

## ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: THE MIS-EDUCATION OF BLIND URBAN STUDENTS: SOCIAL CONTEXT AND EQUITY IN THE DELIVERY OF VISION SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

Rosalba Ramirez Carranza, Doctor of Philosophy, 2017

Dissertation directed by: Dr. Peter Leone, Professor, Department of Counseling, Higher Education, and Special Education

Research has identified various barriers related to the provision of vision special education services in the United States public education system. Factors involving school context, which are of particular importance in high-poverty urban settings, have largely remained unexamined. Thus, a collective case study methodology was used to address the following central question: How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools? Through in-depth individual and group interviews, the analysis of documents, and the submission of photographs, five urban teachers provided their perspectives. An overlapping conceptual framework combining disability studies and critical race theory was used to conduct a close examination of these issues. The research yielded insights on the connections that blind students and their specialized services have to the patterns of educational inequities associated with urban education in the United States. These findings can inform

research, teacher education, and professional practice with the goal of enhancing the educational experiences and future lives of blind urban youth.

THE MIS-EDUCATION OF BLIND URBAN STUDENTS: SOCIAL CONTEXT  
AND EQUITY IN THE DELIVERY OF VISION SPECIAL EDUCATION  
SERVICES

by

Rosalba Ramirez Carranza

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Advisory Committee:  
Dr. Peter Leone, Chair  
Dr. Robert Croninger  
Dr. Jing Lin  
Dr. Victoria-Maria MacDonald  
Dr. Linda Valli

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# **Chapter 1: Introduction**

## **Introduction**

Both my personal adjustment to vision loss, along with my professional involvement in the field of blindness, have led me to undertake several roles on behalf of blind students-- mentor, civil rights advocate, teacher trainer, and urban educator. Living and working in the heart of two cities, while becoming closely acquainted with blind urban youth in those regions, ignited my interest in understanding how issues of race, poverty, and disability status influence the special education services available to blind students.

Through my professional roles, I met blind students who routinely negotiated the inequitable general education systems that have become emblematic of urban schooling in the United States (U.S.), while simultaneously being immersed in special education systems that were often too fragile to provide the supports needed to succeed. As an urban teacher, I felt unable to properly articulate, much less fashion solutions to these issues; instead, I witnessed the fast-tracking of my students towards lives of intellectual underdevelopment, economic dependency, political disempowerment, and personal devastation, despite their persistent efforts to overcome these challenges. What follows are the stories of two of my former students. I include them here for their ability to demonstrate the educational complexities that are at the heart of this dissertation:

## **Trevor**

“We are broke, Black, and blind. Ain’t no one worrying about us like that.” This is how Trevor, one of the blind urban youth whom I mentored, explained the second-class positionality that he felt within the U.S. public education system—a perspective that was mirrored in the stories of dozens of blind urban youth that I met over the span of a decade. Trevor lost the remaining portion of his vision at the end of the tenth grade. Although the possibility that his eye condition could lead to total blindness was well-documented in his educational records, the revolving door of unqualified teachers of the blind that he encountered were unable to provide instruction in blindness skills.

Lacking a knowledge of braille, and unable to properly use a cane, Trevor was left essentially homebound during the peak of his youth. He became isolated, depressed, and reliant on drugs and alcohol to help him cope. The school district provided educational services in the form of weekly visits from a home teacher delivering audio taped classes. Eventually, Trevor came to perceive these educational services as a waste of his time and as an insult to his intelligence; thus, he dropped out of high school in search of a new path.

## **Maria**

I was assigned to teach Maria, a cheerful and thoughtful urban student who was at risk of failing the sixth grade. After spending time in her classroom, the problem was obvious: Maria could not see well enough to read. I consulted her Individual Education Program (IEP) to review her braille literacy goals. Instead, I found a statement explaining that she would be taught salsa dancing, a goal established by a team of education professionals, and legitimized using federal disability policy!

Further, Maria's inability to participate in class and to complete homework assignments was framed as a personal deficiency; consequently, she was diagnosed as learning disabled. After months of intense braille instruction, Maria could fully access the curricula for the first time in nearly two school years. Her grades improved quickly, leading her teacher of the blind to push for a reevaluation of the learning-disabled designation that she had been given. Unsurprisingly, no learning disability existed. Rather, she was suffering from, "ain't been taught" (Blanchett, 2009, p. 366).

### **Background/Context for the Study**

For nearly fifty years, university-based scholars, federally commissioned panels, concerned parents, and equity-minded teachers have called attention to the experiences of minority children in special education (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Studies routinely demonstrate that when compared to their White peers with disabilities, racial minorities are frequently subjected to harmful bias in the identification/evaluation procedures leading to special education placement, unqualified special educators, low-level curricula, inadequate, inappropriate, or nonexistent disability-specific services, chronic isolation from peers without disabilities, low expectations, and substandard life trajectories. The education provided to students with disabilities attending high-poverty urban schools has emerged as an issue of particular concern since the special education services available to these students are nested within broader general education systems which often feature an array of shortcomings that transcend educational settings and disability-specific service provision (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Connor, 2008).

Urban students, including those with disabilities, often negotiate schools that have long been marked by overcrowding, decaying physical structures, high teacher turnover, ability tracking, unstimulating curricula, inadequate under-funding, bureaucratic entanglements, high-stakes testing pressures, and other systemic limitations leading students towards diminished life opportunities (Kozol, 1991; Oakes, 2005). These schools are situated in densely populated areas of concentrated poverty, limiting access to nutritious food, affordable health care options, quality housing, dependable transportation, safe neighborhoods, gainful employment opportunities, and other key resources that can directly impact school achievement. “Living in poor neighborhoods over two consecutive generations reduces children’s cognitive skills by roughly eight or nine points ... roughly equivalent to missing two to four years of school” (Sharkey, 2013, p. 140).

Researchers trace many of the obstacles observable in urban schools to the social, political, economic, and historical developments of U.S. cities. More specifically, racial discrimination in housing, deindustrialization, inequitable taxing policies, limited employment prospects, inadequate public transportation, White flight, and the exit of the Black middle class have been identified as forces accelerating the erosion of U.S. cities, weakening the educational opportunities available to urban children in these regions (Anyon, 2014; Sugrue, 2005; Wilson, 2012).

Within this context, urban children with disabilities are believed to experience “double jeopardy” (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). Essentially, urban students with disabilities are vulnerable to experiencing a pronounced lack of opportunity in general education, while concurrently inheriting a legacy of

disadvantage from special education. For instance, urban students with disabilities are more likely to experience restrictive placements in special education, drop out of school, earn alternative forms of diplomas that exclude them from receiving federal financial aid, encounter harsh forms of discipline, remain underrepresented in gifted education, and become involved with the juvenile justice system (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014).

The problem for urban students with disabilities grows in complexity when disability subgroups are considered. Most of the equity-related research on behalf of urban students with disabilities involves the problem of overrepresentation of minority children in the high-incidence disability categories, including emotional and behavioral disorders, specific learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments. Students with low-incidence disabilities, including those with blindness/visual impairments, have been largely excluded from these examinations. Medically-diagnosed disabilities have been assumed to follow scientifically-based procedures, creating a narrative that largely excludes children with low-incidence disabilities from experiencing the harmful bias observable in the areas of high-incidence disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Consequently, the special education services available to visually impaired students have not undergone the types of fine-grained interrogations that have proven useful for other urban students with disabilities, even though the education of this population has been described as being in a state of crisis (Jernigan Institute, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem**

For decades, scholars have documented the consistently low workforce participation of blind individuals, concluding that only about thirty-seven percent of this

population is employed, a condition stagnating the economic, political, and social mobility of this community. Studies examining the characteristics of employed blind adults draw important connections between educational attainment and workforce participation (Connors, Curtis, Emerson & Dormitorio, 2014; Leonard, D'Allura, & Horowitz, 1999). Blind individuals with a high school diploma or who complete some college, are employed at a rate of 36%; individuals with a four-year degree are employed at a rate of 59%; individuals with a master's degree are employed at a rate of 65%; and individuals with a law degree or a doctoral degree have an employment rate of 80% (Bell & Mino, 2013). Unemployment figures by degree level for the general public include: doctoral degree 1.7% unemployed; master's degree 2.4% unemployed; Bachelor's degree 2.8% unemployed; and some college 5.0% unemployed (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017).

Consistent access to high-quality teachers of the blind emerges as a central component, especially in regards to braille literacy. In her seminal study, Ryles (1996) found that 85 percent of the employed blind adults that she surveyed used braille daily to complete work-related tasks. A subsequent investigation found that students who receive four to five hours of weekly Braille instruction in early elementary grades, evolved to possess literacy skills that were equal to or that surpassed the reading rates of sighted children (Ryles, 1999). Contemporary studies continue to demonstrate the critical linkage that braille offers to literacy across the life span (Bell & Mino, 2015). Blind students also need instruction in negotiating various indoor and outdoor environments, requiring extensive maneuvering throughout school, home, and community neighborhoods to develop the necessary skills to navigate a college campus or a place of employment.

Beyond these skills, blind students need access to state-of-the art technology, both to practice blindness-specific skills and to engage with the types of programs that are used in college, in the workplace, and in the rapidly growing area of electronic commerce.

In terms of other resources, the literature emphasizes the important role of academic advisors, career counselors, and special educators in linking students and families to blindness-specific rehabilitation programs, to internships, and to paid work experiences (Crudden, 2012). High achievement in verbal and mathematic standardized examinations during high school have been found to be predictive of later employment, underscoring the importance for providing blind students an array of rigorous college-preparatory courses (McDonnell, 2010; McDonnell & Crudden, 2009). Blind adults identify learning environments that facilitate critical thinking and problem-solving skills as fundamental components to achieving personal and professional success (Bell, Goodwin, & Singletary, 2009).

When taken together, the literature creates a portrait of the types of educational settings that can most influentially shape academic and vocational success among blind students. Within this context, the education of blind urban youth is of tremendous concern given the troubling historical, economic, and political landscapes framing urban schooling in the United States. The vast majority of urban schools have insufficient numbers of qualified special education and general education teachers, too few guidance counselors, antiquated or nonexistent technology, lower-level curricula, and various other issues that relegate students to lives of few prospects and numerous difficulties. Further, the seminal works of researchers such as Lisa Delpit (2006), Geneva Gay (2000), Angela Valenzuela (1999), and Gloria Ladson-Billings (1994) bring into focus how a culturally



relevant pedagogy is foundational to successful teaching of urban youth. Collins (2009) further details the roles of social justice educators by writing that “teachers are frontline actors negotiating the social issues of our time. Teachers are the ones whom black and brown youth turn to for guidance for upward social mobility. Teachers can be facilitators or gatekeepers of fundamental democratic ideals” (p. x).

While issues of racial and economic equity have been established as powerful forces in the education and life outcomes of urban students, the field of visual impairment has largely pursued research agendas emphasizing medical, scientific, and psychological understandings of disability (Erin & Millian, 2001). This emphasis creates a condition in which disability status eclipses other salient student characteristics, generating a diminished, one-dimensional view of the student. It also precludes a critical interrogation of broader teacher training issues, like the implications of having a primarily White, sighted, and middle class teaching force serving students from diverse disability, racial, or class backgrounds. Thus, the distinct ways in which race, poverty, disability and other student characteristics function across and within school contexts to shape educational opportunity have not been explored, making urban schools a fertile place for blind children to experience various forms of marginality.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to generate information about the provision of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. Urban teachers are central figures and key witnesses to how “the perpetual crisis of urban education” impacts blind children (Kincheloe, 2004, p. 2). Teachers of the blind are the nexus between blind students and the multiple educational, medical, political, and community-

based institutions steering the educational trajectories of this population. Thus, these teachers were well-positioned to describe the underlying factors which most influence teaching and learning in urban communities.

## **Research Design**

This dissertation employed a qualitative research design. “Qualitative studies explore attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of a number of parties involved in special education as well as the general public, and examine personal reactions to special education contexts and teaching strategies” (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Richardson, & Pugach, 2005, p. 196). This central research question guided the study: *How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools?* The following sub-questions also guided this work:

1. How do these teachers describe the educational experiences of their students?
2. What barriers to educational opportunities do these teachers identify?
3. What perceptions do these teachers have regarding the role of urban education in the life trajectories of their students?

Drawing from the frameworks of critical race theory and disability studies, this research used a case study methodology to examine the perceptions of five urban teachers of the blind regarding the educational experiences of their students, and to gather information about the general status of vision services across the districts that these teachers serve. According to Yin (2006), “the strength of the case study method is its ability to examine, in-depth, a ‘case’ within its ‘real-life’ context” (Yin, 2006, p. 111).

Purposeful sampling techniques were used to identify research participants that met the following criteria, which was developed based on the knowledge available

regarding staffing patterns in urban schools: one or more years of urban teaching experience; no restrictions on the grade(s) taught; and no specific credentialing criteria. A review of public documents was used to determine if the teacher worked in the high-poverty context that the dissertation required. In this study, urban or high-poverty urban schools are used interchangeably to describe under-resourced city schools with a majority minority school enrollment.

### **Significance of the Study**

The vast majority of equity-related educational research focuses on children in the high-incidence disability categories, which include emotional and behavioral disorders, specific learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments. While these efforts have produced important information that is useful in addressing the numerous shortcomings experienced by urban youth with disabilities, the needs of students with low-incidence disabilities remain largely unexplored. This dissertation sought to address this gap in the literature by placing race and poverty at the center of analysis, pushing the boundaries of the medical, psychological, and scientific lenses dominating the field of visual impairment towards a broader sociocultural perspective that can more fully address the changing demographics of the U.S. public education system. Further, this research sought to establish groundwork and stimulate increased interest in the schooling experiences of minority students, students with disabilities, students living in poverty, and students at the intersection of all of these identities.



## Chapter 2: A Review of the Literature

This chapter explores equity-focused literature associated with the provision of vision-related special education services in high-poverty urban schools. The scope of this review is restricted to seminal writings and research studies focusing on the contextual forces underpinning vision-related special education service provision; thus, work whose primary focus is on the individual manifestations of the medical, psychological, or scientific aspects of blindness are omitted unless the writings critically inform the topic.

I have organized this review and analysis of the literature into three sections: (a) Urban Education, (b) Urban Special Education, and (c) Challenges in the Delivery of Vision Services. The chapter will conclude with a discussion of the conceptual framework that underlies this study. The following section will describe the process that I undertook to identify and select the studies that appear in this review.

### Selection of Studies

I began by drawing from seminal writings in the field of urban education. While I was not able to locate any studies specifically linking urban education to blindness education, this dissertation assumes that the provision of vision services is influenced by the various complexities that urban education scholars identify as significant in the lives of urban teachers and their students. Key texts include *Radical Possibilities: Public Policy, Urban Education, and A New Social Movement* (Anyon, 2014) which examines the impact of macroeconomic policies on urban education, and *Holler If You Hear Me: The Education of a Teacher and His Students* by Gregory Michie (2009), for its ground-level insights on issues confronting urban educators.

To explore disability-specific topics, I read *Diversity and Visual Impairment* (Erin & Milian, 2001), which is the first and only volume to present an intersectional approach to analyzing blindness alongside other identity markers. I also used *Racial Inequity in Special Education* (Losen & Orfield, 2002), a landmark text describing the ways in which poor children of color are marginalized within special education. I also drew from *Foundations of Education* (American Foundation for the Blind, 1987; 2000), which is the primary instructional textbook used in the preparation of teachers of the blind in the United States.

I searched through the two leading peer-reviewed professional journals in the field of visual impairment—*Journal of Blindness & Visual Impairment* and *Journal of Blindness Innovation & Research*. While education-related studies frequently appear in both publications, neither of these journals exclusively focus on the education of blind students. In fact, education-focused research did not become a regular occurrence in *JVIB* until the 1960s (Erin, 2006).

I also searched the following online resources to locate studies: EBSCO, ERIC, PsycInfo, JSTOR, SocIndex, and Google Scholar. I used the following search terms along with the words visually impaired OR blind OR teacher of the visually impaired to generate relevant studies: special education services OR teacher training OR personnel preparation OR multicultural OR diversity OR teacher experiences OR urban teacher OR school context OR urban setting OR educational outcomes OR severe disabilities OR low-incidence disabilities OR racial inequities. I also combed through the references in the texts that I reviewed to locate new or recurring works. Lastly, after completing this process, I spoke with four teacher educators who had conducted diversity-focused

research in the field of blindness to discuss my findings and to identify any potential omissions from the key literature. The next section will establish the context for vision-related special education service provision by reviewing some of the aspects of the urban education scholarship that is most relevant to this study.

### **The Urban Education Landscape**

In 2002, the President's Committee on Excellence in Special Education made a critical declaration that remains of vital significance to the education of students with disabilities. The committee indicated that special education students are general education students first. This assertion firmly anchored special education services to the school context from which they originate, thereby challenging the popular notion that frames special education as a separate and distinct place from general education. About 90 percent of students with visual impairments are enrolled in public schools, with more than 63 percent of these students spending most of their school day (80 percent or more) in a general education classroom (American Printing House for the Blind, 2015; McMahon, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Given the high-levels of public school enrollment among visually impaired students, and the legal obligation that schools have for educating these students in the least restrictive environment (LRE), it is reasonable to posit that the powerful effects of school context also govern the educational opportunities available to this subgroup of urban youth. Thus, I will begin by discussing the historical emergence of urban schools, and by describing some of the relevant contemporary characteristics of urban schooling that can potentially have a bearing on the provision of special education services to students with visual impairments.

The U.S. public education system has been identified as an influential institution reproducing social inequities (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), prompting equity-focused scholars to construct a substantial literature base built upon alternative epistemological, theoretical, and methodological traditions designed to elucidate and disrupt the school inequities facing minority children (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In high-poverty urban settings, school inequities have been documented across several dimensions including school finance (Kozol, 2005), school segregation (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014), access to quality teachers (Ingersoll, 2001), and the achievement gap (Lee, 2002). These issues, and other pivotal factors, are linked to complex historical, economic, and social dynamics, interacting to create a climate of substandard educational offerings for children in urban communities (Anyon, 2014; Sugrue, 2005).

Yet, the challenges facing high-poverty urban schools are commonly disconnected from the architecture of inequity framing the urban education landscape. Key occurrences, including White flight, federally sponsored highway construction, manufacturing decline, and the relocation of industries to the suburbs fostered the movement of a strong tax base for good public schools to the suburbs, leaving urban schools bereft of financial resources and middle-class students. Additionally, a history of race neutral policies, Supreme Court decisions terminating urban desegregation initiatives, and persistent discrimination in housing, accelerated the increased isolation of racial/ethnic minorities, leaving Black and Latino students to absorb the greatest proportions of educational and social inequities. Orfield and Lee (2007) find that nationally, the average White student attends schools where 77 percent of student enrollment is White -- Black and Latino students attend schools where more than half of



the total student population is Black or Latino. A more recent study by Orfield and Frankenberg (2014) reveals that isolation by race and poverty continues to be an emblematic feature of urban schooling, with Latino segregation increasing in intensity and frequency.

An analysis from the Annenberg Institute for School Reform (2012) builds upon the substantial knowledge base documenting the detrimental impact of segregation on the life trajectories of marginalized students. The authors found that in New York City neighborhoods where 100 percent of residents are Black or Latino, less than ten percent of students graduate ready for college; meanwhile, in Manhattan neighborhoods with the highest college-readiness rates, less than 10 percent of the population is Black or Latino. Thus, the underlying forces upholding residential segregation and generational poverty remain of profound contemporary importance in relation to the role that urban schools continue to fulfill in the overall task of educating children in the United States.

Urban schools enroll about one-third of the total US student population, inextricably linking the academic fates of urban students to our national welfare and to our global positioning (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). About 40 percent of urban students attend a high-poverty school, compared to 14 percent of students in rural schools, 17 percent of students in suburban schools, and 19 percent of students in town schools (NCES, 2015). According to Kincheloe (2007), urban schools exhibit key architectural and demographic differences that make the challenges that children and teachers in these spaces negotiate distinct from those encountered by individuals populating rural or suburban schools.

Urban schools tend to operate in densely populated regions of concentrated poverty, serve greater proportions of racial/ethnic minorities, educate larger numbers of immigrant and English-language learners, and exhibit substantial student mobility. Despite the implementation and the attempts of numerous reforms and targeted resources from the federal government via Title I, high-poverty urban schools have been shown to possess a number of shortcomings, both in their physical structures, and in the limited human and material resources available to them (Payne, 2008). They hire greater proportions of unqualified or inexperienced teachers, offer narrow curricular options that often lack rigor and cultural relevance, and operate under climates of low-expectations (Lleras, 2008; Michie, 2009; Theoharis, Anderson, Alonso, & Su, 2008).

For urban students, these conditions are associated with lower test scores, harsh discipline, higher dropout rates, incarceration, and chronic unemployment. Kozol (2003) provides one example of the subtle types of classroom-level interactions that can perpetuate underachievement or place limitations on the aspirations of urban students. He observed several high-poverty urban classrooms fostering an orientation towards lower-level service sector jobs among elementary age children. In one classroom, posters for JC Penny, Wal-Mart, Kmart, and Sears decorated the walls. A classroom aide explained, “The children are learning to pretend that they’re cashiers” (p. 53).

Another unique characteristic of contemporary urban schooling involves the social representation of these schools in the public eye. Unlike schools in other locales, urban schools are disadvantaged by social representations over-emphasizing student chaos, teacher apathy, and administrator incompetence, perpetuating a narrative that places harsh and decontextualized solutions at the forefront of reform. Widespread

reform measures visible in high-poverty urban settings include zero-tolerance policies, increased testing, heightened surveillance of teachers, intensified scrutiny of teacher education programs, and the reallocation of funding towards charter, magnet, or transfer programs. Cann (2015) found that “supplying high-poverty urban schools with well-meaning, less expensive, under qualified and inexperienced White teachers” (p. 288), also represents a popular reform effort that is further normalized via Teach for America and other programs targeting hard-to-staff schools. Ladson-Billings (2015) notes that these types of programs “make big names for the adults and leave children virtually in the same place they started” (p. 42). These social representations have also gained increased visibility with the national release of several films. *Freedom Writers* (2007), *Dangerous Minds* (1995), and *The Substitute* (1996) are just a few examples of mainstream films promulgating inaccurate and toxic images about urban schooling.

Thus far, I have briefly described the historical emergence of urban schools and the distinct demographic, structural, and social characteristics that fundamentally shape teaching and learning in these settings. The research indicates that despite some outstanding exceptions (Kirp, 2013), high-poverty urban schools exhibit complex structural racial and income inequities, unique student demographics, and difficult working conditions, all of which aggressively derail the dreams of low-income minority youth, extinguish the enthusiasm of teachers, and thwart multiple reform efforts. Students with disabilities, their specialized teachers, and the various strands of service provision constituting special education are also influenced by these contextual features. However, there are additional factors that are specific to urban special education that can potentially leave students with disabilities vulnerable to educational mistreatment and to long-term

hardship. In the following pages, I describe some of the critical issues that have been cataloged in the urban special education research base.

### **Urban Special Education**

A growing body of equity-focused studies centering on special education find that the educational trajectories of minority students with disabilities are embedded within the broader themes of racism, segregation, and discrimination that are associated with schooling in the U.S. (Connor, 2007; Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Cuadrado, & Chung, 2008), and that the negative outcomes associated with these conditions are of intensified potency in high-poverty urban settings (Blanchett, 2009; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Historical accounts cataloging the evolution of urban schools demonstrate the implementation of social and educational reforms institutionalizing discriminatory schooling practices, casting poor, minority, immigrant, and disabled students as anti-intellectual and as well suited for subordinate roles in the work force (Anyon, 1997). Through the establishment of graded classrooms, standard curricula, and the implementation of exit examinations determining grade promotion, urban schools constructed benchmarks of failure and success founded upon Eurocentric, rigid, and bureaucratic mechanisms that pushed minority children, many of whom were deemed disabled, out of school (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001).

Urban reform efforts stemming from the social efficiency movement also affirmed the second-class status of these children in the public eye, clearing the path for industrial/vocational education, intelligence testing, ability tracking, separate classes for students with disabilities, and eugenics to leave their mark on urban schools (Free, 2012; Ravage, 2000). At the time, these mechanisms were devised to sort students according to

their perceived value to the developing industrial economy; however, more modern forms of assessments and evaluations continue to direct urban students with disabilities to the second-class pathways that were deemed suitable by the prevailing social attitudes and scientifically biased tools of the past (Hehir, Figueroa, Gamm, Katzman, Gruner, Karger, & Hernandez, 2005). To counteract the demotion and exclusion of students with disabilities from meaningful participation in the U.S. public education system, people with disabilities and their allies mobilized to secure the right to a free and appropriate education for children with disabilities through the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, presently known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This movement towards inclusion took inspiration and legal know-how from the on-going civil rights movements that sought to equalize educational opportunities for minority children (Leiter, 2012).

The interrelationship between race/ethnicity, social class, language, and disability status remain of critical educational relevance to contemporary urban education. Yet, as Blanchett (2009) notes, “despite the fact that African American students and other students of color, students labeled as having disabilities, and poor students in urban schools are indisputably linked in terms of the quality of schooling they have experienced, few attempts have been made to examine the relationship between urban education and special education” (p. 371). One area that has received joint attention from both urban education and special education scholars involves the long-standing problem of disproportionality, which Waitoller, Artiles, and Cheney (2010) define as “unequal proportions of culturally diverse students in special education programs” (p. 29).

A series of equity-focused studies identified and proposed explanations for the overrepresentation and underrepresentation of minority students in special education programs, most of which primarily studied the placement and treatment of Black students with disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn 1968; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Research examining the experiences of Latino students with disabilities finds that Latinos and English Language Learners (ELL) tend to be underrepresented in national portraits of disproportionality; however, considerable variations exist at the district and state levels, demonstrating both overrepresentation and underrepresentation (Artiles, Sullivan, Waitoller, & Neal, 2010).

Disproportionality literature brought into focus a range of issues in the high-incidence disability categories of emotional and behavioral disorders, specific learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments, which collectively account for more than half of all U.S. students with disabilities (NCES, 2015). The emergence of disproportionality scholarship, which is often traced back to the work produced by Dunn (1968), is of significance for at least two reasons. First, it triggered a closer examination of special education processes, pedagogy, policies, and outcomes, and how these aspects of service provision relate to the quality and availability of specialized services for minority students with disabilities. Second, disproportionality scholarship revealed that special education functioned as a modern vehicle for the continued segregation of minority children, a pattern that is especially pronounced in high-poverty urban schools.

While the contributions related to disproportionality research and the increased dialogues surrounding broader special education processes have been transformative for a large segment of urban students, students in the categories of low-incidence disabilities

have not gained equal educational benefit from these inquiries. Examples of low incidence disability categories include hearing impairments, orthopedic impairments, traumatic brain injuries, and visual impairments. Disproportionality research tends to advance the notion that children with medically-diagnosed disabilities like visual impairment are largely exempt from experiencing the harmful bias observable in the more subjective high-incidence disability categories of emotional and behavioral disorders, specific learning disabilities, and speech and language impairments (Donovan & Cross, 2002). The literature suggests that the growth of equity-focused special education scholarship involving the visually impaired student population has potentially been stunted by the notion that low-incidence disabilities are less likely to experience personal bias within the special education identification and placement process. The field of visual impairment has also contributed to an incomplete portrait of urban special education service provision by leaving equity-focused topics such as disproportionality and the equitable distribution of quality disability services largely unexplored and under-theorized across educational contexts and among various subgroups (Erin & Milian, 2001).

