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Unveiling Characteristics which Contribute to a Heightened Perceived Preparedness and  
Confidence in Interacting with and Teaching Students with Disabilities in Physical  
Education: A Narrative Inquiry

A Thesis Presented

By

NICOLE MALONEY

MAY 2022

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Unveiling Characteristics which Contribute to a Heightened Perceived Preparedness and  
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By

Nicole Maloney

Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies

Bridgewater State University

Bridgewater, Massachusetts

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Science

In Physical Education with an Individualized Concentration

MAY 2022

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## **Abstract**

Students graduating from physical education teacher education (PETE) programs are not being adequately prepared to teach students with disabilities. Their perceived lack of confidence and comfort may be due to lack of disability awareness, hands-on experience, and course content surrounding disabilities and inclusion. Ultimately, students with disabilities' educational experiences may be negatively impacted- in regard to physical, emotional, and social growth—if their PE teacher lacks adequate preparedness. Students are also being placed in inclusion settings at a higher rate, making it even more imperative that teachers are adequately prepared, and students are given guidance from a knowledgeable source. The purpose of this research was to unveil characteristics garnered and honed from my own lived experiences which lead to me having a perceived heightened confidence and comfort working with and teaching students with disabilities. This study used an autobiographical narrative inquiry to explore my lived experiences from my own memories and analyze how they have helped me become the person that I am today. I utilized three autobiographical stories, “Meeting Connor”, “Becoming More Involved in Connor’s Life”, and “Changing Perspectives”, as well as a reflective journal to complete this research.

*Keywords: Preparedness, Inclusion, Ableism, PETE program, Disabilities, PE*

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Through my experience in working as a special education teacher and now adapted physical education teacher, it has come to my attention that many physical education teachers are underprepared to teach students with disabilities in their classes. I aim to explore the experiences I have had in my past, as well as current literature that exists, to determine what characteristics I have that make me feel confident and comfortable working with individuals with disabilities and how those characteristics can be acquired by others.

### **Literature Review**

Physical education (PE) is a discipline that benefits all students, regardless of ability level. McMurray (2003) states that the benefits of PE are essentially the same for students of all abilities. When designed appropriately to include students with disabilities, PE can improve the physical, social, and psychological well-being of all students. Lessons can be designed universally to allow successful participation by all students. If all students can access the curriculum and work together in meaningful ways during class time, they can begin to form bonds and friendships that create a more positive experience for all students. I have seen students without disabilities blossom socially and take leadership roles, students with behavioral challenges step up to become peer models, and students with disabilities learn social skills that have allowed them to make friendships with peers during my physical education classes. With that being said, it took a lot of planning and work to get to a point of seeing success and I failed many times before I succeeded. Appropriate lesson planning from the PE teacher includes individuals of all abilities levels and puts everyone on an equal playing field. This usually entails universal design

and minimizes the challenges or obstacles for students that keep them from participating and socializing with their peers. It is the responsibility of the PE teacher to make changes in curriculum and pedagogy to include all students and help create an environment that is safe and productive (Di Nardo et al., 2014). This allows students to experience potential improvements in their self-esteem, confidence, coordination and physical ability, social skills, leadership, and teamwork (McMurray, 2003). These are skills that will benefit students throughout their lives and help them to be successful. Stigmas and negative attitudes remain towards those with disabilities and what they can do. Some reasons for this could include ineffective inclusion methods, misinformation, false perceptions, lack of social understanding, or lack of exposure and education of persons with disabilities (McMurray, 2003).

Some of the most significant barriers to including students with disabilities in PE, are teachers' attitudes and prior knowledge regarding disabilities (Doulkeridou et al., 2010). Block and Rizzo (1995) found that "physical educators may neither be prepared adequately nor interested in teaching students with disabilities, especially those with more severe disabilities". In recent years, there have been positive changes toward a more open outlook, but there are still many changes that need to take place moving forward. The lack of interest of some educators could in part be due to their own experiences and lack of exposure to individuals with disabilities in the past. In my own experience, I have learned that some PE teachers have been using the same PE lessons and curriculum year after year with little to no modification or adaptation of the lessons. I have come across PE teachers that chose not to change or modify their lesson plans to be accessible and instead told teachers or administration that they did not feel PE was a good fit for



students with more significant disabilities. These teachers had limited or no exposure to students with disabilities previously and their lack of disability awareness created a negative perception of these students. While exposure itself cannot guarantee teachers perceptions and attitudes towards individuals with disabilities will change, it is more likely that they will have a better understanding of disability and hopefully seek further education. Educators with higher perceived teaching competence, more academic preparation, and more experience in teaching are seen as having more favorable attitudes overall, according to Block and Rizzo (1995). Teachers express concern about how they could include students with disabilities into their classes without making significant changes to their current approach (Block & Rizzo, 1995). This claim demonstrates a general lack of disability awareness and professional practice that some teachers are unwilling to make any changes to allow for students to access the curriculum they are entitled to under the law.

Discrimination in favor of people without disabilities is called ableism. Ableism is common in schools and society and is one of the reasons why students with disabilities are often excluded (Storey, 2007). Individuals without disabilities may often be unaware of ableism as they are not affected by disability in their daily lives. Ableism appears in our schools through curriculum, classrooms, policies, the environment, and various other places. One example is prejudice against individuals with disabilities performing activities in ways that may be efficient for them but are different from how people without disabilities might perform them (Hehir, 2002). This could include using Braille to read, using an assistive device or sign language to communicate, or using crutches to walk. Instead of helping these students to find their most proficient patterns of

completing tasks and activities, teachers often attempt to teach them the same way or patterns they use to teach nondisabled students (Hehir, 2002). This is not equal and just education and further excludes individuals with disabilities from participating in education with their peers. Segregating students with disabilities from their peers promotes negative attitudes and preconceived ideas that students with disabilities are not capable of participating in their regularly scheduled PE class (McMurray, 2003). It can be beneficial for PE teachers to find creative ways to weave different motor patterns and communication strategies into class. It helps to normalize various ways of performing certain skills and teaches students without disabilities something new. If teachers model positive attitudes and interactions with all students in class, students may learn that behavior and apply it as well (McMurray, 2003). If students develop negative attitudes toward their peers with disabilities, it can affect those with disabilities for the rest of lives, including the jobs people will give them and what they are allowed to do, despite what they are capable of independently.

The attitudes of a student's peers within the PE setting will affect whether they are accepted, which will follow them into other classes and play a role in their success in those classes (McMurray, 2003). After starting my career as a Special Education teacher, I decided to transition into the role of PE teacher and made it my mission to help my students with disabilities form relationships with their peers and the outcome was better than I expected. I started my year as a PE teacher with no curriculum and was trying to navigate a new environment and subject area. My lessons were not great to start off with and I was overwhelmed by the fact that I had no guidance with a subject I was new to working with in a school setting. When I reflect now, there were so many things I could

have done better, but the one shining achievement I take from that experience is the work I did on relationship building with my students. I spent a lot of time on disability awareness and modeling successful interactions with all students because that was the part of class that I felt confident with. As the students began to understand how to interact with each other and me, I experienced a decrease in disruptive behaviors and friendships started to form in class which made it a little bit clearer to me how to approach my lesson planning. The students from class with disabilities that spent most of their day in a substantially separate setting then began spending more time with their peers in the general education classroom and out at recess, and some even started making plans outside of school. PE teachers can make a difference in students' lives and teach valuable social skills by having a positive attitude and modelling appropriate behaviors for all. Di Nardo and colleagues (2014) found that students with majors in teaching other than PE displayed more positive attitudes about teaching students with disabilities in their classes. This could be due to these majors requiring more education, classes, and field experience surrounding students with disabilities than PE majors (Di Nardo et al., 2014). Combatting negative perceptions of people with disabilities and ableism, including in public school settings, can be done through disability related clubs, professional development opportunities, employing disability literature, role models, and hiring teachers with disabilities (Storey, 2007). By employing a certain set of conditions that cultivate a positive environment, we can begin to change perceptions of those with disabilities to move towards a greater acceptance in the classroom and society.

PE teachers perceived negative attitudes toward teaching students with disabilities suggest that Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) programs are not preparing

teachers for these experiences adequately. Research by Sato and Haegele (2017) shows that an essential component of enhancing PETE student's perceptions and attitudes toward students with disabilities involves providing specialized coursework and practicum experiences. Many PETE programs require only one course relating to adapted PE for the teacher to graduate (Sato & Haegele, 2017). The university that I graduated from falls into that category as well. These are often introductory courses with little to no hands-on experience and a broad overview of what adapted PE looks like. This can provide positive outcomes in a teacher's ability to modify tasks but cannot provide all the information that is helpful in assisting them teach students with disabilities (Sato & Haegele, 2017). This lack of preparation during pre-service experiences "suggest that students will not feel competent and confident to implement inclusive programs at the start of their professional career, which places doubt upon the successfulness of such programs for students with and without disabilities" (Di Nardo et al., 2014). Teachers with more exposure and experience with adapted PE have more favorable attitudes toward teaching students with severe disabilities and demonstrate higher intention of including students with disabilities (Di Nardo et al., 2014). This increase in coursework in adapted PE shows a higher perceived teacher competence (McMurray, 2003).

According to Block and Rizzo (1995), institutions responsible for the professional preparation of teachers have an important role in shaping teacher's attitudes. By providing appropriate preparation through academics and quality teaching experience, institutions can influence the perceived competence and positive attitudes of teachers toward students with disabilities. Teachers should be provided with instruction of the wide range of disabilities they may work with, and lessons in how to modify their current

plans and curriculum appropriately, adapting equipment and rules, or using differentiation strategies in their lessons (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006). By providing teachers with relevant knowledge and experiences before they are licensed and sent out into the field, students will benefit by having an educator who understands them and their specific needs. We will begin to employ PE teachers with disability awareness and the skills to universally design their lessons so they are accessible to any student they may encounter, so they will hopefully no longer turn students away from their classes. Without the background knowledge and disability awareness, we cannot expect teachers to know where to begin or to be able to keep our students with disabilities safe and engaged as active participants in class.

While PETE preparation programs provide the knowledge base and academic experience for future teachers, nothing can compare to real-world experience to feel confident and prepared to teach students with and without disabilities (Layne & Blasingame, 2018). Meegan and MacPhail (2006) found that “opportunities to work with students with severe and profound disabilities can enhance the learning experience for physical education students and provide much needed support to classroom teachers”. Providing future teachers with the experience of working in a classroom setting, and especially one-to-one with students with disabilities, can provide a significant impact in changing teachers attitudes about teaching these students (Meegan & MacPhail, 2006). By allowing PETE students to work hands-on with students of varying ability levels and diagnoses, these students can try out different strategies, observe classroom teachers, and see what students of different ability backgrounds are capable of in their day-to-day lives.

Reading facts in a book or listening in a lecture in university is valuable information, but it does not provide the preparation and retrievable memories that help in the moment when there is a student standing in front of you. According to Sato and Haegele (2017), adapted PE coursework should provide experiences that show students with disabilities daily realities at school, participating in adapted PE at some level, academic and social experiences, and in various environments or school settings. This relates to the dichotomy of theoretic and pragmatic content in PETE programs. Theoretic content is delivered in a classroom during PETE program courses. Students are taught about best practices and how to teach a PE class. These courses are useful because they explain best practices that are based on research, teach relevant vocabulary, and teach policies and practices as well as how to follow them. The limitation of theoretic content is the lack of real-life experience that comes along with it. This is where pragmatic content comes into play. Pragmatic content is the practice of teaching students in classroom and applying knowledge. It provides valuable classroom experiences to new teachers where they can try out strategies and learn from cooperating teachers. The limitation of pragmatic content is that there is not always a teacher or professor present to point out places for improvement and why certain instructional practices may or may not work as well as others in situations as they arise. Theoretic and pragmatic content complement each other in this way, and both play important roles in preparing future teachers. By introducing opportunities for PETE students to see what students with disabilities are capable of, the stigma and attitudes surrounding inclusion and inclusive opportunities can begin to change. Another benefit of hands-on teaching experiences is that cooperating teachers are present modelling appropriate behaviors and demonstrating specialized

expertise on teaching students in each environment (Sato & Haegele, 2017). Observation is a vital tool to learn new strategies and pick up tips from people that are experienced and successful.

