Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed

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EQUALIZING POSTSECONDARY TRANSITION FOR AT-PROMISE YOUTH RECEIVING SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES: 
A CHANCE TO SUCCEED

by

Karla R. Sánchez Gámez

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

May 2023

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ABSTRACT

Postsecondary transition can be difficult for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES). Special educators supporting postsecondary transition often manifest traditional and institutionalized forms of oppressive education while dismissing collective values and beliefs.

This qualitative case study examined the beliefs and attitudes shared by three special education teachers after being introduced to a justice-focused, humanizing intervention to facilitate postsecondary transition for APYRSES. The conceptualized intervention was grounded in liberatory educational frameworks and drew from critical, culturally affirming, sustaining, and humanizing theories that foster cultural reciprocity, self-determination skills, and antiracist social–emotional justice learning to afford opportunities for APYRSES to succeed. The study addressed the urgent need in educational research to recognize and challenge societal inequitable power imbalances between dominant and subordinate identities in the U.S. educational system. The study also acknowledged historical systemic inequities that have maintained status quo and strove to challenge the dominant narrative by highlighting the critical role of special educators in dismantling oppressive systems.

The findings revealed special education teachers’ approaches to postsecondary transition were mechanical in nature, and shaped by convergent thinking and application with the Eurocentric value of independence at the core of their practices. Findings also revealed the exploitation of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices. After participating in a humanizing intervention, findings reflected edification in participants’ critical perspectives that rupture the compliance-based practices upholding the dominant
hegemony, allowing for a closer examination that builds on educators’ critical understanding of practice as to move toward more equity for diversity.
DEDICATION

Para mi hija, Sofía Rosset, always remember and be proud of who you are. Embrace your roots, celebrate the richness of your culture and the beauty of our traditions, and never forget the sacrifices and struggles of those who came before us. I hope this journey has instilled in you a lifelong love of learning and has inspired you to continue breaking barriers and challenging societal norms, not only as a woman but also as a proud member of our bilingual and bicultural family. Nunca te quedes en silencio ante la injusticia; siempre defiende lo que tu humanidad y tu intuición cultural te dicen que es correcto, y siempre recuerda que calladita NO te ves más bonita. Te quiero mucho.

Para mis padres, Carlos y Rosa María Sánchez, quienes han sido mi mayor apoyo en mi camino académico. Gracias por inculcarme el valor del trabajo duro, la perseverancia y la dedicación que me han guiado en la vida, y por su amor incondicional. Espero que este trabajo sea una forma de honrar su amor y sacrificio, y de demostrar lo lejos que hemos llegado gracias a su guía y ejemplo. Los quiero mucho.

To APYRSES, families, and communities whose schools have refutably continued to create barriers to your future opportunities, you deserve better. The educational system was not made for us, and I will continue leveraging my own privilege to improve the system alongside you in solidarity.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Completing this doctoral journey was made possible because the people who demonstrated their care, love, and dedication to help me see it through. I am profoundly grateful and indebted to these individuals who have devoted much time and support to my academic journey and overall well-being. Each individual has positively impacted my life and has contributed to my work with distinct purposes.

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Christian, thank you for your patience with me throughout all my years in school and for sticking with me during the good and bad times. I value your commitment and support in me at all times, even when I was not the easiest person to tolerate. I am excited to see what the future holds and I promise to not get into any more school programs . . . for now.

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opened your heart to a stranger, which resulted in a beautiful friendship that I hope we continue.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Vignette

Sitting in a car on the 1-hour commute to a small district located in northern San Diego, I received a call from a special education teacher. This teacher, overwhelmed with emotion, began to tell me about a student in her class who was, in her opinion, terrorizing her. She began to cry because she did not know what to do with him any longer, as he had continued to disrupt the class, disrespect her, and leave the classroom when he did not feel like being there. The teacher requested that I take the student out of her classroom due to “safety concerns.”

After listening to her concerns, I asked a few questions about the student. I learned the student is a 16-year-old, first-generation Mexican American whose mom works in a factory and whose father is a mechanic, neither of whom are fluent in English. The student received special education services under the primary eligibility criteria of other health impairment (OHI) and secondary eligibility criteria of emotional disturbance (ED). This student had experienced childhood trauma because he suffered from psychosocial and emotional abuse from a parent, and the other parent had been incarcerated for most of his life. These early experiences caused emotional reactivity in the student, which impacted his learning and behavior at school.

I asked the teacher about her upbringing and educational experiences and inquired how they differed from this student’s lived experiences. After telling me her story, we placed ourselves in proximity of the current situation and brainstormed ways to take the context of this student’s life to integrate into daily interactions. I asked the teacher what
the student and family want to see for this student’s life after high school, and the teacher responded, “I don’t know.”

The aforementioned vignette illustrates special educators’ compliance-based focus, which often influences their beliefs and attitudes toward preparing their students for life after high school and centers on independence without accounting for cultural values through familial collectivism. I began to provide shared knowledge of current postsecondary statistics for prevalent disparities in education and employment for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES). I continued to share the historical truths of marginalized populations, including unfulfilled promises of the law and practices that contribute to the cyclical perpetuation of oppression. The teacher and I dialogued about the importance of dreaming, thinking creatively, and collectively building and leveraging a network of support and resources for our most marginalized populations to give them opportunities to succeed. During the dialogue, I noted the teacher’s thinking and asked her questions to push her thinking. How had we included this student’s family in planning for his future? How had the multiple components of the student’s lived experiences shape their educational journey?