Much of the literature in the field of visual impairment emphasizes a scientific, medical, or psychological perspective on blindness, creating a lack of foundational knowledge describing how sociocultural issues manifest themselves both in institutional settings and within individuals to shape educational experiences for blind youth and their teachers (Erin & Milian, 2001).

Equity researchers position historical, cultural, political, economic, and individual belief structures at the center of analysis, suggesting that a failure to attend to these

dynamics contributes to the educational disparities experienced by students whose racial, ethnic, class, language, or ability status place them at the epicenter of school dysfunction (Anyon, 2014; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Lareau, 2003; Sleeter, 2010). The literature base informing the field of visual impairment is largely absent of research that displays these equity-related characteristics, prompting my use of the term diversity or multicultural to describe the orientation of the writings evaluated in this review. Works that consider the social and historical positioning of students, families, and teachers, the power dynamics between these groups, and the relationships that these groups have with public institutions remain largely unexplored. Topics that are of profound educational relevance to teaching poor and minority students, including social class, the geographic location of schools, teacher distribution patterns, and the achievement gap have been under-researched and under-theorized to evaluate their impact on the educational opportunities available to students with blindness/visual impairments. Most of the equity-focused research that does exist is presented within a blind-sighted binary framework, cataloging the oppression that blind individuals experience across public institutions (Ferguson, 2001).

At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Education does not gather key data that is critical for undertaking equity-focused research. The following are some of the gaps in essential knowledge that I discovered in the writing of this proposal:

- 1) *Inconsistent Enrollment Figures*: Students with disabilities comprise nearly 13 percent of total public school enrollment in the U.S.; a percentage that includes 6.4 million students ages three to 21. Students who are blind/visually impaired make up less than one percent of this figure, with a reported enrollment of 28,882



(U.S. Department of Education, 2015). The U.S. Department of Education only allows for the counting of students under one disability category, even if the student possesses additional disabilities. Thus, this process is believed to produce an underestimation of the actual number of blind students in US classrooms (Ferrell, 2007; Youth and Vision Loss Coalition of New York City, 2014).

Another estimate of the blind student population is available via the American Printing House for the Blind (APH), which requires each state to undertake an annual census of their blind student population in exchange for funding through the federal Quota Program. The amount awarded is based on the number of students having a medical diagnosis of legal blindness, including students with additional disabilities. In the 2014-2015 school year, the APH census registered over sixty thousand students with blindness/visual impairments, more than twice the figure calculated by the US Department of Education. The Youth and Vision Loss Coalition of New York City examined the impact of this counting process by analyzing the enrollment numbers of visually impaired students throughout six school years, comparing the number of children counted by the state of New York to the number of students registered by APH, finding that the average percentage of blind students underserved via this counting process stood at about 298%.

- 2) *National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)*: Scores from the NAEP are widely considered a reliable indicator of the achievement gap among racial/ethnic groups. Assessment results are also used to examine academic performance between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers. Students with visual impairments are not included in this vital assessment, or in the assessment

focusing on the twenty-one largest urban school districts in the country. A representative from the National Center for Education Statistics explained that sixty-five students are needed to constitute a sample within a single district, and that districts have insufficient numbers of visually impaired students to fulfill this requirement (personal correspondence). Yet, the public school enrollment of visually impaired students stands at nearly 90 percent (APH, 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2015), raising important questions regarding the academic performance and perceived value of these students across local, state, and federal educational entities.

Other key characteristics of the blind/visually impaired student population remain unknown, such as enrollment figures in the National School Lunch Program (commonly used to generate poverty-related data), information on the percentage of this population who are also English-language learners, and figures on secondary disability-status. Essentially, the invisibility that visually impaired students experience, coupled with the relatively small group of scholars conducting blindness education research with an equity orientation, leave critical gaps in the theoretical and pedagogical knowledge that teacher candidates encounter as they prepare to enter US classrooms that are marked by increased racial/ethnic and economic diversity.

The literature suggests that equity-focused scholars in urban special education and in blindness education are the two groups who represent the most likely sources for generating research-based initiatives to identify any potential inequities in the provision of vision services in the high-poverty urban context. However, despite the existence of studies signaling the presence of unequal conditions in the field of visual impairment,

neither group has undertaken a critical analysis to better understand the underlying issues shaping special education service provision in high-poverty urban schools. This is further exacerbated by the scant information available at the federal level regarding students with visual impairments. In the following section, I will outline some of the areas that the literature identifies as barriers in the education of visually impaired students.

### **Challenges in the Delivery of Vision Special Education Services**

Scholars in the field of visual impairment have identified teacher shortages, teacher demographics, and teacher knowledge regarding issues of diversity as factors impacting the provision of special education services to visually impaired students. These conditions have not undergone analysis to better understand their educational relevance across urban educational settings; however, I include them here because they have emerged as problematic in urban schools, and most acutely, throughout the U.S. special education system.

#### **Teacher Shortages**

Research has brought to the forefront the persistent challenges that high-poverty urban schools experience in attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers, a condition that is especially pronounced in the area of special education (Darling-Hammond & Sykes, 2003; Mason-Williams, 2015). For instance, in the 2013-2014 school year, forty-seven states reported a shortage of special education teachers, a problem facing ninety percent of urban districts (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2015). Teacher distribution patterns are also a significant area of concern since highly-qualified teachers tend to teach in well-resourced

districts, leaving newer or less qualified teachers to work in low-performing, poorly funded urban schools (Mason-Williams, 2015).

Teacher shortages have been a sustained and well-documented problem in the field of visual impairment for several decades (Corn & Silberman, 1999; Silberman, Ambrose-Zaken, Corn, Trief, 2004; Silberman, Corn, & Sowell, 1989; Silberman, Corn, & Sowell, 1996). Data generated by Kirchner and Diament (1999) represents the most frequently cited estimates regarding the population of visually impaired students and available teachers. The research, at that time, indicates that U.S. public schools enrolled 93,600 students with visual impairments (including students with multiple disabilities and deaf-blind students), and that 11,700 teachers were needed to provide instruction to this population. The number of available teachers was about 6,700. More recently, the collective efforts of teacher preparation programs have resulted in an average of 250 graduates a year who were qualified to teach this population (Corn & Spungin, 2002; Ferrell, 2007). This figure suggests that teacher shortages are likely to continue. Information about teacher shortages by geographical location is not reported by visual impairment scholars or by the US Department of Education.

A critical factor contributing to teacher shortages in the field of visual impairment relates to the status of teacher education. There are fewer than thirty university-level programs training teachers of the blind in the U.S.. It is typical for one or two individuals in each program to be responsible for the administrative and instructional aspects of teacher preparation; consequently, producing research, publishing, and generating funding for program expansion does not often occur (Corn & Ferrell, 2000; Corn & Spungin, 2002). Projections indicate that seventy percent of the teacher educators who

staff these programs are either in the process of retiring, or will soon retire. An average of four students graduate each year with a doctorate in visual impairment (Summers, Leigh, & Arnold, 2006). In the absence of a robust research base, teacher educators, teacher candidates, practicing teachers, and others involved in the education of visually impaired students are left to draw from a knowledge base advancing “best practices that are more philosophical than proven, more descriptive than empirical, and more antiquated than modern” (Ferrell, 2007, p. 2).

In this context, where the teacher shortage is severe, where the number of teacher educators is dwindling, and where a weakening research base characterizes professional practice, goals related to developing a diverse population of visual impairment professionals have not been pursued aggressively. However, the need to attract larger numbers of culturally diverse teachers and teacher educators has been identified as a consistent area of concern (Mason, Davidson, & McNerney, 2000; Milian & Ferrell, 1998). Given the importance that teacher characteristics have received in relation to urban schooling, the next section will describe teacher demographics in the field of visual impairment.

### **Teacher Demographics**

Studies examining diversity in the special education work force conclude that the pool of culturally diverse teachers is highly limited and projected to diminish (Laudan & Loprest, 2012; Tyler, Yzquierdo, Lopez-Reyna, & Flippin, 2004). Cultural differences between teachers and students have resulted in the misdiagnosis of disabilities, incorrect special education referrals, and inappropriate services for students with disabilities (Gay, 2002; Laudan & Loprest, 2012; Palawat & May, 2011). To date, there is no singular

resource or consistent method for tracking demographic information about the specialized professionals teaching students with visual impairments. However, some studies do shed light on this topic, revealing the presence of the same problematic demographic trends observable in the general U.S. teaching force, which is predominantly “monolithic, monocultural, and monolingual” (Nieto, 2005, p. 21).

A survey of personnel preparation programs in the field of blindness found that between 1962 and 1983, eighty-three percent of teachers of the blind were female, and ninety-two percent were White (Head, 1987). Milian and Ferrell (1998) found similar trends in their survey of 361 blindness professionals across seven states, reporting that 84.2 percent of their respondents were White, 5.5 percent Hispanic, 1.4 percent African American, and 0.9 percent Asian. 88.8 percent were female. More than half of the group had not been trained to work with culturally/linguistically diverse student populations. Subsequent studies centering on teachers report similar demographic trends.

These figures are important because they represent a cultural, racial, and social mismatch between the teaching force and the US. student population—a gulf that has been linked to various educational shortcomings for urban students. While a host of social, economic, and political reforms are needed to fully address the dismal educational conditions facing many minority students, including those with disabilities, the implementation of culturally relevant pedagogies has emerged as one powerful vehicle to redirect the education of these children.

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) has been described as “using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to, and effective” (Gay, 2002,

p. 31). In other writings, Gay (2013) further explains that CRT is a means for improving achievement of diverse learners by teaching through their own cultural filters. Ladson-Billings (1995) uses the term cultural relevant teaching, which encompasses the following facets: diverse students must experience academic success; they must develop or maintain connections with their primary cultural heritages; and they must learn to critique, challenge, and transform inequities, injustices, oppressions, exploitations, power, and privilege. Common themes across culturally relevant literature involve the restructuring of attitudes and beliefs, confronting resistance, centering culture, and establishing pedagogical connections.

While culturally focused frameworks have been established as priorities in the training of general educators, the field of special education has seen a slower integration of CRT philosophy and practice (Gay, 2013). Erin and Milian (2001) recognize the need for culturally relevant pedagogies in the training of blindness personnel. Students with visual impairments reflect the wide-range of cultural, economic, and linguistic diversity that is observed in the general student population. Studies suggest that teachers of the blind lack the professional training and personal comfort to address the needs of students from diverse backgrounds (Chen, 2003; Correa-Torres and Durando, 2013; Milian & Ferrell, 1998). The following section examines these findings.

### **Teacher Knowledge and Visually Impaired Students from Diverse Backgrounds**

Over the past two decades, researchers have begun to attend to the experiences of teachers of the blind working with diverse student populations. The subgroups that are most often studied include: Latino students, English learners and students described as culturally/linguistically diverse. In terms of the racial/ethnic composition of the visually

impaired public school student population, the break down for the 2014-2015 school year is as follows: White students (15,413); Hispanic students (6,162); Black students (4,370); Asian (1,10); students of two or more races (707); American Indian/Alaska Native students (357); and Pacific Islanders (119) (NCES, 2015).

The difficulties for visually impaired students from culturally or linguistically diverse (CLD) backgrounds can begin in infancy (Kesikta & Kuram, 2009). Chen (2003) identifies barriers to the early detection of visual impairments among infants and toddlers from CLD backgrounds. Issues that can arise include: access to financial resources for obtaining medical attention; possessing the persistence and knowledge to negotiate complex health institutions; and establishing relationships with social service providers. Further, families who are unable to speak English are most vulnerable to not having a child's visual disability diagnosed.

Much of the literature examining the perceptions, competencies, and knowledge that teachers of the blind apply to their work with ELL students suggests a profound need for increased training to work with this population. Urban teachers of the blind are likely to provide instruction to greater proportions of English learners. ELL students comprise an average of 14 percent of city enrollments, ranging from 9.4 percent in small cities to 16.7 percent in large cities; in contrast, the figures for midsize suburban areas are 5.9 percent, and 8.9 percent for larger suburban regions (NCES, 2015).

Milian and Ferrell (1998) conducted a comprehensive multistate needs assessment to identify the greatest challenges encountering teachers of the blind serving ELL students. Three hundred sixty-one teachers from California, Arizona, Colorado, Florida, New Mexico, New York, and Texas participated. Forty-five percent of the respondents



had not received training to work with ELL students. For those teachers who did obtain training, the most commonly reported source was via a school in-service workshop, or by taking a university course. Teachers recognized the importance of possessing competencies in the area of CLD students, but consistently reported that their current skill set was inadequate. Further, Milian and Ferrell (1998) noted that teachers identified working with families, accessing braille materials in alternative languages, and lack of bilingual support for conducting assessments and providing instruction as some of their greatest challenges.

Correa-Torres and Durando (2011) modified the survey used by Milian and Ferrell (1998) to gather data from 204 teachers of the blind. The authors were interested in learning about the training needs of these teachers in relation to the work they undertake with CLD students with visual impairments. The research also sought to establish priorities related to the training needs of vision professionals working with CLD students to improve teacher education. Eighty-nine of the two hundred and four (43.6 percent) teachers served urban schools, but information was not disaggregated to elucidate differences across school locales. The average caseload of each teacher contained one-third of CLD students.

In terms of recommendations for teacher preparation programs, the respondents noted training in culturally responsive teaching, instructional resources, strategies for working with CLD families, the need for a methods course emphasizing cross-cultural communication skills, techniques for working with interpreters, and increased practicum opportunities as the leading recommendations for teacher education in visual impairment. These findings suggest that urban teachers of the blind are likely to lack access to the

professional tools or culturally relevant teaching strategies that could help them meet the needs of their CLD students.

In another study relevant to urban teachers of the blind, Topper and Rosenblum (2013) conducted an online survey to gather information about the perceptions that teachers of the blind have regarding their preparation to teach visually impaired students who are learning English, and about their knowledge of materials and strategies to facilitate learning for this population. A total of 66 teachers from the US and Canada completed the survey. Seventy-four percent of the respondents did not take any courses addressing teaching ELL with visual impairments. Thirty percent of the teachers did not feel qualified to meet the educational needs of ELL students, indicating an insufficient knowledge regarding materials and methods, and a lack of knowledge about the native language spoken by students and families as barriers. Two-thirds of the respondents felt qualified to meet the educational needs of English learners with visual impairments. However, the authors question this finding, positing that the self-selection process likely drew interest from teachers who are more experienced with ELL students.

The literature also included Latino students with visual impairments, who constitute a growing proportion of urban students (Orfield & Frankenberg, 2014). Milian (2001) investigated schools' efforts to involve families of Latino students with visual impairments in various school-related activities. One hundred and eight families completed surveys. The findings showed that parents were not asked to volunteer in the school, did not receive home visits from school personnel, and did not provide guidance on teaching self-care/self-advocacy skills to their children. Further, parents felt that school supports were made available in the early grades, but that services for their

children diminished in the middle school and high school grades. The greater number of years that a family has resided in the US was associated with greater dissatisfaction with the communication that a school provides families, perhaps suggesting that the longer a family is in the US, the greater knowledge they acquire regarding the responsibilities that a school has towards their child with a disability.

While the aforementioned studies generate important knowledge about both the challenges and the range of strategies that can help circumvent common issues in teaching minority students with visual impairments, the knowledge base on these topics is narrow, both in terms of the amount of available publications, and in the topics addressed. The emphasis is primarily placed on the communicative and instructional aspects of work with diverse students. There is minimal recognition of the unique social and historical positioning of minority students within the US public education system. Harry and Klingner (2014) explain that the term culturally and linguistically diverse students, which is frequently used throughout the visual impairment literature, obscures the power differentials that exist at the intersection of race, language, or culture. Thus, there is much potential for developing multidisciplinary inquiries that acknowledge the existence and interactions of social dynamics and their possible impact to school context and personal characteristics. In the following section, I discuss both the literature base and the personal experiences that constitute the conceptual approach I will apply to this proposed study.

### **Introduction to the Conceptual Framework**

This section will describe the conceptual framework guiding my examination of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. According to Maxwell

(2013), the conceptual framework can be understood as an embodiment of the systems of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories supporting and informing the research. My conceptual approach to examining vision special education services draws from critical race theory and from disability studies, recently integrated to create Dis/Ability Critical Studies Theory (DisCrit; Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2013; Connor, Ferri, & Annamma, 2016). However, my conceptions are also informed by the relationships that I established with a group of blind urban youth that I mentored and taught over the span of a decade.

Now in their early adulthoods, the social locations of these young people, and their relationships to public institutions, remain salient in the context of their educational trajectories. Before delving into theory, I share Mario's story as it has shaped my understanding of special education service provision in high-poverty urban settings:

I began mentoring Mario the summer he graduated from the eighth grade. Mario lived in one of the most racially segregated and economically disenfranchised regions of the city. He possessed a degenerative retinal disorder that would result in total blindness; consequently, his mother advocated for vision special education services beginning in the first grade.

Unlike the other students in the city, who underwent an application process to seek admission into a high school reflecting their interests, Mario and the other blind students in the district were funneled into the vocational high school that housed the special education program for visually impaired students. Although Mario had requested enrollment in the college track, course availability was limited, and he was placed on a

waiting list. Eventually, Mario was tracked into the food services program, where he remained for his entire high school career.

In possession of a high school diploma, and eager to contribute to his family, Mario applied for a position at the fast food restaurant that employed one of his friends. He did not disclose his vision loss to the hiring manager because he feared that knowledge about his disability would prevent him from becoming employed. Unable to see the print on the job application, Mario excused himself to the bathroom, where his friend waited to assist him with the paperwork.

Mario was hired; unfortunately, he worked for only two days before being terminated. Mario gave back incorrect change, could not see if food was properly cooked, could not detect if surfaces were clean, and could not work the late shift because he had not been taught to use a cane. His neighborhood had limited public transportation services, essentially trapping him into a cycle of chronic unemployment and despair that would prove nearly impossible to escape.

## **Reflection**

Early in my doctoral training, I ran across the article “A Retrospective Examination of Urban Education from Brown to the Resegregation of African Americans in Special Education- It is Time to Go for Broke” (Blanchett, 2009). Initially, I was energized by the spirited and action-oriented tone I saw reflected in the piece: “It is time to go for broke...doing whatever it takes to shine the brightest lights on educational inequities experienced by poor children, African American and other children of color, children identified with disabilities, and children affected by the intersection of all of these issues” (p. 385).

Later, this work helped me make sense of the patterns of underachievement and lack of opportunity that I observed in Mario's life—all of which seemed critically connected to urban special education, urban education, and to various inequities in urban regions. As I developed my conceptual lens, I could trace my theoretical and methodological approaches to this piece and to other publications that question how social processes and structural inequities relate to school configurations and to the distribution of educational opportunities (Blanchett, Mumford, & Beachum, 2005; Connor, 2014; Ferri, 2008). In the following section, I expand upon these notions by describing the context for my conceptual framework.

### **Context for the Conceptual Framework**

In *The Miner's Canary: Enlisting Race, Resisting Power, Transforming Democracy*, Guinier and Torres (2003) use the metaphor of the canary and the coal mine to call for a reconceptualization and a new response to enduring racial inequities. As the metaphor goes, the respiratory distress of a canary alerts miners to the presence of dangerous toxins in the coal mine-- similar to the ways in which the authors believe that the existence of structural inequities signals the presence of broader social issues threatening the collective well-being of all individuals, not just the canary. This metaphor has also been used to frame the numerous structural and cultural challenges facing black males, undocumented youth, and special education students in the US public education system (Noguera, 2008; Waitoller, Artiles, & Cheney, 2010). Regarding the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, Waitoller and colleagues posit that patterns of disproportionality in special education represent the canary's attempt to "warn us of potential unequal distributions of access to opportunities and

participation in society that might result from inadequate use of educational practices” (p. 29). These scholars call for a situated analysis of the coalmine, urging for an interrogation of the policies and practices of educational institutions and their possible relationship to the differential school outcomes observable among student subgroups.

These inquiries, along with similar efforts across various branches of education research (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Connor, 2008; Harry & Klingner, 2014) are significant because they represent a departure from the epistemological, theoretical, and methodological traditions that have long pathologized, undermined, or omitted minority communities in the professional literature. These deficit-oriented frames are especially evident in disability-related research. Schroder (2010) explains, “Research related to blindness has had a long history of imprecise, over-general design rooted in stereotype and tradition yielding dubious outcomes” (p. 2).

In an effort to construct a multidimensional knowledge base that both acknowledges and centers the varied historical, social, and political locations that individuals with disabilities negotiate, an increasing number of scholars and activists have engaged in multidisciplinary approaches utilizing diverse research orientations to reframe disability issues across settings, including public education. DisCrit theory (Annamma et al., 2013) has recently emerged as a novel analytic tool integrating perspectives from Critical Race Theory (CRT) and from Disability Studies (DS). In the next section, I will provide a sketch of CRT and DS, describing both their contributions to DisCrit, and the possible tensions that may develop from their partnership.

## **Critical Race Theory and Disability Studies**

Since the inception of the U.S. public education system, schools have systemically instituted practices advancing the marginalization, oppression, and exclusion of minority students (Anderson, 1988; MacDonald, 2004; Nielsen, 2013). In response to these institutional conditions, and motivated by socio/political civil rights movements, scholars established Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Disability Studies (DS), with each discipline forging alternative lenses from which to examine and counteract school inequities. Foundational to each movement is the belief that race and disability are social constructs embodying political, historical, and economic meaning—not something merely “bred into the bone” (Davis, p. 279).

In the context of schooling, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) ferried CRT from the field of law to the field of education to “uncover or decipher the social-structural and cultural significance of race in education” (p. 50). DS scholars also problematized the positioning of students with disabilities in schools; however, critiques are most leveled upon special education research, practice, and policy for their subscription to positivism, which predominantly frames disability within the boundaries of charity, science, medicine, and psychology (Connor, Gabel, Gallagher, & Morton, 2008). “Special education is neither simply a set of services for students with particular learning needs nor is it a neutral place to serve these students. Instead, special education must be seen as a dubious mechanism for the maintenance of an exclusionary general education system” (Ferri, 2008, p. 420). As Linton (2006) argues, “special education is not a solution to the problem of disability, it is the problem” (p. 161).



In terms of methodology, both CRT and DS scholars employ stories and personal narratives, encouraging traditionally silenced voices to engage in the act of “naming one’s own reality” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 57). According to Solorzano and Yosso (2002), storytelling can counteract majoritarian methodology which “relies on stock stereotypes that covertly and overtly link people of color, women of color, and poverty with bad, while emphasizing that White, middle to upper-class people embody all that is good” (p. 29).

Both CRT and DS began in the late 1990s. In the decades following their development, each field has separately, and at times jointly, approached some of the most troubling educational issues, including the achievement gap, the school to prison pipeline, the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, and the preparation of general education and special education teachers (Connor & Valle, 2010; Fenton, 2013; Howard, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Prior to the formal introduction of DisCrit, researchers had limited options in terms of the analytical tools to concurrently study the dual roles of race and disability—leading to some tensions between the two fields. Disability Studies was critiqued for excluding race, prompting Bell (2006) to describe the field as “White disability studies” (as cited in Davis, 2013). Further, CRT scholars have “mistakenly conceived of disability as a biological category, as an immutable and pathological abnormality” (Erevelles & Minear, 2013, p. 390). Thus, neither discipline has fully succeeded in attending to the concurring roles of race and disability, despite their long-standing relationship in educational arenas. Next, I will turn to an analysis of the inaugural piece that established a theoretical linkage between CRT and DS.

## **DisCrit Theory**

In 2013, the article “Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/ability” appeared in *Race, Ethnicity, and Education*, proposing a new theoretical framework that would permit a dual analysis of both identity markers. As articulated by the authors, “a DisCrit Theory in education is a framework that theorizes about the ways in which race, racism, dis/ability, and ableism are built into the interactions, procedures, discourses, and institutions of education, which affect students of color with dis/abilities qualitatively differently than White students with dis/abilities” (Annamma et al., 2013). The following foundational tenets are proposed:

1. DisCrit focuses on ways that the forces of racism and ableism circulate interdependently, often in neutralized and invisible ways, to uphold notions of normalcy;
2. DisCrit values multidimensional identities, and troubles single notions of identity such as race, dis/ability, class, gender, sexuality, etc;
3. DisCrit emphasizes the social constructions of race and dis/ability and yet recognizes the material and psychological impacts of being labeled raced or dis/abled, which sets one outside of the western cultural norms;
4. DisCrit privileges voices of marginalized populations traditionally not acknowledged within research;
5. DisCrit considers legal and historical aspects of race and dis/ability and considers how both have been used separately and together to deny the rights of some citizens;

6. DisCrit recognizes Whiteness and Ability as property, and that gains for people labeled with dis/abilities have largely been made as the result of interest convergence of White, middle-class citizens; and
7. DisCrit requires activism and supports all forms of resistance. (Annamma et al., 2013, p. 12)

The authors next address some of the possible tensions between CRT and DS. In the context of race, the long-standing relationship connecting disability to notions of deviance and unintelligence is presented as a potential motivation for the rejection of disability designations among communities of color. Rather than subscribing to the social construction of disability, marginalized communities are assumed to rely on “hegemonic notions of normality viewing dis/ability as purely a biological fact that is apolitical, asocial, and ahistorical” (p. 19).

In terms of disability, the authors reject the notions of essentialism that are visible in DS scholarship. Instead, they seek to problematize the idea that disability encompasses a universal experience, or that disability represents a primary feature of personhood. They contend that the interrelationship between cultural context, social class, race, gender, and other identity markers make the experience of disability a distinct phenomenon. The assumption that all types of oppression are manifested equivalently is also framed as counterproductive to a DisCrit framework. “To be a woman is not equal to being Black, to be a Black woman is not equal to being a White woman, and to be a Black woman with a dis/ability is different than being a White woman with a dis/ability” (p. 20).

While DisCrit is still in its infancy, it is supported by two well-established theoretical perspectives that have been instrumental tools for uncovering and

counteracting the educational injustices facing students from diverse racial/ethnic and ability backgrounds. Further, the original article that formed a theoretical linkage between CRT and DS was recently expanded into a volume-- *Dis/ability Critical Race Studies (DisCrit): Theorizing at the Intersections of Race and Dis/ability* (Annamma, Connor, & Ferri, 2016), affirming the need and demonstrating the varied applications for this framework.

In terms of this study, DisCrit will be employed to examine the processes underlying vision services in high-poverty urban schools. Although issues of race and ability are deeply nested within urban education policies and practices, there is a dearth of knowledge on how these topics potentially relate to the education of blind urban youth. DisCrit presents an opportunity to explore vision special education services within their corresponding historical, political, social, and economic contexts.