The challenge in providing more hands-on experience to pre-service teachers is fitting additional courses or requirements into student's packed degree programs (Layne & Blasingame, 2018). The university that I attended, Bridgewater State University, is known for its teacher preparation programs and offers a bachelor's degree program in PE that consists of between 28-32 credits in PE related content. Of those 30 or so credits, only 3 credits are required that relate to teaching students with disabilities. Through my teacher training program, I have noticed many opportunities where adapted PE concepts could be woven into the course material to provide additional information about inclusion to students. Through this realization it seems logical to me that inclusive and adapted PE practices could be fit into an already packed PETE program course load by embedding the content into all the courses that are already required. If the goal is to include students with disabilities and make it common practice for them to be in PE with their peers, then all the material being taught in college courses should be relevant and pertain to individuals with disabilities as well. By not teaching courses that include information on all different types of students, institutions perpetuate ableism through the curriculum they teach future educators (Beratan, 2006). Future educators then take the knowledge they have learned in their higher education institutions and apply it to their classes when they begin their careers further perpetuating the ableism that is already built into the education system. There is no expectation from these institutions or the government policies that are

in place to combat the ableism that is present, as there is often a lack of people with disabilities that are helping to create the policies (Beratan, 2006).

Due to a lack of content knowledge surrounding all types of students, teachers with limited experience with students with disabilities may not have the pedagogical knowledge to teach these students or the social skills to interact with them. This can become a safety risk for students with disabilities if teachers do not know the health considerations that may be present with their disability, such as a student with Down Syndrome being overly flexible and accidentally dislocating a hip during class. When professors do offer strategies or content surrounding teaching students with special needs in their courses, that content may center around certain types of disabilities and not paint a full picture of the various types of learners that are present in a classroom, both with and without disabilities. There are students without disabilities that may benefit from accommodations and students with disabilities that may not need any. Research shows that pre-service teachers possess a lack of confidence working with students with severe or profound disabilities and desire more hands-on experience (Layne & Blasingame, 2018). This practical experience will positively affect the attitudes, confidence, and preparedness of future teachers to work with students of all ability levels (Layne & Blasingame, 2018). By providing PETE students the opportunity to witness and experience what the day looks like for students with disabilities and how they can fit into PE class with their peers, we can promote a positive change. The more education and inclusive opportunities that are provided, the sooner we can begin to try to minimize ableism and disability discrimination from our schools and in turn, our society.



Inclusion in PE has become more common practice in recent years. During the last 25 years, larger numbers of school districts have begun to implement inclusion programs for students with disabilities (Di Nardo et al., 2014). This change can largely be attributed to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) condition that was brought about within the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in the 70s (Grenier, 2006). This push for inclusive education aimed to dismiss previous constructions that students with disabilities were unable to reap the benefits of good education due to their limited intelligence (Grenier, 2006). Inclusive education provides equal and just education opportunities for all, including in PE classes. PE and participation in sport can provide a vital opportunity for inclusion and socialization opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities. These socialization opportunities help to reduce the stigma and misconceptions about those with disabilities and create relationships with their peers that extend outside of the PE classroom. According to McMurray (2003), these misconceptions of people with disabilities “can be negative influences on employment, acceptance within societal structures, acceptance within educational settings, acceptance within sporting structures, as well as the general well-being of persons with disabilities”. When people do not understand something, they tend to avoid it. If they have never had experience with individuals with disabilities and have preconceived biases, they are not going to provide them with the same opportunities in school, in athletics, with a career, or generally in public places in the same way they would for people without disabilities.

Inclusion provides more motivating and stimulating environments for students with disabilities. By including them with their peers, we can reinforce that they are part of the class, provide more skillful role models for them, and allow them to participate in

age-appropriate activities (Di Nardo et al., 2014). Students can begin to identify friendships from their interactions during class time, which can become supports for them throughout their lives (Di Nardo et al., 2014). These interactions and friendships allow our students of all ability levels to live successful lives and experience the benefits of having close relationships that all people desire. By keeping students in substantially separate classrooms throughout their entire day, educators remove the opportunities to learn how to socialize naturally. Substantially separate classrooms are beneficial in many ways, but peer interaction is often limited so PE can be an integral part of the day for social opportunities. Friendships teach students what is appropriate in society and can build on skills necessary for them to be successful down the line. Students with disabilities can benefit from social supports in the same way students without disabilities do, so they should be provided as often as possible. If students are brought up interacting with a wide range of peers, society will begin to promote positive attitudes toward inclusion and inclusive settings and have a positive impact on the opportunities given to students with disabilities in the future (McMurray, 2003). According to research by Di Nardo and colleagues (2014), “attitudes toward people with disabilities are changing in a positive direction over the last few decades”. This is a positive sign that by changing teacher’s attitudes, increasing disability awareness for all from a younger age or through college education courses, and providing more opportunities for working with students with disabilities in real life, we can continue to shift into a more inclusive environment and society. We can begin to achieve this by reflecting on what characteristics and supports need to be in place to help teachers, and society, feel more competent and comfortable interacting with individuals with disabilities. For me, determination,

patience, observation, and confidence are especially important, and I have gained these attributes through my personal experiences starting as a young child. My family structure growing up, contact with individuals with disabilities at defining moments in my life, and collaboration with a variety of individuals are just some of the pieces of the puzzle that have brought me to where I am today and that I continue to explore.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this research was to unveil characteristics garnered and honed from my own lived experiences which led to me having a perceived heightened confidence and comfort level working with and teaching students with disabilities in physical education. Specifically, the research puzzle I intend to piece together throughout my narrative inquiry are identifying the beneficial attributes and experiences I have had that make me have a perceived higher comfortability and confidence teaching and interacting with students with disabilities and how these attributes can be taught to others to contribute to reducing the stigma surrounding disability.

### **Rationale**

The contemporary knowledge base surrounding PETE graduates perceived preparedness to teach students with disabilities, outlines that students feel unprepared. The knowledge base also shows an increase in students being placed in inclusion settings at younger ages in public schools. I perceive myself as having high confidence and preparation to teach students with disabilities and this research aims to discover why I feel this way while others do not. I will do this by exploring how I have lived in personal, social, and professional contexts through past experiences that I have had that helped to prepare me.

## **Goal**

The goal of this research is two-fold: (1) The intellectual goal of this research was to determine certain character traits and attributes that have contributed to my heightened sense of competence and confidence to interact with and teach individuals with disabilities, as well as identify more effective inclusion methods for young students in school; (2) The practical goal of this research is to inform PETE programs of attributes or experiences to hone in on in order to help increase the prevalence of graduating PE teachers who feel more confident and prepared to teach, motivate, engage, and interact with students of all abilities in PE. This research can provide insight on areas of focus for improving curriculum and hands on experiences for PETE programs and early elementary classrooms to begin to break down barriers surrounding disability to create equal and accessible education for all students.

## Chapter 2: Methodology

### Narrative Beginnings

Positionality is the practice of a researcher outlining their attributes or position that could have influence over aspects of the study. A researcher's position may be affected by attributes like race or gender, their life history, and past experiences. I am a 28-year-old white female that went to a diverse elementary school in Dedham, Massachusetts right outside of the city. I grew up with two younger brothers and think of myself as outgoing and caring, always wanting to help my brothers with everything. My mother started volunteering at my school when I was young, and eventually accepted a position working with special education students in my school. She constantly told me stories and shared strategies she had picked up working at the school.

When I had entered kindergarten, I was placed in an inclusion classroom as a “peer model” with students with various disabilities and extra teaching staff for support. I was naturally drawn to the students with disabilities and was placed the inclusion class for first and second grade following this experience and was a “big buddy” to a first grader with a disability when I entered fourth grade. While this was an important experience for me in developing friendships with individuals with disabilities at a young age, I do also believe that I had experiences that shaped my views both positively and negatively. Just as anyone else, I have biases surrounding disability that I have been working to change as an adult, though they may be different than those that someone who did not have experiences with individuals with disabilities.

In fifth grade, my family moved to Foxborough, MA and for the rest of my schooling I attended a predominantly white school with limited inclusive opportunities. I

sought out opportunities to interact with students in my school with disabilities through mentoring programs and joined Best Buddies at my high school. Although I am not diagnosed with a disability, I feel a sense of responsibility to bring light to the positive impact that inclusive opportunities can have for students with and without disabilities as it has impacted my life in a different way than many others without this experience. I have worked with families of children and adults with disabilities both in and outside of school and have heard from them firsthand how important these opportunities are and what they mean to the families. After learning about disability from a parent perspective in my teenage years and then transitioning into a teacher role as an adult, I feel that I must do all I can to help make a change for the better.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

Narrative inquiry is a method of study of the human experience that aims to provide insight and a deeper understanding of a topic through the study of stories of real-life experiences. Narrative inquiry is based in John Dewey's philosophy of education being life and life being experience. According to Dewey, experience consists of the principles of continuity and interaction (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The principle of interaction refers to both personal and social conditions by looking at the individual, but also the social context in relation to the individual (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Dewey's philosophy was not only concerned with life as it is experienced here and now, but as it is experienced on a continuum as part of the notion of continuity (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Our own lives are embedded within a larger narrative that will change over time because experiences have a past, a present as it appears to us now, and an implied future that we must reflect on which creates the notion of temporality (Clandinin

& Connelly, 2000). I look at events and experiences I have had differently today than I did in the past and may reflect on them differently in the future as both myself and the world changes in the future. By describing and analyzing these narratives, researchers can apply the findings to either attempt to recreate these experiences for others by showing how the narrative inquirer came to a new way of understanding or help others to avoid these experiences altogether.

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) set out to explain John Dewey's theory of experience by focusing on his notions of continuity, interaction, situation. All three are criterion of experience and form a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The first dimension consists of the *temporality* of the past, present, and future which deals with continuity. The second dimension is the personal and social that goes along with the *sociality* of interaction. The third dimension is situation or *place* (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). All three of these dimensions make up inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) dive further into continuity, interaction, and situation by focusing on the four directions of inquiry that include inward, outward, backward, and forward. Inward refers to the internal conditions of the individual, while outward is the external conditions of the environment. Backward and forward refer to temporality which means the past, present, and future (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These directions allow a researcher to assess experience on a deeper level and apply it to behaviors or decisions that may occur in the future.

Narrative inquiry is often used in educational research as a means of learning from understanding the lived experiences of others. In this study, Connelly and Clandinin's (1999) four stories were used as a conceptual framework. This approach

consisted of organizing field texts into secret, sacred, cover, and counter stories. For this proposed research: Secret stories—are stories of my lived experiences leading into becoming an APE teacher and are told in safe private places to a select few (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999); Sacred stories—are stories underpinned by theory and best practice, which for me is predominately informed by a social model of inclusion in PE (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999); Cover stories—are stories told in a less private forum and often highlight successes and filter away follies, a more romanticize retelling of secret stories (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999); finally, Counter stories—are stories which contrast my own secret and sacred stories and provide broader perspective on these stories (Huber et al., 2013).