This vignette depicts the real-life, in-depth description over time of the daily struggles of special educators working in urban K–12 public school districts. I was interested in a praxis for special education teachers I had been mentoring, leading to the development of this study, which was specifically designed to include special education teachers with whom I had already established relationships through my work in the field of special education. I identified a need for praxis versus practice, as praxis takes theory, reflection, and action carried out through practice to transform the world (Freire, 1972).
The study's storyline closely examined three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition and their application of knowledge in their practice in an urban K–12 public school district in southern California after the application of a humanizing intervention with theory and historicizing as the critical guidance and my “north star”. Through critical guidance with equity at the forefront, a collective group of special educators participated in dialogue toward collective action (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

The relationships between myself and study participants are showcased in this storyline. These relationships were already established through mutual understanding as special educators working in the same urban district with collective effort toward the common goal of helping students with disabilities succeed. The relationships between special educators allowed for a descriptive case study design in search of how special education teachers make meaning of their work in preparing their AYRSES for postsecondary transition. The relationships that were previously built on trust made it possible to take a deep dive into the inner workings of their beliefs and attitudes as special education teacher participants related to postsecondary transition.

**Introduction**

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), a student’s Individualized Education Plan (IEP) requires an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) by the time the student is 16 years old. The ITP outlines the services and goals for adult outcomes and objectives by supporting continuous learning with planning and support. The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) furthered teachers’ responsibility to provide transition support to all students by
mandating schools provide college and career preparation to young adulthood; however, the postsecondary transition can be especially challenging for APYRSES due to the Eurocentric focus and values placed on the activities to support the transition process by educators who manifest traditional and institutionalized forms of oppressive education (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Suk et al., 2020). The postsecondary transition preparation process often excludes diversity and dismisses collective values and beliefs that recognize and celebrate students’ cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds (Black et al., 2003; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Reyes-Blanes, 2002). Mireles-Rios et al. (2020) defined the asset-based term at-promise as a culturally responsive approach to supporting students from historically marginalized communities and uplifting their voices by telling their stories and making connections to their experiences for healing, resilience, academic success, and development of healthy relationships with community members.

This study aimed to understand how three special education teachers derived meaning from their practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and group dialogue. The humanizing intervention was informed by a critical guiding praxis framework, which I conceptualized by drawing from theories that build special educators’ critical awareness through individual and group dialogue. The critical guiding praxis framework was composed of three components: (a) reciprocal cultural understanding; (b) critical self-reflection through an intersectional view; and (c) a critical mattering stance, which this study argues is essential for special educators to prepare APYRSES more equitably for adulthood. The study had three objectives: (a) to ascertain the beliefs and attitudes of three special education
teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework; (b) to uncover beliefs and attitudes of three special education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition, specifically self-determination, after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework; and (c) to unveil beliefs and attitudes of three special education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition, specifically social–emotional learning, after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

Chapter 1’s structure provides an introduction to the study, beginning with the background of the study. Subsequent sections include the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the objectives, and the research questions. Following these sections is the significance of the study, limitations and delimitations, my positionality as researcher, and a structural outline of the dissertation.

**Background of the Study**

Throughout the evolution of special education laws came the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services’ (OSERS) call to transition (Will, 1984), which mandated student preparation for adulthood after high school for students with disabilities (SWD), specifically in the areas of education, career and vocational, and independent living (as appropriate). The U.S. educational history has demonstrated a consistent fight for equity, providing educators with the context of how education got to where its current state as of 2023; however, the standardization of postsecondary
transition has equated to disparities in successful postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES, given the focus on the Eurocentric value of independence (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; IDEIA, 2004; Suk et al., 2020). To better prepare APYRSES for postsecondary transition, special educators need to know the educational history to learn how the current state of postsecondary transition emerged, identify the current disparities in postsecondary outcomes between APYRSES and their White counterparts, and understand how this phenomena is understood by special educators.

**Historical Roadmap Leading to Transition**

Factors that have influenced what postsecondary transition for APYRSES entails as of 2023 have manifested throughout U.S. educational history. Understanding the disparities in postsecondary outcomes between APYRSES and their White counterparts necessitates a critical review of the historical aspects of exclusion and the legal endeavors created to benefit some and not others (Smith 2004; Yell et al., 1998). Dominant hegemonic resistance efforts to hoist segregation based on race have been evident since the separate but equal doctrine of 1896 (*Plessy v. Ferguson*, 1896). This judicial precedent normalized the preparation of students for their adult place in society by confining racial barriers and excluding the Black community in all aspects of social living, including education and employment (Samaradiwakera-Wijesundara, 2022). The separate but equal doctrine affected not only the Black community, but all students from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds, upholding the status quo (McCarty, 2018; San Miguel & Valencia, 1998; Wollenberg, 1975).

*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) provided a glimpse of hope, as it sought to desegregate schools and equalize opportunities for all students and families who were
historically marginalized in the U.S. educational system. After 10 years passed, the 1964 Civil Rights Act was initiated and prohibited discrimination against all, including individuals with disabilities (Mills v. Board of Education, 1972; Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1971). The outlawing of discrimination also applied to SWDs and their right to access education, along with program placement for students with the parental legal right to due process, which required services to support their individual needs (IDEIA, 2004). This law evolved to include due process and postsecondary transition, including preparing for life after high school (Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA], 1990; Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). Although it is evident that history has paved the way for the opportunity to succeed in school and adulthood, educators are rarely prepared to support APYRSES in a manner that values collective views and honors their cultures, ethnicities, and languages (Black et al., 2003; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Reyes-Blanes, 2002).