## **Conclusion**

This review of the literature examined and analyzed selected studies in the areas of urban education and urban special education. I also featured studies that were specific to the education of students with visual impairments, detailing the current state of service provision to this population. Issues encompassing the topics of teacher shortages, teacher demographics, and teacher knowledge related to the education of visually impaired students from diverse backgrounds each emerged as salient.

When taken together, the literature demonstrates a need for increased collaboration between equity-focused scholars, and a need for the application of diverse epistemological, theoretical, and methodological approaches to better encompass the overlapping complexities visible in the high-poverty urban context. Research linkages

between urban education, special education, and blindness education were not evident in the literature. Thus, the application of a DisCrit theoretical framework presents an opportunity to capture some of the unexplored nuances in the educational experiences of blind urban youth. The next chapter will describe my research design.

## Chapter 3: Research Methods

This collective case study examined the perceptions of teachers of the blind to generate information about the provision of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. Teachers of the blind are the nexus between blind students and the multiple educational, medical, political, and community-based institutions steering the educational trajectories of this population; thus, they were well positioned to provide valuable insights into a topic that has received limited consideration across urban education, special education, and blindness education. As outlined in Chapter One, the following central research question guided this study: *How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools?* The sub-questions guiding this study were:

1. How do these teachers describe the educational experiences of their students?
2. What barriers to educational opportunities do these teachers identify?
3. What perceptions do these teachers have regarding the role of urban education in the life trajectories of their students?

### Research Design

This study examined the perceptions of teachers of the blind to generate information about the provision of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. A qualitative research design was used to undertake the study. Qualitative designs have served as a vehicle to closely interrogate special education systems, generating knowledge that has contributed to increased educational equity for students with disabilities (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Trainor & Leko,

2014). Despite their strengths, qualitative designs remain under-utilized in special education research.

Between 1988 and 2006, less than six percent of research articles published in the eleven leading special education journals employed qualitative designs (Mastropeiri, 2009). A more recent analysis (Rock, Cheek, Sullivan, Jones, Holden, & Kang, 2016) also noted a decline in the use of qualitative designs. The national trend in education research has been the production of generalizable, evidence-based forms of inquiry privileging experimental designs (National Research Council, 2002), a position that has been critiqued within education research (Berliner, 2002) and also cited as a barrier to the production of knowledge in the field of visual impairment (Ferrell, 2007; Holbrook, 2015). Thus, while qualitative designs may experience a diminished status in some arenas, their ability to “elucidate local processes, meanings, or contextual influences in particular settings or cases” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 91) enabled a fine-grained analysis of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools.

Epistemologically, this study was undergirded by social constructivism, which holds that knowledge is not fixed, but instead embedded in social interactions and residing in an individual’s mind (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Social constructivism acknowledges the interactive and evolving nature of relationships between individuals, settings, and institutions (Bogdan, Taylor, & Devault, 2016). A constructivist approach integrates the researcher’s perspective, reveals underlying situations, networks, and relationships, while uncovering the function and location of power structures (Creswell, 2013). In relation to blindness, Ferguson (2001) posits that a social constructivist perspective allows for both an analysis of how inequality and prejudice are normalized

across educational programs serving the blind, and also how the blind exert personal agency to oppose these structures. Thus, the concurring attention to meaning making, process, and context that a social constructivist epistemology prioritizes are qualities that aligned well with the goals of the research.

Case study methodology was used for this study. Methodology can be described as the strategy, plan of action, process or design lying behind the choice and use of particular methods—linking the choice and use of methods to the desired outcomes (Crotty, 1998). Hancock, Algozzine, and Squire (2011) describe case studies as “intensive analysis and descriptions of a single unit or system bounded by space and time” (p. 11). Creswell (2013) noted that case studies are desirable under the following three conditions: research questions seek to answer how or why; the researcher has little control over events; and the research focus is on a phenomenon occurring in a real-life context. To construct a comprehensive understanding of contextual conditions, case studies feature multiple data sources and utilize diverse strategies for data collection (Creswell, 2013; Yin, 2003).

The present research was a collective case study, in which each individual teacher represented a case. The delivery of vision special education services served as the binding concept, which is described by Stake (2006) as a “theme, issue, phenomenon, or functional relationship that strings the cases together” (p. 8). A collective case study design is useful in understanding a problem or theory by combining information from individual cases (Hancock, Algozzine, & Squire, 2011). Data sources included individual interviews, a focus group, documents, and photographs, with each strand contributing to the development of themes and theories. Through the application of a case study



methodology, this study examined how teachers of the blind described vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

I used purposeful sampling to identify study participants. According to Maxwell (2013), in purposeful sampling “the inquirer selects individuals and sites for study because they can purposefully inform an understanding of the research problem and central phenomenon in the study” (p. 103). Weiss (1995) proposed the idea of constructing participant panels. These respondents are described as “people who are uniquely able to be informative because they are experts in an area, or who were privileged witnesses to an event” (p. 24). Nieto (2005) stated that teacher voices “hold important lessons for all of us” (p. 215). Thus, utilizing purposeful sampling techniques enabled me to construct a panel of teachers that elucidated ground-level issues surrounding vision special education service delivery in high-poverty urban schools. Several considerations were taken into account when criteria for study participation was established. Teachers of the blind typically work under the itinerant model, acting as multi-grade teachers across several schools; consequently, this research was not grade-specific, and was not connected to a particular school. In response to personnel shortages, districts tend to employ teachers with varied certifications or qualifications to teach blind students. Thus, uniform preparation standards were not required for study participation, making the present study more reflective of staffing trends in urban school systems. The review of public documents provided poverty-related information; thus, the federally operated database listing high-poverty schools was not consulted as originally planned. The research sought to include between five and seven teachers.

The goal of this study was not to produce and disseminate conclusions that are generalizable across the fields of urban education, special education, and blindness education—an objective that would have required differing epistemological, theoretical, and methodological choices. As Yin (2011) indicated, “Case studies are generalizable to theoretical propositions, and not to populations or universes” (p. 15). Instead, the recruitment strategies, sample size, and criteria for study participation applied to this research was geared towards careful exploration and critical examination.

To recruit participants, I consulted the personal and professional networks that I have formed from being a blind person, a mentor of blind urban youth, and a former urban teacher. I posted a recruitment announcement to a Facebook group for teachers of students with blindness and visual impairments. I reached out to teacher preparation programs situated in urban communities to identify participants. Ten possible participants emerged.

I called the teachers to share study-related details, and to determine suitability for the study. One of the major roadblocks that I encountered involved confidentiality. The teachers with whom I spoke expressed the view that the community of vision personnel is small and closely connected; therefore, in particular contexts, it would be possible to link teachers to their school district with minimal effort. For instance, one of the teachers who ultimately decided not to participate was one of four teachers assigned to an urban district in the northwestern region of the country. The teacher felt that sharing daily routines, student stories, and district details would leave her identity vulnerable. Others expressed the view that their urban districts are highly politicized spaces, and one teacher noted that speaking out against administration was “scary.”

After contact was made with the initial group of ten teachers, five teachers agreed to participate in the research. The five participants arrived at the study through the following channels: One teacher was referred to the study by her teacher preparation program, one agreed to join after reading a Facebook post, one teacher was introduced to me through a former colleague, one teacher participated in a professional development program that I oversaw, and one teacher is a personal friend that I have known for about five years. Additional information about the teachers is presented in Table 1.1.

Apprehension about confidentiality prompted me to proceed with increased care and caution in how I presented my findings. This commitment has become especially pronounced as I established friendships with participants, and as my admiration for the work that the teachers undertook blossomed. Consequently, when uncertainty about how or what information to include arose, I contacted study participants to seek guidance. As noted below, participants could review their case report before the dissertation was finalized.

### **Data Sources**

This study used participant interviews, focus group, document analysis, and photographs, all of which were aligned with my qualitative approach and with my use

Table 1

*Participant Characteristics*

Participant Name*	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Education	# Years Teaching	Student Caseload	Assignment
Alejandra	Latina	31	M.Ed. Teaching Blind Students	4	5	Resource teacher
Erin	Mixed Race	33	M.Ed. Curriculum/Instruction	7	9	Self-contained
Kelly	White	56	M.Ed. Severe Disabilities	16	5	Itinerant
Mary	White	56	M.Ed Special Education	28	50	Itinerant
Tyler	White	31	Master's in Visual Disabilities	3	16	Itinerant

*Note.* Pseudonyms were used to preserve the anonymity of study participants.

of a case study design (Creswell, 2013; Hancock, Algozzine, & Squire, 2011). The skills and hands-on experiences I gained in two of my doctoral courses (*EDCI 791: Qualitative Research* and *EDCI 788A: Mixed Methods*) provided valuable strategies and hands-on experiences that supported me throughout data collection and data analysis. Data sources are described below.

### **In-depth Individual Interviews**

This study used a semi-structured interview protocol to gather rich and detailed information about participants and the school districts they serve. According to Hancock, Algozzine, and Squire (2011), a semi-structured protocol is particularly well-suited for case study research because it “invites interviewees to express themselves openly and freely and to define the world from their own perspectives, not solely from the perspective of the researcher” (p. 47). Between April and October 2016, all participants

completed two individual interviews. Each interview lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. All the participants were contacted outside of the individual and focus group interviews to explore emerging themes and to answer additional questions.

The participants were located in five geographically different regions of the U.S. While conversations could have occurred using various methods, interviews were conducted over the telephone. Every participant displayed a unique vocal rhythm. It was fascinating to observe how long pauses, changes in tone, the increase in volume, and other subtleties necessitated further probing.

The first interview started with a review of research-related information. I confirmed receipt of the signed consent document, which participants emailed prior to the first interview. Next, all questions were addressed. Verbal permission was sought to begin the interview and to activate the recording device. Once the interview was underway, I asked participants to describe how they came to work in their districts, to share details about their professional roles, and to provide information about the educational experiences of their students. The second interview captured information about school environments, professional relationships, parent engagement, available resources, and several other topics.

### **Focus Group Interviews**

The focus group interview occurred in February 2017. A toll-free number was generated through FreeConferenceCall.com, which enabled participants to easily connect with one another. Four of the five participants joined the phone call. The fifth participant confirmed attendance, but failed to call-in on the day of the interview despite the

reminder that she was provided. The conversation lasted about sixty minutes and was audio recorded.

The focus group provided an opportunity to share preliminary findings and offer participants a chance to comment on the degree to which the findings reflected their individual or group experiences in high-poverty urban settings. The participants directed the conversation towards exchanging information about how vision services are achieved in each district, which revealed new details. Also, the group was asked to provide suggestions for a dissertation title. The focus group capitalized on the collective expertise of the teachers, and lent a fresh perspective to the topics considered in the individual interviews.

### **Documents**

A variety of sources were investigated to gather contextual information, such as figures regarding the visually impaired population, teacher background details, and district-level special education procedures. Numerous documents and reports related to each city were also reviewed, along with IDEA legal documents, federal or state policy guidance documents, and relevant assessment figures. Data for the blind population was not uniformly collected, analyzed, and reported in the available sources; therefore, there are limitations and variations in the types of figures that appear in each of the case reports that appear in the following chapter.

### **Photographs**

Each participant was invited to submit a photograph(s) that was emblematic of vision special education service provision in their region. Four of the five participants

submitted photographs, for a total of fifteen captioned pictures. The pictures demonstrated a wide range of images—from the types of professional roles that the participants undertook, to contextual details of the schools they serve.

### **Data Analysis**

Consistent with qualitative designs, my strategy for data collection and data analysis was both simultaneous and interactive (Stake, 1995). I applied an inductive approach to elucidate emergent themes related to the research questions, and remained especially alert to issues arising outside of these initial boundaries. My process for data analysis was based on the five-step spiral procedure presented by Creswell (2013). Below I described how this strategy was applied to the present study.

### **Data Management**

After speaking with each participant, I listened to each audio recording to create a verbatim text file of the interview. I also used this process to generate a transcript of the focus group interview. I created separate files to preserve and organize information from the public documents and the photographs that I acquired.

### **Reading and Memoing**

In this step, I gained a sense of the entire scope of the data by carefully reading through transcripts and by examining the documents and the photographs that the participants submitted. I wrote brief braille notes cataloging the thoughts and reflections that occurred as I reviewed the data. I accessed and added to these notes throughout analysis, interpretation, and reporting. In this step, I started developing descriptions of each case based on the initial contextual information presented.

## **Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting Data into Codes and Themes**

The next step required that the researcher “build detailed descriptions, develop themes or dimensions, and provide an interpretation based on their views or views of perspectives found in the literature” (Creswell, 2013, p. 210). Coding was central to this process. A code was a word or short phrase that assigned a cumulative or salient meaning to a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldana, 2009).

Based on my careful and repeated examination of the data, I generated a list of 255 codes that corresponded with key segments of the text. I derived names for the codes according to the words that participants use to describe concepts or experiences. Alternatively, I selected words that best captured the essence of what participants conveyed. This process of delving into the data and developing codes resulted in the formation of a preliminary list of twenty-one themes-- broad units of information comprised of codes to construct a common idea (see Appendix E for a table of codes, themes, and categories).

These initial themes were used to examine emergent patterns, divergent cases, and important omissions within individual cases, across cases, with focus group interview data, and with the text descriptions that accompanied the photographs.

To conduct an analysis across the five cases, I first began by transcribing the focus group interview. I connected the focus group data to the data that I gathered during each individual interview. This process helped establish a fuller understanding of emerging themes by drawing connections between patterns observed in individual interviews and their broader collective role among the group. This process also permitted me to compare professional practices and institutional policies. Importantly, the focus group served as a



platform to dissect my preliminary findings. I began the focus group by asking participants to share what they thought the research revealed. The role of expectations and the lack of consistency in service delivery were both discussed energetically. These themes were evident across all five cases, and were reported in the key findings section. Other topics, such as school crime or bussing difficulties seemed localized to individual participants. Thus, the focus group was pivotal in clarifying data, elucidating themes, and identifying inconsistencies.

By drawing comparisons, making careful refinements, and remaining alert to the complexities in the data, four broad categories emerged—School Context; District Practices; Vision Services; and Families. These categories functioned as building blocks for continued analysis and subsequent interpretations of the data.

### **Interpretation**

After developing codes, constructing themes, and developing broad categories, I began interpreting the data by examining how the categories relate to the central question guiding this study-- How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools? Each of the sub-questions required close analysis to discern if tentative explanations or descriptions are well supported by the data, and if assertions are also appropriate across cases. Data interpretations also encompassed linkages to the conceptual framework and to the extant literature.

### **Representing and Visualizing the Data**

In this final step, I developed a thorough description of each case and its setting. This section was organized around the central research question, and the three sub-

questions. Final assertions, which represent the most prominent relationships in the data (Stake, 2006), were also generated. I created rich descriptions by including: passages from the interviews and focus groups capturing key insights; contextual details derived from the documents; and visual representations of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools via photographs.

### **Researcher Positionality**

This study originated in my own experience-- a blind Latina born in the US to working class Mexican parents. My K-12 educational narrative parallels much of the literature involving minority children in special education. Low expectations, segregation from non-disabled peers, and inappropriate services all relegated me to a second-class positionality in school, a legacy that continues to shape my adulthood.

My desire to interrupt this cycle brought me to the urban education landscape, first as a mentor and educational advocate of blind urban youth, and later as an urban teacher. In these roles, I witnessed how the social and educational marginalization of blind urban youth is reproduced in school settings, despite multiple forms of resistance from parents and children. One incident from my time in the urban classroom captures some of the experiences that contribute to my understanding of the topic under investigation.

My supervisor requested that I locate a teacher of the blind for an urban high school with a growing Latino population. I was able to identify someone who exceeded the qualifications for the position. The candidate possessed a graduate degree in teaching blind students, certificates in braille competency and in working with deaf-blind students, knowledge of the rehabilitative supports available to blind students, and fluency in

Spanish. I emailed the candidate's application to the special education director at the high school, who was responsible for hiring.

When I called to discuss the candidate, the administrator was indeed impressed. However, she told me that she would not extend an offer of employment because the candidate was blind. When I asked her to elaborate, she explained that she had once hired a blind teacher, and that he was lazy and gossipy. In a lower voice she added that she did not have extra staff to guide the teacher around, or to assist the teacher with paperwork. Obviously, the administrator had no clue that she was speaking to a blind teacher! I reported the exchange to three high-level administrators in our district. In the following school year, the special education director was promoted to assistant principal--expanding her power and influence over some of the most marginalized students in urban schools.

If not properly addressed, my experiences in high-poverty urban schools could have influenced the research process. For instance, my values and expectations could have had a bearing on study procedures and the final conclusions that were generated. Thus, I implemented multiple strategies, as suggested by Maxwell (2013), and Bogdan, Taylor, and Devault (2016), to address the most serious or likely sources of threats to the validity, or trustworthiness of the study. Strategies are outlined below:

1. *Rich Data*: Through two semi-structured individual participant interviews, one focus group interview, the analysis of public documents, and the submission of captioned photographs, a comprehensive description of vision special education services was developed for each case. The varied sources enabled a close probing

of data interpretations within and across multiple channels, leading to a set of final assertions that are firmly supported by the data.

2. *Respondent Validation*: According to Maxwell (2013), member checking is the single most important strategy to rule out the possibility for misinterpreting the meanings or perspectives of participants. Thus, participant input was consistently obtained as data was collected and as conclusions were generated. Participants were encouraged to review interview transcripts and to provide commentary on their case study. Reactions to the final assertions were also sought. These elements helped identify misinterpretations to ensure that participant experiences were accurately represented.
3. *Discrepant Evidence*: Maxwell (2013) recommended that researchers “rigorously examine both the supporting and the discrepant data to assess whether it is more plausible to retain or modify the conclusion(s) derived from the data” (p. 121). Consequently, data sources were rigorously analyzed at both the individual level and across cases to help identify any discrepancies or mismatches between my assertions and the data. The information collected from the focus group and from the photographs was also used to search for discrepant evidence. Participant feedback was helpful in calling attention to the underlying assumptions that I brought to the research.
4. *Reflexivity*: I maintained a research journal to catalog the assumptions, perspectives, and feelings that emerged throughout the research process. Writing helped me gain increased awareness of how my professional background and multiple identities influenced the meaning that I attributed to the data, and the

choices that I made throughout the research process. This continuous practice of reflection increased my awareness as a researcher, and helped trace the origins of the analytic threads that resulted from this inquiry.

### **Participant Consent and Confidentiality**

Prior to the start of the first interview, I obtained informed and voluntary consent through a consent form that was written in Standard English. To ensure comprehension of the consent form, I verbally reviewed the document with each participant. Each participant received a copy of the consent form to retain for their personal records. Data collection did not commence until the consent process was complete.

I reviewed the following information with each participant: the purpose of the study; the type of data I wish to collect; and the role they can fulfill if they elect to participate in this research study. I reminded participants that they could ask questions before, during, and after the interviews, and that they could withdraw from the study at any point. I distributed my personal contact information to each participant.

I stored all the data that comprises this dissertation in a secure office and on a password-protected computer. To help protect participant confidentiality, the names of individual participants were replaced with pseudonyms. The names of the schools/districts that participants serve were also replaced with pseudonyms. When providing information related to school locale, I used general descriptors (e.g., a mid-size urban middle school in the south) to avoid providing information that can link participants to schools. If a publication or presentation emerges from this study, the identities of participants, and the details about their schools will be protected to the

maximum extent possible through the use of pseudonyms and by providing generalities regarding school locale.

In accordance to the procedures set forth by the Institutional Review Board, electronic or audio-recorded data related to this study will be maintained for ten years and then deleted. I will also shred any written or brailled documents that result from this research project.

### **Risks and Benefits**

This study presented some possible risks. Participants may have experienced a range of feelings as they related accounts of the educational and social conditions that framed their work in high-poverty urban schools. The possibility existed that participants felt uncomfortable with the content of the interview, or with the knowledge that the interview was recorded. To minimize uneasiness related to the recording process, participants were encouraged to make additions, corrections, and deletions to their interview transcripts. During the interview, participants were reminded that they had the right to decline questions that they did not want to address, and may also introduce topics that I have failed to include in the interview. Participants could ask questions throughout the research process and could also withdraw from the study at any point.

Finally, the possibility existed that the confidentiality of study participants could be compromised. To minimize this risk, all participant names, and the names of the schools/districts that they serve, were replaced by pseudonyms. All research-related data was securely stored, and will be properly destroyed in accordance to IRB procedures.

While this study does not offer any direct benefits to participants, there is the potential that participants will derive advantages from this project. For participants with

an advocacy orientation, reflecting upon service delivery may strengthen their outreach to parents of blind children, to blindness education professionals, and to policy-makers. On a broader scale, the knowledge that these participants construct can help support the development of increased linkages between blindness education, special education, and urban education, potentially igniting action on how to best provide special education services to blind urban youth.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter described my research design, including my choice for a qualitative approach, my epistemological orientation, and my rationale for the use of case study. I also provided details related to how I will manage, collect, analyze, and interpret data. I included information about the possible ways in which my identities and professional experiences can inform this work, and outlined various strategies to ensure the trustworthiness of this study. The following chapter describes my findings.

## Chapter 4: Case Studies

The purpose of this collective case study was to generate information about the provision of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. A collective case study methodology was used to examine the central research question: *How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools?* The sub-questions that guided this work were as follows:

1. How do these teachers describe the educational experiences of their students?
2. What barriers to educational opportunities do these teachers identify?
3. What perceptions do these teachers have regarding the role of urban education in the life trajectories of their students?

Five teachers of the blind served as participants in the study. The group provided powerful and candid ground-level knowledge regarding the supports and barriers that students, families, and teachers in urban communities consider salient in special education service provision. Illustrative examples of these and other findings are reported in the five case studies that appear in this chapter.

Each case study is reflective of the varying levels of knowledge that participants demonstrated regarding student, classroom, school, and district dynamics. These variations appeared linked to such factors as the number of years taught, the nature of teaching assignments, and the communication channels between teachers and administration. Thus, while the three sub-questions lend structure to the case studies, the content of each case study is unique to the individual and institutional lens that each participant applied to their understanding of vision special education services.



Case studies were constructed through the careful collection, examination, and analysis of multiple data sources. Each teacher participated in three semi-structured in-depth interviews: two individual interviews, and one focus group interview. Various public documents related to the five school districts that the participants serve provided increased contextual details. Finally, participants contributed captioned photographs that added to a more layered understanding of the special education supports that their visually impaired students are provided.

Finally, this research is presented against a profoundly difficult political backdrop that has dramatically altered the educational landscape of the US public education system. As one study participant shared, “The day after the election students were really scared and asking questions about what was going to happen. Some students were so scared they did not want to go to class.” Yet, these times of hardship have been met by powerful acts of resistance, alliance-building, and bravery by the teachers and students inhabiting our nation’s classrooms. Urban schools have long been the doorways into public education for students and teachers from vastly differing backgrounds, setting the stage for both personal advancement and for uplifting the collective vitality of our nation. Among these groups are students with visual impairments and their teachers. Here I present some of their stories.

### **Case Study One: Oceanside Public Schools**

I tell my kids, “I am here for you. I am not here for your parents, or the teachers, or the principal. You are my boss. You tell me what you need and what you don’t need.” Until you build a relationship with the kids, and they realize that you are

there, and that you are working for them. Until you establish that with them, you are just one more grown up in their life—Mary, 56, Oceanside Public Schools (Personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary is an enthusiastic and seasoned public educator. Her manner of speaking, energetic and animated, often transported me to the frontline of her work. Before entering the field of blindness, Mary had taught students with severe cognitive impairments, one of whom began to simultaneously experience vision and hearing loss. A statewide blindness agency provided Mary rudimentary training on how to educate her students. This experience brought to the surface a burgeoning desire that pushed Mary to expand her skill set. This is what Mary shared:

I felt like in the position that I was in, I had been there a really long time. I felt like I wasn't growing, wasn't learning anything myself. So, this was an opportunity for me to grow myself, to service other students, to change things up. (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary earned a graduate degree in education, with a focus on visual impairment. The majority of the courses that Mary completed addressed classroom management, lesson development, and learning theories. The blindness-specific courses emphasized medical or instructional topics. While her graduate classes had provided a foundation in the practical aspects of teaching, examinations of the underlying historical, political, and economic factors shaping schooling in the US were left unaddressed. Consequently, Mary entered the classroom with few analytical tools to critique the structural inequities, achievement differences, or gaps in school resources that she would witness in the lives

of her students. This gap would take on increased importance when the agency that employed Mary assigned her to teach in the Oceanside school district.

Oceanside is located on the eastern coast of the US. The city is engaged in substantial revitalization efforts to transform the urban region into a center of cultural and economic prosperity. A pattern of prolonged political corruption, race-based discrimination, widespread poverty, and a designation as one of the most dangerous places in the US, are the leading narratives shaping the public imagery of this once thriving city. These, along with a steady stream of failed educational reform efforts, are some of the underlying circumstances on which the school system is predicated.

More than half of the schools in the district are decaying. The average age of Oceanside school buildings is 85 years, constructed before the access-related needs of students with disabilities became a federal mandate. Dangerous levels of lead have left the water in nearly half of the schools unsafe for consumption. Seventy percent of Oceanside children live in low-income households. Enrollment in the school system is about fifty thousand students, with most students belonging to racial or ethnic minority groups. Approximately 10 percent of students are English learners. About 17 percent of students have IEPs.

Mary works in the vision program, which is situated with other disability-specific programs within the special education branch of Oceanside. Vision program personnel include four teachers of students with visual impairments, an assistive technology consultant, and a few orientation and mobility specialists. The department is overseen by a program director whose work responsibilities exclusively involve the administration of vision special education services. The vision program delivers instructional or

consultative services to about sixty-five students with visual impairments. Students attend traditional or charter public schools, private schools, and specialized schools for students with disabilities.

Mary provides vision services itinerantly, delivering a range of supports to 50 PK-12 students in 30 schools. Mary teaches in two other locales, one middle-income suburban district, and in a second high-poverty urban school system bordering Oceanside. In a typical day, Mary will deliver services to four or five students. The perceptions that Mary has regarding vision services are closely entwined with both her identity as a teacher, and with her pedagogical approach. Thus, these two elements will be discussed before the educational details of her students are presented.

In her early career as an urban teacher, Mary reported feeling like an outsider, both in terms of her status as a White woman, and in her role as a special educator. These factors posed barriers that made accessing school-based social and professional networks difficult. In response, Mary forged caring relationships with her students, letting their insights on education and societal inequities shape her teaching.

Becoming closely attuned to these sources of information shifted Mary's gaze outward, which enabled her to better understand situations from the perspective of her students. For instance, Mary shared the story of a student who decided to discontinue receiving special education vision services. The student felt that having a "White teacher" was eliciting too many questions from his peers. The situation was worsened because Mary was not provided a classroom. She taught the young man in the school library, which placed the pair directly in the public eye. Mary made sense of the situation in this way:

I don't blame him. He already has to wear these thick huge glasses. He has all the technology, the iPod, the VisioBook, the magnifiers. Now, here is this White lady coming in every week, and pulling him out of class meeting him in the library.