### **Data Collection**

This research venture relied on field texts as data. Field texts are data sources which are collected throughout the narrative inquiry and can take many forms (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For my research, field texts were comprised of autobiographical stories and a reflective journal. These field texts transitioned into research texts through the process of interim texts. Interim texts are texts that are situated between field texts and research texts. They vary based on the inquirer and are the beginning step of re-reading and analyzing field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Interim texts may be written at different times throughout the research process, may take different forms, and may serve different purposes. Research texts are an interpretation of experience by the researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Autobiographical stories are a way to write about life experiences. They provide important snapshots of the researcher's life that set the context for future events or



experiences. It is important to note that autobiographical stories are told from the researcher's own perspective and their reconstruction of events may not be the same as someone else's (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As I wrote my autobiographical stories, I wrote, reflected on, and re-wrote my narratives many times. Part of *temporality* in narrative inquiry is that the present is constantly changing based on the past and future which affects how we view experience. A reflective journal was also kept throughout the entire process to explore the *sociality* of my thoughts, profound moments, inaccurate or distorted memories, and feelings while reading my own stories.

### **Ethical Consideration**

I received confirmation from the institutional ethics review board at Bridgewater State University that ethics approval was not needed for this research as no human participants were used. In order to be mindful of the privacy and anonymity of individuals included in my stories, all names are pseudonyms and years and ages of individuals in my stories, including myself, have also be altered.

### **Quality Criteria**

When writing narratives, we recall lived experiences from the past. These recollections do not detail experiences exactly as they happened, but as we perceived and remembered them. In this inquiry, I recall lived experiences from years ago which makes it important to consider issues surrounding trustworthiness of my data. I attempted to write my narratives in my field texts exactly as I recalled them and reflected on details in my reflective journal in order to try and minimize the effect of imagination on my narratives as much as possible. I also considered the following twelve criteria for narrative inquiry (Clandinin, 2013; Clandinin & Caine, 2012):

- Relational Responsibilities (considered the way in which my inquiry will be viewed by society and the how it will affect the lives of elementary students and PETE program students)
- In the midst (continually acknowledged the way my inquiry transforms within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space)
- Negotiation of relationships (took ethical aspects into consideration with individuals in my lived stories)
- Narrative beginnings (personally justified my research by bringing forth my own experiences and reflections)
- Negotiating entry into the field (Considered the ways that I could protect the privacy and identities of the individual's I refer to in my stories through the use of pseudonyms and changing of dates and years)
- Moving from field to field texts (Constantly referred back to my research puzzle while writing back in forth in my three-dimensional narrative inquiry space)
- Moving from field texts to interim and final research texts (Wove my narratives, research, and reflections together to convey my experience)
- Representing narratives of experience in ways that show temporality, sociality, and place (Included personal and social meanings, time, and place were in my data)
- Relational response communities (was in frequent communication and collaboration with my advising professor for guidance and perspective)
- Justifications-personal, practical, social (Provided consideration to how this study could contribute to future research and inclusion practices)

- Attentive to multiple audiences (provided entry points to my experiences through storied representation)
- Commitment to understanding lives in motion (continually reflected on my personal growth throughout the inquiry)

### **Chapter 3: Meeting Connor**

From a young age, I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher. At school, I was quick to be the teacher's assistant when the opportunity arose, and I loved to help people. I was also a major rule-follower and rarely strayed from what I was told was the right thing to do or the right way to act. I spent a lot of my childhood playing "school" and other made-up games with my younger brothers in our basement, and I was always the teacher. My mother worked in the school system and would come home and talk about her day and what happened in the classroom she worked in. I listened to her stories attentively, always learning new strategies and reasoning for solving problems and incorporated them into my made-up games with my brothers. They were multiple years younger than I was and essentially did whatever I told them because it was easier for them to comply than to engage in one of my passionate arguments that they had no hope of winning.

Due to my affinity for taking care of the other students as if I was in charge and following the rules I was given, I was placed in inclusion classes as a peer model in elementary school. My personality traits including my love for chattering away to anyone who would listen and following directions to a tee, made me a prime candidate to be a peer model. The purpose of a peer model is to provide positive social interactions and language, demonstrate play skills, and model expected classroom behavior and routines. Thinking about my childhood self, I was made for this role, and I wholeheartedly embraced it. I loved figuring out how to engage with my classmates that had trouble socializing with others and seeing them succeed.

When I entered high school, I was confident that I wanted to teach and going into the field of special education was my passion. There were times where I briefly thought about pursuing graphic design as I enjoyed creating new things, but it did not give me the excitement or comfort that I felt from forming a connection with another individual and being someone they could rely on and trust. This feeling has not waned throughout the years and led me to my current teaching career. After a short time in high school, I had started thinking about my college applications and participating in as many clubs and activities that would help me gain experience and get accepted to college. I knew that I needed some community service hours, so I signed up to volunteer at my town's summer camp taking place at one of the elementary schools.

An overarching theme in my life is that when I attempt something new, the anticipation of the new activity makes me sick to my stomach. I have never been able to control it and it happens with even the smallest of changes. This was especially true when I entered the elementary school on my way to what would be my first experience working in a classroom. I entered the building the first day and was greeted by the director who was giving out assignments to all the high school volunteers. My stomach was in knots, and I felt sick as I was told that I was assigned to a classroom with early elementary school students. I walked what felt like a never-ending hallway to a cluster of classrooms. The tiny students had just arrived and were all in the hallway hanging up their bags before entering a classroom on the left and getting situated on the rug. One of my biggest fears standing in that hallway was that I was going to enter this classroom and leave absolutely *hating* the idea of being a teacher. I got myself together and walked through the doorway into the classroom and the teacher turned around and quickly greeted me.

She said she was just about to start the morning routine, but I was only half listening to her. Over her shoulder, all I could see was a small boy full of energy, running and bouncing from one end of the classroom to the other and making loud vocalizations. The other students were all situated on the rug and one of the teacher's assistants went over to try and redirect the energetic boy. The teacher had started to go over the classroom routine with me, but I could not keep my focus and was not retaining what she said as I glanced at this boy repeatedly. The teacher's assistant seemed overwhelmed, uncomfortable, and confused, like she did not understand what she should be doing to help this child. At this point, the teacher seemed to notice my lack of attention and acknowledged the student running back and forth across the room. She said his name was Connor and she had just met him earlier in the week. The teacher casually said she was still figuring out the best ways to help him interact with the group, but that he was fine to do his own thing while she started the lesson with the other students. While it was a more relaxed summer camp and not the same as the typical school year, this seemed unsettling to me that the teachers did not have a plan and that this child was not going to participate with his peers in the classroom activity. The teacher had an air of annoyance about her toward the whole situation and continued with her scheduled morning routine of calendar and greetings while I stood at the back of the rug watching the teacher's assistant follow Connor around the room in a panic, shutting doors and moving objects as he roamed.

I was a bit mortified as a newcomer to the classroom and had thoughts racing through my head about whether this was okay and how to approach my involvement in the classroom. After the morning rug routine was done, the students started to participate in stations set up around the room. I asked the teacher while she had a moment if there

was anything I could do to help Connor or provide support. She raised her eyebrows as if she was confused why I would even offer help and said, “no he will be fine, why don’t you go sit with those girls over there”. This response made me disappointed as it seemed as though I wouldn’t be able to work with Connor at all during my time in the classroom and was a little peeved by the tone of the teacher’s voice and facial expressions. They conveyed a condescending attitude as if I was silly to offer help since I was a high school student.

Throughout the day, I was assigned to do various, monotonous tasks in the classroom and started to form relationships with some of the students. I did my best to connect with students by finding out their interests and learning about them throughout the week. This helped me to bond with the kids and win their trust because I expressed interest in what they liked and made them more comfortable with me. It also helped that to them I was a “big girl” (also known as a teenager) and they thought I was cool because I was from the high school. During this time, the teacher kept Connor with the teacher’s assistant so I had limited interaction with him, but I was so drawn to him and wanted to see him engage with the students that I was spending all my time with. Whenever I had a free moment, I made sure I was at his table or in his general area so that he would start to become more familiar with me. I spent most of the first week with a small handful of the girls who I had made connections with and wanted to sit at the table with me and do their work, as well as play out at recess. They either made up their own games or had me chase them around the playground.

One afternoon at the end of the week, I was sitting at a table in the classroom with two little girls and Connor was supposed to sit at our table for a coloring activity. Each

student had a paper already laid out at their seat and there was a bucket of markers and crayons in the middle of the table that the children were all sharing from. The teacher's assistant brought Connor over to the table and he sat down, rocking back and forth while giggling to himself. He picked up the paper and threw it on the floor and the teacher's assistant sighed and retrieved it while attempting to redirect Connor that the paper stayed on the table. I said to one of the little girls, "why don't you show Connor how we are coloring our pictures!". Without a second thought, the girl scooted her chair over next to him and said, "Connor look! Do it like this!". She continued coloring glancing at Connor a few times to see if he was watching. He did not respond at first, but the little girl continued talking to him while remaining focused on her coloring. She prompted him again to color and gave her marker to him. Connor took the marker but continued laughing and making loud vocalizations. The little girl grabbed a new marker for herself and colored a small area of his paper saying, "Connor look, color it like this!". For a brief moment, Connor was quiet watching the girl. He started to giggle again after a few moments and then he colored on his paper, copying the little girl. To say I was thrilled would be an understatement. This was the first moment all week that I had seen Connor engage in any activity or with any peer at all without physical prompting. We all praised Connor and the little girl continued to color and chatter away to all the kids at the table. I sat there feeling overjoyed and found myself looking around to see if the other teachers realized what had just happened. While it was a tiny moment of engagement for most, this was a huge victory in my eyes! I was annoyed that the other teachers did not have any reaction or understand that this was a victory, but it was so motivating for me that I continued for the rest of my time at the school that summer to strengthen my bonds with



Connor's classmates. I personally did not feel totally confident interacting with Connor at the time, mostly because the teacher did not seem to want me to work with him. She avoided placing him in my group for activities or seating him at a table if I was already sitting there. However, I felt that if I could use my bonds with the other students in the class to direct them in interacting with Connor maybe he would start to understand the routine and be able to participate in class more successfully. I was impressed with many of the other students and how they were able to engage with Connor when he seemed like he was not paying attention. They never questioned him and showed patience in their communication with him. It was refreshing but also frustrating that the adults in the room did not have the same ability to understand. Throughout the rest of the summer, I was able to engage Connor in small moments of play through his peers on the playground and during more unstructured activities. Seeing his success lit a fire in me that only made me want to continue down this path in the future.

### **Reflection on Narrative**

My experiences as a child with my brothers shaped my outlook and approach toward teaching in many ways and was the first place that I learned to use patience and observe others to determine how to approach situations based on behavior. My brothers can be stubborn, and it took a long time for me as a child to determine the most appropriate ways to engage them in positive interactions continuously. I felt that I was a caregiver as their older sister and took charge whether they wanted me to or not but determined strategies over time that worked to help them. This made me reflect on birth order and whether being the firstborn in my family played a role in my personality

development and path to becoming a teacher, so I chose to review the current literature to see what I could find.

I also think it is important to take a deeper look at the role of peer tutoring and how it can affect students with disabilities. In my experience with Connor, it has typically been positive as I have been able to guide students and provide clarifying information to help Connor and his peers engage more independently over time. However, I have also witnessed a shift in the power dynamic with other students in the past that has been negative, so there must also be factors that influence whether the experience is positive or negative that I chose to further investigate.