Special education is grassroots in origin and was initiated by parents whose SWDs were marginalized. These parents created groups to advocate for their rights beginning in the 1800s, yet the fight for equal access and treatment became more widely known in the 1900s. This era reflected a dark period in the history of education because little was done to advance the rights of SWDs, and they were often excluded entirely from schools because they were considered “weak in mind” (Yell et al., 1998, p. 220) and would not benefit from instruction. Although systems are now in place to support early intervention, special education, and related services, inequities still exist, as demonstrated by the negative postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES.
Statistics of Disparities: A National Landscape

Research on postsecondary educational outcomes for APYRSES has indicated more challenges than their White peers without disabilities (Gil-Koshiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Kim & Morningstar, 2007; Landmark et al., 2007; Leake & Boone, 2007; Lipscomb et al., 2017; Newman et al., 2009; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015; Suk et al., 2020; Trainor, 2017; Trainor & Bal, 2014; Wagner et al., 2014). In 2019, APYRSES graduated from high school at a 20% lower rate than the national average (Atwell et al., 2019). National Center for Education Statistics (2020) also reported 11% of undergraduate students who enrolled in college received services from the disability office, and 72% dropped out of their postsecondary setting before completing a degree (Lefler et al., 2016). Disaggregating the 2016–2018 data from NCES (2021) on college enrollment rates for 18–24-year-old SWDs by race and ethnicity resulted in 52% Asian, 42% White, 40% Latinx, and 37% Black. Moreover, 23% of students who received services were age 30 or older (McFarland et al., 2019). Additional research (Bangser, 2008; Kochhar-Bryant et al., 2009) has linked older college students with inadequate preparation in high school.

Postsecondary employment outcomes for APYRSES are also discouraging. Recent data comparing employment rates in the United States for individuals with and without disabilities ranging from 16–64 years old indicated 31.4% of individuals with disabilities are employed versus 72.5% of those without disabilities (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Unemployment rates for individuals with disabilities were twice as high during this time frame, at 10.1%, compared to their counterparts without disabilities at 5.1% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Among unemployed individuals with
disabilities, jobless rates by ethnicity included 15.1% Black, 13.3% Latinx, 9.3% White, and 8.5% Asian (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Of the employed individuals with disabilities in 2020, employment according to ethnicity was 39% Asian, 35% non-Hispanic White, 35% Latinx, and 25% African American (NCES, 2020). Socioeconomic challenges become prominent for individuals with disabilities due to limited employment opportunities, exclusion from the inclusionary workforce, and restrictions in pay (Banks, 2014; Goodman et al., 2017). Discrimination and stigma often intensify these inequities, resulting in many individuals with disabilities living below the poverty line; Goodman et al. (2017) reported 37% Black, 29% Latinx, 24% Non-Hispanic White, and 19% Asian. Other researchers (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014) have captured the impact and implications of marginalization in postsecondary transition for APYRSES. Many APYRSES have been traditionally marginalized and need systematic change in TK–12 to address their needs to afford them more equitable opportunities for their lives after high school (Artiles et al., 2010; Newman et al., 2009; Trainor, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

**Statistics of Disparities: The Local Perspective**

According to the 2020–2021 data from NCES (2020), 7.2 million students in the state of California between the ages of 3–21 received special education services under the IDEA. Of these students, 19% were American Indian/Alaska Native, 17% were Black, 15% were White, 14% were Hispanic, 12% were Pacific Islander, and 8% were Asian. In the 2021–2022 census day enrollment for students receiving special education services in San Diego County, the California Department of Education (CDE, n.d.) reported students with disabilities by the following ethnicities: 2.6% Native American Indian or Alaska
Native, 2.6% Asian, 2.6% Black or African American, 2.6% Filipino, 76.9% Hispanic or Latino, and 12.8% White. Of these students, 30.8% were classified as English language learners (ELL), and 41.03% were eligible for free and reduced lunch (CDE, n.d.).

**Statement of the Problem**

APYRSES and their families have historically faced negative experiences with special education through a “historically segregated system parallel to general education, furthering privileges of certain groups through separation and marginalization” (Artiles, 2003, p. 170). These factors negatively impact youth’s postsecondary transition experiences and outcomes compared to their White counterparts (Atwell et al., 2019; Suk et al., 2020; Trainor, 2017). APYRSES have also continued to be overrepresented in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2010; Cook et al., 2014). Many have been misidentified with higher incidence disability categories, such as emotional–behavioral disorders (EBDs; Bal et al., 2014; Fish, 2019; Grindal et al., 2019; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). This disproportionate identification may lead to more restrictive educational placements deemed as significant interference with options for the postsecondary transition than their White counterparts (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Keller-Bell, 2021; Maximoff et al., 2017; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). These inequities have highlighted a need to support postsecondary transition for APYRSES that reflect their cultures and lived realities to afford these students a chance to succeed. Federal mandates have also outlined transition supports for education, employment, and independent living (as appropriate) for SWDs beginning at 16 years old, according to IDEIA (2004).

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 also represented national educational efforts to end discrimination against individuals with disabilities and afford adequate education to reach
students’ maximum potential. The act was a predecessor of federal and state law regarding SWDs during the Civil Rights movement and laid the foundation for the Public Law 94–142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975. This shift in educational views included the provision of services to SWDs by educational need, emphasizing special education services to meet individual needs and granting access to education to all students regardless of disability. The PL 94-142 also mandated schools create plans based on individual needs of SWDs to provide an education that closely emulated that of their nondisabled peers. The law guaranteed this directive using specific language: IEP, Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), least restrictive environment (LRE) due process, and nondiscriminatory assessment (Keogh, 2007).