The other kids know I don't belong there (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016).

Rather than viewing the reaction of her student through a framework of defiance or educational disengagement, Mary acknowledged the twice-stigmatizing feelings that both possessing a disability and receiving instruction from a community outsider may engender in students. Moreover, Mary acknowledged the stereotypes that urban students face, describing that these learners are routinely assigned deficit identities. The perspective that she offered was diametrically distinct from this public narrative. This is what she stated:

In the media, people have an idea about what inner-city kids are like, that they would resist school or have an attitude. I don't see that. I don't know if it is because my kids are blind or visually impaired, or because they are just kids...They do care about school (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016).

The lens that Mary applied to her understanding of urban education demonstrated growth. She integrated perspective-taking into her professional practice, learning to listen to the worldviews of her students. She learned that collectively, her students and the communities they inhabit are often viewed through a prism of misconceptions, which are used to leave substandard educational treatments unquestioned. Although Mary never framed herself as a social justice educator, the knowledge that she gained about her

students and their communities erected an orientation towards equity that was observable in her pedagogical approach.

The next section delves into some of the dynamics that Mary shared in relation to the educational experiences of her students.

### **The Educational Experiences of Blind Students**

Mary described a series of conditions that she perceived as influential in the educational experiences of her students. Most of what she reported highlighted the role of district-wide educational placement policies, and the subsequent impact of these decisions on the lives of her students. She described the Oceanside administration as a “mess,” detailing accounts in which widespread disorganization and insufficient dialogue between district and school leadership resulted in decreased educational access for her students.

Mary connected these conditions to the broader political climate in Oceanside. Mary spoke about the state control that has governed Oceanside for a number of decades and provided background on the topic. She explained that the governor-appointed superintendent does not live in Oceanside, which contributes to his unpopularity among Oceanside residents. A complicated record demonstrating both personal affinity and financial support of the charter school movement created a deep mistrust among Oceanside families, who want resources to target the improvement of existing neighborhood schools. Mary narrowed-in on the implications that having a state-ran district has on the lives of her blind students:

I don't think the state has a sense of investment in the kids, especially when kids are blind and visually impaired. Unless the family is hypervigilant and they are

like “my kid is going to get the education that the sighted kids are going to get.”

Unless you have that parent, the school district is not going to do it. (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary reported that the state leadership charged with reforming the District is vastly disassociated from the lived experiences of Oceanside residents. This disengagement set the stage for the implementation of ineffective policies and poorly targeted improvement plans which disproportionately impacted low-income communities of color. For instance, under-performing traditional public schools were closed, leading to the expansion of the charter network. Another district practice that Mary felt disadvantaged her students involves the annual universal application process that students undergo to seek admission into one K-8 public or charter school. This plan is understood to provide children an escape route out of a low-performing school. It is also believed to facilitate enrollment for the large proportion of transient students that the district educates.

Mary expressed that the initiative prioritized administrative convenience-- failing to properly support neighborhood schools: eroding a sense of community among residents, and introducing bureaucratic entanglements that are not easily navigated by families. Further, this process exacerbated the student placement problems that were already plaguing disabled students in the district.

Similar to the general education population, students with visual impairments are situated in schools through the online enrollment program. However, school enrollment trends, busing options, and disability-specific educational offerings can place restrictions on the schools that these students can access. Students in the Vision Program are taught

in one of two ways: itinerantly, or in a self-contained classroom. “You are either in or out of general education,” is how Mary summarized the educational placements that her students are extended.

Oceanside has about six dozen schools in the district. When a district-level decision is made to remove a blind student from general education into a self-contained special education classroom, schooling options dwindle. About nine types of self-contained classroom placements exist in the District, examples can include a class for students with autism, or a class for students with hearing impairments. A substantial proportion of Oceanside students with disabilities are educated in segregated, self-contained classrooms, a pattern that the district is currently reevaluating. To frame the impact that this practice has on the educational experiences of students, Mary provided this unvarnished account, which details one student’s transfer out of general education into a self-contained placement:

I have one five-year old girl who had switched elementary schools because they wanted her in a smaller self-contained class for the first grade because she did have some behavior problems... They moved her to another elementary school because her elementary school did not have that kind of accommodation. That school, for whatever reason, I don’t know if it was because of the little girl’s behavior or because of their own prejudice against her. I don’t know what the reason was, they just totally refused... No matter what she did, it was wrong, and they didn’t see any potential in her. It even got to the point that the school district’s doctor was called in, because the school nurse complained about her not being able to see in gym. The gym teacher never complained. The school doctor



came in and told the school that she wasn't allowed to play gym at all. He never even sat down with her and talked to her. He saw her playing in the gym with her big huge glasses on and decided right then and there that gym was not safe for her. He associated her having very low vision to having a heart condition or asthma. (August 30, 2016)

Mary stated that she intervened, providing the school and the doctor with proven strategies for including students with visual impairments in physical education courses. Mary also had the mother of the student obtain a note from the child's personal physician, which provided clearance for participation in physical education. Still, the doctor remained unconvinced.

In a face-to-face encounter, the doctor reiterated to Mary that asthma and heart disease disqualify students from physical education courses. Mary was not dissuaded, stating that her belief in inclusivity motioned her forward. "Asthma could be life threatening. A heart condition could be life threatening. Not too many people have died from being visually impaired," was her response to the doctor. No level of intervention reversed the medical determination. Further, the student was not provided an alternative class to attend. Mary noted, "They used to make her just sit down so she had to watch her friends have gym."

Another aspect of educational experiences that Mary discussed involved the determination of service minutes. Mary explained that the Oceanside Vision Program places blind students into one of four service categories, ranging from Level One to Level Four. Each level corresponds to the amount of services outlined in the IEP. Such factors as school context, or the professional development needs of general education personnel

are not considered. For example, the first grader that was referenced in the previous account was categorized as a Level One. This designation entitled her to receive four to eight visits from Mary over the course of a school year. However, Mary's concern for the welfare of her student prompted weekly visits. As Mary observed, "For whatever reason, they just had a thing against a blind kid being put in their school."

It has been Mary's experience that unresponsive district-level administrators, bureaucratic roadblocks, and hostile school environments can leave some blind students trapped in settings of severe educational mistreatment. Mary shared the story of an elementary-age deaf-blind student who she felt was inappropriately placed in a self-contained classroom for students with cognitive impairments. "No one would sign with her, except for me and her aid... The only direct instruction she got was when I was there, which was an hour a day for four days a week."

The special education teacher in the self-contained classroom refused to touch the student's hands, leaving the child disconnected and abandoned. Technologies were introduced that held the potential for the student to hear class activities, and Mary cited that these efforts were also met with resistance by the classroom teacher:

She had gotten a hearing aid, the kind that goes on the outside of your head and vibrates. Like a headband. The hearing aid sits behind your head. She had an FM system in the classroom, and the teacher wouldn't even plug it in, and would never put the microphone on while she was talking. (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Despite the intense advocacy that Mary launched on behalf of this student, the young deaf-blind girl remained in this classroom for three school years.

Mary reported that in Oceanside, the presence of a secondary disability commonly results in an increased likelihood that the student with a visual impairment will be placed in a segregated, self-contained classroom. While this placement decision is commonly understood to target students with severe cognitive impairments, the practice can also impact students whose cognitive abilities are typically-developing. This is one incident that Mary provided to illustrate the effect that rigid educational frameworks have on her students:

I have one student whose family moved to a neighboring state because they were horribly served here in our district. The student was very frail and had some physical disabilities with his hand and his feet. Academically, he was on grade level. He had a significant visual impairment and was learning braille. He did have some vision, but he was learning braille... Our district, in their infinite wisdom, put him in a school in the complete opposite side of his family where he lived, in a self-contained class that was in a building with no elevator. His classroom was on the third floor. Because of his feet and because of his fragility, he had a hard time going up and down the stairs and so they were carrying him up and down. (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary added that her student began missing school because he refused to be transported up and down the stairs by school personnel. He felt ashamed and worried about how his high school peers would view him. Oceanside sought to bring truancy charges against the family. Both Mary and the Mother of the student attempted to negotiate an alternative placement, arguing that the student was functioning on grade-level. Oceanside did not abandon the one-size-fits-all model that they institute for their

students with disabilities. Administration reaffirmed that the combination of physical disabilities necessitated a self-contained placement, an option that was only available at the school with no elevator.

Mary described other district-wide contextual features that she felt influenced the educational experiences of her students. She stated that students in the traditional public general education system tend to encounter a broad range of challenges rooted in decades of political mismanagement and educational neglect. She described a two-tiered educational system, in which students that attend traditional public schools are considered second-class pupils when compared to their charter school counterparts. Mary listed some of the educational assets that charter school students are afforded, “They have a better lunch. They have a better cafeteria. They go on better school trips. They have better computers.” Mary reported on some of the perceptions that traditionally enrolled students encounter:

All the kids who can’t get into the charter schools, or stay in the charter schools are left in the public schools. So now, the people in the public schools, the administration and the teachers don’t have high hopes for these kids. They are like, “We have all the ones that couldn’t get into the charter schools or stay in the charter schools... we have all the bad kids, we have all the ones left over.” (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

In these troubling educational climates, the success of blind students is contingent on the adult network overseeing the educational plan of the student, rather than an institutional belief in the capabilities of pupils. Mary provided some important

observations that are helpful in creating a clearer portrait on the types of supports that can assist students in these schools:

It depends on what guidance counselor they are given, or what case manager they have. If they get the one that is just like whatever, I'll do the minimum that I have to do to get this kid out of here, then the student is not going to do as well... The good ones will keep us more involved, they will expect more from that kid, they are like, "You are not going to use your vision as a reason not to get through this." Those real put the kid's feet to the fire people, that's when students do the best. (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary reported that in half of the general education classes that her students attend, there are inconsistencies in the implementation of IEPs. In some circumstances, general educators struggle to provide students appropriate modifications or accommodations because they lack the know-how. At times, implementation failures are a consequence of school or classroom pressures. For instance, Mary has encountered teachers who do not let blind students stand near the whiteboard to copy notes, even when the accommodation is required by the IEP. The extensive time that Mary has spent in general education classrooms throughout Oceanside led to this assertion, "Some of the teachers feel like if they let one kid do it, it is going to be total mayhem if they don't keep absolute control."

Mary also provided observations regarding the types of expectations that her students face in general education. She has noticed that school-level expectations are a vital indicator of the types of academic and social behaviors that blind students are expected to fulfill. She pointed to the ways in which expectations are operationalized

across the robust Oceanside charter school system. While Mary recognized that considerable variations exist in the quality of charter schools, she stated that many of these settings present a school environment that position high expectations as a central tenant. Mary made this connection, “their expectations for all are high. So they are expecting our blind kids to keep up with the other kids.”

The following section will describe some of the barriers that Mary reported.

### **Observed Barriers to Educational Opportunities**

Mary described a complex backdrop of District and Vision Program policies that created formidable barriers in the education of Oceanside students with visual impairments. Several teacher-related challenges emerged as educationally relevant.

One barrier that Mary identified involved the vision personnel that students are provided. Oceanside vision services are provided through an outside contractor, who deploys teachers based on their proximity to the schools that blind students attend. Mary expressed that there is tremendous variation in both the skill level that the teacher possesses and in the advocacy that a teacher is willing to undertake on behalf of students. Noting that a blind student can remain with the same teacher for a number of school years, Mary provided this account to illustrate some of the pitfalls that staffing patterns can foster:

I got this student sophomore year in high school, and it was the first time we ever met. I would ask him questions and he would be like, “Yeah. No. Yeah. No.” I would be like, “Alright dude, what is going on? Why aren’t you ever talking? I want to know how you do the Smart board, what do you do when you have to use the laptop, what do you do when you have to take notes?” He was like, “No one

has ever asked me this before. Why are you asking me this now? I am a sophomore.” I was like, “Because if you can’t do those things, that is what I need to fix. That is what I am here for.” (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Mary reported that by senior year, the student had access to technology that he had “never ever seen before.” The student questioned Mary, “why didn’t anyone ever give me this stuff before? What if my teacher didn’t change sophomore year? I’d still be struggling like freshman year. I didn’t realize how much I struggled until I was given the tools I needed.”

Mary cited teacher attrition as a second personnel-related barrier limiting the educational opportunities of Oceanside students with visual impairments. Mary detailed conversations with her colleagues regarding their perceptions of long-term employment with urban schools. The general sentiment that was frequently expressed was one of, “Alright, I did my stint. I did my urban district for three or four years and I am done.” Mary identified some factors that seem to have accelerated the disengagement of vision personnel from the urban districts that she serviced.

To draw out these factors, Mary referenced a set of prized environmental features that she has observed in well-resourced suburban school systems. “When you are in a suburban district, you get to pull right up into the school parking lot. It’s plowed. There is always a spot. Everyone is welcoming. You don’t have to go through metal detectors.” The size of urban schools also tends to augment feelings of professional isolation, a condition experienced by both Mary and her colleagues. Mary explained that in heavily populated schools with constant streams of activity, the teacher of the blind is often only

able to cultivate superficial relationships with the adults that are most closely connected to the blind student. “You don’t become a part of the whole culture of the school,” is what Mary described. Mary acknowledged that while on the surface these details may appear “stupid”, they are collectively influential when teachers weigh their career options. This is especially true for itinerant teachers, who spend a considerable amount of time commuting between school sites.

Another barrier that Mary noted involve the braille literacy practices in Oceanside. Mary explained that the vision program views braille as an educational priority. However, the vision program does not implement standardized, research-based tools to determine what students should receive braille instruction. Without policy guidance, decision-making is heavily dependent on the teacher of the blind. In the case of the students that Mary teaches, access to braille instruction is determined in a couple of ways. First, Mary stated that she can follow the braille literacy recommendations that were crafted by former teachers. In relation to her own approach, Mary outlined:

If it is a new student to me, it depends on whether or not they have vision at all. If they have some, then I would determine their reading rate, whether or not they go super slow with a VisioBook, or if they need print so big on the VisioBook that reading is slow or awkward. So that will determine it. (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)

Mary also said that parents or school district personnel will provide feedback based on the demonstrated ability that a student has in accessing the general education curriculum. She reflected on two other forces steering the delivery of braille instruction. The first involved caseload size. Teachers who feel that they are stretched too thin are



less likely to provide thorough and consistent braille instruction. Alternatively, vision program policies indicate that, “the more braille students that are assigned to us, the less students we have overall.” Thus, some teachers are motivated to maintain more manageable caseloads by distributing higher numbers of braille minutes to their students. About four of the fifty students that Mary teaches are braille learners.

Mary reported that students with visual impairments often go under-diagnosed for secondary disabilities. She outlined a couple of reasons to support her claim. She stated that unfavorable behaviors or unexplained circumstances are typically attributed to blindness. For instance, Mary once told a classroom teacher that was letting poor behavior slide, “Oh, that’s not the blindness honey!” She also explained that school psychologists lack accessible evaluation instruments that can help detect additional conditions. Interventions can also be inappropriately applied if disability-specific knowledge is either limited or founded upon a deficit approach. The next section will describe the implications that the educational conditions presented thus far have on the future lives of the students that Mary teaches.

### **The Role of Urban Education in the Life Trajectories of Blind Students**

When Mary described the types of lives that she desired for her students in their adulthoods, she spoke with hope and optimism:

I would love to see them be independent. Being able to support themselves, have a productive job, have been able to get the education that they wanted. It doesn’t have to be a higher education, it could be a vocational education, trade, learn something with their hands. Have them be confident adults, knowing that they can

compete with sighted people. Knowing their vision is not an obstacle. (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Mary stated that the racial and economic plights that underpin Oceanside schools, and the community at large, reflect high levels of neglect and disinvestment. These conditions tend to confer a sense of hopelessness to her students, especially as they near the end of their high school years. Some students feel that their present-day social positioning will inevitably result in an ominous future. She shared this account exemplifying these feelings:

I had this one young man who will be in eighth grade this year. When he was in elementary school, he loved school. Loved reading, real good at math. His first year of junior high, he was still like that. But then I could see it start dwindling... Almost like he couldn't see that working hard was going to benefit him in the end. (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

The student expressed that even with an education, he was still going to be Black, poor, and visually impaired. He posed the question, "So what hope am I going to have?"

Indeed, Mary reported that many of her students are often met with messages that position long-term achievement as unattainable for most. In terms of college, she described that college access is framed in terms of "if you can get yourself to graduate and if you can get yourself to college." She stated that her students also struggle with the social peer pressures, "you are not cool if you do well."

In this context, Mary maintained the belief that blind urban youth are at an advantage when compared to their sighted peers. She stated that while graduation rates for Oceanside students are low, she has never had a blind student not complete high

school. Mary reported that disability status provided her students access to additional supports that are not widely available to Oceanside pupils. For instance, she referenced a statewide leadership program that many of her students attend. The program provided her students access to a college-going culture, career guidance from employed blind adults, and intensive mentoring. She also cited parent attitudes as an important buffer from the shortfalls that she discussed. This is the outlook that she perceived as helpful:

The kids whose parents are like, “I don’t care, get over it, you are fine, don’t worry about it. Just because you can’t see it, doesn’t mean you can’t do it.” Those kids do much better, they believe in themselves more. They don’t see their vision as an obstacle, they just keep going forward. (Mary, personal communication, September 9, 2016)

Mary articulated a vision of the role that she and her vision program colleagues can fulfill to best assist her students in reaching their dreams. This is what she stated: “We need to do our best and give them all that we have, and convince them that we believe in them. We know that they can do it. We try as hard as we can, I know I do.”

Mary presented herself as a caring and advocacy-oriented teacher. The educational experiences of her students are affected by district policies that overlooked the specialized needs of students with visual impairments. School context was also influential in determining both the academic expectations that students are presented, and the types of general education learning environments that the students are afforded. Invalidated assessments, teacher shortages, and large caseloads influenced service delivery. Students with blindness and additional disabilities seemed

exceptionally vulnerable to experiencing unfavorable academic and social conditions. Mary holds the belief that the network of disability-specific supports available in Oceanside provide an escape route that blind students can use to obtain levels of success that are perhaps out of reach for sighted students. The next case study presents the work of another itinerant teacher.

### **Case Study Two: Rosedale Public Schools**

Some of our kids are getting a world-class education, not just as a student, but as a student with a visual impairment. Some of the kids aren't. The variability is profound. It is one-hundred percent your address. —Tyler, age 31, Rosedale Public Schools (Personal communication, September 15, 2016)

As an undergraduate student, Tyler envisioned a career in archeology. However, during his final year of college, an unexpected encounter gave birth to a new interest. Tyler became closely acquainted with a dynamic teacher who was in the process of assembling a school for blind students. Tyler witnessed how disability disqualified the students from participating in conventional educational options, and became interested in learning how the visually impaired population could access a high-quality public education. Prior to his involvement with the school, Tyler had never interacted with a blind person; however, his association with this educational movement compelled him to earn a graduate degree in teaching students with visual impairments.

Tyler knew that he wanted to teach in Rosedale, a major U.S. city widely known for seismic social and political challenges. Thus, he selected a teacher-training program that included faculty with extensive urban special education teaching experience. These ground-level perspectives, coupled with the years that Tyler spent living alongside

Rosedale residents, offered an unobstructed view of the circumstances that he could face in the deeply challenged school system. Tyler indicated that he let a periscopic lens of promise guide his path into the Rosedale district, refusing to subscribe to the pessimistic perspective that he felt marred the image of his city in the public eye. He described some of the assets that Rosedale offers students with visual impairments, and also discussed his orientation towards his work:

I live in Rosedale. I did want to work where I live. This is a great place. The kids learn public transit. There are colleges in the area. If they want to go to community colleges, we have those too. If they are going to live in a more structured living situation there's those options in the city... There are great things to check out. And then, just the population, it is a little bit more needy, which I respond to. People need help and support. (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

The Rosedale school system is among the five largest districts in the US, constituting a substantial network of students, schools, and personnel. Like Tyler, half of Rosedale teachers are White. Racial or ethnic minorities comprise nearly ninety-percent of student enrollment, with about eighty percent of all students categorized as economically disadvantaged. The population of English learners is seventeen percent. Enrollment in the Rosedale school system has been decreasing for over a decade. Meanwhile, enrollment in special education has continued to increase over the same period, with fourteen percent of students having an IEP. A contentious political climate engulfs the entire district, with intense critiques also being leveled upon special education services.

Although the overall district budget reflects a significant investment in services to students with disabilities, there are multiple indications that Rosedale operates a profoundly troubled special education program. In part, these conditions are associated with the broader financial health of the district. A sizeable deficit looms over the entire school system, placing a considerable amount of pressure on local and state leaders to restore fiscal and educational stability. Efforts to understand how to best allocate district resources have recently triggered an internal inspection of special education processes and policies, unearthing two problematic findings. First, the achievement gap between special education students and their non-disabled peers remains pronounced, despite varied and multiyear interventions. For instance, the graduation rate for general education students has demonstrated a steady increase for the past fifteen years; however, the modest progress that Rosedale students with disabilities saw in relation to this key indicator has been stalled for about a decade. The second finding involved the disproportionate levels of special education enrollment by minority students, a pattern that is particularly acute for Black and Latino males. Collectively, these trends highlight intersecting issues between general and special education, and primarily speak to the experiences of students with high-incidence disabilities.

In response to the internal audit, and to escalating external pressures, the district decided to recalibrate special education through a series of systemic changes. Changes include: instituting a set of comprehensive eligibility procedures; restructuring and eliminating some school-based special education personnel; placing greater numbers of special education students in full inclusion settings; and providing school-based leadership significant autonomy in prioritizing special education expenditures. The

district-led reform efforts overlooked the status of low-incidence disability subgroups, applying data gathered from the high-incidence student population to all special education reform efforts. Tyler reported that there is a strong sense among key stakeholders that the blunt changes weakened special education services. The general ground-level perceptions that Tyler has observed indicate that the changes will compound the conditions revealed by the internal inquiry, and that students will experience delayed and decreased access to special education services.

Since these changes were recently instituted, it was difficult for Tyler to discern the possible effect on vision services. Further contributing to the ambiguity, was the inadequate communication between district leadership and Rosedale teachers. Tyler stated, “I’m more likely to read about what Rosedale is doing in the paper, than they actually telling me what’s going on.”

Tyler concluded that the global state of the district, in combination with the difficulties in the special education system, make Rosedale a highly undesirable place to teach. He offered, “people laugh when I try and recruit teachers for our vision program!” Tyler works in a context where nearly half of all Rosedale teachers leave the district within five years of entering the classroom. Yet, Tyler is nearing the completion of his fourth year and does not plan to leave his position with the vision program.

The Rosedale vision program is directed by a veteran teacher of students with visual impairments. The director manages the work of nearly two dozen teachers, succeeding in establishing a departmental tone that Tyler described as both collaborative and cordial. The vision program provides direct or consultative services to more than six hundred visually impaired students citywide. Rosedale teachers are tasked with

determining program eligibility. They also conduct evaluations to identify the scope and content of vision services.

The details that Tyler provided regarding vision services primarily originate in the educational experiences of the sixteen students that he teaches. His students receive direct or consultative vision services itinerantly, or through a resource room placement. However, two other sources appeared to augment the perspective that he brought to the research. Tyler is an instructional coach in the vision program, providing support with assistive technology. These responsibilities place Tyler in frequent dialogue with his colleagues, which allowed him to report on a broader swath of program happenings. Tyler also cited several confidential conversations between him and the vision program supervisor, highlighting another source informing his description of vision services. The next section addresses the first sub-question, which gathered information about the educational experiences of the students that Tyler teaches.

### **The Educational Experiences of Blind Students**

Tyler discussed several characteristics related to the educational experiences of the sixteen students that he serves. Generally, his observations fall into two categories—structural schooling inequities and vision program disparities. Tyler reported that socioeconomic factors have a gripping effect on the educational experiences of his students. He commented extensively on the educational pitfalls that racial segregation and income-based inequities fostered in Rosedale. He noted that polarizing social inequalities produce schools that are “worlds apart,” citing differences in student demographics, teacher quality, class size, curricular offerings, and enrichment opportunities. Tyler reported that schools marked by concentrated poverty and low-



achievement tend to reduce academic expectations for all students, creating a context where disability status further dilutes the education that students with visual impairments are afforded. Tyler remarked, “I think it is kind of the neighborhood that you are in. If they have lower expectations of a lot of students, they are more easily impressed by my academic third grader who can tie his own shoes.”

Tyler posited that high-poverty, under-resourced schools tend to staff teachers and administrators who lack institutional support, making it possible for a pedagogy of “babysitting” to take hold. Under this approach, students with visual impairments are often not pushed to participate in class activities, to complete homework assignments, and in some cases, to generate evidence that grade advancement is warranted. Tyler suggested that this educational practice disproportionately targets students with multiple disabilities, a group that tends to receive decreased educational surveillance by school or district leaders.

Tyler also suggested that lowered expectations rest upon a broader web of challenges that often pit general education activities and special education services against each other. He provided this example:

I have a fourth grader who is at a really good elementary school doing higher-level work. Then I have a high schooler who is at a school where the academics are maybe not as important as other things going on. So there is an alarming amount of similarity between what they are learning between fourth and ninth grade (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

Tyler explained that even with the unchallenging curricula, his high schooler was still “getting some horrible grades.” Tyler made numerous visits to the general education

teacher, imparting strategies for increasing nonvisual access to class. Seeing no improvements, Tyler changed his schedule to attend regular math classes alongside his student. He stated, “The class was so bad...everyone was suffering.” The classroom teacher frequently distributed piles of worksheets without having previously taught the material to the class. She made no real effort to provide the blind student accommodations. Against a backdrop of high-level student needs, poor teacher quality, school-level administrator inaction, and an overall depressed school culture, Tyler felt that his interventions lacked the potency to make a meaningful difference. “It was going in one ear, and out the other,” is how Tyler described the impact that his expertise had in this school. With his student lacking foundational skills, Tyler felt obligated to undertake math instruction. “It was that or nothing,” is how he summarized the situation.

Tyler also made observations regarding the educational experiences of students enrolled in resource-rich schools. He remarked, “Schools in higher economic status neighborhoods, where everyone has really high academic expectations, the expectations go right along for the blind kid.” Tyler further unpacked his ideas regarding the underlying educational conditions that these school environments present his high-achieving visually impaired students. He reported that the Rosedale school district has a set of elite, highly sought-after schools. Tyler explained that in these successful schools, it is uncommon to have a population of special education students who are fully integrated into general education classrooms. Rather, these schools overwhelmingly educate a group of non-academic students who are excluded from high-stakes testing activities. In contrast, Tyler reported that visually impaired students in these schools are

viewed as a potential liability. Their full integration into general education is perceived to sway school-wide achievement indicators, since blind students also complete the assessments that are administered to the general education population. In relation to school personnel, Tyler reported, “They are like very stressed because these tests matter for the school’s rankings, and then also for teacher evaluations.”

Beyond poverty-related contextual features, Tyler also positioned policies that are specific to the vision program as being influential to the educational experiences of his students. Rosedale students with visual impairments are permitted to attend their neighborhood school with the support of itinerant services, and some of the students that Tyler instructs choose this option. However, a long-standing off-the-record policy steers students away from neighborhood schools, and into schools where resource programs are installed. Tyler reported that vision personnel are instructed to direct students requiring two hours or more of services per week into one of these resource room settings.