### ***Hierarchy of Siblings***

There are conflicting theories surrounding birth order, the hierarchy of siblings, and personality development in relation to these two concepts. Theories from Adler and Sulloway (1999) outline various positions a child can be born into as part of a family and how those positions affect the personality and character traits each child will have (Hertler & Walla, 2017; Shulman & Mosak, 1977). My family consists of a first-born (me), middle-born, and last-born child. Sulloway's theory says that sibling personality variation is due to competition siblings have for resources from their parents (Hertler & Walla, 2017). He believes that personalities vary among siblings to extract the most resources possible from the parents (Hertler & Walla, 2017). Adler on the other hand felt that the environment and psychological situation a child is born into is important and that birth order is influential, but not a determinant of personality (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Adler also found that larger differences in age between siblings affected the amount of competition between them (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). In my case as the first-born, there

is a two-year age gap between me and my brother who is the middle-born and a five-year age gap between me and my brother who is the last-born. I do find that I have had less in common and less conflict with the last-born as we have typically always been at different phases in our lives up to this point. Mosak expanded on Adler's theory saying that a second child in a family of three children's birth position is very different from a second child in a family of eight children (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). The second child in a family of eight is considered closer to a first-born. Children born later in the birth order in large families may also have difficulty developing a position or role for themselves according to Mosak, but some roles may also be available to more than one sibling (Shulman & Mosak, 1977, Stewart et al., 2001). Adler and Sulloway also failed to fully recognize the psychological position of the child in the family, taking into consideration alternative family dynamics such as divorce or remarriage (Shulman & Mosak, 1977). My family dynamic and upbringing as a child does seem to fall into the category Adler and Sulloway focus on, having parents that were married and three children.

Birth order theories see siblings as rivals that compete for resources including attention, time, and instruction from their parents (Hertler & Walla, 2017; Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Sulloway viewed sibling rivalry as one of the ultimate causes of personality development (Hertler & Walla, 2017). Each child in a family plays a different role in the family setting in his theory and this system of picking a niche is what causes each sibling to have varying characteristics (Kawamoto, 2021). Across birth order and sibling hierarchy theories, views regarding first born children are the most consistent. I related greatly to most of the theories surrounding firstborns. Firstborns are seen to play the role of a surrogate parent in many cases (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012; Hertler &

Walla, 2017; Kawamoto, 2021; Stewart et al., 2001). I constantly wanted to help take care of my brothers, treating them like babies and toting them around with me. My mother always jokes that I was a great helper, but often took it to the extreme, contributing my brother's unwillingness to take initiative on his own. The firstborn role develops personality traits such as a sense of responsibility, rule-following, obedience, an outgoing nature, and can be seen as leaders respecting power and the laws (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012; Hertler & Walla, 2017; Kawamoto, 2021; Shulman & Mosak, 1977). I was always afraid to break the rules and was overly obedient. I made up my own games that I convinced others to participate in and used the power that I had to make my brothers engage with me regardless of their interest level. Firstborns are seen as gravitating toward family roles that provide authority or leadership with order and structure (Stewart et al., 2001). Due to firstborn children being only children for a time, they can be objects of high expectations from parents which can be a contributing factor to firstborns seeking power (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012). In interactions with their younger brothers and sisters, older siblings have the authoritative advantage developmentally which allows them to control interactions, which can be both beneficial and detrimental to both siblings engaging in the interaction (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012). While my brothers often did not want to play the games I created or follow my direction, I was often able to manipulate the situation in my favor. I learned how to be both a caregiver and a leader interacting with my brothers which carried with me into my older years. My brothers also benefitted from the social interactions, learning to share, follow directions, and use their imaginations. In many cases, older siblings are more aware of their younger sibling's competence. They may have better approaches and greater

experience teaching their siblings because of the amount of time they spend together (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012). Theories are far more inconsistent when it comes to later-born children. They can be broken into different categories such as middle-born, last-born etc. Overall, theories seem to state that later-born children are less likely to obey rules, take more risks, and be more open-minded than first-borns (Hertler & Walla, 2017; Kawamoto, 2021). They are also seen as far more agreeable and likely to follow another's lead, serving in the role of learner while older siblings are supervisors (Eckstein & Kaufman, 2012; Shulman & Mosak, 1977). Due to my strong personality traits and the authoritative role I took, I was being seen as the "responsible one" and my brothers grew up taking my direction, often without complaint. Later-born children can be more sensitive to unfairness or feel disadvantaged compared to their older siblings, which can result in them being spoiled or assuming a role of helplessness (Shulman & Mosak, 1977; Stewart et al., 2001). My middle-born brother learned to walk later than most other children which my mother attributed to me carrying him around like a doll for the first year and half of his life. My youngest brother also expected everything to be done for him for a long time. He had a learned helplessness because, instead of letting him learn on his own, I would do tasks for him.

Results of one more recent research studies implied that birth order may have little or no effect on personality trait development (Hertler & Walla, 2017). About half of personality variation could be due to genetics with little variance being attributed to the shared environment (Hertler & Walla, 2017). My personality as a child mimicked how my mother was as an adult. People constantly joked about how similar we were, including our mannerisms and voice. This could be due partly to genetics and partly to

the environment I grew up in. However, another study implied that family dynamics could shape our behaviors, thoughts, and values during childhood (Kawamoto, 2021). Regardless, siblings within the same house can experience the same situations differently. How I experienced an event standing next to my younger brother could be completely different than how he experienced that event, based on how we interpreted it and our developmental understanding of what was happening at that time (Dilthey, 1961). From this perspective, a single event can have multiple realities based on the individuals past experiences, identity, developmental age, and a variety of other factors that influence how they view and understand the world (Dilthey, 1961). These gene-environment interactions could produce the observed personality variation among siblings (Stewart et al., 2001). The atmosphere and environment of the family changes with the addition of each new child which can influence the character of the child depending on the situation into which they are born and how they interpret it (Stewart et al., 2001). My personality traits fit into Sulloway and Adler's ideas of first-borns, but also mimic the genetics of my mother, who is the last-born in her family. Regardless, my genetics and environment have affected my disposition and how I perceive and interact with those around me.

### ***Peer Tutoring in Early Elementary School***

Inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classroom settings has become common throughout the last two decades with a major push for all students to be in classes together regardless of ability level (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Haegele, 2019). Connor was included in a class of about fifteen of his same-age peers and provided with one-to-one teacher support. This push for inclusion is especially true in specialty subject areas such as PE, art, and music classes as well as recreation time such

as recess (Haegele, 2019). While Connor did much of his work in a quiet space with a teacher's aide, he sat with the group or was placed with other students during leisure time, art activities, snack/lunch, and recess. The school viewed this as inclusion by putting Connor with his peers, however he was merely integrated into the classroom environment. The teacher was seemingly unprepared to teach Connor and help him be a participating member of the classroom community which, in effect, kept him from being included. Inclusion can be an especially beneficial experience for all students when it is planned and implemented to be accessible for all learners (Block & Zeman, 1996). As a current PE teacher, anecdotally I see PE class can be a great place to start with opportunities for inclusion as it provides natural opportunities for social interaction and room for exploration and creativity, while still maintaining a structured environment (Haegele, 2019). At summer school, I was able to lead games out at recess that helped provide more structure and Connor was able to access that time with his peers to have natural interactions. Instead of merely placing him in a room with his peers and calling it inclusion, I was able to be a bridge that allowed him the ability to socialize with his peers and participate effectively in the classroom community.

When teachers lack the experience and adequate preparation to be able to provide social experiences and engagement for students it can lead to negative outcomes. Inexperienced teachers may attempt to find ways to fit students with disabilities into their existing class structure instead of restructuring their classes in a way that meets the needs of all students (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007). Connor's teacher was seemingly unprepared to include him in her summer school routines which resulted in him being left out of most, if not all, class activities. This did not seem to be purposeful, but her

pedagogic decisions and lack of knowledge in this area inadvertently excluded Connor from being part of the class. There was little to no push to get him to interact with others or be an active participant with his peers. Teacher's that are unprepared in this regard typically have goals and objectives during class time either are not relevant for students with disabilities or are generally unclear (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). In Connor's case, there seemed to be no goals for him at all and he was left on the sidelines looking in. This existing structure is problematic and does not afford students with disabilities the opportunity to engage in motor activities or social opportunities successfully, which they need more opportunities for (Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). However, inclusion can be a positive experience when the teacher creates opportunities for all students to engage with the curriculum effectively. The more that Connor's peers approached him and attempted to get him to engage, the more he was able to access the classroom activities.

Peers can be used as natural supports in the classroom, including the gymnasium, because it is more motivating for our students to interact with their peers than with adults. There is a benefit of forming a friendship which we all crave as individuals and is more developmentally appropriate than interacting with adults. Inclusive educational settings can provide students with opportunities to improve or develop social skills, participate in activities with their age-appropriate peers, develop healthy habits, and begin to develop friendships in a motivating environment (Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). Connor was unphased by the adults around him constantly prompting and cueing him, but once he received attention from a peer including him in the activity, he was curious and motivated to follow her lead. I was able to act as the bridge to connect two non-socializing students to take an instance of integration and turn it into an inclusive opportunity. It is important



for adults to model and prompt these types of interactions to make them part of the norm in the classroom. After doing this a few times and giving a general explanation of how to get Connor's attention, the little girl was able to start doing this on her own and forming her own bond with Connor. Many students with disabilities lack adequate support in inclusive settings, especially in PE where the environment changes often (Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). PE can be used as an opportunity to employ inclusion as it typically provides increased opportunities for peer interactions, though the active nature of the changing environment can also increase the challenge of employing inclusion effectively (Klavina & Block, 2008). One way to facilitate inclusion in PE class is by utilizing trained support staff or peer tutors (Block & Zeman, 1996).

According to the knowledge base, peer tutors, when utilized effectively, can be a great resource for PE teachers to use as a means of support for instruction (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000; Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). Peer tutoring provides natural contexts for peer behaviors and social interactions which is one of the main goals of inclusion (Klavina & Block, 2008). Although we did not have PE at summer school, we were able to play structured games at recess in a similar fashion to a PE setting. After taking the time to form rapport with some of the students, I was able to provide instructions and cueing for a few of them during our games on how to get Connor to participate (Lieberman et al., 2008). I could act as the bridge connecting the gap between the students during leisure time. Although this was not formal training, it was enough to increase Connor's participation in group activities through increased socialization. Support from peers provides more natural opportunities for interactions between students while also providing teaching instruction. Connor might not have

followed my lead or instruction on the rules or how to perform a skill, but his peers were able to get him to copy them to an extent. Students with disabilities often spend excessive amounts of time with adults throughout their day to get the support they need (Klavina & Block, 2008). This creates a separation between the student with a disability and their classmates, as well as a dependence on adult support (Klavina & Block, 2008). Connor was constantly being pulled to a separate area to do his work during the day one-to-one with a teacher. Although this may have been his least restrictive environment, it still yielded no potential to socialize with same-age peers. He was dependent on the teacher's assistant to do many tasks he should have been able to do on his own and had begun to demonstrate a learned helplessness. Learned helplessness occurs when an individual is unable to make a connection between responses and outcomes (Greer & Wethered, 1984). They begin to expect that outcomes are out of their control and results in a lack of effort or persistence, so individuals become passive, letting others do everything for them (Greer & Wethered, 1984). According to Gacek et al. (2017), learned helplessness is often linked to psychological characteristics of individuals with intellectual disabilities.