The PL 94-142 law was reauthorized and its name changed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, and was last reauthorized in 2004 to include the interpretation and implementation of IDEA (IDEA, 1990, 2004). Before this reauthorization, the fate of individuals with disabilities was likely to be dim, as they were excluded entirely from schools or received their education in separate classroom settings by default (Hardman & Dawson, 2008; Yell et al., 1998). Too often, individuals with disabilities were sent to restrictive settings such as state institutions, where they were accommodated rather than assessed, educated, and rehabilitated. Former Assistant Secretary of Education for Special Education and Rehabilitation, Madeline Will, prioritized improving the transition from school to work life in the postsecondary transition process. Will’s (1984) call for transition services by the OSERS was included in the 1990 reauthorization of the PL 94–142/ EAHCA, IDEA. The services outlined in IDEA (1990) sought to assist SWDs with transitioning from school to adult life through
educational services emphasizing academic, employment, and community participation experience during secondary school. These policies were established to combat the long-term outcomes, including unemployment or lower paying jobs for individuals with disabilities along with segregation from the general population of individuals without disabilities (Banks, 2014; Goodman et al., 2017).

With nearly 5 decades of existence, special education has evolved to make independent living an option with the development of individualized educational planning incorporating transition preparation; however, more work needs to be done. Although national policies have outlined clearly the need for transition support, educators have often remained unsupported and lacking the resources to do this work (Catone & Brady, 2005; Johns et al., 2002; Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2007, Landmark et al., 2007; Trainor, 2017). High school-level explicit planning for basic skills is generally lacking in specific objectives or learning goals tied to the IEP. Moreover, basic skills instruction planning often focuses primarily on acquiring content knowledge rather than skill development (Catone & Brady, 2005). Additionally, ongoing training in developing effective and appropriate transition plans that involve the student as an active participant in the development of their future goals then drives the curriculum and supports necessary to meet their goals (Johns et al., 2002). Educator decision making also varies in accommodations and recommendations that do not mirror students’ IEPs through systematic inconsistencies, which detriment students’ accurate knowledge and growth (Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2007).

At the turn of the century, the ITP for postsecondary transition promised preparation for life after high school in the areas of education, employment, and
independent living (as appropriate), which center individualistic dominant hegemonic voices and values (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; IDEIA, 2004; Suk et al., 2020). In contrast, APYRSES receive less attention than their peers due to racism and social stigma (Artiles et al., 2010). Postsecondary outcomes have remained a constant struggle for APYRSES, especially those who come from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (Newman et al., 2009) and who are not commonly equipped with the skills necessary to live in a socially unjust society (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012; Simmons, 2021).

In addition, APYRSES have been disproportionately subjected to push out from the educational system and push into the juvenile and criminal justice system through paradoxical experiences of exclusion, surveillance, and punitive educational practices (Morris, 2016). The educational process has fallen short in integrating collectivist values and behaviors due to its Eurocentric focus (Harry, 1992). Research (Ladson-Billings, 2014; Simmons, 2019; Wehmeyer, 1992), highlighting the importance of practices that assist in developing culturally responsive self-determination and antiracist social–emotional skills (CASEL, 2021; Gay, 2013; Paris, 2012; Troyna, 1987) for better preparation for adulthood. These practices would afford more equitable postsecondary opportunities for APYRSES by setting up possibilities to which they can relate in the future (Achola & Greene, 2016).

Activities that build on cultural competence allow for meaningful social interactions that include students’ ecological factors, languages, and cultures through culturally relevant pedagogy to foster students’ strengths toward academic success and adequate preparation for APYRSES (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Practices that build on
students’ prior experiences and backgrounds through cultural responsiveness (Gay, 2002) are necessary to value preserving a multiethnic and multilingual society with culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) in the postsecondary planning process for more equitable opportunities in adulthood.

**Humanizing Postsecondary Transition**

In this study, I humanized special educators’ approaches to postsecondary transition through a relational context because I believed the education process is about relationships, not simply a job. In terms of positionality, my mentorship experiences had demonstrated that teachers did not know ways to humanize their pedagogy in preparing APYRSES for postsecondary transition, particularly one that includes multicultural views and one acknowledges the racial and political elements of their students’ backgrounds, special education experiences, and schooling journeys as a whole. As such, I turned to theory, which explains how the world works, who the world denies, and how structures continue to uphold oppression (Freire, 1970; Love, 2019). The theoretical rationale guiding a humanizing intervention included three concerns:

- Teachers need deep cultural connections to foster cultural reciprocity with students and their families to help students develop self-determination skills (Gay, 2013; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).
- Educators need ongoing self-reflection, which is necessary to develop critical awareness and explore how pedagogy can be used for social change (Buedia, 2016; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991; Freire, 1973).
- Students’ lives need to be affirmed as an active resistance through social–emotional learning within a sociopolitical and racial consciousness that
humanizes and shows APYRSES they matter (Love, 2019; Mayes et al., 2022; Simmons, 2019, 2021).

I combined these theories for a deeper framing that humanized pedagogy to promote social justice and equity in the postsecondary transition process for APYRSES. These theories were used in research-based resources provided to special education teachers through a humanizing intervention to help them understand and address issues of power and oppression in education and recognize how these systems of power and oppression shape the educational experiences of historically marginalized populations. The theories guided my work in conceptualizing a critical guiding praxis framework and humanizing intervention based on theoretical, historical, and dialogical praxis to address the inequities, experiences, and identities constantly left aside when complying with the histories that have not created equitable opportunities for APYRSES.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to describe the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers in an urban high school in southern California, specifically concerning postsecondary transition for APYRSES. The study aimed to understand how these three special education teachers derived meaning of their practices after participating in a humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The humanizing intervention included topics framed by a critical guiding praxis: (a) the educational history leading to transition, (b) the theory and literature behind self-determination and antiracist social–emotional learning, and (c) research-based resources to enhance APYRSES beliefs in the abilities to change their own lives while supporting them in postsecondary transition preparation. The humanizing intervention based on research-

The study’s first objective was to obtain an understanding of the three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes before they participated in a humanizing intervention. The intervention was based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The beliefs and attitudes were used to benchmark understanding in how the participants derived meaning from their practice. The second objective was to find out what the three special education teachers shared about their beliefs and attitudes regarding self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue. The third objective of this study was to learn what the three special education teachers shared about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention.