The public dialogue validating a resource placement centers around the idea that the blind student will have increased access to some of the following: other blind peers; general educators with blindness experience; availability of assistive technology; and on-site quality teachers of the visually impaired. Internal to the vision program, there is an understanding that these placements ease staffing shortages, lessen commutes between school sites, require less school-based training of general education teachers, and alleviate other administrative challenges. These explanations are regarded as secondary factors steering placement decisions. Instead, the vision program advances a narrative trumpeting the superiority of resource room schools –using these schools as an avenue

for visually impaired students to circumvent the numerous negative outcomes facing the majority of Rosedale schools.

Tyler provided some important details that complicate the public narrative surrounding resource room placements. This is how he framed the historical origins and contemporary realities of resource settings, “These resource rooms were put there when schools were really good. Things change over twenty, thirty, forty years. So some of our resource rooms aren’t in as good areas, and the school is not as good as it used to be.”

The declining status that some of the schools have experienced has not halted vision program leadership from funneling students into resource rooms. In fact, Tyler has observed an internal urgency to preserve resource rooms. When developing an IEP for a student who had inadequate school options, Tyler reported, “We kind of put his minutes up to qualify him for the resource room.” In the context of broader vision program priorities, the needs of individual students at times seem to take on less importance. To illustrate, Tyler described how the vision program assigned a “fluff kid” to attend a school with a resource room. This is what he reported:

We needed a body in a resource room to justify them existing. So there is no reason he is in a resource room getting like three hours a week. He is A. second grade, B. can read print with no problem, no lack of access and C. he gets around fine (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

Regarding the response of the parent to this placement, Tyler explained “Language barriers, so the parent really didn’t say much.” The vision program supervisor commented, “We got a student to a good school and it helped us out.” Tyler stated that the district places pressure on the vision program to maintain a steady resource room

population, a dynamic which can partly explain some patterns in resource room placements.

There are some indications that the resource room model may experience some instability in the coming school years. Tyler stated that proactive parents have been advocating against resource placements, citing poor school conditions or distance from the home as reasons for sending their children to alternative school sites. “this year, I have a fourth grader who didn’t go to a resource room because it wasn’t in as nice an area as the parents wanted.” The district-wide push to move students towards a full inclusion model may also change the landscape of placement options. Tyler provided an in-depth perspective on the educational experiences of the students he teaches. The next section will examine the second sub-question, which involves barriers to educational opportunities.

### **Observed Barriers to Educational Opportunities**

Tyler outlined numerous barriers, which collectively lay the groundwork for an unpredictable educational program to develop. Barriers spanned both special education and general education, largely describing systemic issues impacting funding, teacher perceptions/practices, and school resources. Tyler provided a structural explanation for the barriers that his students encounter, “Depending on what school you go to, there is a huge difference in resources. We have the best schools in the state, and also literally the worst schools in the state.”

The financial pressures affecting the Rosedale school district have placed a continuum of limitations on the services that students with visual impairments can obtain. For instance, for portions of the school year, Tyler was unable to purchase educational

basics, such as braille paper or assistive technology devices for his students. Tyler also indicated that it is “nearly impossible” to get students with a documented need a one-on-one paraprofessional, a trend that is especially perceptible in low-income schools. Moreover, reductions in school budgets have triggered changes to the teaching force. Tyler explained that experienced teachers require more pay; consequently, school principals, who are looking for ways to stretch their budgets, are motivated to employ cheaper, less experienced teachers. Tyler commented that the prevailing sense among the newer teachers that he has spoken with is one of, “Wait, I am fresh out of school. I can barely get this classroom to sit down, and you are throwing a blind kid at me.”

There were also situations where inadequate funding and disconnected district-decision making led students to precarious learning environments. Tyler discussed an instance where school funding seemed to pull a vanishing act. This is how he described the educational impact that the insufficient funding had on his student:

She was at this school because they were supposed to have enough money where they were going to hire another person, bring a couple kids in. But money got cut and they never hired that person. So this girl is in a class by herself. We are trying to get her to an environment where she is just not by herself, just sitting with a middle-aged woman all day. (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016).

In another example, district personnel decided to redefine the population of a self-contained classroom for students with autism. As the new school year was commencing, the classroom was converted from serving children with mild autism, to serving students with severe autism. The vision program was not consulted to evaluate the implications

that the restructuring would have on the participating students with visual impairments.

Tyler explained:

So when we placed my student in there, she was going to be pretty much run of the mill, right on par with everyone for their reading abilities. It was going to be great because there were going to be a couple more paraprofessionals to help her out. (Tyler, personal communication, September 15, 2016)

While the blind student possessed a mild cognitive impairment, Tyler reported that her educational goals were still largely academic. The repopulation of the class dramatically dulled the academic focus of the program, leading the vision program to identify a less optimal placement for the youngster.

Tyler also identified a set of barriers specific to Rosedale vision program teachers. Low numbers of teachers of students with visual impairments emerged as a systemic obstacle hindering the delivery of timely and quality educational services. For instance, two teachers failed to report back to work midway through the school year, leaving the vision program scrambling to reorganize caseloads and to identify qualified replacements. While efforts are underway to fill these and other critical vacancies, Tyler felt that the extensive recruitment strategies that Rosedale implements are no match for overcoming the negative perceptions that stoke teacher shortages in his district. For instance, frequent and highly publicized conflicts between the district and the teachers' union represent one sustained deterrent. "We don't have a contract. There is strike talk. So we look a little scarier," is how Tyler summarized the impact that the troubled relationship has on recruitment efforts.

Misconceptions regarding the role of poverty and the nature of work in urban communities also seem to exacerbate the teacher scarcity. Tyler established linkages between the intensified potency of these factors in Rosedale, with the long-standing national personnel shortage in visual impairment:

Well, this is predominantly low income and it's harder to find vision teachers when you live in a place like this. It is harder for Rosedale to find teachers period... so when even the best districts have a really hard time finding vision teachers, it's only worse when you're us. (Tyler, personal correspondence, March 17, 2016)

To address the personnel shortage, the vision program petitions retired teachers to reenter the classroom via a rotation model. The retired teachers take turns covering vacancies, with no teacher exceeding one hundred days in one classroom. Shortages are also addressed by increasing the number of students that each teacher serves. In terms of instructional consistency and working conditions, both of these measures seem to place students and teachers at risk of disengagement and poor performance.

The evaluation tools that vision program teachers use to determine the scope and content of vision services also surfaced as a barrier to equal educational opportunity. Tyler noted that while some teachers conduct evaluations that suggest rigor and legitimacy, the tools used in these scenarios lack an evidence-based foundation. For instance, to determine if a student needs orientation and mobility instruction, a teacher may conduct an assessment guided by checklists or scales that reflect the cumulative knowledge and beliefs of a few teachers, not a legacy of best practice.



Tyler pointed out that without policy guidance from the Rosedale vision program, personal ideology or administrative convenience can drive service provision, leading to uneven services for children. Miscalculations on the scope and content of services can emerge at any point of the student's educational career; however, initial qualification procedures, when baseline data are gathered, appeared to be a particularly sensitive period. Tyler provided candid insight on the evaluation practices that he has noticed in his district:

I will be honest. It depends on who your assessor is and on how cute and agreeable you are. If you are a cute fun kid to work with, you get lots of minutes. But if you are a little shit, a little less pleasant to work with, magically you only get like ten minutes a week or something. (Tyler, personal correspondence, March 17, 2016)

I asked Tyler to describe the types of students who are most susceptible to the sort of appraisal he described. He replied, "It totally changes. It really depends on the kids' disposition." Tyler noted that instruction in braille and cane travel represent the greatest disparities, with students that have remaining vision most likely to incur educational inequities. Tyler revealed a second underlying barrier influencing the services that this subset of students receives.

Eye medical reports are required for consideration into special education, underscoring the weight of medical opinions in the context of educational decision-making. The eye medical report is one principal source determining the suitability of vision special education services. The report will generate quantitative figures, such as visual acuity and visual field. Information regarding the eye condition and the long-term

implications of the disorder are also outlined. Tyler reported that some teachers discount medical opinion, electing to instead implement their own ideas regarding the power that usable vision should have in determining the educational plan of a student.

This deeply ingrained ideological division among his colleagues results in vastly different perspectives regarding the timing and content of vision services. This is how Tyler explained the systemic rift in the Rosedale vision program:

So for kids who have a visual prognosis where they are going to be blind, or they are going to be significantly visually impaired, there is some debate on whether we pick up services now, or do we pick them when they lose vision... so it kind of depends on who got assigned that assessment that day... I would say that a thousand times over for mobility. The mobility, I see that a one hundred times worse. The more experienced teachers don't really give minutes before a kid loses their vision. (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

Tyler chooses to provide his students with diminishing or decreased vision instruction in braille and cane travel. He stated that as a recent graduate, his instructional outlook is aligned with contemporary practice. He also said that his approach is more likely to result in uninterrupted access to the curricula, which he views as a primary objective of vision special education services.

Tyler introduced one final element fueling uneven vision services in Rosedale. He has observed that even when the vision program is adequately staffed, the never-ending threat or collective memory of a teacher drought prompts vision personnel to hoard service minutes from students. Conversations between Tyler and his colleagues regarding greater levels of service to students with remaining vision typically raise these

questions, “Okay, what if things get bad? How are we going to meet this kid’s minutes? When we have the kid who is blind now. We can barely meet his minutes.” Tyler’s colleagues told him that the task of educating hundreds of visually impaired students has been undertaken by anywhere from eight to thirty teachers.

The final set of barriers that Tyler outlined relate to the families and student groups that he serves. Tyler explained that families of visually impaired children experience barriers that intersect across school processes, language, poverty, and disability. Insufficient assistance with negotiating bureaucratic or legal complexities often produced delays in service provision. Tyler described a situation with a newly arrived immigrant family, whose son had been prohibited from attending school beyond the third grade because of blindness. The student entered the Rosedale school system as a tenth grader with no English skills. It took the family six months to maneuver through the special education pipeline. As Tyler lamented, “You can’t do anything until you have that paperwork.”

Having previously worked in the vision program of an affluent suburb, Tyler was able to draw comparisons between how families in both school locales navigate school structures. “I think the parents in the suburbs are a little more scarier. They know the words to say—due process. They just know the game a little bit more, which is a shame.” Tyler observed that high-levels of parental persistence provided his suburban students bountiful educational resources, including innovative technology, highly individualized vision supports, and knowledgeable general educators.

Tyler also discussed the common social dialogue that presents minority or low-income families as educationally unengaged. He articulated an alternative narrative,

based on the consistent parental engagement that he has witnessed through texts, phone calls, and in-person conversations. The close contact that Tyler maintains with families enabled him to offer this layered perspective: Some of these other kids in a high-poverty situation that are more medically involved, parents are spending a lot of their time and money on appointments to frankly just keep their child alive. So when it comes to school, they emphasize that it is very important, but they are also just trying to make sure their kid stays alive (September 15, 2016).

Tyler also remarked extensively on the difficulties experienced by non-English speaking families. He described that families sometimes struggle to produce medical documents, to communicate with schools about medically excusable absences, and to fully participate in IEP meetings. These families are frequently not positioned to advocate for their blind children, whom often require additional intervention to ensure an appropriate educational program. Tyler drew from an experience that he had with a school principal to illustrate how this challenge played out in the life of one of his teens:

I have a situation right now where this kid is going blind, it's just a matter of time. One parent is blind. But they are new to the country, only one person in the family really speaks English. The kid is just learning and we wanted to get him to the resource room so that he had someone in the building all day that knew what was going on. The teachers at this school are so good, and the kids' education would be amazing. There is a blind kid there that spoke his language and that reads braille. But, this is like the top school in the state, and this kid is on the lowest level of ELL... But the principal got involved, and the ELL got involved, and

they were like “no, he is not coming here.” (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

Tyler also described specific barriers experienced by subgroups within the visually impaired student population, a segment of diversity that he feels is especially evident in urban settings. He spoke about the needs of students who are in foster care, students who lost their vision because of gun violence, students facing terminal illnesses, students having children, and students who are engaging in risky behaviors to help support their families. He discussed a student who is currently coping with blindness, homelessness, and a recent sexual assault. These students experience simultaneous disadvantages, and in many cases, their under-resourced schools lack sufficient staff to deliver intense interventions. Disability status also functions as a barrier to receiving quality interventions. Tyler pointed out that school or community therapists often lack blindness-specific knowledge, making it difficult to pinpoint difficulties and to appropriately intervene.

The third sub-question, which involves the future lives of blind urban youth, is discussed in the next section.

### **The Role of Urban Education in the Life Trajectories of Blind Students**

Tyler articulated a clear vision for the types of lives he wants his students to pursue in their adulthoods. “I want them to have a chance to find fulfillment in doing something meaningful with their lives, not just collecting a check or something like that.” He indicated two primary forces steering the future lives of his students. He asserted that the likelihood that his students will thrive in their adulthoods is inextricably connected to the schooling opportunities that broader socio-political and socio-economic structures

afford. “Depending on what kind of school you go to, there is a huge difference in resources...a lot is determined by where you live.” The second factor relates to the quality and appropriateness of the vision special education services that students are provided. Tyler perceived nonstandard assessment tools, individual ideologies, and staffing patterns as conditions that can restrict the scope and content of service delivery. Tyler appeared to consider a future for his students that was contingent on the mobility skills that are infrequently taught to some Rosedale students. He stated, “There are a lot of community colleges and four year institutions, the whole gambit of higher education is readily available off public transit.”

Tyler applied an equity-orientation to his description of vision special education services in Rosedale. He described school contexts that were profoundly shaped by socioeconomic factors. He drew connections between differentiations in school resources and the associated circumstances that his students faced in terms of expectations, academic achievement, and general educators. Lack of guiding policies in the vision program suggest that educational disparities are perpetuated among students with usable vision. However, teacher shortages also limit the access that students have to quality special education services. Ultimately, Tyler proposed a future for his students that is closely aligned with the educational opportunities that are made available to them. Thus far, case studies have centered around two itinerant teachers. The next case study will provide the perspective of a school-based teacher of the blind.

### **Case Study Three: Wilson Public Schools**

A lot of times they are just regular kids. They like to do normal kid things. They like to sing. They like to dance. They like being social...Some of my students are

very eager learners. A lot of them enjoy school. — Erin, age 36, Wilson Public Schools (Personal communication, September 25, 2016)

Erin was recommended for participation in this study by a teacher educator in the field of visual impairment. Erin had nearly completed her Master's in curricular foundations when she stumbled upon an employment opportunity with a blindness educational nonprofit. The organization needed a teacher for their early childhood classroom, and Erin was hired for the position. She recalled, "I kind of just found the job while I was doing my Master's, and I happened to like it." Consequently, Erin abandoned her plan to become a general education teacher and enrolled in a federally funded teacher-training program for the visually impaired.

"I just remember it being so intense. Like a lot of hands-on working with students, going into clinics, and schools, which I liked. A lot of reports and presentations," is what Erin recalled about her teacher education program. Although the university that she attended is known for a focus on urban education, Erin was unable to articulate the relationship that under-resourced urban schools have to broader sociopolitical and sociocultural conditions. She stated that learning about the emotional aspects of blindness and undertaking reading interventions with struggling blind learners were the two elements of her graduate training that are most pertinent to her present day work in the Wilson school system.

The Wilson school system is one of the three largest districts in the US. Minorities comprise more than ninety-percent of student enrolment. Nearly fourteen percent of the total student population has a disability. Seventy-nine percent of special education students are categorized as low-income. About half of all English learners

receive special education services. A thorough search of the Wilson website, phone calls to the Wilson special education department, and email correspondence with Wilson vision program administrators did not yield any enrollment information for visually impaired students.

The Wilson special education system has been under federal court oversight for nearly three decades, providing a troubling overarching context from which to deliver specialized supports to students. More recently, Wilson's deep financial pressures have triggered widespread alarm across local and state education leaders, bringing special education expenditures to the forefront of reform efforts. This condition has intensified in light of multisource reports projecting that special education will represent one-fifth of the overall district budget by 2020. Meanwhile, the need for special education services have continued to surge. For instance, in the most recent school year, one in thirty-eight general education students were evaluated for special education services. Eighty-six percent of the referred students qualified for the specialized supports. Thus, the scrutiny surrounding special education policies and procedures are likely to deepen, especially in light of the population of students that require both English learner supports and special education interventions.

Developing a strong teaching force also emerged as salient in the context of special education delivery. During the period that data collection was underway, more than two dozen Teach for America members were assigned to special education classrooms throughout the district. This decision was understood by key stakeholders to represent both a deprofessionalization of teachers and a devaluing of students—the district attributed the decision to teacher shortages. Regarding vision program teachers,



Erin stated, “I feel like there is a lot of VI teachers in the program that are credentialed, but it seems like there is still a shortage because I hear of itinerant teachers in my district that have huge caseloads.”

While vision services are likely impacted by these underlying conditions, a decision to dissolve disabled-only schools was of specific relevance to this study. These school closings appeared connected to a broader story, in which mounting legal pressures, financial strains, and poor academic outcomes for disabled learners propelled the district to relocate students with disabilities into inclusive educational placements. Despite opposition from some parents and teachers, the district-operated school for the blind was closed as part of this larger reform effort. This resulted in the installation of specialized classrooms for visually impaired students at Sunnyside Elementary, a traditional public K-5 school where Erin has taught blind preschoolers for the past three years.

Erin provided a portrait of her school, explaining that the school is bordered by a “wealthy neighborhood with big houses and big yards. Very suburban looking.” Sunnyside sits one block over from the upscale neighborhood that Erin described. The Sunnyside school building is an older, unadorned brick structure, surrounded by a wire fence and a concrete landscape. It is flanked by a series of large apartment buildings, which many Sunnyside pupils call home. The school is situated on a small two-way street in one of the most iconic and populated cities of the US. In terms of the Sunnyside student body:

We have ELL students. I don’t know the percentage. Our school does receive free breakfast and lunch for all students. Our school is classified as low-income. We

do have a lot of Hispanics and White kids. There are some kids that are African American, but that population is smaller. (Erin, personal communication, September 25, 2016).

Erin shared some of her perceptions regarding differences that she has observed regarding family socioeconomic status:

As far as the high poverty schools, the cultures of families I feel are just different. For example, if you are in a suburban middle class, the families are much more different in the ways they interact with each other versus lower income families who are working all the time. I don't have a lot of personal, one on one experience, but from what I have read, it just seems like lower income families have to work more, so there is less time with the kids. Also less I don't know if I want to call it instruction, just formal interaction...Families that are double income and middle or higher class have the opportunities to interact with their kids more (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016).

About two dozen visually impaired academically tracked students attend Sunnyside. An additional group of visually impaired students with multiple impairments also attend. Students are divided into classes by academic designation (academic or non-academic) and by grade. For instance, one classroom is populated by academic students in grades two through three. The students are taught by a team of six teachers of the blind and several paraprofessionals. There was no mention of orientation and mobility instruction.

The educational model implemented at Sunnyside resembles the institutional segregation that followed the early introduction of disabled students to the U.S. public education system. This is what Erin described:

We integrate with gen ed for music class or dance class. As the kids get older, they stay together and integrate more and more each year until the fifth grade. After they leave our school, that is when they go into the gen ed classes and they have itinerant teachers. So our goal is to work towards independence. (Erin, personal communication, September 25, 2016)

Erin also provided some background on the evolution of the school. Her remarks provided some insights helpful in understanding the forces underlying general education access by visually impaired learners:

Sunnyside and Walker used to be separated schools. A few years ago, our current principal decided to integrate both schools to become one. There are two separate buildings. The Sunnyside building houses general education students and academic visually impaired students. The Walker building houses students with multiple disabilities with visual impairments and the integration classes, PE, music, and dance. As much as we want to completely integrate, in conversations the two buildings are referred to as Sunnyside and Walker. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

Erin is stationed in the preschool classroom, where her teaching assignment involved providing academic and blindness instruction to eight students in a self-contained classroom. Erin suggested that the nature of her teaching assignment left her isolated from trends in the broader vision program. For instance, she was unaware of the

number of visually impaired students in the district, or of the amount of teachers of the blind that the district employed. She also seemed unaware of the policies that directed student placements. Identification and eligibility procedures occurred external to her role. The relationships that Erin had with other teachers served as her primary source of information and support.

Erin reported spending most of her day providing both academic and blindness skill instruction to her students. Consequently, the scope of the responsibilities that Erin fulfilled generated a perspective for this case study that is almost exclusively centered around her daily classroom happenings. The next section will detail these events in relation to the first sub-question.

### **The Educational Experiences of Blind Students**

The preschoolers that Erin taught negotiated at least two systems that held educational relevance to this study. First, they were decedents of a segregated ability-based model of schooling. Second, their schooling experiences were imbedded within a framework of racial and economic inequities. Yet, commentary related to school or community context received minimal attention. Instead, the information that Erin provided was presented as a decontextualized chronicle of classroom activities.

The preschool class included eight students, ranging in ages from three to five years old. Six students are racial/ethnic minorities, and two other languages other than English are spoken in the homes of the students. Most of the students arrive at Sunnyside in a disabled-only school bus. Since pick-ups begin at 6:30, Erin noted, “some of them fall asleep on the way so they might be groggy. But they are usually happy when they get to school.”

Five of the preschoolers are exclusively classified as visually impaired, meaning that their educational plans are geared towards developing competencies that will enable full inclusion into general education. The remaining students possess severe cognitive impairments. Erin stated that the district was unwilling to create an alternative arrangement for such a small population, leading to their placement in Erin's classroom. Erin felt like she lacked the professional background to concurrently balance the specialized needs of these children with the academic goals that she was responsible for addressing with the rest of the class. Here she described the unique dynamics that the continuum of student needs introduced:

This year I have a student that has additional disabilities but she has equipment that she should be using every day, such as her stander. She has a D trainer, so she is learning to walk. She has some orthopedic impediment, wears ankle and foot braces. She is also nonverbal. As much as I want to work on those things with her every day, it's hard to actually find the time to give to her. I would say six out of eight of the students, are a lot. They need more movement, and they just need more instruction... I honestly feel like I need to slow things down for her, which is tough too because it takes away time from the other students. I try to plan easy activities where my TAs can easily instruct. But she is a lot more involved, and I feel like I could be doing more. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

Despite these variations, the daily activities that Erin outlined seemed typical of what would play out in a general education classroom. The students begin their day by "signing in," which requires that students shift an object that corresponds with their name to the opposite side of the class roster. Next, students are responsible for independently

locating their basket, where backpacks, canes, and other personal items are deposited. Students wash-up in preparation to eat their federally subsidized breakfast. After eating, “they clean up after themselves and we help the students that need more help or encourage the other students to clean up by themselves if they are more independent.” The school day officially begins at 7:55.

Academic instruction typically begins with circle time, followed by seven to ten-minute small group rotations. Small groups of students complete hands-on activities at two or three learning centers. Two paraprofessionals help facilitate the rotations. Students complete a whole group read aloud, which is preceded by a fine motor activity.

The students are exposed to foundational braille skills throughout the school day. Erin described activities that allowed for both structured and unstructured braille literacy experiences. For instance, students are encouraged to use the braillewriter to scribble in the same ways that their sighted peers experiment with a pen and paper. Braille literacy goals are included in the educational plans of five of the eight students. While not clear if the decision is personal or institutional, Erin described providing students with deteriorating vision access to braille instruction.

The students are “integrated” into a couple of classes outside of their self-contained placement: music and dance. Erin provided some details about the educational experiences that her students have in these classes. She stated that the music teacher calls on every student in the class, an approach that allowed her students to take part in class discussions. Students are paired with “buddies” to assist with hands-on activities.

Dance class appeared to present some challenges that Erin attributed to blindness:

Movement for dances is difficult. Just simple keep your arms straight and crisscrossing or things like that... They don't have a visual example. So my students that have low vision they pick it up a lot easier because they can kind of see a little bit of what they are supposed to be doing. And my kids that don't have any vision, their dance isn't that motivating. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

Erin described how she made accommodations and delivered instruction to the young dancers:

I try and get around to most of them to teach them the basic one-two movements. The second-year students are starting to get it better; it took them a whole year to learn the basic steps. But they are following the instructions of the dance teacher as best as they can. But she does go fast for my little preschoolers. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

The visually impaired students are also assigned "buddies" to assist in dance class.

Erin stated that the school principal decided to include the students in these two courses; however, further probing revealed that the choice was established by district administrators. When the school for the blind closed, there appeared to be a pressure to alleviate the concerns of parents and general education teachers, both of whom were doubtful of how an inclusive educational model would be implemented. A high-level special education administrator described the integration of the blind students as an evolving process that would unfold over time. The administrator emphasized that students with visual impairments would have access to art or library, and it was also stated that, "we are not sending them into math or reading classes."

Erin described a series of educational experiences and settings that are marked by varying levels of segregation. For instance, students ride to school in a bus that is designated for students with disabilities, most of the school day is spent among other children with disabilities, and the students with blindness and additional disabilities are educated in a separate building that is primarily populated by severely disabled learners. Additionally, the two buildings that constitute the Sunnyside campus run on different schedules, and are also treated as separate schools on district webpages.

Erin felt that the gradual path towards general education that her students follow introduced several strengths. This is what she described:

My opinion about the classes is that they are great because they are a support network for all of the kids. They make such good bonds and they are alike. I feel when they are in these big classes and there is only one or two that they can only relate to, socioemotionally there might not be a lot of support in that sense. And there is also adapting materials. So I guess it depends on personal opinions on what is better for them. (Erin, personal communication, September 25, 2016)

The next section will describe the obstacles that the preschoolers encounter.

### **Observed Barriers to Educational Opportunities**

Erin did not perceive that the education of her students exhibited significant barriers. She felt that when compared to blind children in neighborhood schools, her self-contained students received a greater dose of blindness skill instruction. She attributed the differentiated access to service models, stating that high caseloads prevent itinerant teachers from providing thorough services to students with visual impairments. She



pointed to the daily braille instruction that her students are provided to support her assertion.

While Erin expressed support for the gradual-integration approach endorsed in her district, accounts suggested that placement in the self-contained model created barriers in accessing general education. For instance, she described prerequisites that visually impaired preschoolers need to achieve for integration into general education to occur. To illustrate, she provided this account:

This student who is being integrated for math right now, it was my idea. I pushed for it because he was aligning. I was a little nervous. I hope I made the right decision. But he was aligning with the state standards that I use. So I pushed for him to be mainstreamed. My assistant principal was a little shocked by my recommendations, but I just restated that he was aligning with the standards. And he is low vision. He does see a lot, he just needs large print. With large print, I really feel he could do. Also, being in that regular classroom environment he might see that modeling from his peers. That was my whole thing. In the small class I feel he was getting real bored. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

From what Erin described, two barriers needed to be addressed for the student to access general education. First, he needed to produce evidence of academic readiness. Erin used the student's alignment with state math standards to validate her placement recommendation. Second, Erin needed to address the underlying school culture that may not always perceive visually impaired students as academically capable. This was the

only time that Erin recalled advocating for early academic placement in general education.