Peer tutoring helps to generalize interactions between students with and without disabilities (Klavina & Block, 2008). Effective peer tutoring occurs when peer tutors receive training, ideally from an individual possessing knowledge or experience working with diverse populations. Peer tutors should be taught how to instruct other students by presenting them with cues, reinforcement, and breaking skills down for understanding (Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). Trained tutors increase motor performance and create positive outcomes using these skills (Houston-Wilson et al., 1997). Although Connor's peers did not receive training and, at the time, I would not have considered myself a

knowledgeable source, they were able to get his attention to either redirect him or show him a skill. This could have been due to my modeling or their natural disposition. Had these students received adequate training ahead of time, there is no telling how different Connor's involvement could have been. Incorporating trained peer tutors into class at a young age may also be beneficial to creating an inclusive environment. Young children are less likely to attend to the outcomes of aid and experience negative self-evaluations or respond negatively to help from peers (Goodwin, 2001). In my own experience, young children are far more accepting of others for who they are and have not yet had opportunities to form negative biases. In this regard, it is much easier to shape their interactions and provide them with positive experiences from the start before these negative perceptions can be formed. If we can begin to normalize these social interactions at a young age, they can ripple through a child's lifespan. Relationships can be created during these formative years that help to provide individualized instruction, engagement in activities, and increased independence (Goodwin, 2001; Houston-Wilson et al., 1997; Klavina & Block, 2008). Social interactions can begin to be generalized which may lead to the development of positive attitudes towards those with disabilities and cause individuals to be more willing to engage with and socialize with diverse populations (Block & Obrusnikova, 2007; Goodwin, 2001; Houston-Wilson et al., 1997; Klavina & Block, 2008; Lieberman et al., 2008). Ultimately, this could lead to effective inclusion and the formation of friendships between students with and without disabilities.

While there are many benefits to utilizing peer tutoring, it does have down sides as well. Without training and guidance, peer tutoring can create an unequal balance of power between peers of the same-age (Goodwin, 2001; Houston-Wilson et al., 1997).

Lack of training for peers can lead to over helping or treating the individual with a disability as inferior leading to negative thoughts and experiences for that individual (Goodwin, 2001). Overhelping can lead to a threat to the self-esteem of the individual with the disability (Goodwin, 2001). Peers play a defining role in the experience of those with disabilities and can enhance or isolate their participation in school activities.

Negative peer experiences from overhelping can remove the choice or opportunity for decision making from those with disabilities in some instances (Goodwin & Watkinson, 2000). If the individual with the disability perceives they cannot change the state of dependency once it has been established or control their future encounters with the peer, they may begin to experience a state of helplessness (Goodwin, 2001). The balance of power shifts to the peer tutor and the individual with the disability may begin to resent them, affecting their active participation as well as their social experience in class. For this reason, peer tutoring should be utilized cautiously and employed with proper training and guidance for students.

### **Adding to the Recipe of who I am Today**

My childhood dreams to be a teacher, observing my mother and her work, and helping to take care of my brothers were the building blocks that led me to enter the teaching field as an adult. However, my introduction to Connor was a pivotal moment in my life. I believe this experience led me specifically to teaching students with disabilities and building on the traits and experiences I had as a child to solidify my ability to be confident and comfortable interacting with individuals with disabilities. When I first met Connor, I felt an immediate connection to him which I believe was partially due to the fact he looked exactly like one of my little brothers. I loved teaching my brothers as a

child and getting them to play with me but getting them to engage could sometimes be difficult and I always loved the challenge. With Connor, I saw the challenge both he and the classroom teacher were facing almost immediately.

Between my childhood experiences with my brothers, as well as in my elementary inclusion classes working with my own peers with disabilities, I had developed skills including patience, determination, and the ability to manipulate my environment and personality very quickly as needed. I was also overly observant and was constantly watching and picking up on cues between individuals, helping me determine how to respond or proceed with my interactions. In all honesty, these are skills that I find helpful for me in all social situations, not just when I interact with individuals with disabilities. Regardless, I had decided that I wanted to connect with Connor and was determined not to give up. I used the other skills I possessed to learn about Connor and his peers' interests to manipulate the environment and my personality to gain their attention. I also had to use a significant amount of patience to wait Connor out and build trust between us to get him to engage meaningfully.

With that being said, I was a teenager when I met Connor. Had the situation played out differently and I had not been asked to be a caregiver for his family, I do not know that I would have made the same connection with him. In fact, I may have decided to teach a different subject altogether and my life path could have looked a lot different. I may not have the same interest in working with individuals with disabilities or have chosen to go to college for Special Education. It was the right series of introductions to take place at that point in my life when I was so keen to figure out what path I was going to take in the future. I was struck by the fact that his teacher seemed to lack adequate

knowledge to engage Connor is the classroom which triggered my determination to work with him. As a teacher now, I have come across individuals that do not know how to read an IEP, implement an IEP, or modify work for students with disabilities. I reflect on this experience and wonder if this was a factor at play with Connor's teacher. I did not really know what an IEP was at the time, but I could sense that something was missing, and it propelled me to want to make a change. I also believe that I was lucky to have ended up with a group of children that I could connect with and open to engage with Connor. Had I been with a group of students that was more stand-offish or reluctant to spend time with me or Connor, I do not think I would have had the same result.

While there are many things that I felt went well with my ability to engage with Connor and get him involved with his classmates, my process may not have been the most effective. I was untrained and still a child myself, so I am sure there are many things I would do differently if put in the same situation now as an adult. Regardless, at this point in my life, this experience guided me to becoming more determined and passionate and helped Connor to be included with his peers. I worked to be a bridge between Connor and his peers to fill in the gaps in social skills that were preventing successful interactions. This was my first experience being this bridge and has framed my approach to teaching today. My whole desire to join the physical education field was based around bridging the gap for students socially and creating fun, structured environments to do so. I attempt to do this daily and incorporate any and all social skills practice I can to my lessons. I collaborate with the team of teachers I work with and parents, and I continue to try and learn and grow my skills in this area.

## Chapter 4: The Proposal

At the end of the summer volunteering at school, Connor's mother came into the classroom early to pick him up one day. She brought with her this adorable, freckle-faced girl with curly hair. I was taken aback when she introduced herself to me as Connor's older sister because I felt as though I was staring at my childhood self. Not only did his sister look like I did at her age, but she had the same personality traits. She was outgoing and commanded Connor's attention unlike anyone else could but was also sweet and clearly took her big sister role seriously. Something about seeing her, Connor, and their mother interact reminded me of my family dynamic and was very comfortable and alluring to me which made wanting to work with him even more enticing. Connor's sister was a few grades above him in school and had come in to visit the classroom teacher whose class she was in previously. Connor's mom, Michelle, also introduced herself to me and said that she knew my mom. My mom had worked in the school building and Connor had worked with her in the past. Towards the end of the conversation, she asked if I might be interested in providing care for all three of her kids from time to time and if she could call me the following week if I was interested. In the split second after this, I had a whirlwind of thoughts run through my head. While the thought of continuing to see and work with Connor was exciting to me, it also made me anxious, and my stomach tied itself in a knot again. Was I ready to be left alone with three children, one of whom I was not sure if I was prepared and capable of keeping safe and, quite frankly, interacting with or understanding him effectively at all? I tried to fix my face so as not to show the panic I was feeling as I blurted out, "Sure, I would love that!". I spent the next week waiting for her phone call and experiencing a back and forth of emotions ranging from a sickening

anxiety to an ecstatic euphoria that I was being given an opportunity where someone trusted me, and I could hopefully make a difference in the life of this family who had been unable to find a caregiver up to this point. I had many conversations with my mother, who knew Connor and his mother, expressing my concern and episodes of panic about signing up for something I was not ready for. What if I majorly messed up somehow or did not know how to take care of Connor? My mother assured me that I would be fine and that I needed to trust my instincts. She calmed me down a great deal and explained that Connor might communicate his needs differently than his sisters, so I needed to pay close attention and use his sisters as a resource when we all spent time together.

Michelle worked from home the first few times I came over in so she would be in the house if I needed her, or if there was something we did not go over in Connor's routine that I needed to ask a question about. I quickly became more comfortable with Connor and his sisters as I got to know the routine and figure out who they were as individuals. Over the course of the following two years, I started taking care of them more and more frequently until it became a part of the weekly schedule. In the spring of the following school year after meeting Connor, I had finished watching the kids on a Saturday night and was getting ready to leave when Michelle, looking concerned and unsure of herself, told me she had a proposal for me. She was standing on the other side of the kitchen island moving items back and forth while she appeared to be thinking of how to start. I suddenly felt concerned that I did something wrong, or she did not want me to spend time with the kids anymore. I thought things had been going so well, but maybe I was wrong, and I was not cut out for this after all? All my thoughts were quickly



interrupted as she started speaking. She told me that she had applied for Connor to go to a few different camps that summer. She did not feel it was fair that he had to go to summer school while his sisters went to recreational camp and got to have fun and make friends. Michelle wanted Connor to be able to have a more typical summer camp experience and get a break from the monotony of the school day for just a few weeks. She said that so far, he had not been accepted to any of the programs she had applied to, but that she had a plan. However, the only way the plan would work was if I was on board. Although I had no idea where she was going with this plan, she had me hooked at this point. Michelle then laid out her whole thought process. She said that she wanted to contact the camp directors of the camp that the girls attended in the summer and see if they would let Connor attend. She knew this was a long shot because the camp did not have the supports in place to provide him the one-to-one adult supervision he needed to be successful. Michelle said that was where I came into this plan. She wanted to propose that she would send me to camp with Connor to be his one-to-one counselor as someone who is familiar with him, and she would pay for me to attend with him. She figured the camp would have a hard time turning this down because they would still get paid but would not have to pay for me to work there. I was skeptical at first, but the more she went into detail over this plan the more it seemed like it would work out well. There were obviously a few glaring issues that would need to be sorted out, but overall, they were all things that could be sorted out with the camp if we could get them to agree.

Michelle told me she wanted me to think it over before I decided officially, but I quickly cut her off and told her there was no need. I was excited for the opportunity and was one hundred percent on board. All she needed to do was tell me where to be and

when and I would make it work. Michelle's whole attitude changed, and she appeared far more relaxed after hearing that I thought it was a great idea. I knew it was going to be a hard sell to a camp that was not inclusive and cost an exorbitant amount of money to attend. The camp made so much money each summer with the way it was being run that it seemed like there would be little reason for them to change the way they were doing anything. I left the house and sat in the driveway in my car for a minute to let myself process the whole arrangement before driving home. I was not expecting all the information I had just been hit with and so much was unknown that it was hard to figure out how exactly to feel about it.

The next week, Michelle texted me that she followed through and applied for him to go to camp. She nervously waited for a reply and the directors got back to her a few days later. They expressed major reservations about accepting his application and told her they did not think their camp would be a good fit. Michelle was determined for this to work and would not take no for an answer. She went back and forth with them and explained her plan of hiring me to go as his aid. The directors responded that they had concerns that as a teenager, I could effectively support him in their environment. They made this decision knowing little information about Connor, or me for that matter, other than that Connor has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Their preconceived notions of what ASD is were apparent and appeared to contribute to their idea that it was cut and dry that Connor could not be successful in the environment they had cultivated. Part of Connor's disability was that his skills varied across a broad range of activities. He was highly skilled in some areas and lacking in others, just like anyone else. Although Michelle did not fully express her feelings on the response to me, she seemed both

frustrated and hurt by their negative perceptions and lack of effort to find out more before deciding. She would not give up though. Michelle followed up with the director's multiple times asking them to at least meet with me and have a conversation about the positives and negatives of what our experience would be like at camp.