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing
intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

2. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

3. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

**Methodology**

I used a qualitative approach to examination in this study to take a close look at the nuances of relations and to examine the way special education teachers related to APYRSES, their families, and my role in this study as a researcher–mentor. Specifically, this study used a descriptive case study approach (Charmaz, 2006; Maxwell, 2005) for an in-depth exploration of the complex phenomena (Wolcott, 2008) of the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES in one urban high school in southern California (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Stake, 1995). Based on the relationships established beforehand through ongoing mentorship, I was interested in a praxis for high school special education teachers that drew from theories on which I held as a practitioner through lived experiences, identities,
cultures, and social practices. As such, I developed a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. To develop the humanizing intervention, I gathered theories and frameworks for practitioners to ruminate that inform a humanizing stance in preparing APYRSES for postsecondary transition. In addition, the intervention included relationship building among the three teachers for an authentic and deep dialogue on the topics and theories to guide their work.

I sought to look at how this intervention influenced how the three special education teachers help APYRSES through their transitions by building on self-determination and social–emotional learning skill sets. This study aimed to obtain a profound understanding of how the three special education teachers working at one urban high school setting derived meaning of their pedagogy related to the postsecondary transition preparation of APYRSES after participating in a humanizing intervention. The intervention was based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue informed by the critical guiding praxis framework I conceptualized after drawing from theories that build on special educators’ critical awareness through individual and group dialogue. To engage in this work, the participants completed in an initial survey to gauge their beliefs and attitudes prior to participating in the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. Participants then watched a two-part video on theories and frameworks. They then reflected on the theories and completed feedback forms to document their immediate thoughts. Subsequently, the participants gathered with me in a dialogical cultural circle (Freire, 1968) for deep conversation on the topics related to their
own students. Lastly, the participants engaged in one-on-one interviews with me to discuss and reveal their beliefs and attitudes following the intervention.

Existing literature on postsecondary transition for APYRSES guided the design of this study. Multiple data sources were collected for a comprehensive and detailed understanding of participants’ thoughts (Creswell, 2013). By providing the special education teachers with a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework focused on critical self-awareness through individual and group dialogue, I designed space for the participants to share equal power in the transition process (Bhattacharya, 2017; Charmaz, 2006). I drew from Kuntz’s (2015) call for alternative enactment of truth telling in methodological research through the notion of parrhesia (Foucault, 1983) by emphasizing the relationality, risk, and citizenship in orientation toward truth-telling inquiry that provide social justice-minded researchers with the truths they seek to speak as opposed to those that have traditionally dominated education and social sciences. In this research, I considered the inquiry (and my role as inquirer) relationally bound to the phenomenon of interest through my unique relationship with the participants, which had been previously established as colleagues build on trust. This relationship resulted in the inability to distance oneself from one’s engagement in the research methods (Kuntz, 2015). Mehta’s (2019) view of foregrounding human dignity was also used as research was coconstructed, and gave space for both myself and participants to pose questions and share insights, becoming an equal system to uphold research entrenched with social justice-minded practices.
Significance of the Study

At the time of the PL 94-142 implementation of the IEP, there was no support to help scale the movement for students from diverse backgrounds. The reauthorization of PL 94-142 to the IDEIA (1990, 2004) included mandates to develop a transition support plan for the areas of education, employment, and independent living (when applicable) for every student receiving special education services at the age of 16. Furthering this came the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015, which made transition possible by requiring support for all learners through quality education that includes socioemotional and interpersonal skill development and academic support; however, as noted in the aforementioned statistics, postsecondary transition is disproportionately challenging for APYRSES and their families (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014; Wagner et al., 2014).

In researching this topic through a critical lens, it was essential first to understand the United States’ long educational history rooted in exclusionary efforts (Smith, 2004; Yell et al., 1998) and the resistance and fight for equal education. Although laws and mandates have come a long way to provide equality, education is far from equitable. As such, it was also vital to note that the demographics of educators in the United States are predominantly White (80%) and female (76%; NCES, 2019), whereas APYRSES are on track to become a majority demographic in the United States officially (Sullivan et al., 2012). Knowing this reality, educators must scrutinize the effects of Eurocentricity on postsecondary outcomes, particularly in the educational practices used to support the postsecondary transition of APYRSES. Traditional tools and methods deemed appropriate by a postsecondary transition plan preparation are often developed by
centering the dominant voices and values of Eurocentrism, which do not consider youth’s cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds and differences. Practices resulting from Eurocentrism create a monocultural and monolingual society based on dominant hegemonic language and cultural norms; therefore, APYRSES and their families need resistances that embrace cultural pluralism and equality (Paris, 2012). Whereas some APYRSES have difficulty navigating a process that contradicts their upbringing, educators also struggle with the lack of support and adequate resources to guide APYRSES and their families in a way that honors and values their linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism (Paris, 2012).