Other barriers that she reported mainly involved classroom-level conditions or district-wide personnel policies. For instance, the paraprofessionals that work in her classroom do not possess any formal training in visual impairment. This lack of training placed a limitation on the scope of duties that they could complete, especially in terms of producing braille materials. Erin stated “its tough getting my classroom to be like a perfect literacy environment.” A lack of background in blindness also made it difficult for the paraprofessionals to require age-appropriate behaviors from the students. Erin shared, “My student bent over and licked a banana off the lunch tray, and my TA started laughing. I told her not to laugh, not to promote socially inappropriate behaviors. I just had to put my foot down.”

Erin cited the accessible production of materials as a challenge. She said that she typically spends several after-work hours making story boxes and tactile worksheets for her students. “So if we are learning about the letter A, I will make a worksheet and I will find real apples and we will glue the skin on and I will put a print A with a braille A on there. I will try and get it as tactile as possible.” Sunnyside once had a braillist that produced materials for all the blind students; however, Erin believes that either budget cuts or teacher shortages were behind her departure.

Another challenge involved curricula. Erin articulated a strong desire to transplant the types of educational and social experiences observable in general education into her self-contained classroom. This effort seemed to be a source of frustration. “I want it to be exactly. To mimic the curriculum that the gen ed students are using... And sometimes

I can't come up with something." She discussed concerns regarding a recently adopted district-wide inquiry-based curriculum. She did not know how to make lessons accessible and felt that there was no institutional support to provide guidance. Meanwhile, there is an expectation at Sunnyside that Erin and the other vision program teachers can problem solve internally. Regarding the new curriculum and the perception of the school principal, Erin stated, "I really feel that she trusts us to know because visual impairments isn't her specialty. She really does put the ball in our court, and trusts that we can adapt it to what our students can do."

Erin cited a set of parent-related challenges that can pose educational barriers. She extensively discussed issues related to the emotional needs of her student's families. She described unsure and grief-stricken parents who were in need of strategies for coping with disability. One family spent almost an entire school year at Sunnyside, monitoring the well-being of their child. "The parents were going through a lot of stages where they were accepting and trying to deal with his abilities and disabilities... They would be there every day watching, just afraid that he'd hurt himself." Another parent told Erin, "I have two different kids and I need to come to terms with them being different from one another." Erin observed that parents were mainly unconcerned with the self-contained arrangement because families are just getting accustomed to sending their children to school.

Erin explained that families who are unable to speak English experience increased difficulties, both in learning how to negotiate the school system, and in obtaining assistance to cope with disability-related emotions. She remarked that language barriers can lead to inappropriate placements for visually impaired students who are also English

learners. To communicate with her non-English speaking families, Erin reported having to locate a teacher that “has some minutes to translate a quick note for me.” The next section will address the third sub-question.

### **The Role of Urban Education in the Life Trajectories of Blind Students**

Erin expressed satisfaction with the education that her students receive, “As far as my students go, I really do feel like they all get served very well.” She presented a hopeful future, in which her students have the opportunity to:

I want them to have normal lives! I mean in the working world, socialization and doing typical things that we all like to do. Hanging out with friends. Maybe there will be cars that drive themselves when they get older! But you know like recreational things too. (Erin, personal communication, October 9, 2016)

The contemporary educational experiences of the students that Erin teaches are rooted in decades of district-sponsored ability-based systemic segregation. Their educational experiences reflect the continued educational relevance that the framework created. Institutionalized forms of segregation were evident in their educational experiences. Yet, Erin and the families that she served did not view this model as problematic.

In this case study, proximity to peers without disabilities did not always grant access to inclusive learning opportunities, as evidenced by the recurring need for sighted “buddies” in the music and dance classes that the blind preschoolers attended. It did not appear that consideration had been given to the power imbalances or social narrative that using such arrangements tend to create between children. The difficulties

that Erin noted suggest that placement in academic classes may have yielded greater academic and social gains.

The next case study also features a school-based elementary teacher of the blind; however, the different educational configuration that the school district operates provides a lens to help more fully elucidate some of the patterns observable in Erin's account.

#### **Case Study Four: Union Park Public Schools**

I was a kid in an urban school with a visual impairment that didn't speak English. So I received a very bad education. So I think that is what made me want to become a teacher. —Alejandra, age 31, Union Park (personal communication, August 24, 2016).

At age five, Alejandra entered the U.S. public education system as a newly arrived undocumented immigrant with a disability. "I remember not being able to participate in what was occurring at school. It took me longer than usual to learn my alphabet because I could not see the board or understand what the teacher was saying." In our conversations, Alejandra detailed a sequence of school years marked by deep feelings of being an outsider, emotions that were punctuated by the lack of culturally pertinent pedagogical approaches in her educational environments. Alejandra also reported receiving a set of bare-bone vision special education services, whose ineffectiveness rendered her to the margins of both general education classes and English language learning supports. Despite these educational deficiencies, Alejandra achieved considerable academic and professional success-- earning a graduate degree in visual impairment, founding a nonprofit organization, becoming politically engaged with social justice issues, enrolling in a doctoral program, and becoming a US citizen. Yet, her

profound cultural and educational hardships lie just beneath her highly-polished exterior, continuously powering her work on behalf of urban children:

I was an English language learner myself, and so I had to go through all of the struggles that these kids are going through in school. So I think I take it very personally. I want my students to do well because I was in their position.

(Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

For nearly four years, Alejandra has been living and working in Union Park. Union Park is situated in the mid-Atlantic region of the US, enrolling about fifty thousand students. Nearly three-quarters of all students are enrolled in the National Lunch Program. African American students constitute the largest share of pupils. Latino enrollment has been climbing steadily for the past five years, currently accounting for about eighteen percent of total student enrollment. Eleven percent of students are English learners. About fifteen percent of students have disabilities. The graduation rate is 69 percent for general education students, and 47 percent for students with disabilities. A disaggregated figure for students with visual impairments was not available.

Union Park educates approximately 50 students with visual impairments in a continuum of placements, including resource, self-contained, and full-inclusion settings. Resource rooms are housed at three well-regarded schools, making them a popular option for students in grades pre-kindergarten through high school. Students can also elect to attend a neighborhood school with the support of itinerant services.

The Vision program is nested within the department of low-incidence disabilities, which is overseen by a central office administrator. The vision program includes Alejandra and four other specialized teachers of the blind. Outside contractors provide

orientation and mobility training to students. Alejandra provided insight on two conditions that she feels are relevant to understanding vision special education services in her district. The first involves the uniform approach that is applied to the education of blind students. This is how Alejandra articulated her observation:

In an urban school district, there are lots of students with disabilities, lots of kids with visual impairments. So they don't specialize. They should be doing specialized instruction, but it's not happening. It's, "Okay, this is what we are going to provide to all of our fifty students." Instead of really coming up with an individualized program. (Alejandra, personal communication, September 29, 2016).

The second factor involves the perceived mechanisms that Union Park employs to guard district resources, including teachers, technology, and transportation. These two factors will take on greater relevance as details regarding the children that Alejandra teaches unfold.

Alejandra is stationed at Kern elementary school, serving as the daily, on-site teacher for a group of five students with visual impairments. However, a growing sense that Union Park families had insufficient access to adjustment-to-blindness resources led Alejandra to fulfill an additional role that was not traditionally adopted by vision program personnel. Alejandra began teaching families strategies for promoting independence and confidence in their blind children outside of school hours, viewing this intervention as vital for elevating the academic and social success of blind students. In this work, Alejandra shared the techniques and outlook that she employs for managing her own

blindness, and she also established connections between families and local blindness advocacy organizations.

With her public visibility increasing, and with families feeling disenfranchised from the Union Park school district, Alejandra began hearing from parents and community members seeking remedies for the educational shortcomings experienced by blind students in the school district. Interventions requested by families involved issues such as insufficient braille instruction, challenges with general education, and difficulties with IEP processes. While Alejandra originally understood these types of issues to be localized to her caseload, the collective voices of these families highlighted systemic leaks in the educational pipeline of blind Union Park students. The next section will shed light upon the educational experiences of the students that Alejandra serves.

### **The Educational Experiences of Blind Students**

Kern elementary school, where Alejandra teaches, serves children prekindergarten through eighth grade. Although blind students can choose to attend their neighborhood school with the support of itinerant vision services, Alejandra reported that most families prefer the vision resource program at her school since Kern is among the best schools in the district. “Like we have really good teachers, high standards, are test scores are going up, and we have high expectations,” are among the attributes that Alejandra believes create a fruitful learning environment for blind Union Park students.

Despite these strengths, Alejandra acknowledged that the educational infrastructure supporting the daily learning of her students lacks the fortitude to weather the tempestuous political climates of her school and district. Alejandra disclosed that there is an unspoken rule governing the relationship between the school leadership and



the vision program, which rests on the concept that Kern is performing the district a favor by housing the vision program. In this arrangement, complaints against Kern can leave the blind student population susceptible to being moved to a less desirable school locale. Consequently, Alejandra and her students are quite vulnerable, and at times forced to assume a demoted status. To illustrate this point, Alejandra shared the difficulties that she experienced in securing a classroom at Kern.

Last school year, Alejandra was informed that her classroom would be designated as a self-contained setting for a student with intellectual disabilities. She was reassigned to instruct her students out of a copy room/bathroom, where she has been for nearly a school year. Alejandra provided a description of her new room:

So you walk into the room, and there is a bathroom. Then you keep walking and there is my desk. And then you walk one step beyond my desk and there is a copy machine that all the elementary teachers use. (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016).

Alejandra was unable to convince her school principal to identify an alternative location. She then sought intervention from her central office supervisor. “They did nothing,” is how Alejandra summarized the outcome of her request for assistance. With no avenues for advocacy, Alejandra decided to “make the best of her situation.” She proposed to limit the hours of the day that teachers could make copies to avoid interruptions to her students. However, administration did not approve the request, citing teacher inconvenience as a factor. This is how she described a typical day in her setting:

These are young blind students. They are very curious. First, the copy machine is very loud. My blind students are very observant. So someone walks in and they

are like, “Who walked in? What’s your name? Why is the copy machine on? Who is in the bathroom?” (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Alejandra reported that some teachers see that she is working with students and respond by quickly exiting the room. However, the vast majority express their apologies, but move forward with making copies. Alejandra continued by explaining the interruptions that this arrangement posed for her students during a braille class:

So there is this loud machine going on. I am like, “read the next word,” and I am trying to get them to focus. Then you have a teacher who comes in greeting, because they know the student. I am like, “No, please don’t talk to the student.” But, then again, the student wants to know what’s happening. (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016).

Aside from pulling students out to provide direct instruction, Alejandra also reported weaving through various general education classes to make accommodations, to deliver accessible materials, and to consult with teachers. These sustained and in-depth interactions across multiple classrooms enabled Alejandra to notice patterns that tilt the balance in favor of educational excellence for her students. She concluded that optimal educational conditions emerge when a high-quality general education teacher, a knowledgeable teacher of the blind, and a proactive parent establish a solid partnership. Alejandra provided some insights on how this partnership was operationalized in the education of Luna, a first-grade student.

Luna, who is totally blind, was assigned to Alejandra as a three-year-old preschooler. While Alejandra taught Luna various blindness skills, she emphasized daily instruction in braille and cane travel. At Kern, students spend two years in the preschool

program; thus, Luna had the same general education teacher for two consecutive school years. Alejandra spent significant time providing instant support to both Luna and her teacher during these grades. She also continued high-levels of support in both kindergarten and first grade. Luna is presently meeting or exceeding the academic accomplishments of her sighted peers, an achievement that Alejandra attributed to “getting what is needed in general education.”

Alejandra chiefly credited the succession of high-quality general educators for enacting subtle, yet impactful classroom practices that established an environment of “really high expectations” for her student. She stated that collectively, the teachers “Understand the importance of inclusion and including them in everything.” Alejandra provided examples of Inclusive practices, “So anytime there is an activity in the classroom, the teacher describes everything automatically.” Also, “When there is a physical activity, the teacher uses the blind student as the model to teach the other kids what to do.” These actions seemed to be propelled by a can-do mindset that causes the teacher to view blindness as an opportunity to grow professionally, not as an occupational burden. For instance, Alejandra reported that teachers would approach her with excitement, eager to share their ideas for new adaptations. “Oh, I thought of this! I thought of that!” are the types of statements that Alejandra recalled hearing.

In terms of Luna’s parents, Alejandra devoted an extensive amount of time during the preschool years building trust and helping the family cope with blindness. She also delineated the importance of developing mastery of blindness skills, explained the inner-workings of special education procedures, and presented advocacy strategies to circumvent district-level roadblocks. By the time Luna reached the first grade, the triad of

parent, teacher, and special educator contributed greatly to the creation of a strong educational foundation. Further, this partnership generated a [Field] blueprint that had been tested and refined over the span of multiple school years, building capacity for launching future educational endeavors. Alejandra concluded, “The parent has kind of seen what good looks like, so they are not going to be willing to get anything less than that be a part of the education of their child.”

The rest of the students that Alejandra teaches at Kern have yet to experience the same level of acceptance and educational engagement in their general education classes. “They kind of feel like it’s not their responsibility to teach the child at all,” is how Alejandra described the stance that many Kern teachers adopt in relation to her students. Alejandra reported being summoned to classrooms, not to provide accommodations, but to serve as an intermediary between an unsure teacher and the blind student. Routinely, Alejandra is asked to teach her blind students academic subjects, or to administer their examinations—essentially asking that Alejandra assume the role of both a special educator and a general education teacher. She pointed out that less successful teachers of blind students tend to set low expectations, struggle to fashion classroom accommodations, and are unable to differentiate learning. She indicated that overall teacher quality is suggestive of the educational environment that the blind student will encounter. “It just so happens that the blind students need more support and more accommodations, so if the teacher isn’t good for the general education kids, let alone for the blind student.”

Alejandra does not place blame on teachers. She asserted, “I feel like the majority of the teachers don’t feel equipped because we don’t provide them with enough resources

to feel equipped.” Alejandra explained that very minimal professional development training from the Union Park school district, coupled with insufficient special education coursework in teacher education programs, preclude teachers from developing the skills needed to fully address the needs of their students with disabilities. She drew these conclusions:

There’s a lack of exposure to special education. So general education teachers are like “I am not going into special education, so I don’t need to know it.” But the thing is that they are all going to have students with disabilities in the classroom, and they are not prepared because the majority of coursework for general education teachers is like one class on disability. So they are ill-prepared, and they are the main people who are providing instruction to the students, and they don’t know what to do. (Alejandra, personal communication, September 29, 2016)

Alejandra provided key insights regarding the broad educational experiences of her students. The next section will bring to the forefront the barriers to educational opportunities that Alejandra described.

### **Observed Barriers to Educational Opportunities**

Alejandra described numerous obstacles threatening the educational well-being of her students. The challenges that she reported are multilayered, intersecting across vision special education service provision, school context, and district decision-making. She positioned the barriers that her students experience against a backdrop of profound race-based and income-related inequitable schooling conditions. Alejandra cited these factors as significantly relevant to her students in terms of the “funding, buildings, teachers, and

educational content” to which they are exposed. She reported that the preliminary steps triggering special education identification frequently pose barriers in gaining services.

Regarding identification procedures, Alejandra described two problematic patterns effecting Union Park students. “The first people to refer students are teachers. The majority of teachers are young White female teachers and so they don’t speak Spanish or any other languages.” Alejandra reported that a cultural disconnect between Union Park teachers and their diverse students is frequently a source of delay in the identification process. Teachers lack the personal background or the institutional resources to swiftly disentangle English language learning issues from vision-related difficulties. This task increases in complexity when the student lacks the words, either because of English language status, or because of additional disabilities, to alert adults about poor vision.

The second identification challenge involves the disability documentation that families must generate for students to become eligible for vision services. To qualify, Union Park requires both a report from a general medical physician, and a detailed report from an ophthalmologist. The latter is considered a routine request; however, producing a medical report to verify that the vision issue is not caused by any other condition has not been reported by any other study participant. Alejandra asserted that the additional requirement increases bureaucracy while decreasing access to services.

She described the burden that gathering the necessary paperwork places on Union Park families, an impact that disproportionately affects low-income and non-English speaking families. “So you have to have a parent who doesn’t speak the language navigate a whole system, and tell the doctor what the school wants.” She also noted that

employers are reluctant to provide time off to parents for appointment-related needs. Some parents are also unable to pay for the appointments and their associated costs. Alejandra reported that programs exist to provide children subsidized vision screenings, but that completing the referral and income verification procedures for these programs is quite complex and time-intensive.

Alejandra reported that students can also encounter challenges after the initial qualification requirements for special education services are met. “The school district that I work for has a very specific process of doing IEPs, and in my opinion a lot of them are contrary to what the IDEA says.” She pointed to the process that Union Park implements to determine LRE, a highly influential component of the IEP document. According to Alejandra, a team of district personnel is deployed to the visually impaired student’s school, where an unspecified amount of observations and data collection is undertaken. This process is conducted separate from the vision program, which is the only source in the district for blindness-specific expertise. Based on this process, a placement recommendation is advanced without the input of Alejandra, general educators, parents, and other members of the IEP team. Alejandra related that the process is cloaked in pseudoscientific special education practice, undermining student needs, while prioritizing administrative convenience.

Another obstacle that Alejandra cited involved inadequacies in the level of support that parents are provided in navigating IEP procedures. She shared that parents often feel disoriented by legal or procedural terms. Yet, they move forward with endorsing documents without fully understanding the educational ramifications that their signature can induce. This trend is especially pronounced in cases where a non-English

speaking family lacks translation services. As Alejandra explained, “The parents who advocate get the majority of the special education resources. So the schools in lower income communities of color, the parents aren’t necessarily advocating because they don’t know how. It’s a huge disparity.”

Alejandra outlined a host of problems that can breach the special education pipeline once service provision commences. Issues surrounding technology surfaced repeatedly.

To determine the assistive technology needs of a student, the district implements a similar model to the procedure used for determining LRE. A central office employee lacking a background in visual impairment conducts an assistive technology evaluation of the blind student. Often, Alejandra learns what technology her students will be provided after the directive is in place. Other times, she is consulted to assist in whittling down options to limit district expenditures. She shared this account:

An assistive technology person from central office comes to observe my student. They know nothing about blindness. I say, “Hey, the student needs this and this and this.” Then they respond, “We can probably only get one thing. So, if your student could only have one thing, what would you get them?” (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

In this exchange, Alejandra requested a laptop with screen-reading software. The evaluation was conducted in the fall of 2015, and the technology was written into the student’s IEP. Despite Alejandra’s advocacy, after a year and a half, the accessible laptop has not been provided to the student.



Challenges involving the home use of assistive technology was also reported by Alejandra. Union Park offers students two options for after-school assistive technology usage. In one scenario, students can bring devices back and forth between school and home. Alejandra expressed that the bulky, heavy, or fragile nature of the devices make them impractical to transport, especially for children or in public transit settings.

Alternatively, students can keep technology at home, if parents sign a waiver accepting full financial responsibility for the device. With much of the assistive technology costing upwards of five thousand dollars, Alejandra noted that her low-income families are often fearful of taking such a financial risk. Alejandra stated that district technology policies limit or prevent her students from such activities as completing homework, pursuing leisure reading, undertaking college or career exploration, developing increased expertise with devices, or engaging in self-directed learning activities. Alejandra disclosed, “So I tend to break the rules. I let them keep it at home, and pretend I don’t know about it... if they even get the technology in the first place!”

Alejandra also provided information about two district practices that limit access to braille literacy. Recently, Union Park adopted an invalidated assessment tool to determine reading media for visually impaired students. After thoroughly examining the content of the evaluation tool, Alejandra believed that the questions posed would result in a literacy recommendation that favored print. For example, one question asked if the student used their hands to explore objects. Alejandra commented, “If they haven’t been taught, then no they don’t.”

Alejandra voiced her opposition to her supervisor, but the assessment tool remained a district-wide mandate. Thus, many students whom previously received braille instruction, stopped receiving lessons with the implementation of the new tool. Alejandra concluded, “This tool benefits the teachers because they have to do less work. It benefits the people in charge of the vision program because they can say they are using less district resources. But it harms the student.”

For the students who do receive braille instruction, Alejandra reported high-levels of concern regarding the production and availability of braille materials. Funding cuts resulted in resource rooms losing their braille transcribers; thus, a new process was put in place across the district to convert print materials into braille. Five steps must be completed for students to receive braille materials: classroom teachers provide Alejandra their materials; Alejandra provides the print documents to central office; someone in central office brailles the documents; brailled documents are either mailed or driven to Alejandra; and Alejandra completes the cycle by delivering the materials to the general education teacher. Alejandra reported that her students have yet to receive their braille materials at the same time that sighted students receive their print documents.

The final set of challenges that Alejandra reported relate to inequitable physical access to school or district resources. For example, the district-sponsored transportation that blind students are provided does not allow access to after-school activities, since adjustments to pick up and drop off times are not permitted. Consequently, the students that Alejandra teaches miss out on music, dance, art, chess, academic enrichment, trips, and opportunities to socialize with their peers. Alejandra also shared that insufficient

instruction in cane usage also prevents visually impaired students from using public transit.

Alejandra reported that aging school buildings represent barriers to Union Park students with visual impairments. Further, she communicated that decaying school structures tend to project a broader school culture where high expectations and academic achievement are eroding. To demonstrate the interplay between these factors, Alejandra described the range of barriers that one of her students must navigate in pursuit of a free and appropriate education:

My student is totally blind, English language learner, and has cerebral palsy. He has trouble walking, and the school is not very accessible. The school environment is not constructive for learning, or for getting around. Students do the bare minimum to pass. So for example, there are two entrances to the school. The entrance that has the doorbell to let you in is not accessible. The entrance that has the wheelchair ramp does not have the button that lets you in the school. So if you want to get into the school, you have to find someone to go around and kind of get you in that way. The students' classes are on the third floor. So when the only elevator in the school breaks, which happens quite often, there really isn't a priority on getting the elevator to work. Then the student can walk to class, but it's tiresome, really not the best way for him. So he ends up either not going to class, or just taking 20 minutes to get up to class. By the time he gets back down, that's 40 minutes. To go to the playground, you have to go downstairs and that's it. There's no way to get to the playground. (Alejandra, personal communication, September 29, 2016)

The next section will share what Alejandra reported in relation to the third sub-question.

### **The Role of Urban Education in the Life Trajectories of Blind Students**

Alejandra defined three factors that she believes can potentially stunt the economic, political, and social mobility of her students well into their adulthoods. She posited that the fates of Union Park students are closely entwined with the quality of the teachers provided through the vision program. A leading concern that she voiced involved the minimal exposure that the teachers had to blind adults. This is how Alejandra framed the issue:

The things they know about blindness are about how to teach blind kids... They don't know blind adults. So I think that is the biggest thing lacking. They don't know blind adults, so they have no idea how blind adults do things. (Alejandra, personal correspondence, September 29, 2016)

Alejandra pointed out that the disconnect between her colleagues and the blind community was of tremendous consequence as students sought guidance crafting their educational and occupational goals. In discussing employment more deeply, Alejandra identified an underlying factor that broadened the conversation beyond the contact that teachers have with blind adults. This point was raised when Alejandra relayed the narrative surrounding a blind student who wanted to become a pilot. The teacher of the blind signed off on the career choice without posing questions that would prompt the student to research blindness adaptations, leading Alejandra to think:

They inherently believe that the student is not going to be able to do it... They don't believe that the kid can do it, but they are not going to be the one to say I

don't think they can be an airplane pilot because they don't want to be politically incorrect. And so then they don't say anything. (Alejandra, personal communication, September 29, 2016)

Alejandra presented a scenario in which she mined the blind community to identify career resources for her student:

So I have a student who wants to be a ballerina. So I don't know a blind ballerina, but I know a lot of blind folks. So I was able to find a visually impaired ballerina. We connected with her. So now we have realistic goals. Okay, so what does she do? What did she do to get there? What did she do in school? Now my student is very excited about it and she is like I want to do this. (Alejandra, personal communication, September 29, 2016)

Alejandra also discussed a central office initiative that required teachers to draft a transition plan for every Union Park pupil. The transition plan would function as a road map towards the achievement of academic and occupational goals. Alejandra reported that the initiative was completely detached from the transition plans that students with visual impairments complete to enroll in the federal rehabilitation services administration, which enables access to disability training, higher education, and vocational services. Alejandra felt that devoid of this vital connection, the exercise was both unproductive and irrelevant to her students.

Alejandra expressed grave concern for the future lives of her students. While the majority of what she described reached across district and school contexts, she emphasized the role of classroom-level activities on the life opportunities that her students are afforded:

I think directly what happens in classrooms impacts what they do after high school whether they go to college, go to technical school, get a job and I don't think that's happening for our students because we are not preparing them at all. (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Alejandra presented an equity-focused lens to her description of vision special education services in Union Park. She viewed herself as an advocate for her students and their families. She introduced some promising classroom-level practices, revealing specific approaches useful in constructing a culture of inclusivity for blind children in general education. Alejandra also detailed multiple barriers faced by students and families, spanning the entire special education process, from identification through service provision. Alejandra has also observed a pattern of excluding the professional opinion of vision personnel. In many ways, Alejandra's physical location in her school is symbolic of the second-class station that students with visual impairments occupy across the district. The next narrative will narrow-in on the educational experiences of a student and his teacher.

### **Case Study Five: Carson Public Schools**

I feel as though they just think he has little potential. That is just how I see it, they just don't expect as much of him as they do of the other kids. —Kelly, 56, Carson Public Schools (Personal communication, August 29, 2016)

Kelly joined this study by responding to a recruitment announcement that was posted to Facebook. While we had no previous connection, the conversations that transpired throughout the research were both comfortable and enjoyable. In the first interview, Kelly shared that she was blind. This aspect of her identity was relevant in

understanding the perspective that she brought to teaching, and the mindset that she applied to special education service provision. “I met an itinerant teacher who was blind. She took me in as a high school senior because my parents were getting divorced, and I had nowhere to go.” Kelly framed this relationship as pivotal to the development of her own disability identity. She reflected:

I learned, wow, what a full life this woman has. She can do it all! She has a beautiful home, she has a guide dog, she shops, and she cooks. She is able to really have a fulfilling life. And I thought, I want to do that. (Kelly, personal communication, August 29, 2016)

After eleven years of work in the field of blindness rehabilitation, employment at a summer camp for students with disabilities provided Kelly a nudge towards a career in education. Kelly taught a group of visually impaired youth, blindness and recreational skills. “After working with those kids, I made the decision that I knew exactly what I wanted to do. Those experiences really clarified for me that teaching is what I wanted to do.” Inspired, Kelly went back to school, where she earned a second graduate degree.