The directors reached out to me after a few conversations with Michelle and set up a formal meeting on site. I had little to no interview experience and was in my mid-teens, so a formal interview was an unknown experience to me. I felt an enormous amount of pressure preceding our meeting. I did not want to be the reason that Connor was turned away from an important opportunity and played out key points I wanted to make repeatedly in my head. I knew Connor and felt he could access camp with support and knew this was a tremendously important experience for his parents as well. I dressed up in professional attire and tried to make myself as presentable as possible. When I arrived at the campus I was blown away by how beautiful and massive it was. They offered such a diverse array of activities for the campers to choose from and an even stronger feeling of determination fell over me. I impatiently waited in the camp office, fidgeting with one of my rings and my leg bouncing nervously. After what felt like an eternity, the secretary said, "Excuse me miss, they are ready for you in the office there", pointing at a door across the room. I entered the office and shook the hands of both directors. They invited me to take a seat and gave me a brief introduction about the camp history before getting right down to business. They expressed many concerns about Connor being able to participate in activities and their mandatory swimming lessons. The directors bombarded me with questions about my relationship with Connor and how he would react in various situations or fit in with his peers. It seemed to me that they were

fishing for reasons to deny Connor's camp application and did not want to change their program to be accommodating because what they were already doing was easier. They clearly did not have much background knowledge or exposure to children with ASD in the past and many of their questions made that very apparent. I was able to answer a vast majority of their questions without a second thought, offering up solutions to problems that may arise and explaining my relationship and expectations for Connor. After reviewing the schedule and going over Connor's strengths and areas for growth, we narrowed down a few small issues that would need to be ironed out, such as how Connor would use the locker room with his peers to get changed for swim time since I could not accompany him. One director seemed to have changed her mind already at this point and made it clear she was willing to put in the effort to help me make this work. The other remained skeptical even when our meeting had concluded, and I left the campus with an air of uncertainty about what their decision was going to be.

The following week, I went to Connor's house to stay with him so his mother could take one of his sisters out. When I arrived, Michelle had a smirk on her face and welcomed me into the kitchen to chat with her. She started off by saying that the two camp directors had reached out finally with their decision. She said that they were still unsure about the whole situation but were willing to trial it for the first few days and see how it went! Michelle was beaming and followed up with a statement that made me both proud and shocked. She said the directors included in their email that they were only considering it because I convinced them to give it a shot and that they felt comfortable doing so because I seemed responsible, confident, and knowledgeable. I was willing to

accept the compliment and felt great about it, but in no way did I feel at the time that I was any of those things. Regardless, I was excited because we were going to camp!

### **Reflection on Narrative**

When it comes to working with children, knowledge about the child's background, strengths, preferred activities, triggers, etc. can be vitally important to help the child succeed. The best place to learn this information is from the other individual's that know or work with the child whether it be a family member, staff member, or peer. When you lack information, you risk setting both yourself and the child up for failure and potentially losing that child's trust. I reflect on this story and how I used Connor's sisters as resources because they knew him better than me and were able to give me information to help him be more successful. This is something that I now do in my teaching profession with my co-workers when first meeting a child. By gathering information ahead of working with the student, I can make sure to create the most positive and productive environment I am capable of.

This story also demonstrates to me a clear example of disability being thought of as a binary notion as opposed to a continuum. The directors heard that Connor had a disability and immediately jumped to the conclusion that he would not be able to do anything they offered at camp. They did not take the time to do any research and, had Connor's mother not pushed back, were willing to dismiss him without even asking any clarifying questions. Nearly a decade later, this is still an issue that seems all too common. I decided to dive into the knowledge base on both of these topics to gain more insight.

## *Human Resources*

A recurring theme in the current literature outlining the difficulty in employing successful inclusion is a lack of preparation and knowledge of teachers who work with students with significant disabilities (Grenier et al., 2020). A tool that is vital for teachers to use to combat this challenge is collaboration with general and special education teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, peers, and family members of students. Collaboration allows educators to continue to grow and learn by gaining insight and information from those around them which helps their students to experience more success (Grenier et al., 2020; Zagona, 2017). A study by Grenier and colleagues (2020) found that their research on collaboration demonstrated the importance of working collaboratively with general educators, related service providers, paraprofessionals, and peer mentors. This can only be done by using effective communication methods and making sure all individuals have clear roles and responsibilities (Sayeski, 2009). General education and special education staff should report and share new or valid information with each other to make sure that all staff that work with the student are up to date on what is occurring in the student's life (Grenier et al., 2020). When we finally made it to camp, I viewed the other counselors in our group as general education staff while I was the special education staff in a way. Particularly during locker room time, it was vitally important for all of us to collaborate and communicate to ensure a successful transition for Connor to swim time. If Connor was having a difficult morning or had a certain script stuck in his head that he was fixating on, I needed to relay that message to the other counselors and create a plan for how to redirect him and stick to the routine so that I was not setting them up for failure. This worked both ways and the other counselors shared

information with me after locker room time about what worked and what was still challenging. This approach allowed us to work together to tweak the plan and create the most successful environment possible for Connor.

This is also why it is important to cultivate positive and trusting relationships with the parents or guardians of the students in the classroom (Collier et al., 2015). Collier and colleagues (2015) discuss the importance of teacher-parent relationships and find that teachers that create positive relationships with their student's parents are better able to involve the parents in the student's education and provide necessary support to engage students in successful learning. By building relationships with parents there is typically more information received from parents about what is going on with the student outside of school. This information can provide insight into student behaviors and help teachers to avoid setting students, and themselves, up for failure in the classroom. Parents want to feel heard and appreciated as part of their child's education (Collier et al., 2015). When teacher's get involved and listen to parent's concerns, they can build the relationship and gain insight on challenges the child may be having in settings outside of the classroom.

Peers and siblings are also great resources. They often have a greater insight into the student's preferences or wants and needs from spending time with them and can be a helpful source of knowledge. Michelle and I had cultivated a relationship where she bounced ideas off me to get my opinion and I asked for clarification on behaviors I was experiencing with Connor. We talked often and the sharing of information was beneficial to both parties to create successful experiences for Connor. However, when Michelle asked me over to watch the children, I often did not have access to her for clarification and information. In these circumstances, Connor's sisters were my best resource. They

had grown up together and understood Connor's method of communication and behaviors better than anyone. They could pick up on things he was going to do before he did them and help resolve the issue before I could get involved in many instances. Through them, I began to pick up on signals when Connor was unable to express his needs and gain a better understanding of him as an individual. While they were still children themselves, they were very capable of collaborating with me and giving me useful tips for bedtime and certain words that would trigger various behaviors for Connor.

Collaborating with others is not always an easy process as it requires voluntary and equitable participation as well as the sharing of resources (Grenier et al., 2020). Many teachers experience challenges with collaboration when their coworkers are resistant to changing their attitudes and perceptions about students with disabilities and are not willing to make the necessary curricular changes for content to be accessible to all students (Grenier et al., 2020). One way to begin to shift perspectives is to improve the professional development activities educators are participating in to provide educators the expertise to implement effective practices for learners in inclusive settings (Zagona, 2017). The knowledge base is constantly growing and changing which is why it is important for educators to have opportunities for learning throughout their careers (Zagona, 2017). When collaboration is used successfully by educators, it can lead to an increase in skill acquisition, peer interactions, and classroom outcomes for students (Grenier et al., 2020). By collaborating with others, I was able to gain so much useful information about Connor and provide more accessible environments for him that



allowed him the ability to focus on improving his skills and peer interactions when we went to camp and beyond.

### ***Disability as a Binary Notion***

There is conflicting information surrounding how disability is defined. Through time, there have been various models of what disability means as well as differing cognitive authorities, or individuals with the authority to establish definitions in society and have command over the knowledge in their field (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). This has caused the way society views disability to change and adapt as some views have been seen as prejudice. The definition we choose to ascribe to disability is vitally important as it influences the ways in which we view individuals with disabilities and interact with them (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Stefano, 2016). Through my communications with the camp director's, it was apparent that they had a very different definition and view of Connor and his disability than I did. I felt that they had limited disability awareness and a lack of experience with people with ASD as well as other disabilities after my initial interactions with them. They seemed to have a preconceived bias that could have been formed from prior experiences or things they had seen or heard through the media. Regardless, their preconceived notions did not align with how I viewed Connor and his abilities.

Some feel that disability is a steadfast notion and either you have one or you do not. However, others see disability as a continuum that varies from individual to individual and affects the way we functionally participate in activities (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Ability and disability have a broad range and can be considered to exist on a spectrum, affecting all individuals in one way or another (Stefano, 2016). Those that

experience disability, might have barriers to their ability to participate. In many cases we can remove those barriers by altering the way the activity is designed, changing the rules, or altering the equipment that is used (Lieberman et al., 2008). Part of Connor's disability was that his skills varied based on what he was working on. Just like any other student, he had skills he excelled at using better than most, and skills that needed more work and support to master.

Several disability models have been used throughout history, but there are currently two major models that define disability: the medical model and the social model (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Stefano, 2016). Each of these models defines disability differently and has positives and negatives with the thought processes they present. The medical model of disability came about when doctors and scientists began to be seen as the cognitive authority in place of religious leaders (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The medical model definition views disability as an individual or medical phenomenon that results in abnormality and deficiency in functioning which is defined using medical terms (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Disabled people are also viewed as needing to be "cured" or "fixed" by eradicating the impairment. In Connor's case, the medical model would be attempting to fix Connor's "deficits" by having the doctor prescribe various medications and other medical treatments to address his behaviors.

The social model on the other hand, defines disability as a social construct and that society disables people with impairments due to not being inclusive (Fitzgerald, 2005; Haegele & Hodge, 2016). The aim of the social model was to counteract the medical model and provide a voice from the standpoint of disabled people who had been silenced by doctors' labels and categorizations (Fitzgerald, 2005). In Connor's case, the

social model would be changing parts of the environment by removing stimuli or changing the way in which you provide him with directions. However, neither of these models addresses individuality or the values and needs of those with disabilities. The medical model states the cause of the problem to be within the individual while the social model states the cause of the problem to be everything surrounding the individual, without taking the individual themselves into consideration at all (Fitzgerald, 2005). The medical model is a binary while the social model is a continuum where a person's disability is dependent on their environment, and it is possible that a person may experience their disability more profoundly in less supportive spaces.

Neither of these models can define Connor, an energetic and excited little boy, but the factors of advantage and disadvantage that intersect could be either empowering or oppressing to him. In some ways, both models could be useful to him or be a disadvantage, but he should not be confined or labeled by his disability regardless (Haegele & Hodge, 2016). Doctors prescribed him with medications and treatments to help him focus and function in his day-to-day life, but they could not "cure" his echolalia, repetitive scripts, loud vocalizations, or constant bouncing. Society could provide accommodations for him, such as one-to-one support, frequent breaks, and quiet spaces, but that also could not keep him engaged in activities or teach him to interact with his peers. Connor is an individual that is different than anyone else who requires a mixture of all of these supports and more to be the best version of himself (Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Lieberman et al., 2008). I explained this to the director's during our meeting and knew it would be a long road to shift the preconceived notions of disability they had previously learned.