Educators must take an equitable and social justice stance in teaching practices to prepare all students for the realities of the world they will inherit. This stance necessitates that psychological ties are cut to participate in coinvestigation and dialogue to create problem-solving creativity (Freire, 1968) in postsecondary transition for more equitable outcomes. Doing so requires an in-depth examination to understand how special education teachers derived meaning of their practices to better describe their beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES after the teachers participated in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework focusing on critical self-awareness through individual and group dialogue. I drew from theories to conceptualized the humanizing intervention that included three main components that are vital for special education teacher guidance. This study argues and advocated for; a reciprocal cultural understanding in postsecondary transition; critical self-reflection through an
intersectional view; and a critical mattering stance and approach to pedagogy to address inequities and injustices evident in the current U.S. educational system.

This dissertation serves as the groundwork for collective efforts to challenge the dominant narrative. The findings help inform the futures of APYRSES toward more equitable preparation for youth to recognize and respond to societal inequities and combat oppressive experiences of discrimination and adversity that they have encountered and will encounter.

**Positionality**

Awareness of one’s worldviews and philosophical paradigms regarding knowledge acquisition or any other source of knowledge is critical in framing an approach to phenomena. *Reflexivity* (Holmes, 2014), or to identify one’s positionality, allowed for engaging in the questions Milner (2007) outlined regarding the seen, unseen, and unforeseen. In contextualizing my positionality as a researcher, my assumptions and biases as a current practitioner contributed to my perspective. I could not begin to address the type of work I did without noting my humanity and the identity that informed every thought and decision I made. I am a first-generation Latinx both in the country and as a student in the United States. My parents grew up in Mexico and have been the hardest workers I have ever known, despite barriers in language, the navigation of systems, and sacrifices made to provide for me, their only daughter, with the privilege to attain a level of education they never had. I am bilingual and bicultural, and I identify as *transfronteriza* “de aqui y de alla” (Anzaldúa, 1987) because the experiences of my upbringing spanned both sides of the U.S.–Mexico border.
My relationship with special education started more than a decade ago when I began working as an applied behavioral analyst. Since then, I have worked in various positions in special education: behavior specialist/childcare worker in a residential facility; special education teacher providing push-in supports and self-contained classrooms; nonpublic school case manager and district liaison; program specialist; and district special education coordinator. I have performed in various educational settings. My philosophical paradigm is not limited to one scope; rather, my worldview, with an emic ontological perspective, is based on the understanding that multiple participant meanings exist, such as social and historical constructions and experiences in a cultural background. As a current practitioner in an urban high school district, I have witnessed the adverse effects of perfunctory transition preparation in the lives of APYRSES. This inequitable preparation is largely due to unaddressed transition needs in ways that are culturally responsive and understand the various ecological factors influencing postsecondary transitions for APYRSES. Instead of working in a system that provided positive learning experiences in my career, I realized practices mirrored the dominant hegemonic narrative that perpetuated the same inequitable postsecondary outcomes of APYRSES. I learned that the practices used by educators were merely used as interventions, as a form of false generosity (Freire, 1970) that would never mirror the lives of APYRSES. In addition, I remained grounded in the strong relationships established with fellow special educators, which is essential for collectively working together in solidarity toward sustainable change for a more equitable future.

The trust set and the support given to one another was critical in having authentic dialogue without emphasizing hierarchy in educators, but rather in valuing unity toward a
more just educational system. As a Latinx woman, I represent the community being served by these practices. I see myself in these students and these families. These people are my family. As a critical educator in special education, I have continued to disrupt and deconstruct the normalization of traditional, standardized practices by transforming the status quo and normalizing critical thought and action toward more equitable transition preparation for APYRSES.

Concluding Summary

Chapter 1 reviewed the study’s context, including the background information leading to the problem and current statistics of disparities exposing inequitable postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES. This chapter then unfolded the purpose of the study and outlined its aims and objectives, followed by the research questions that drove the examination. I also presented an overview of the research methodology used for the study and ended with its significance for furthering knowledge and practice in special education. This dissertation contributed to applying the critical guiding praxis as a framework for practitioners in special education in preparing APYRSES for life after high school. The findings also contribute to literature pertaining to the concepts of self-determination theory through culturally responsive and sustaining practices (e.g., reciprocity and social–emotional learning through an antiracist lens). This study made visible the components of taking a humanizing stance in the traditional systematic and procedural approach to practice in the field of special education, and affirmed the lives of APYRSES for more equitable opportunities for their futures.
Dissertation Structure

Chapter 2 Summary

Chapter 2 presents existing literature regarding postsecondary transition, with an emphasis on self-determination and social–emotional learning. This presentation begins with a brief educational history leading to transition, followed by literature outlining what APYRSES would benefit from and effective tactics found in the literature to inform more equitable postsecondary transition. Chapter 2 also unveils the conceptual framework used for the study and ends with a summary of the literature chapter with identified gaps to be addressed.

Chapter 3 Summary

Chapter 3 justifies the adoption of a qualitative methodology through a descriptive case study approach used for this study. The broader research design with the study components is also discussed, including participant profiles as a method of humanizing research. Lastly, the techniques used for data analysis are presented with their explanation, including the study’s limitations and delimitation to enhance the study’s validity.