Her graduate classes emphasized the legal and instructional aspects of special education. She also completed a variety of practicums, which she cited as the most useful element of her graduate training. Absent from her classes were discussions or readings that explored the dynamics between student characteristics, social conditions, and their relevance to school structures. In fact, access to these explanations of schooling were first introduced to Kelly at her local grocery store. A week prior to her first interview with Carson Public schools, Kelly ran into a friend at the store. He suggested that Kelly prepare for her upcoming interview by reading about the perspective that Dr. Martin

Haberman applied to the education of urban children. Growing up in a White, middle-class home, Kelly credited the knowledge that she gained about students from “different backgrounds” as instrumental in securing a second interview with the school district.

In her description of the interview process, Kelly stated that she presented the hiring committee an asset-based portrait of her blindness. She recalled, “I kept talking and talking because I just feel strongly that our population really needs first-hand experience with other blind and visually impaired people in different roles. Especially in the role of vision teacher.” Kelly was offered a teaching position, which she eagerly accepted.

Moreover, in a context where systemic discrimination across public institutions prevents most blind adults from gainful employment, Kelly expressed that the job offer represented more than an opportunity to teach students with visual impairments. Kelly felt that being hired signaled a belief in the equality of blind people, and by extension, a belief in the capabilities of the blind students that were in the district. It has been sixteen years since Kelly was invited to join the Carson Vision program. However, the present-day realities that she described have long been severed from the hopeful outlook that marked her entrance into the Carson school system.

Carson is located on the eastern coast of the US. The school system provides an education to nearly thirty-five thousand students, with African Americans constituting the largest share of student enrollment. Eighty-two percent of the student population is economically disadvantaged. Most of the students that Kelly teaches are Latino, who represent the fastest growing ethnic group in Carson. These pupils account for about twenty-percent of student enrollment. Across the district, fifteen percent of students are



categorized as ELL, and fifteen percent of this population receive special education services. Thirty-five percent of all ELL are Latinos. About seventy-three percent of ELL with IEPs are Latinos. Finally, the Latino graduation rate is fifty percent, compared to sixty-one percent for African Americans, and seventy-two percent for Whites.

Information pertaining to the population of visually impaired students in the district is scant. Publicly available documents indicated that fifteen of the approximately seven thousand students receiving special education services in Carson have visual impairments. Information that Kelly provided pointed to some incongruences with this figure. For instance, Kelly has five students on her caseload. She reported that another teacher also has several students on her caseload. Thus, it is possible that students with visual impairments are counted under other categories, such as other health impairments, or in the category for students with multiple impairments. Kelly provided an alternative explanation for the low figure. “We are not so full. We used to be, but all the kids are going to the suburb schools. It’s a trend. I think that it is because of the bad services here.”

The Carson vision team is staffed by a total of five teachers, and one orientation and mobility specialist. The group delivers direct or consultative services to students throughout the district. The vision staff is overseen by a program director, who is also responsible for managing other special education programs. Kelly stated that the program director lacks a professional background in the field of visual impairment. She positioned this gap in experiential and academic knowledge as a significant disadvantage that frequently left the vision program without a spokesperson to properly champion student and teacher causes. This lack of targeted leadership is understood by Kelly and

her vision colleagues to dilute the standing of the program within the district hierarchy, which often requires aggressive advocacy to achieve results.

For instance, requests for assistive technology escalate through five layers of administrative review before a final determination is made. Kelly has experienced only sporadic support in overcoming roadblocks related to central office procedures, which caused her to conclude, “We are at the bottom, so even if we get angry, we don’t get anything done faster.”

In the past several years, the Carson school district decided to eliminate or scale back two common configurations for special education service provision, resource rooms and itinerant services. Consequently, students with visual impairments either attend a neighborhood school, or receive educational services in a separate, self-contained setting. For the past two school years, Kelly’s primary teaching assignments have involved service delivery to two totally blind students. One student is stationed at a low-income urban school, where both the student body and staff are almost exclusively Latino. The second student, a sophomore from Iraq, transferred out of Carson to attend a high school outside of the city limits. The new district was unable to locate a teacher of the blind for the high schooler; thus, Kelly was deployed to the neighboring district through an arrangement between the two school systems. As a result of these teaching assignments, the perceptions that Kelly shared regarding vision special education services are centered around Jose, the totally blind first grader with whom she had the most contact at the time of the research. The following section will bring to the forefront details of the educational experiences that Kelly shared regarding this student.

## **The Educational Experiences of Blind Students**

Kelly spent half of the school day in the same general education classroom that Jose attended. In this role, she was tasked with providing instant, on-site instructional and adaptive services. This close vantage point enabled Kelly to provide extensive details on the educational and personal circumstances of her student.

Jose entered the public education system as a preschooler in Puerto Rico. While in Puerto Rico, blindness was used to justify the placement of Jose in a non-academic preschool classroom for students with severe multiple impairments. The following school year, Jose and his parents left Puerto Rico, hoping to start a new life in Carson. Jose was enrolled in a traditional public elementary school, where he would attend as a kindergartener. However, enrollment in his neighborhood school provided Jose the same fate that he encountered in Puerto Rico.

Jose was placed in a self-contained special education classroom for children that required intensive cognitive or behavioral supports. Kelly provided that the district lacked evidence to support this placement, a decision that she said was emblematic of broader placement practices in the school system. She explained, “They weren’t sure about his levels, and there was no testing done.”

The special educator that Jose was appointed was a Teach for America corps member. The teacher had no personal or professional experience with blindness—Jose was the first blind person that she had come across in her life. Further, the special education paperwork that made service provision a legal mandate was not located until two months before the end of the school year. Thus, Kelly was only instructed to provide occasional consultative services to Jose and his kindergarten teacher. Kelly felt that

collectively, these conditions relegated Jose to months of unfulfilled academic and social potential.

For the following school year, Jose remained in the same elementary school, but his placement changed. He was transferred out of the non-academic self-contained setting, to a first-grade general education classroom where Kelly would provide various special education supports.

Jose was one of twenty students in the class. Kelly described the classroom that the children occupied as a cluttered and cramped space. The volume of specialized materials for Jose added to the disorder. This is what Kelly depicted:

Oh, we have so many boxes of books and we just have to pile them on top of each other because just there is just no space in the classroom for his adaptive materials, paper, and just the number of devices that we need for him. (Kelly, personal communication, August 28, 2016)

Kelly reported that both the items that she used to produce accessible materials and the supplies that Jose used to complete work were often moved around by the classroom teacher, causing confusion among the pair. Her request to have an alternative storage space for bulky instructional materials was denied. The principal cited insufficient space, a justification that Kelly felt was untrue.

The only other adult in the class was the general education teacher, who had the responsibility of providing academic instruction to Jose and the rest of the children. The relationship between Kelly and the general educator was cordial; however, tension seemed to lie just beneath the surface. In part, Kelly felt that Jose's educational experiences were negatively impacted by various elements of classroom-level dynamics

that she could not influence. For instance, Kelly asked the general educator to provide advance notice of when the classroom would be rearranged, which occurred frequently.

Despite this explanation, the request was not fulfilled:

Please let me know in advance, not just me, but for Jose... It is difficult for a little one. I can adjust, I have a cane, I have a guide dog. But the child comes in and he doesn't know where the rug is. He doesn't know where his seat is. And, even though he has a little cane, he isn't using it very well. He is a child! (Kelly, personal communication, August 28, 2016)

Kelly reported that she made numerous efforts to engage with the teacher. Kelly arrived to work early, attempted to connect with the teacher during the school day, and suggested tips to maximize Jose's learning. These efforts did not generate any substantive changes in the educational experiences of Jose. "So I am putting forth all these efforts and I feel like they are just being kinda dashed," is what Kelly concluded.

Kelly described events in math class that illustrated subtle ways in which Jose was disadvantaged by a context of poor collaboration. Math instruction occurred on the rug, where Kelly, Jose, and the rest of the first-grade class would sit. From this position, Kelly could verify that Jose knew the braille equivalent of a print math symbol, or could demonstrate how to read a braille math equation. Kelly reported that the classroom teacher frequently used visuals to teach concepts, routinely failing to inform Kelly of her plans with sufficient time to develop accessible versions of the materials. In response, Kelly rushed to create physical manipulatives. The process typically took about fifteen minutes, enough time that the class had moved on to the next topic.

Kelly also felt that school-level factors were influential in relation to the educational experiences of her student. Kelly described the school administration as advancing a “ready or not kind of mentality,” after having witnessed widespread grade promotion practices. In relation to the status of general education students, Kelly observed, “They are being passed without having the skills that they need to pass. I don’t think that they are given the supports that they need. I see blatant under-achievement.”

The principal, assistant principal, and school-based special education coordinator were at the helm of educational decision-making for Jose. Some circumstances suggested that these adults were complicit in creating a substandard educational experience for Jose. For example, the district-sponsored transportation delivered Jose and his disabled peers thirty minutes late to school every day. Kelly raised this issue with the school principal. She explained that the tardy arrival made it impossible for Jose to complete his bell work and to adequately prepare for the school day. The principal responded with disinterest, inaction that Kelly felt normalized the miseducation of Jose and his disabled peers.

Kelly felt that the school leadership team viewed Jose through a lens of deficiency—a flawed perspective that Kelly felt was at times applied to her as a blind teacher. She remarked, “I really think that they expect them to not be able to do at the same rate as the other kids. They talk down to us, even me. They will always talk down to us.”

Kelly reported on the state of English Language Arts (ELA) instruction. The sequence of events that Kelly related were positioned as representative of the troubling circumstances that she felt powerless to remedy. This is what she shared:

Jose isn't getting ELA because the teachers didn't give him anything that I brailled. The vocabulary, I braille. On every other line I brailled all the stories that they use, but they wouldn't have him track it. Which I showed them how to track. I just wanted to see if he can make out any of the letters or words. They wouldn't even give it to him. There was print written above or below the braille lines so that a person can read along with him. But again, his aide can't read much English... so I had two notebooks, one in Spanish and one in English. I showed everybody what I had, and where it was. Nobody used it. I would place it in a certain way, and I knew the next day that nobody had touched it. The reason that the aid gave me is that when she leaves for her break, the substitute aid comes in and just talks to my student the whole period because they didn't know how to use the brailier, which is not true. They didn't know how to work with him.

(Kelly, personal communication, September 11, 2016)

Kelly met with her program supervisor to voice her concerns about the lack of instruction in English language arts, the low expectations expressed by the school leadership team, the shortfalls in the general education classroom, and the tardy school bus. A few months later, and none of the issues had been addressed. Jose's education continued to spiral. Demoralized, Kelly reported, "I stopped brailing. No one even knew it because no one was looking at what I had already done. I just said, okay that's it."

At the end of the first grade, Jose demonstrated minimal academic growth. Yet, Kelly heard that Jose would advance to the second grade. Fearing that without foundational skills, Jose would fall further behind, Kelly attempted to intervene. She met with both the school principal and the school-based special education chair. They both

provided the same directive, “I was told not to put up a fuss about it because none of the other kids in the class were better than he was at reaching first grade level benchmark.” Jose’s parents divorced during the school year. Thus, Jose and his mother moved out of Carson at the end of the first grade.

The next section will provide a more general perspective of the barriers to educational opportunity that Kelly has observed during her sixteen years with the Carson school system.

### **Observed Barriers to Educational Opportunities**

Kelly is a seasoned employee of Carson public schools, a role that has granted her extensive access to classrooms and schools throughout the district. She provided a ground-level perspective on a complex web of school and district conditions that imposed barriers on the education of visually impaired students.

One barrier that she identified dealt with the classroom-level contexts in which many of her students are educated. She described highly strained classroom environments that made teaching and learning a challenge. This is the common scenario that she said unfolded in classrooms across the district:

I see interruptions, constant interruptions. The principal might come in, and then the assistant principal might come in, and a parent may bring their kid late. Then someone will come to collect the breakfast boxes. Then a physical therapist will come in to get a kid. Then there is going to be a behavior outburst from a child... Then the smart board won’t work. There is just constant crisis for the teachers. I feel bad for them. But, the blind child takes the back door. (Kelly, personal communication, September 11, 2016)



Kelly reported that in these contexts, classroom teachers tend to have minimal direct contact with the visually impaired student, leading to reduced academic instruction or diminished support for struggling blind learners. Kelly noted that some general education teachers use special education supports as a way of rationalizing their detachment, “Oh, the aid is over there. The TVI is over there. They are going to take care of every need that the kid has.”

For Kelly, the negative educational ramifications that withheld instruction presented her students was sufficient motivation to undertake both instructional roles. However, she indicated that her efforts often created a scenario in which time constraints resulted in watered-down instruction.

Kelly pointed to an additional contextual feature that created educational obstacles. She cited the context of high-stakes pressure that teachers face as one explanation for the limited subject-matter instruction that her students are provided. This is how Kelly framed the circumstances that she has observed:

I think that teachers are teaching to the test. They are frightened that students aren't going to do well on the test. So it is going to impact their evaluations. That is a big scare among teachers. I think that they have even less time to focus on anything other than the typical student. (Kelly, personal communication, September 11, 2016)

There is a third factor that seemed to lessen the educational opportunities that blind students accessed in general education. The Carson school district does not provide general educators disability-specific training before a student with a visual impairment is placed in their classroom. The mother of a totally blind kindergartener expressed her

disbelief to Kelly about this practice, “Doesn’t the district educate this teacher? Doesn’t the district give them some sort of training?” Kelly replied, “No, no, they aren’t given any kind of special training.” Kelly stated that some teachers fashion classroom accommodations to the best of their ability, but that the majority of the teachers spend the school year struggling to provide the educational basics to their blind students. Additionally, scheduling the delivery of special education services also proved difficult since state laws prohibit students with disabilities from missing instruction in math, English, and other subjects.

A specific focus on the Carson vision program revealed a number of challenges. The teachers of the blind seemed to work under minimal supervision, and in isolation from one another. This method appeared to foster an inconsistent service delivery model that is dependent on the personal knowledge or initiative of the individual teacher, not a cohesive set of best practices or governing policies. For instance, Kelly stated that over the summer, she gathers the alternate format versions of the textbooks that her students will need for the upcoming school year. Not all teachers assume this responsibility. “She should have ordered them over the summer, but she didn’t, so now he is stuck,” is what Kelly stated regarding a sixth-grade student who was left without large print textbooks for the first several weeks of the new school year.

Kelly related that policies that are perceived to be in the best interest of the district are communicated to the teachers of students with visual impairments as unspoken directives by the vision program supervisor. Regarding assistive technology devices, “It has to say it on the IEP if they have use of the device at home, and we are told not to write that they do.” Thus, students who use technology to convert print school

work into large print, braille, or audio are left with few options for completing homework assignments. Kelly admitted, “I don’t like it. I break the rule.”

The methods that vision program personnel employ to determine the scope and frequency of special education services also emerged as problematic. Vision program personnel use a teacher-generated resource that lacks an evidence-based foundation to develop and justify service recommendations. Nevertheless, the tool is widely used in districts across the US, including in the Rosedale school system that was featured previously in this chapter.

Kelly reported that subjectivity has been noted as a concern among teachers who conduct the assessment; therefore, the task of evaluating children is carried out in pairs. Kelly indicated that the general approach is to prescribe totally blind students an hour of vision services per day, with minutes scaled back when the student enters ninth or tenth grade. Kelly suggested that when compared to their totally blind peers, subjectivity plays a bigger role in the determination of services for students with remaining vision. Finally, the evaluation tool that Carson teachers use does not account for the educational status of English learners, an omission that appeared particularly consequential in light of the surge in Latino student enrollment that has been seen in the Carson school district.

Another barrier that Kelly shared involved the lack of translation services in the Carson school system. Translation services are not provided for everyday communication regarding homework, behavior issues, or other matters. Students are at times called upon to translate during IEP meetings. For Kelly, the contentious relationship that she had with the staff at her assigned school gave way to an additional translation challenge. Kelly felt distrustful of school personnel, who had provided her sufficient reason to believe that

decision-making was not always motivated by what could most help Jose succeed. Thus, Kelly became suspicious of the translation assistance that school personnel provided.

This is what she said transpired in an IEP meeting:

They communicate with the parent anything that they want to communicate and I can't be sure that they are communicating what I desire for them to communicate.

A lot of times, I find that it is not communicated what I want to say to the parent during the meetings. (Kelly, personal communication, August 28, 2016)

Kelly expressed the view that parents could also create educational barriers for their children. At times, her rationale for poor parental engagement seemed to have a critical slant:

I think that they don't have the education either. They don't value it. They may have several other kids at home. They may not have transportation, which isn't really a good excuse. They don't have resources, maybe the money to take alternative transportation. Sometimes there is drug addiction, or alcohol usage.

(Kelly, personal communication, September 11, 2016)

Kelly did acknowledge that the school system needed to improve the outreach and resources that parents are presented. She cited confusion regarding school processes and questions related to IEP procedures as recurring challenges, especially for families who are not fluent in English.

The next section will explore what Kelly reported regarding the third sub-question.

## **The Role of Urban Education in the Life Trajectories of Blind Students**

Kelly expressed a desire for her students to lead successful and fulfilling lives.

“They can do whatever they want to do. The sky is the limit,” is how Kelly summarized an ideal life outcome for her students. However, Kelly believed that the deficits that profound disability-specific educational inequities created will leave the majority of her students unprepared to pursue their dreams. She summarized, “There is just too many, too many walls. Too many problems need to be solved. Just too many obstacles.”

Kelly did not position racial and economic inequities as influential to the future lives of her students. This is what she noted:

There is such a mix in these schools. I really don't see that it is any different. We all have the same issues. I mean there are more people of different ethnic backgrounds in Carson than there are White. So is there racial injustice in Carson? If there is, I don't see it. (Kelly, personal communication, September 11, 2016)

Kelly stated that parents are best situated to redirect the educational fates of their students. She said that putting pressure on the school system to provide support with IEP development and to create procedures to acclimate general educators to blindness strategies represent two steps that can have an immediate impact on vision services in Carson. She viewed herself as a partner in these initiatives, serving as both a center of motivation, and a clearinghouse of information for families.

Kelly provided extensive detail on the educational happenings of her student Jose. She described a sequence of events that produced inadequate and interrupted access to the general education curriculum. Salient educational factors included the fractured partnership between Kelly and the general education teacher tasked with educating Jose.

Significant challenges also emerged related to the lowered academic and social expectations that Jose was projected to fulfill.

On a broader scale, vision program procedures and practices created a context in which uneven levels of service delivery were likely to occur. Lastly, although beyond the scope of this research, it is reasonable to offer that the color-blind stance that Kelly expressed also had an impact on the lives of the students that she educates.

## **Conclusion**

These case studies shed light on how vision special education services were achieved in some of the most underserved communities in the US. The accounts presented in this chapter originated in various settings -- self-contained classrooms, resource rooms, general education classrooms, and IEP meetings. They delved into the less discussed instructional spaces of urban special education --noisy cafeterias, busy libraries, dark hallways, empty auditoriums, and a copy room/bathroom that one district has designated as a classroom for blind students.

Each case offered a more holistic portrait of visually impaired students, going beyond the prevailing medicalized identities often assigned to these children to demonstrate how other aspects of personhood influence educational offerings, access to social institutions, and life opportunities. However, insufficient data on students with visual impairments placed limitations on the analysis of patterns that could more closely examine the challenges and successes that the participants identified.

In general, there was much overlap in the types of educational conditions that the teachers reported. Participants largely described the educational experiences of their students as defined by sustained patterns of low-expectations that created the potential for

pronounced under-achievement. Similarities surfaced regarding the underlying undercurrents that were perceived to accelerate the disengagement of qualified urban teachers of the blind. School-level contextual features emerged as salient in how vision special education services are operationalized in general education classrooms. Participants identified tenuous relationships with school leaders and district-wide financial strains as two dynamics that weakened educational opportunities. Bureaucratic and legal complexities related to special education service provision proved difficult for a majority of the urban families to negotiate. The two blind participants most actively critiqued the educational system for the under-development of their blind students. They also foregrounded the skills, expertise, and positive disability attitudes that the blind community view as vital for long-term success.

The following chapter will provide a discussion of key findings, implications, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

The United States public education system exhibits continued and intensified segregation by race and poverty, placing poor and minority students in a state of educational peril (Orfield, Frankenberg, & Siegel-Hawley, 2016). Between 2000 and 2014, the percentage of high-poverty public schools that served a predominant Black and Latino student population nearly doubled (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2016). In urban communities, high-poverty schools are distinctly shaped by their historical inequitable relationship to housing, employment, health, and law enforcement, leading to an unequal allocation of vital educational resources (Anyon, 2014; Kozol, 2005; Sugrue, 2005). While some high-poverty urban schools “beat the odds,” inadequate school resources often yield poor academic and life outcomes (Center for Reinventing Public Education, 2015). A recent influx of middle-to-upper class families into cities is cited as another potential source of inequality, since these households tend to exercise high-levels of educational advocacy on behalf of their children (Posey-Maddox, 2014; Lareau, 2003).

Blanchett, Mumford, and Beachum (2005) observe that within this educational landscape, students with disabilities are placed in “double jeopardy,” an assertion that is well-documented in the literature (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Dunn, 1968; Harry & Klingner, 2014; Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982; Losen & Orfield, 2002). Urban students with disabilities are more likely to experience restrictive placements, school suspension or expulsion, and low graduation rates, factors that have been found to feed the school-to-prison pipeline (Carter, Skiba, Arredondo, & Pollock, 2017; Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014). Equity-focused special education scholars have taken



exceptional strides towards identifying and remedying the numerous challenges encountered by urban students with disabilities; however, these efforts have chiefly probed the special education conditions of high-incidence disability populations.

This study expands the dialogue between urban education and special education scholarship by introducing an examination of vision special education services for students with blindness or visual impairments, a low-incidence disability subgroup. A collective case study methodology coupled with a DisCrit conceptual lens was used to pursue the following central question: How do teachers of the blind describe vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools?

While the guiding research question sought to generate information about the provision of vision special education services, much of what the participants revealed spoke to the schooling experiences of their students. This was a logical point of focus since blind urban youth are at the heart of the general and special education ecosystems that vision services intersect. Moreover, the research yielded some insights on the connections that blind students and their specialized services have to the patterns of educational inequities associated with urban education in the United States. Key findings include:

1. School and district contexts appear to exert considerable influence on the educational experiences of blind students, and on the provision of their vision special education services.
2. Institutional mechanisms and professional practices seem to contribute to the inequitable distribution of vision special education services.

This chapter examines these findings and their relationship to the extant literature. It also describes implications for research, study limitations, and provides some recommendations for urban systems and teacher educators.

### **Key Finding #1: The Impact of School and District Contexts**

*“It’s hard because it’s not vision that’s the problem, it’s everyone in the class can’t read.”—Tyler, Rosedale Public Schools*

The first key finding is related to the pivotal role of context, as it was manifested by school culture and by the relationships that urban schools have with broader social structures. This research suggests that school and community contexts exert considerable influence on the educational experiences of blind students and on the delivery of their special education services. Further, vision special education services do not function as isolated sets of student supports. Instead, these services are molded by educational, social, and legal contexts, and actualized by the localized capacities of each district. To varying extents, participants perceived schools as social institutions and were able to articulate the relationship that their schools and students have to these macrolevel factors. Participants provided extensive descriptions of educational settings, classroom interactions, and conditions that either fostered or hindered authentic engagement with both academic and blindness-specific instruction.

The participants reported that most of their students had extensive daily contact with general education; however, even with the minimal contact that self-contained placements and other forms of separation created, school context was still educationally relevant. Three aspects appeared acutely influential: general education teachers, expectations, and relationships with school leaders. These three elements were perceived

to steer student achievement and to impact the quality of services that students were provided.

In all educational settings -- inclusive, resource, and self-contained -- the skills and attitudes that school-based teachers brought to instruction and behavior management proved influential in the access that blind students had to general education content. According to participants, unskilled or unexperienced general educators struggled to design inclusive lessons, provide meaningful instruction, fashion accommodations, and communicate with blind learners about their educational needs. Participants also observed that some challenging classroom climates required that general education teachers expend considerable energy on maintaining a structured and controlled classroom climate. In this context, meeting the individualized needs of blind students represented a potential threat to the overall stability that consistent rule enforcement was designed to provide.

In other cases, the efforts of thoughtful and motivated teachers were derailed by the lack of training that districts provided in inclusive practices specific to the visually impaired population. The research suggests that these types of teacher competencies and approaches to classroom management can place visually impaired students on a continuum that extends from fully engaged student to educational spectator. Interestingly, participants were indiscriminate advocates for full access to general education, even in settings where poor teacher quality or low-level curricula contributed to unfavorable educational outcomes.

## **Expectations**

The second finding involved the sources and application of expectations.

Participants positioned school-wide expectations as an influential educational element. The findings suggest that the collective expectations that govern the academic and social performance of general education students are also applied to visually impaired students. This finding was surprising. Much of what is known about the perceived academic or behavioral abilities of blind students is attributed to the visual impairment, not to the expectancy trends in the broader school environment.

The participants generally described school cultures that upheld low expectations, especially in the middle and high school grades. Expectations were projected by the appearance of school buildings, course offerings, extra-curricular opportunities, and in the relationships between school personnel and the student body. Mary viewed these belief structures as powerful educational variables. She proposed, “If the adults don’t think they can do it, how is the kid going to think it can be done?” There is an extensive research base documenting the role of expectations in the lives of minority students. Students with visual impairments are likely to absorb some of the advantages or disadvantages that these perceptions confer.

However, the data suggests that visually impaired students contend with an additional set of disability-specific expectations that do not target general education students. These attitudes can deliver distinct disadvantages to blind students. Alejandra made an observation regarding her high-stakes school environment that elucidates some of these complexities. “So high-stakes tests are becoming a huge barrier in that teachers that might have been like, ‘Okay, yeah I will work with this blind student’, are now like

‘I don’t want to stick him in my classroom because I will be evaluated based on their performance’.” (Alejandra, personal communication, August 24, 2016)

Yet, high-performing urban schools appeared to present a broader range of expectations. As Tyler explained: a school will have a totally academic kid and they are surprised when he can show up wearing his clothes on correctly... I do have other schools where you are like “You realize this kid is blind right...Because there are no eyeballs!” (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

In terms of expectations, one other factor stood out. Participants described situations where school personnel exhibited low academic or social expectations that participants viewed as blindness-related. For example, teachers assigned academically capable blind students half of the classwork that sighted students were asked to complete. In other situations, participants reported that sighted peers were used to provide assistance and companionship to blind students in general education classes. For instance, Erin relied on peer assistance to help her preschoolers during music and dance class. Kelly had a sighted student take her blind high schooler to class, where the sighted student also functioned as a friend, note-taker, and guide.

Participants did not view these arrangements as harmful; however, I would assert that both the actions of general educators and the use of “buddies” significantly contributed to the overall disability-specific expectations that circulated within the schools that the students attended. Inadvertently, these adult-directed arrangements displayed the perceived incompetence of blind students among their peers, who are likely forming their own disability perceptions. Thus, the possibility exists that school personnel are creating a second-hand exposure to low expectations, in which their

blindness attitudes are passed on to other students and staff in the wider school community.

