learning difference and need differentiated learning in order to be successful. When this occurs, the teachers must have the ability to help these children realize that they can contribute. Learning must be able to occur in various situations. Learners come in all shapes and sizes and learning should as well. The data confirms that the themes that were analyzed in the study play into how these teachers interact with, advocate and support students with learning differences. Finally, this study demonstrates that independent prep schools must be proactive and strategize the best ways to help their teachers meet the needs of students with learning differences. It is in the best interests of the children, the teachers, the parents, and ultimately the school itself.

As for my experience, understanding the journeys of these teachers has helped me to gain insight into better ways in which I can help them. It has given me solace in the fact that I am not alone in wanting to help students with learning differences to be successful in this independent school. It has given me hope that changes to a school's culture are possible. And finally, it has given me optimism that students who have learning differences will be able to thrive in the independent school world.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Demographic Information from Participants**

Name:

Age:

Gender:

Your highest level of education:

Grade level you are currently teaching:

The length of time in this grade level:

Other grade levels you have taught:

The current student/teacher ratio in your classroom:

What grades/ages do you prefer to teach?

What grades/ages would you prefer not to teach?

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Question

#### Interview One

1. Tell me about your journey to becoming a teacher.
2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?
  - a. Public school
  - b. Independent school
3. What has made you stay in this field?
4. Have you had any training or coursework on working with students with learning differences?
  - a. If so, please tell me about them.
5. I see that you prefer to teach students in grades xxx. What about that age do you enjoy?
6. I see that you would prefer not to teach students in grade xxx. Will you tell me more about that?
7. How did you chose to work at an independent school?
8. What, if any, assumptions did you have regarding the abilities of the students you would be teaching?
9. What are some words you would use to define yourself as
  - a. Teacher
  - b. Person

#### Interview Two

1. What is your school's mission?
2. What are your admissions procedures?
3. What historical or cultural traditions influence the school's admissions process?
4. What are your school's procedures for counseling out students who are not succeeding academically or behaviorally?
5. Are there students in your classroom with diagnosed learning differences?
  - a. If so, what are their diagnoses?
  - b. What behaviors and/or learning differences do these students demonstrate in the classroom, if any?
6. Are there students in your classroom who appear to have undiagnosed learning differences?
  - a. What behaviors and/or learning differences do these students demonstrate in the classroom, if any?
7. How do you meet the needs of these students?

8. Are your efforts successful?
  - a. Why or why not?
9. Are there resources at your school to assist you?
  - a. If so, what are they?
10. Are there any major obstacles to helping students with learning differences?
11. What are some words to describe how working with students with learning differences makes you feel?
12. Let's talk about what I saw when observing in your classroom (use notes from classroom observation to have participant reconstruct the lesson).

#### Interview 3

1. How do you see yourself working with students with learning differences in the future?
2. How do you interpret the meaning of success in your classroom for students with learning differences?
3. How do you see yourself interacting with administration when planning for students with learning differences?
4. Given how you viewed yourself as a teacher (share what they said in interview one) would you add or change anything?
5. Has your attitude towards teaching students with learning differences changed due to the training? If so, how?
6. Has the teaching culture of the school towards students with learning differences been influenced by the training?

## APPENDIX C

### SRI School Reform Initiative



Quinn's Six Questions  
*Developed by Juli Quinn.*

1. What am I teaching and to whom?
2. Why am I teaching it?
3. How am I teaching it?
4. Why am I teaching it that way?
5. What evidence will I collect to show my kids are getting it?
6. How will my students know they are getting it?

## APPENDIX D

### SACIE scale

**Lisa Lockhart** <lisa18@mail.usf.edu>

Sun, Aug 27, 2017,  
4:11 PM

to tim.loreman

Dear Dr. Loreman,

My name is Lisa Lockhart. I am a doctoral candidate at the University of South Florida. I am currently writing my proposal for my dissertation. The abstract is below. I would like to use your SACIE scale as part of the Critical Friends Component of my research using the Continuum Protocol. I am writing to ask your permission to use this scale to facilitate teacher discussion of this topic. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,  
Lisa Lockhart

There are various types of private schools. This study will focus on what are termed as “British style” (Cooper, 1988 p.19). These select, independent schools have a long and distinguished history in the United States. Many, if not all of these schools, have stringent admissions requirements. However, due to special considerations given to certain demographics ( siblings, children of alumni, etc.) there are times when students are accepted that may not have been a part of the original mission of the school. In addition, sometimes learning and/or social issues do not present in children until after they have been accepted to these schools. Budgetary issues are always a concern in independent schools. Money is raised by tuition dollars and, at times, admissions requirements may be more flexible than others. Due to these circumstances, some students who are admitted to the school do not fit the “mold” of the ideal student. This study aims to investigate, using narratives and an autoethnographic component, the ways in which teachers interact with and address the needs of these students.





**Tim Loreman** <[tim.loreman@concordia.ab.ca](mailto:tim.loreman@concordia.ab.ca)>

Sun, Aug 27, 2017,  
8:36 PM

to me

Dear Lisa,

No problem at all. Please feel free to use it as you wish and good luck with your project.

Best,

Tim

**Tim Loreman**, PhD.

President and Vice-Chancellor

Professor of Education

Phone: [+1 780 479 9356](tel:+17804799356)

Toll-Free: [+1 866 479 5200](tel:+18664795200)



[concordia.ab.ca](http://concordia.ab.ca)



**APPENDIX E**

**The SACIE scale**

**The Sentiments Attitudes and Concerns about Inclusive Education Scale**

**Please circle the response which best applies to you.**

	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
	<b>SA</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>D</b>	<b>SD</b>
It is rewarding when I am able to help people with disabilities.				
I am grateful that I do not have a disability				
I feel comfortable around people with disabilities				
I am afraid to look a person with a disability straight in the face				
Students who have difficulty expressing their thoughts verbally should be in regular classes				
Students who need assistance with personal care should be in regular classes				
Students who are physically aggressive towards others should be in regular classes				
Students who need an individualized academic program should be in regular classes				
Students who require communicative technologies (for example Braille and sign language) should be in regular classes				
Students who are inattentive should be in regular classes.				
With appropriate support all students with disabilities should be in regular classes.				
Students who frequently fail exams should be in regular classes.				
I am concerned that my workload will increase if I have students with disabilities in my class				
I am concerned that there will be inadequate resources/staff available to support inclusion.				
I am concerned that I do not have knowledge and skills required to teach students with disabilities				
I am concerned that it will be difficult to give appropriate attention to all students in an inclusive classroom				
I am concerned that students with disabilities will not be accepted by the rest of the class				
I am concerned that the academic achievement of students without disabilities will be affected				
I am concerned that I will be more stressed if I have students with disabilities in my class				