Chapter 4 Summary

Chapter 4 objectively and neutrally presents what I found following data collection for the study’s data analysis. The findings include excerpts taken directly from the qualitative data to exemplify or demonstrate identified results. This chapter ends with a concise summary of the findings used to respond to the study’s three research questions.
Chapter 5 Summary

Chapter 5 discusses the study’s findings as they pertain to the literature review. This discussion outlines its implications and recommendations for application and future research. This chapter concludes by delving into the meaning, significance, and relevance to the field of special education.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

A great opportunity for equitable adult postsecondary outcomes for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES) require high school special educators to consider students’ cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds and the context of their lived experiences; further, educators should include students’ families in the preparation process for life after high school. Although current law mandates the preparation for college, career, and independent living of adulthood (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015), such directives have created an equity issue as to what this preparedness means to diverse families and the conditions of each child’s life. The idealized system allows for a predetermined formula to examine the development and socialization based on the interrelated influences of a child’s various ecosystems (Bronfenbrenner, 1979), but does not account for the inequitable power imbalances in society between dominant and subordinate identities APYRSES experience in the U.S. educational system. For example, traditional postsecondary practices, such as planning for a 4-year college to obtain a career (e.g., doctor, lawyer) and forgetting about alternative pathways to success can disempower and ignore the values of students and families from cultural, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds that do not mirror those of the dominant hegemony. Often, such practices do not honor these communities’ assets and perpetuate inequities in access and opportunity, as evidenced by the current statistical disparities existing with postsecondary outcomes.

To explore the understanding of postsecondary transition through a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical
guiding praxis framework, this dissertation focused on deconstructing two traditional practices used in the field to prepare students for life after high school: self-determination skills (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Wehmeyer, 1992) and social–emotional learning skills (CASEL, 2021). Deconstructing the postsecondary transition process is important because research (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014; Wagner et al., 2014) has highlighted the continual disproportionate challenges for APYRSES. APYRSES need schools to challenge the reproduction of historic systemic inequities, which begins with an understanding of how special education teachers derive meaning from their pedagogy.

This chapter is organized into three main bodies of literature. The first body includes a brief educational history leading to transition and the research trends that outline the barriers to postsecondary transition. The second body outlines literature on what APYRSES benefit from in preparation for life after high school. The third body of literature explores effective ways to inform special education teacher practices found in the literature that promote more equitable postsecondary transition for APYRSES’ antiracist social–emotional learning skills.

Subsequent to the main bodies of literature is the conceptual framework of this dissertation and the theories drawn from envisioning a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators. This chapter concludes with a summary of the literature and its gaps. Critical examination of this literature review investigates the complexity of human development and the intersection of factors impacting postsecondary success for APYRSES. The impact of teachers understanding this information will lead to better prepared antiracist teachers with the skills needed to dismantle the status quo (Suk et al.,
2020) by honoring students and families and improving postsecondary outcomes (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Suk et al., 2020).

**Barriers to Postsecondary Transition**

America’s educational history is overrun with dark suffering built on the suffering of students of color. The educational survival complex, in its essence, leaves students learning to merely survive, learning how schools mimic the world they live in, making schools a training site for a life of exhaustion. (Love, 2019, p. 27)

Barriers to more equitable postsecondary transition remain unaddressed through imbalances in power between the superior and the inferior identities in society. This dissemblance produces and reproduces inequitable opportunities through the U.S. educational system, inevitably maintaining the status quo. This section reveals themes discovered through scholarship that encompass the realities and struggles of APYRSES that impact postsecondary outcomes. The section begins with an overview of the U.S. educational history, focusing on landmark court cases that laid the foundation for postsecondary transition today. Following this section, I review themes identified in the literature (i.e., discrimination, disproportionality, and the opportunity gap), demonstrating the urgency of unlearning status quo clout and increasing critical thought regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES.

**History and Influences Leading to Transition**

Disability rights have evolved through activism since their beginning initiatives demonstrated in the 1800s. Various events and laws have contributed to developing the rights of individuals with disabilities. At the dawn of the Jim Crow era, *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) assisted in upholding the legalization of racial segregation rooted in
Black Codes to limit opportunities for Black communities (Messner, 1968) by creating grounds for separation based on race known as the *separate but equal* doctrine. This doctrine resulted in unequally funded separate facilities, including schools, where White schools were seen as professional and intellectual. In contrast, non-White schools were seen as vocational opportunities for boys and home economics for girls (Wollenberg, 1975). By devaluing and nullifying culture, identity, and language, the dominant hegemony held the power needed to keep Black communities subjugated by disallowing language and literacy in structures that would maintain the domination of White ideology. The oppressive ideologies of segregation extended to Mexican Americans, Native Americans, and Chinese populations with the erasure of language and culture (McCarty, 2018; San Miguel. & Valencia, 1998; Wollenberg, 1975).

This segregation was the status quo until the Board of Education was ordered to desegregate schools and abolish segregation through the originating efforts of the visionary Charles Huston. Huston made progress toward equity in his fight against Jim Crow laws and outlawed racial segregation in schools (Gaskins, 2017). Huston’s struggle affected not only the Black community, but all students and families who were othered in the U.S. education system, allowing for equal access and the hope for equity in education (García et al., 2022; Tushnet, 1987). Following the demolition of racial segregation in public schools, the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ruling deemed segregation of students by race unequal, therefore, unconstitutional, meaning such segregation was a violation of the 14th Amendment. Although the ruling was based on racial segregation and injustice, it initiated the idea of equal education for all through the protections granted to historically marginalized populations (Yell et al., 1998). Despite Brown’s
efforts, the legacy was left unfulfilled, struggle has persisted, and opportunity has continued to be unequal (Bell, 1980; Ladson-Billings, 2006). The complexities of the Brown decision are reflected in the challenges historically marginalized populations face through adversity, discrimination, and systemic racism in education (Brown & Brown, 2010).

Ten years after the Brown decision, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was signed; this law prohibited discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin for public accommodations and any federally funded programs. Soon after, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (“P.A.R.C”) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (1971) case stressed adequate education for all individuals, specifically those with disabilities, by prohibiting the denial of appropriate public education to any child up to the age of 21, establishing their right to due process, and setting the precedent for addressing unethical discrimination against any student. One year later, Mills v. Board of Education (1972) expanded on this ruling to include students identified with historically excluded disability categories (i.e., mental, behavioral, physical or emotional disabilities).