### **Relationships with School Leaders**

The third finding addressed the influence of the school leadership team, which typically constituted principals, assistant principals, school-based special education administrators, guidance counselors, and school psychologists. Collectively, these individuals appeared to wield substantial power regarding the types of settings, activities, resources, and opportunities that visually impaired students experienced. Participants stated that negotiating these relationships often required a high degree of diplomacy. Situations were especially delicate at the schools with resource rooms, where advocacy on behalf of blind students could result in the transfer of the vision program to a less desirable site.

For instance, Kelly, who taught Jose, approached her school principal in hopes of getting her student a new paraprofessional. The paraprofessional assigned to Jose was unable to read or write English, which imposed deep educational disadvantages to Jose. Kelly was unable to speak Spanish, or to notice the visual cues that the paraprofessional provided. Thus, Kelly, the paraprofessional, and Jose often were left to communicate with Google Translate!

While the school principal in this scenario was unmoved by the situation, the participants provided other instances in which members of the school leadership team supported the meaningful engagement of blind students in their schools. Mary, Erin, and Tyler could each point to positive actions that school leaders took on behalf of their students. However, these findings indicate that changing personnel trends in urban

schools can leave students with visual impairments and the programs that educate them vulnerable to the preferences or political pressures of school leaders. Thus, specific policy guidance from central office administration could potentially create more equitable and sustainable educational environments for blind students.

The three contextual elements that this section explored, general education teachers, expectations, and relationships with school personnel, are part of a larger constellation of factors that cut across both district context and professional practice. The second key finding will highlight these linkages and their relevance to the education of blind urban youth.

### **Key Finding #2: The Inequitable Distribution of Vision Services**

*“In urban districts it is like, ‘Okay, this is what we are going to provide to all of our 50 visually impaired students’ instead of really coming up with an individualized program.” -- Alejandra, Union Park Public Schools*

The second key finding suggests that vision services are unequally distributed, with students who have usable vision being particularly susceptible to receiving inappropriate services. The scope of this study could not fully account for the factors that contributed to the inequitable service models. However, the data did present some reasonable explanations for these patterns. Mainly, participants described institutional mechanisms and professional practices that seemed to contribute to the reproduction of disparities. Educational placements and braille instruction appeared to represent the greatest sources of inequities, despite the legal mandates that drive these areas.

## **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**

Determining LRE is a cornerstone of the IEP. IDEA broadly supports full inclusion placements in general education. This stance runs counter to the best practices proposed by visual impairment scholars, who advocate for a continuum of placement options that can account for such factors as additional disabilities, degree of vision loss, giftedness, etc. Consequently, the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) drafted and circulated a policy guidance document that reflected these unique placement considerations. “In making placement determinations for children that are blind or visually impaired, it is essential that groups making decisions regarding the setting in which appropriate services are provided consider the full range of settings that could be appropriate depending on the individual needs of the blind or visually impaired student,” (as cited in Huebner, Garber, & Wormsley, 2006). Essentially, both the general spirit of the IDEA LRE mandate, and the more specific placement recommendations by visual impairment scholars jointly advocate for a student-centered approach prioritizing access to general and disability-specific content.

Findings indicate that districts were largely undertaking placement strategies that were stunningly out of compliance with federal special education policy. The research found that urban districts implemented an assembly-line approach to student placements. The data provided robust accounts in which individual placement needs were fulfilled by preexisting educational frameworks, not a thoughtful determination of student needs. This often resulted in placements that were either too restrictive or not supportive enough. Some of the participants were encouraged to steer families towards placements that eased challenges for the vision program. Participants also indicated that these



placement decisions were frequently presented as a useful back channel that families could use to escape undesirable schools. The Rosedale and Union Park districts seemed to install vision programs at sites with better academic and educational climates than what was generally available across the school system. However, students who elected not to receive services in these placements appeared to have little protection when problems arose. The account of the blind Union Park student with orthopedic impairments who was left to negotiate a school building with a broken elevator pointed to this pattern of institutional disengagement.

Further, blunt LRE determinations seemed to have a negative and disproportionate impact on students who were blind and had additional physical or cognitive disabilities. Each participant described recurring cycles of social and academic misfortunes for these populations that spanned grades and educational placements. Severely disabled blind students appeared to most frequently be placed in self-contained placements with special educators lacking a blindness background. One-size-fits-all frameworks were also noted in policies related to the use of assistive technology and in school bussing procedures.

### **Evaluations and Braille Instruction**

In each district, both the tools and the processes underlying braille instruction seemed to reveal a series of troubling conditions. First, vision programs did not require that teachers use research-based assessment tools to determine the optimal media (print, braille, audio, or combination) for blind students to access the curricula. This left vital literacy instruction vulnerable to influence from such factors as professional preference, caseload size, and personnel shortages. Most participants felt that students did not have

equal or sufficient access to quality braille instruction. There were also accounts in which participants observed their colleagues manipulate braille service minutes to accommodate growing caseloads, or to remain at desirable school sites. Moreover, there was a strong perception among participants that district-level special education administrators ignored the braille provision in IDEA:

The IEP Team shall...in the case of a child who is blind or visually impaired, provide for instruction in Braille and the use of Braille unless the IEP Team determines, after an evaluation of the child's reading and writing skills, needs, and appropriate reading and writing media (including an evaluation of the child's future needs for instruction in Braille or the use of Braille), that instruction in Braille or the use of Braille is not appropriate for the child." (20 U.S.C. § 1414)

A sighted bias in the distribution of vision special education services emerged as a consistent strand throughout the case studies. There was a preference for students to access the curricula visually, which required less intense services from vision personnel. While this trend was most frequently cited in relation to braille instruction, participants pointed to limitations that were imposed on other educational services. Here is one example that Tyler provided:

Teachers that are most recently trained are much more willing to give minutes before a kid loses their vision. And I would say that a thousand times over for mobility. The mobility, I see that a 100 times worse. The more experienced don't really give minutes before a kid loses their vision. (Tyler, personal communication, March 17, 2016)

These findings are consistent with broader debates regarding the degree to which sighted bias impacts the educational services that are made available to visually impaired students (Castallano, 2006; Koenig & Holbrook, 1989; Ferguson, 2001). However, these works did not explore context, which participants identified as relevant in the delivery of braille instruction and in the production of braille materials. Thus, this represents an area that warrants further study.

In all, the three sighted participants enacted pedagogical practices that ran counter to the visual-centric narrative that appears in the research. However, unfair or invalid assessment tools may have inadvertently resulted in decreased braille instruction for students, especially those with remaining vision. For instance, only four of the 50 students that Mary served were learning braille at the time of the study. The two blind participants, perhaps because of their personal experience with blindness, were more apt to frame low-levels of braille instruction in terms of educational injustice, asserting that sighted teachers need increased access to the strategies and outlooks which the blind community position as vital for long-term success.

In sum, the two key findings that identified the importance of context and the potential for inequities in vision service provision transcended the scope of the central research question and the three sub-questions. This broader perspective likely resulted from the research design, which urged participants to center the experiences that they perceived as most pressing in their work with urban communities. Following the tradition of socioconscious urban researchers, this research sought to move passed the routine practice of “giving voice to urban communities...which is another manifestation of

power and privilege,” instead, the study aimed to “create spaces where their voices could be heard” (Blanchett & Scott, 2011, p. 14).

The conceptual approach, which was grounded in DisCrit (Annamma et al., 2013) also instigated a fuller portrait of the educational nuances associated with the delivery of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. Most applicable to this study, are the notions that DisCrit scholarship brings to the conversation regarding professional subjectivity in the educational pipeline. In contrast to leading equity special education literature, DisCrit locates subjectivity across all disability categories. The attention that DisCrit brought to the underlying functions of special education law, which can serve to create or constrain opportunity at the intersection of race and class, was also beneficial.

Despite these important contributions, this research suggests that there is a need that is not fully met by disability studies, critical race theory, or the resulting partnership between these two perspectives. The unique manifestations of blindness, the broad swath of society that blindness impacts, and the power imbalance between the blind and the sighted community seem to necessitate a distinct discourse for approaching some of these multifaceted dynamics. Importantly, in the context of public education and educational equity, such reconceptualizations would benefit from maintaining intellectual and professional alliances with movements that have long been engaged with the deconstruction of oppressive social hierarchies. The next section explores study implications.

## **Implications**

For many students in the US public education system, race and poverty continue to be salient factors in directing academic and life outcomes. Deeply ingrained notions of colorblindness and meritocracy further marginalize the experiences of these students, creating a distorted portrait of the educational landscape that they negotiate. Minority students with disabilities are at increased risk of experiencing pronounced disadvantages in these institutions. The high-poverty urban context introduces other sets of conditions that can also alter educational experiences. This study sought to generate information about the provision of vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools.

The research yielded some insights on the connections that blind students and their specialized services have to the patterns of educational inequities associated with urban schooling. First, the research found that school, district, and community contexts appear to exert considerable influence on the educational experiences of blind students, and on the provision of their vision special education services. Second, institutional mechanisms and professional practices seem to contribute to the inequitable distribution of vision special education services. These findings create a more layered understanding of the contextual dynamics that influence the education of blind urban youth, and the delivery of their specialized services. Like special education, visual impairment scholarship is rooted in science, psychology, and medicine, contributing to both an oversimplification of educational processes and a reduced view of the student experience. Thus, this study largely departs from this framework to consider how the field can better serve the needs of blind students from diverse backgrounds. Moreover, this study supports and extends the literature on minority experiences in special education in a few

ways. It aligns with the broader findings that point to the inequitable conditions surrounding service provision. It also highlights the ways in which some minority families struggle to negotiate the legal and bureaucratic complexities in special and general education systems. Finally, it joins the chorus of studies calling for the development of a teaching force that can more fully respond to shifts in school demographics.

### **Limitations**

All research studies exhibit limitations, and this dissertation was no exception. My relationship with the participants, the types of questions posed, and the timeline of the research are elements that required careful consideration. Further, since three of the study participants are associated with some aspect of my professional or advocacy work, it is possible that as a whole, the group possessed an increased level of teaching excellence. Thus, the participant selection process could have potentially excluded the voices of less connected urban teachers. The roles I have fulfilled in urban communities-- teacher, district-level administrator, and youth advocate, erected a personal lens that required close monitoring throughout the research process. Despite these limitations, this research can serve as a platform for advancements in the areas of theory development, policymaking, and professional practice, all of which are presently under-studied in the field of visual impairment.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The results of this study can enhance the provision of vision special education services to blind urban youth. The first recommendation responds to the desire for

increased equity education, as articulated by each participant. The majority of the participants reported that equity issues related to race, poverty, language, and other identity markers were either excluded or marginally mentioned in their teacher education programs. For all teachers, including urban teachers, this lack of foundational knowledge fosters pronounced educational disadvantages that can restrict meaningful collaboration with families, students, and the school community.

The second recommendation was inspired by the two blind participants. Kelly and Alejandra strongly advocated for the development of linkages that connected the blind community to teacher education programs and to urban school systems. This partnership would help teachers of the blind critically examine and counteract blindness misconceptions, which they both reported. It would also provide teachers examples of achievement in the blind community, valuable illustrations of success to share with students and families. This partnership could result in educational policies and professional practices that are informed by the skills and perspectives that the blind position as important for long-term success.

Finally, teacher shortages were presented as a significant challenge that are exacerbated by such factors as poverty and conflicts between school systems and teachers' unions. Further, the social narrative surrounding urban schooling often portrays students and their families as academically disengaged. The participants widely challenged these perceptions, affirming the intellectual engagement and deep investment that they witnessed among their families. Based on these observations, it appears that district teacher recruitment strategies need to attend to these challenges in honest and factual ways. Further, school districts would likely benefit from instituting recruitment

strategies that placed teacher supports at the forefront of their efforts. Certainly, urban spaces can present a range of complex challenges; however, study participants assert that an array of continuous supports coupled with a factual framing of these issues would likely prove helpful in attracting qualified teachers of the blind to urban regions.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This research identifies an urgent need to collect a broader range of data regarding the visually impaired population and their specialized teachers. There is currently no large-scale information on poverty status, English learners, and the secondary disabilities of students with visual impairments. National details are also needed regarding the extent to which blind students are accessing general education, and the supports and placements that maximize learning. Contextual knowledge is needed to better understand the environments that underpin service provision and the quality of the services delivered to students. Such estimations need to consider sociocultural and sociopolitical contexts, along with elements that are specific to special education service delivery. A focus on rural or affluent settings would generate important contextual details that could perhaps elucidate conditions that create enhanced educational environments for visually impaired students.

Demographic information about the blindness teaching force is needed. Information such as racial/ethnic identity, age, certifications, knowledge of additional languages, and related details would help establish recruitment priorities, and would also assist with identifying the geographical areas that are in greatest need of qualified vision personnel. It would also be useful to collect rich accounts of successful partnerships between teachers of the blind, general education teachers, and school administrators.



The teachers in this study represented a broad range of personal and professional backgrounds (see Table 1). While each participant taught in an urban setting, the research was unable to generate any substantial conclusions that could help address questions regarding student achievement, teacher characteristics, and optimal educational placements. Thus, these areas require future inquiry.

Additional research is needed in the area of braille literacy, especially as it pertains to learning media assessments. More specifically, studies that catalog how these assessments are used to diagnose the reading needs of students with remaining vision, in contexts of financial and personnel strains, and within the off-the-record educational communities where some teachers build their professional knowledge.

Learning more about the strategies that families use to negotiate special and general education systems would also highlight information that could better shape the supports that urban parents are provided. Most of the participants said they encountered parents who were grief-stricken about their child's disability. Also, families who are not English speakers seemed especially vulnerable to facing challenges throughout the special education pipeline. Thus, studies that center the experiences of parents can yield valuable insights for visually impaired populations, and for the broader disability community.

Foundational to these research efforts, is the need to develop a theoretical framework that integrates an equity focus into the field of visual impairment. This study employed DisCrit, which was invaluable in highlighting linkages between disability status and patterns of social inequities. However, a more focused theoretical framework

could create pathways to closely interrogate the educational trajectories of blind urban youth in dynamic new ways.

## Appendices

### Appendix A: IRB Application

<b>Project Title</b>	
<b>Purpose of the Study</b>	<p><i>This research is being conducted by <b>Rosy Carranza</b> at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am inviting you to participate in this research project because of your experience working in high-poverty urban schools teaching blind/visually impaired students. The purpose of this research project is to gain a deeper understanding of the conditions that teachers of the blind encounter in high-poverty urban schools. I believe that you can provide important insights that can help support urban special educators and the school districts that employ them in improving teaching conditions and student achievement for urban youth with disabilities.</i></p>
<b>Procedures</b>	<p><i>You will be asked to participate in two semi-structured interviews, which will be audio taped. Each interview will last about 60-90 minutes, and will occur either over the phone or in a location that is convenient for you. I will ask you questions about how you became a teacher of the blind, what drew you to work in a high-poverty urban school, and about the conditions you encounter as you undertake your work. I am interested in learning about the challenges you face, and about the supports/resources that you have available to you. I also want to learn about any unique opportunities that working in the urban context provides you or your students. I will email you interview questions two days prior to the interview. The interview will not begin until all of your questions are answered and you are ready to participate.</i></p>
<b>Potential Risks and Discomforts</b>	<p><i>There may be some risks from participating in this research study.</i></p>
<b>Potential Benefits</b>	<p><i>There are no direct benefits from participating in this research. However, you will have an opportunity to connect via social media or through email with the other urban educators in this study. This connection can possibly benefit you by introducing you to others in the field with whom you can exchange resources, discuss challenges, or provide encouragement. Additionally, in the future, other people might benefit from this study through improved understanding of the conditions that frame the experiences of special educators working in urban schools.</i></p>

<p><b>Confidentiality</b></p>	<p><i>Any potential loss of confidentiality will be minimized by <b>storing research-related data on a password-protected computer</b>. Also, each participant will select a pseudonym to protect the identity of the teacher and the identity of the school.</i></p> <p><i>If we write a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.</i></p>
<p><b>Medical Treatment [*If Necessary]</b></p>	<p><i>The University of Maryland does not provide any medical, hospitalization or other insurance for participants in this research study, nor will the University of Maryland provide any medical treatment or compensation for any injury sustained as a result of participation in this research study, except as required by law.</i></p>
<p><b>Compensation [*If Necessary]</b></p>	<p><i>You will receive _____. You will be responsible for any taxes assessed on the compensation.</i></p> <p><i>If you expect to earn over \$100 as a research participant in this study, you must provide your name, address and SSN to receive compensation.</i></p> <p><i>If you do not earn over \$100 only your name and address will be collected to receive compensation.</i></p>
<p><b>Right to Withdraw and Questions</b></p>	<p><i>Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.</i></p> <p><i>If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator: Rosy Carranza, (410) 493-9854, <a href="mailto:rosy.carranza79@gmail.com">rosy.carranza79@gmail.com</a> 405 University Blvd. Ruston, LA 71270</i></p>
<p><b>Participant Rights</b></p>	<p><i>If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:</i></p> <p><b>University of Maryland College Park Institutional Review Board Office 1204 Marie Mount Hall College Park, Maryland, 20742 E-mail: <a href="mailto:irb@umd.edu">irb@umd.edu</a> Telephone: 301-405-0678</b></p> <p><i>This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.</i></p>

<b>Statement of Consent</b>	<p><i>Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form.</i></p> <p><i>If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.</i></p>	
<b>Signature and Date</b>	<b>NAME OF PARTICIPANT</b> <b>[Please Print]</b>	
	<b>SIGNATURE OF PARTICIPANT</b>	
	<b>DATE</b>	

## **Appendix B: E-mail Recruitment Invitation**

Hello,

My name is Rosy Carranza. I am a doctoral candidate in the Minority and Urban Education program at the University of Maryland, College Park. I am looking for teachers of the blind/visually impaired to participate in my dissertation research. My study examines vision special education services in high-poverty urban schools. I am interested in speaking to teachers of the blind/visually impaired to learn more about their work in these schools, about the available resources, and about their thoughts on the educational conditions facing urban youth with visual impairments. To participate, individuals must be a teacher of the blind/visually impaired working in a high-poverty urban school, or have recently (within the last two years) left a position in one of these schools.

Individuals agreeing to take part in this study will be asked to participate in two interviews, and in a focus group interview. All interviews will take between 60-90 minutes, and will occur over the phone. Individual and focus group interviews will be audio recorded, and you will have the option to review and modify the interview transcript. Several procedures will be put in place to maximize confidentiality. Any data that I collect for this study will be stored in a secure office and on a password protected computer. The audio files obtained from the interviews will be transcribed and stored in a lock file drawer. The original audio files will be stored as electronic files on a computer and password protected.

Your participation in this study will make an important contribution to enhancing teaching and learning in the high-poverty urban context. I am excited about this research, and sincerely hope that you are able to participate. To participate, or for questions about this study, call me at (410) 493-9854, or email [rosy.carranza79@gmail.com](mailto:rosy.carranza79@gmail.com).

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration,

Rosy Carranza

## **Appendix C: Interview Questions**

### **Topics and Interview Questions**

Interviews will be semi-structured, and the discussion will be heavily directed by the topics that the participants wish to explore. Topics will include: experience with blindness and vision loss; urban teaching; challenges/unique opportunities in urban teaching; interactions with parents; special education mandates; and availability of services/supports for teachers and students. The following questions will be used as a starting point:

1. What motivated you to become a teacher of blind students?
2. What kind of training did you complete to become a teacher of blind students?
3. What drew you to work in an urban school?
4. What most stands out about the school and community where you work?
5. Describe a typical day at work.
6. Tell me about the blindness skill instruction available to students.
7. How does your district handle getting books in alternative formats?
8. What types of accessible technologies are available in your district?
9. Describe challenges or disagreements that you have had to address.
10. What kind of vision resources or supports are available in your district?
11. Tell me about your interactions with your principal and with general educators.
12. What role do central office special education administrators play in your daily job?
13. Why do you think some teachers avoid working in urban schools?
14. If I was a new teacher of the blind in your district, what would you tell me to expect?
15. Describe your current caseload. Do you think it allows you to appropriately serve your students?
16. How many of your students have additional disabilities? What about high-incidence disabilities?
17. How much time do your students spend in integrated general class vs. disability-specific resource rooms?

18. What criteria is used to determine eligibility?
19. Tell me about your students and their participation in state/federal-standardized examinations.
20. What vision-related assessment tools are used in your district?



## Appendix D: Images with Descriptions



Figure 1. Student cafeterias of a charter school and a public school. Mary described that her district, Oceanside School District, has many charter schools and most share the same building as a public school.

“There has become a separation of class within these schools. The students attending the charter school enter and exit from a separate door, use dedicated stairwells, and may not speak to the public school students. The first image is the cafeteria of a charter school. It is brightly painted and has college banners hanging from the ceiling. The second image is the cafeteria of a public school. It is not as nicely painted as the charter school cafeteria, the tables are much older, and there are no college banners or decorations.” (Mary, personal communication, August 30, 2016)



Figure 2. A five-gallon jug of drinking water with plastic cups beside it, Oceanside Public Schools.

Mary described that most of the public school buildings were found to have high levels of lead in their drinking water. Because of this issue, the students have to drink water from jugs like the one above. The buildings are very old and the infrastructure is not being maintained.



Figure 3. An iPad.

Mary explained that many of her low vision students are given iPads to use as book readers. Many of her students will not bring their iPads to school because they fear that they will be “stolen or willfully broken by another student. They are also afraid for their own safety in general as a result of having the iPad. The lack of security and safety at school is a huge issue” in Oceanside Public Schools.



Figure 4. Book covers in languages other than English.

The two book cover images above represent the students' materials in languages other than English. One is in Spanish form that is not available and must be brailled. One image is of Arabic materials that require Braille for students.





Figure 6. Adaptations, Wilson Public Schools.

“This picture displays the range of adaptations we use. The image shows large print letter practice sheets, brailleable labels, a Perkins Braillewriter, braille paper, a swing cell, etc. We need to prepare and plan for large print readers, print writers, and Braille readers and writers.” (Erin, personal communication, September 25, 2016)

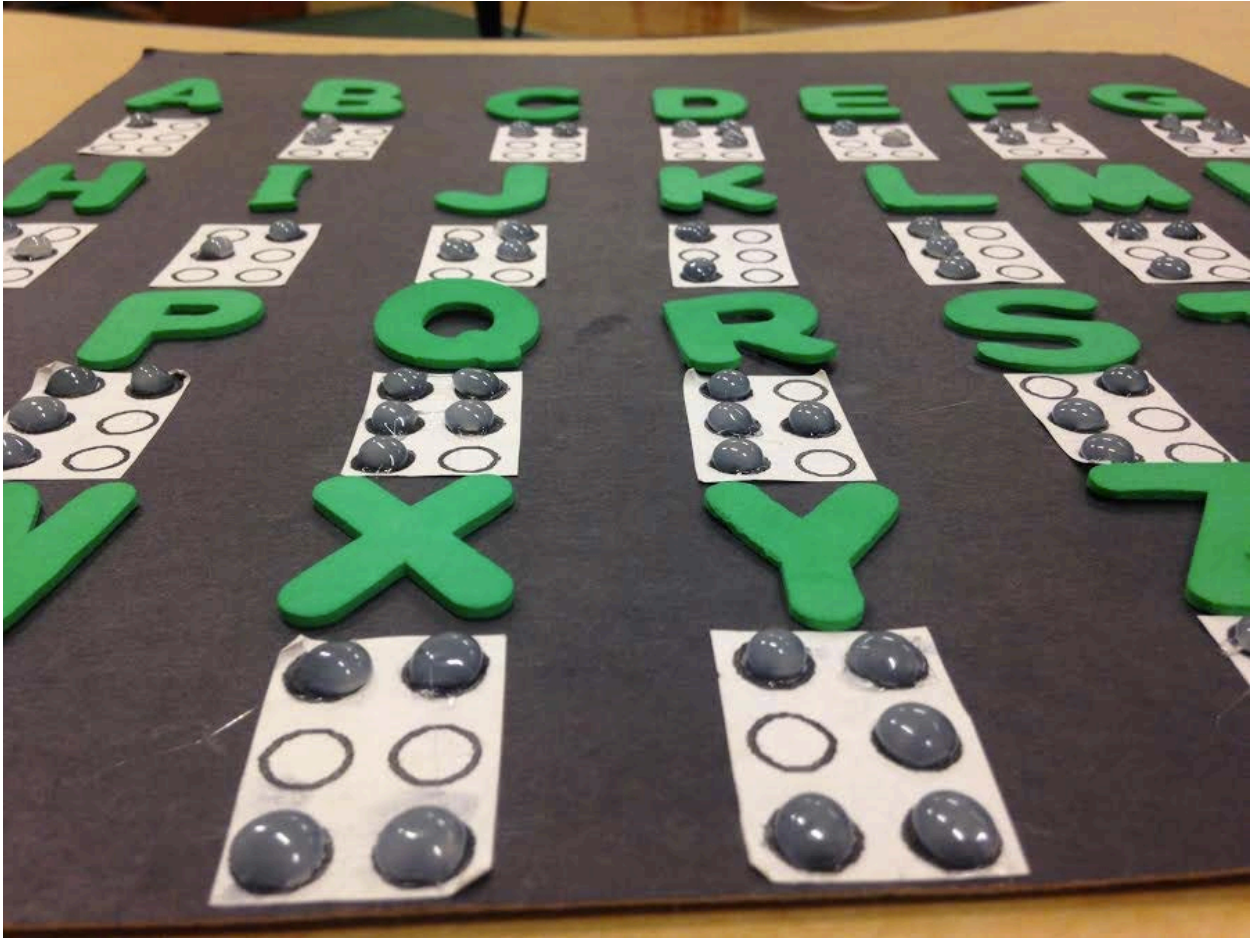


Figure 7. Adaptation details, Wilson Public Schools.

“We need to include both print and Braille readers. Not to mention, trying our best to make everything as tactile as possible.” (Erin, personal communication, September 25, 2016)





## Appendix E: Selection of Codes, Themes, and Categories

### Codes

- Insufficient funding for staff
- Live near job
- Eye towards inequity
- Broader conditions of urban schools
- Selective school programs
- Pushing into model
- Pressure to maintain models
- Hard to get specialized materials
- English language learners
- Principals as gatekeepers
- Personal beliefs about braille/blindness in place of policies
- Instructional spaces
- Traffic
- Good teacher by chance
- Subjectivity in service provision
- Resource rooms: fragile, political standing
- Silencing of teachers
- Can't upset school principal
- Parent involvement
- Hard to get eye medical report
- Variations on vision services
- Lack of vision program policies
- Teachers decided based on time/personal outlook
- Teacher drought
- No translating at IEPs

### Themes

- Perceptions of student achievement in general education
- Influence of school leaders
- General education teachers
- Outlook towards vision program staff and students
- Lack of program policies
- Administrative convenience
- Teacher Bias in providing braille or cane instruction
- Teacher quality
- Teacher shortages
- Teacher access to equity Education
- Relationship to school
- Educating English language learners
- Student placement
- Policy decisions (Transportation, Technology, etc.)
- Curricula and Assessments
- General education Teacher evaluations
- Training for general education teachers and paraprofessional staff
- Language barriers
- Parent involvement in IEP
- Difficulties negotiating medical systems
- Grieving parents

### Categories

- School
- District
- Vision Services
- Families

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