## **Adding to the Recipe of who I am Today**

Getting the okay to go to camp was a moment that I look back on now as an adult and realize was somewhat life changing. It brought me closer to Connor's family as I was spending extended periods of time with them and getting real-life experience of what it was like to have a family member with a disability. It also became blatantly apparent how little people knew or cared to know about disabilities, as well as how quick they were to judge. I became very defensive when we were out in public places and was vocal to those who inquired, trying to educate anyone who would listen that Connor just needed a few extra moments to process information and not to let him off the hook for an interaction if he did not respond the first time. He felt like my family member, and I wanted other people to understand that he was just like their family members as well. My patience had grown immensely for Connor but had shortened for many other people we came across when together.

The confidence boost that I got after my interaction with the directors was also important for me moving forward. It was the first time that I had gotten real confirmation that I seemed like I knew what I was doing from strangers, and important ones in the moment no less. At the time, I did not feel like I knew fully what I was talking about but went with my instincts during the meeting and did my best to explain what I knew. My mother coming home from school every day and lecturing me about student behavior and how to approach varying problems in the classroom had kicked in and I had responses to all their questions. The directors responding positively increased my confidence in myself, but also made me more determined to make everything work. If I didn't and everything fell apart, it was fully my fault. It was a lot of pressure for a teenager but made

me work harder because the outcome would directly affect the life of Connor and his family. I also knew that this process would entail a great deal of collaboration with other counselors and campers. I was not going to be able to do everything completely by myself which was stressful. However, I knew that I was prepared and would be able to do it because I had in the past with Connor's family and in the classroom when I first met Connor. I continue to use a collaborative approach in my teaching today. I meet with special educators, related service providers, and paraprofessionals on a weekly basis. I maintain consistent communication with parents and have close relationships with the peers and siblings of my students. These relationships allow me to gain as much insight on my students as possible and work to cultivate positive, successful environments that bring out what I believe to be their best work as often as I possibly can.

In some respects, I do think that the determination and pressure of successfully attending camp had a negative effect on me, at least at first, because I was overwhelmed and overthinking everything throughout the entire initial steps of the process. I took some smaller issues too far and did not focus enough on others because I was a nervous wreck that the whole thing would fall apart on me, and we would be asked last minute not to come to camp because the directors changed their minds. However, despite being somewhat neurotic leading up to camp, we made it there and my passion, patience, and determination helped me to persevere and solidify my bond with Connor and his family.

## Chapter 5: Off to Camp We Go

After finding out we were going to camp, I began to receive an influx of emails from the camp directors full of questions and schedules. They seemed overwhelmed by the logistics of Connor using the boy's locker room since swim time was a mandatory camp activity students had to get changed for and I was not allowed in with him. This was the one concern I did not have an answer for. I tried to remain relaxed whenever it was discussed and appear unconcerned so as not to alarm the directors and have them change their minds. I assured them it would not be a problem repeatedly, while internally I was in panic mode trying to figure out what I was going to do. The directors also informed me that they wanted me to attend all the scheduled camp counselor training prior to the summer since I would be interacting with all of the other campers while working with Connor, as well as to meet the other counselors from our group.

When I arrived on the first day, it finally started to sink in that this was actually happening. The excitement I had previously quickly faded and turned to an overwhelming sense of dread that I had made a mistake. I felt like an imposter walking through the campus and being introduced to people, answering questions about Connor and putting on a performance to keep everyone else at ease. Underneath it all, I felt guilty and uncomfortable that I was pulling one over on all these people. I was a teenager, why in the world were these people listening to anything I had to say?

I was shown around the main building where the camp office was located. I was blown away by the size of the campus and the state-of-the-art equipment and facilities that the camp operated with. I tried to keep my cool as we entered the lower gymnasium and the director introduced me to the counselors in the group I would be working with.

My dread subsided for the time being as I looked around and saw a group of individuals that looked like they would be fun to work with, all laughing together. However, upon our introduction the other counselors seemed hesitant to interact with me which made me feel uncomfortable and wildly confused. I expected to jump right in with the group since I was under the impression this was the first time many of them were meeting each other too, even if they had worked at the camp previously.

The directors left me, and I sat in the bleachers off to the side of the rest of the counselors, looking like a total outcast. We listened to presentations all morning and then we were given group time to go over all the campers' packets and get to know each other. After being fed lunch, I walked down the long path through the field behind the rest of my group. We sat at our group's picnic table under a tree and the head counselors gave introductions about themselves and everyone's expectations as part of the group. When it was my turn to introduce myself and what I would be doing as part of the group, everyone seemed to become especially quiet and attentive. I did not really know what to say but I tried to be as bubbly and welcoming as possible, explaining that I would only be coming to camp for three weeks and would be with Connor the whole time. I showed them a picture of him that his mom had sent me and gave them an overview of his preferences so that they could begin to understand him as an individual and think about ways to connect with him. I talked excessively and immediately felt like I had overdone it and rambled on for too long and that all these people would think I was crazy. However, the opposite happened. When I finished talking, it rapidly became clear that these high school and college students had little to no experience interacting with someone with a disability before. They were so cold to me during our initial introduction because they

were nervous and did not know how to approach me with their queries. They fired off questions about their responsibilities with Connor and expressed nerves about not knowing what to do. The clear lack of experience made me uneasy about what our next three weeks were going to look like with all these people.

Our first day of camp, Connor's mother dropped us off in the fast-paced drop-off line where the students needed to jump out of the car quickly with all of their belongings and find their group. Connor was in the backseat, loudly scripting and giggling as I rushed to get him out of the car. All the other counselors were down the hill holding bright, colorful signs with the group numbers on them to show where each group was located during morning drop-off. Connor had gotten out of the car but had little safety awareness at this point in his life and I was desperately clinging on to him, while also trying to make sure I collected all his belongings from the car before it was forced to pull away. One of the counselors from my group was watching this struggle from afar and ran over to help me carry Connor's things as he was not yet adjusted to this new routine. I gripped his hand tightly as I guided him to our group spot. He was a runner from the time he started walking and would take off in the blink of an eye if something interesting caught his attention, and this campus was massive. When we arrived at our group's spot, I was flustered and disorganized and tried to get Connor to sit down so that I could go over the expectations with him and introduce him to the counselors. A few of them had attempted to say hello to Connor when we walked over, but the awkward energy exuding from them made it obvious they were uncomfortable and had little to no idea what to say or do. Connor was not one to initiate an interaction unprompted or respond on the first



attempt if you did not have his attention, so he ignored them completely and the counselors sort of sunk back and gave up.

This energy continued for most of the first few days as I worked tirelessly to facilitate interactions between Connor and his peers, as well as the adults around him. I modeled how to engage him repeatedly making sure counselors were paying attention, while trying not to make it obvious that is what I was doing. I wanted them to pick up on my cues, phrases, tone, and body language so that they could mimic it and attempt to connect with Connor without me prompting and guiding the interaction. It was exhausting. A few of the counselors that were motivated and committed to getting Connor's attention paid extra attention and made a large effort to learn about him and gain his trust. It made me both proud and content to see that there were individuals willing to put in the effort, but it took some longer than others to buy in to what needed to be done. By the end of the first two days, I had identified which male counselors to depend on for Connor's locker room transitions and began to help them curate a routine they could follow and how to redirect Connor to keep to the routine. I saw rapid changes in the confidence of the counselors who spent the most time with Connor in their first few days and was so impressed and relieved that I was able to relax a little bit.

By the end of our three weeks, the camp atmosphere toward me and Connor had shifted, and he had essentially become the mayor of camp. Every counselor knew who he was as he came running down the path past all the other groups giggling and jumping, and they wanted to say hello to him. During swim time, counselors gathered around to cheer him on as he did pencil dives into the pool and climbed all over whichever adult was near him in the water. The lifeguards all wanted to be in his canoe with him during

boating to try and get him a little bit farther the river than the previous time to see his excitement. The specialist teachers, especially the ropes course staff, knew when Connor's group was on their schedule and made sure to plan the most exciting and high-flying activities for the days they saw him because they loved his daredevil spirit. All over camp I was seeing changes in the attitudes of staff that were standoffish and inexperienced working with people with disabilities. While the camp had not become fully inclusive overnight, I had begun to see glimpses of change and a willingness to be more open from a large majority of the adults.

Connor and I returned to this camp every summer for two to three weeks for the next four years. Throughout the first three years, Connor continued to be the only student with a disability that had a one-to-one counselor. We were with a new group each year which required me to start from the beginning with each group of high school and college students to teach them engaging ways to interact with Connor and begin to break the biases they may have. In a way, it was more beneficial that we were with a different group every year because it gave me the opportunity to infiltrate groups across the camp and create a more widespread change. I made sure to network with other counselors as often as possible and form relationships with the campers. This allowed me to answer people's questions, model interactions with Connor, and help him show that he could participate at every activity. This was a lot of work as I was modifying activities everywhere we went, but some of the counselors picked up on that and were able to take my lead. By the end of our fifth year at camp, there were suddenly four other students at camp with disabilities and one-to-one counselors. The camp had begun to implement a program to hire their own counselors for this specific reason and incorporate activity

modification into our initial training. It was not much and could have used an overhaul to be more beneficial, but it was more than was in place before. I had witnessed all my hard work starting to change this environment and its people to be more inclusive. There was a long road to go, but I do not think it would have been possible with just any random person put into my position. It took a lot of calculated thinking and motivation to foster this positive change and manipulate the environment to be accessible. It also took an awareness and observation of the people around me to determine what strategies to use and which people were more open to start with. Overall, it was a long process, but also one of the most positive accomplishments I had achieved at that point in my life.

### **Reflection on Narrative**

By providing people with the proper tools and knowledge, we can start to decrease their preconceived notions about disability and increase their comfort and confidence to initiate interactions with individuals with disabilities. However, these people must be willing to embrace the knowledge and tools to employ them effectively. They should also be motivated and have a sense of determination to use this knowledge because this cannot be achieved overnight in some circumstances.

### ***Contact Theory***

In 1954, Allport proposed his idea of contact theory which stated that contact with people different from oneself under the proper conditions would cause a positive change in attitude toward that person or group of people (McKay, 2013; McKay, 2018; Pettigrew, 2021; Slininger et al., 2000). The conditions that he specified to improve negative attitudes include: (a) equal status, (b) cooperation to reach common goals, (c) personal interactions, and (d) identification and acceptance of social norms provided by

authority (McKay, 2013; McKay, 2018; Pettigrew, 2021; Slininger et al., 2000). By spending time together and meeting these conditions, Allport believed that people's prejudiced ideas of each other would diminish because they would begin to understand one another (McKay, 2018). This meaningful contact would allow individuals to learn personal details about each other which Allport asserts lets them get to know each other creating positive outcomes (McKay, 2018; Rademaker et al., 2020; Slininger et al., 2000). In a study done by Pettigrew and Tropp in 2006, they suggested that positive outcomes for intergroup contact could be achieved with only one or two of the conditions present, depending on the environment of the contact (McKay, 2018). Interventions including awareness activities or education programs that are designed to improve attitudes can be effective ways of changing behaviors (McKay, 2013).

Allport's first condition of changing negative attitudes toward an individual or group of people is that both groups must have equal status. He states that when groups come in contact with one another and can be seen as equals in status, they are more likely to get along (McKay, 2018). When a group feels that they have an inferior role, antagonistic feelings may develop and existing stereotypes may also be reinforced (McKay, 2018). At camp, I do not believe that the environment was set up to help Connor have equal status to his peers. Some activities were not accessible to him, and the camp "curriculum" was not designed with individuals with disabilities in mind. Despite not having equal status, Connor was still very young and appeared unaware of the difference at this point in time as he was very focused on himself and we were working to improve his social skills. It was more concerning in terms of his peers that were aware of their differences and the negative stereotypes and perceptions of individuals with

disabilities that were being reinforced. As the counselors and campers began to get to know Connor, a shift began to occur in mindset and attitude and the balance of power did begin to shift, but mostly only when we were doing activities with our group. When other counselors or campers became involved, the equal status started to shift back to Connor having an inferior role. Regardless, Connor enjoyed the camp activities and participated when he wanted and how he wanted, despite what was available to him. Based on Allport's explanation and ideas of this condition, Connor and I's experience at camp did not satisfy this condition of contact theory.

The second condition that Allport outlined to improve interactions was that both groups need to utilize cooperation to reach common goals. Any activities that groups are completing together should always be cooperative instead of competitive (McKay, 2013; McKay, 2018). When groups are forced to work together, they are more likely to find commonalities and see the best in each other. Competition on the other hand can cause negative feelings and attitudes. It may lead to stereotyping, hostility, or place limited value on accomplishments (McKay, 2018). By sharing common goals and working together, groups must dig deeper to get to know each other which is that type of contact that may alter attitudes (McKay, 2018). Many of the camp activities that Connor participated in throughout the day revolved around teamwork or some form of working with others. This was how Connor became familiar with many of his peers in the group as campers were given choices and got to pick their favorite activity for each block of the day from a list of choices. The other campers that picked the activities that Connor chose were just as excited and interested in that activity as he was. This gave him common ground with the other campers and allowed them to see him participate effectively in

activities that they enjoyed. I think that Connor earned a lot of the other camper's respect and understanding by showing off what he was capable of, which was often more than what they expected. Connor's experience at camp did meet the second condition outlined by Allport to improve negative attitudes and perceptions.

Personal interactions with meaningful contact is Allport's third condition of contact theory. Allport stated that meaningful contact between groups is necessary to change attitudes because it provides participants the chance to acquire knowledge about each other (McKay, 2013; Slininger et al., 2000). When we get to know others, it is much easier to connect and find commonalities. To achieve this at camp I found that my best avenue was to make my own personal connections with some of the campers. I learned about their interests and ideas so that I could talk with them about what matters to them and earn their trust. Once we had made a valuable connection, I began to bridge the gap with Connor by modeling and verbally teaching the campers how to effectively get Connor's attention and engage him in activities with them. Allport went even further to say that the deeper the personal connection that is made, the more significant the change in attitude will be (McKay, 2018; Slininger et al., 2000). He outlined two different types of contact: typical and exceptional (McKay, 2018; Rademaker et al., 2020; Slininger et al., 2000). Typical personal interactions were more limited everyday interactions that we might experience which lack connection to personality or life experiences. These interactions at camp looked like saying hello to other counselors and campers we passed by, visits to the nurse or camp office, and minor interactions with camp activity staff that seemed uninterested in connecting with Connor on a more personal level. These are the interactions that can reinforce stereotypes (McKay, 2018; Rademaker et al., 2020;

Slininger et al., 2000). I think this is especially true with the activities staff at camp because they assumed Connor could not participate in some activities and this stereotype was reinforced when they said hello to him or asked a question and he did not respond. The interaction was surface level and did not give Connor the opportunity to show off his abilities or engage with them. Exceptional interactions allowed participants to dive deeper and learn more about each other to break down the existing stereotypes (McKay, 2018; Rademaker et al., 2020; Slininger et al., 2000). Those that made the effort to try to get to know Connor and take my guidance in engaging with him were able to produce exceptional interactions that helped them to realize that Connor was capable of much more than he usually showed. It took some time and relationship building for him to give anyone attention or acknowledgment, but it paid off for those that put the time in when they were finally able to see his sense of humor. A group of three counselors in particular were so dedicated to getting to know Connor and spent the free swim activity block in or around the pool with Connor. They tried to engage him on their own, play games with him, and asked clarifying questions when they hit a roadblock and did not know what to do. By the end of our three weeks, Connor was drawn to these counselors and would seek them out in other activities and events. He started choosing to go canoeing with other people during boating time, sitting at a different table from me in arts and crafts, and climbing the ropes course with another counselor when given the option. Connor very clearly experienced both typical and exceptional interactions at camp and the exceptional ones clearly met Allport's third condition in relation to contact theory.

The final condition that Allport outlined as part of contact theory was that providing social norms that were identified and accepted by a figure of authority would

help to change negative attitudes (McKay, 2013; McKay, 2018; Pettigrew, 2021; Slininger et al., 2000). In terms of camp, the directors were seen as an authority to the counselors and the counselors were seen as an authority to the campers. With the directors expressing their excitement and positive attitudes about Connor joining us to the counselors, it reinforced that Connor, and I were welcome members of the community and essentially gave everyone the green light to be kind and accommodating because it was coming from the boss. With the counselors buying into Connor's participation, they showed positive attitudes toward Connor and I and treated him as an equal member of the group whenever we were all together. This reinforced for the campers that Connor was just like any other member of the group and promoted positive attitudes from them as well. Allport believed that having the support of an authority, including laws, customs etc., created a norm of acceptance that helped to break down stereotypes (McKay, 2018). When leaders show acceptance like the camp directors did with Connor, it can cause a trickle-down effect to all those under the authority causing widespread change. In schools, administrators and teachers are figures of authority to different groups and can work to change negative attitudes using consistent awareness activities (McKay, 2013). This can be true in any environment and Connor and I experienced it firsthand at camp that first summer. Our camp experience did meet Allport's final condition of acceptance by an authority figure.

While Allport's contact theory outlines four conditions necessary to improve negative attitudes towards a group, that does not always ring true. In my experience with Connor, we were able to meet three of the conditions he outlined: cooperation to reach common goals, personal interactions, and identification and acceptance of social norms



provided by authority. Even by only meeting three of the four conditions, we saw a wide range of negative attitudes change throughout our time at camp through contact with Connor. Interventions utilizing contact only do not typically do enough to shift perspectives though. The contact must be paired with an increase in knowledge in some way and it must be meaningful to create real change (Rademaker et al., 2020). It is obviously impossible for us to shift the mindsets and attitudes of a camp of over one thousand people of varying ages in three short weeks, but we were able to change the attitudes of individuals that we had meaningful, close contact with throughout that time. As a facilitator of many of Connor's interactions, it was important for me to think about all the factors and the environmental stimuli around so as to cultivate the most positive experience for all. Negative experiences typically have a larger impact and can be more memorable than positive ones, so it is important to utilize thoughtful interventions (Rademaker et al., 2020). I tried to manipulate our environment as much as possible throughout our day to day to create the optimal experience for everyone coming in contact with Connor, but obviously it is not possible to control everything. It is important for those who do have experience and some understanding working with individuals with disabilities who do not yet have the skills to express their thoughts to help facilitate positive interactions whenever possible.

### **Adding to the Recipe of who I am Today**

After making it to camp, I quickly realized that there were not many people that had experience interacting with individuals with disabilities at all. Many of them had preconceived notions of what Autism was and were surprised by what Connor was able to do. They lacked confidence when trying to get Connor's attention and many were not

persistent in their efforts. However, the few counselors that were determined to get Connor's attention and engage him with the rest of the group, put in extra time and effort to their relationship with him and it paid off. They were patient and took direction to learn strategies that worked for Connor and gave him the time he needed when he needed it. Of course, this was not without a learning curve and mistakes along the way. Most of us were teenagers trying to figure out how to direct and care for a group of children other than Connor as well, so there is always trial and error in seeing what children respond to best.

While the adults took some time to come around and needed to have patience, determination, and confidence, interactions came much easier for the children in the group. They had limited biases toward individuals with disabilities and quickly picked up on Connor's scripts and behaviors and found creative ways to get his attention. Some needed little to no help from me, while others needed some explanation and guidance. Once they felt they understood him (which usually did not take much time as the children were not as judgmental), they took the reins and Connor was far more responsive to them. Even though he often appeared to not pay attention or want to be with his peers, he was motivated by their attention. He enjoyed parallel play most of the time and wanted to be near them, but not necessarily in the group with them. However, parallel play was difficult with the way camp was set up and somewhat forced him to get involved.

By including Connor with his peers from a young age, they demonstrated that it is easier to avoid judgment and bias at a younger age. The adults had preconceived notions from what they had learned or heard from others over time and had no experience of their own to form their own opinions and thoughts about individuals with disabilities. They

assumed that Connor was not capable, while the children just used their creativity to get his attention and play with him. Working around preconceived notions and bias, I was still able to get some of the other adults on the same page as me by using my own experiences to guide them. I built up their confidence, used their determination, and prompted them to be patient when necessary. This helped them to become more observant of Connor's behaviors because he was not also able to communicate his wants and needs effectively on his own. The other counselors began to learn about him as an individual and use these skills to help him become an active participant in our group and create friendships with his peers.

## **Chapter 6: Who I am Today**

There are a set of skills that I have acquired throughout my life that include, but are not limited to, patience, determination, confidence, and continued observation of my surroundings. My determination first came into play when I met Connor and saw how little he was being included with his peers and lack of engagement. I wanted to see him form bonds and learn with the other students in his class. Gaining Connor's trust and learning strategies to engage him as an active participant in activities took patience over an extended period of time where I collaborated with his family, teachers, and peers to gain insight and understanding about him as a person. I consistently took in new information and observed others from the time I was young interacting with individuals with disabilities and attempted to emulate and mimic those interactions, especially in my interactions with Connor to determine which avenues helped him to be the most successful.

My involvement with Connor and his family was a unique experience that helped to bring to light these skills and increase my ability to use them, as well as to model them for others. It gave me the opportunity to see how both a household runs, and the education system works for families with disabilities and to gain perspective from a parent point-of-view before entering the field of education and receiving formal training to be a teacher. I have been able to collaborate with a wide range of individuals over the years and gain a variety of knowledge in different areas related to disability and continue to try to learn and grow. All these experiences have shaped how I view and engage with the disability community and my approach to teaching and working with families. They also shaped the path that brought me to where I am today. I knew I wanted to teach from

a young age, but I was also very focused on my artwork and had considered pursuing graphic design. I could have ended up in a completely different field altogether had it not been for these experiences.

As with the counselors in our group at camp, adults can be taught these skills and how to employ them to become more comfortable interacting with individuals with disabilities if they are willing. They often have preconceived notions or biases about disability, but those notions can be changed with guidance and modeling if the person also has understanding and determination to put in the time and effort to make a connection. In my undergraduate teacher training courses, there was little to no experience given or required working with individuals with disabilities before being thrown into the teaching field. I was lucky to have had the experiences I did when I was younger, but that was not the case for many of my peers. Teacher training programs should be focusing on increasing disability awareness and providing experiences for teacher candidates to have real life experience teaching individuals with disabilities before being thrown into jobs they are unprepared for. By incorporating this into the curriculum, we can create better prepared teachers and adults and teach them the skills of patience, determination, observation, and confidence which will improve the experience of the growing number of students being placed in settings that are supposed to be inclusive.

In my experience, it has been far more challenging to get adults to change their perspective and takes longer to increase their confidence and comfort level with these interactions than with children. In most cases, children are far more malleable and have less preconceived bias toward individuals with disabilities. They can be curious to learn

and adapt to change in different ways than adults. By introducing children at a younger age to individuals with disabilities through opportunities for meaningful and deliberate inclusion, there could be greater possibilities for reducing the stigma surrounding disability and creating more inclusive environments both in and out of schools. Future research is warranted to determine if there is a real correlation between introducing these skills and interactions at a young age and positive impacts on the disability community, as well as increasing hands-on experience with individuals with disabilities for teacher training programs.

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