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (PL-94-142), most recently reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004), required each eligible child to have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) that outlines services provided to access free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), along with the protection of student and family rights. Under IDEIA (2004), teachers are required to annually reevaluate students’ progress in their IEP and postsecondary transition (e.g., education, employment, and independent living) goals. The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) made
society and employment accessible to individuals with disabilities by prohibiting discrimination based on ability.

The 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) required accountability reporting of performance indicators for stakeholder transparency of performance for various student subpopulations, with the goal of increased college and career readiness (Elgart, 2017). During Betsey DeVos’ time as the U.S. Secretary of Education during the Trump administration, she proposed various changes to the implementation of Every Student Succeeds Act, which became controversial. Devos sought vouchers for federal funding to be used for privatized education and school choice options, broadened maximum flexibility and reduced requirements in accountability reporting for student achievement, weakened federal oversight, and increased state and local school districts’ governance of the implementation of the Every Student Succeeds Act (Duff & Wohlstetter, 2019; Klein, 2017b). A shift in approach to their work and priorities has since occurred during Miguel Cardona’s time as U.S. Secretary of Education under Joe Biden’s presidency through an equity and justice lens focusing on the whole child; Cardona has concentrated heavily on equitable education for all students and the importance of data-driven decision making to provide adequate support for every child’s success. In addition, Cardona has prioritized the safe return of in-person learning for students during the COVID-19 global pandemic and addressed learning loss efforts (Lam, 2021). Although mandated policies have outlined the necessity of supporting students from all backgrounds, educators have rarely been provided with the guidance, resources, or training to implement the work (Catone &
Discrimination

Families are a vital component of the IEP team (Kim & Morningstar, 2005), as they provide essential information about their children that is needed to plan and deliver special education-related services successfully. However, the participation of parents and families of APYRSES has been limited (Achola & Greene, 2016; Clark & Marable, 2017; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007; Lo & Bui, 2020). Parents lack knowledge of the transition process, most significantly with the legal requirements involved in the transition of children receiving special education services (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007). More specifically, 37% of the culturally, ethnically, and diverse parents in Landmark et al.’s (2007) study indicated not knowing what transition planning was, and 16% knew little to nothing about the transition planning of their children. In addition, the special education jargon used, and the legal requirements indicated, are not easily accessed by all parents and families, which inhibits their understanding and participation in the transition planning process. With parents and families from European backgrounds having the greatest knowledge of the transition process, there is a need for parental training and dissemination to authentically include diverse parents and families in the transition planning process (Landmark et al., 2007; Salembier & Furney, 1997).

Lo and Bui’s (2020) mixed-methods study examined the experiences of Chinese and Vietnamese parents of APYRSES in the transition planning process through individual surveys and unstructured, open-ended interviews. The authors identified four
emerging themes from the data that represented factors impeding parental involvement in transition planning and activities: (a) level of understanding of transition and planning, (b) communication between school and family, (c) community support, and (d) school expectations for support and resources that supported the familial experience and involvement (Lo & Bui, 2020). Lo and Bui (2020) suggested enhancing school and familial partnerships in the transition planning process and activities. Despite Newman’s (2005) findings of 90% parent participation in their child’s IEP meetings, Landmark et al. (2007) held this metric was true for only half of the parent population. Landmark et al. interviewed the parents of 19 high school students with disabilities (SWDs) to learn about their experiences in the transition planning process. Although parents expressed the value of participating and communicating with their child’s educators, there was little to no parental involvement, and less than half of parents attended transition meetings (Landmark et al., 2007).

Families from diverse backgrounds also face oppressive experiences during meetings with school professionals (Achola & Greene, 2016; Clark & Marable, 2017; Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Lo & Bui, 2020). Research seeking to understand the experiences and relationships with school officials in the transition planning process has been consistent in findings (Burke et al., 2021; deFur et al., 2001; Geenen et al., 2001, 2003; Hirano et al., 2018; Lynch & Stein, 1987), reporting a lack of respect for family contributions and feelings of inferiority in their experiences with transition planning. Hirano et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative synthesis of findings from 22 studies conducted by 66 researchers that involved interviews with 405 parents. The researchers identified themes of family barriers that included lack of resources, cultural capital
affecting self-efficacy, and stress (Hirano et al., 2018). School barriers included themes of racism, discrimination, schools preventing family empowerment, and poor transition planning. Themes identified as adult services barriers included the deficit view of students, low expectations, lack of postsecondary options, challenges navigating adult systems, and lack of value and respect for caregivers (Hirano et al., 2018).

Similarly, Francis et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative study through semistructured interviews with caregivers from Hispanic backgrounds to understand their positive and negative experiences in supporting family members with disabilities in achieving successful postsecondary outcomes, specifically in employment. The study revealed Hispanic caregivers experienced various barriers with educators and community service providers that contributed to their negative experiences, such as lack of communication and trust issues, poor postsecondary transition planning, and limited knowledge and resources (Francis et al., 2018). Moreover, in a mixed-methods study exploring similarities and differences in experiences between Spanish-speaking and English-speaking parents of students with disabilities using a demographic survey and focus group protocol, Burke et al. (2021) found exacerbating negative experiences and unique communication barriers for Spanish-speaking parents became barriers to advocacy and parents were less likely to take part in educational decision making for their children. Furthermore, educators have not been equipped with training about mandated laws or practices that support APYRSES in the transition process (Benitez et al., 2009; Kim & Morningstar, 2007; Morningstar & Benitez, 2013; Wandry et al., 2008). Given the differences and importance of family involvement in the transition process, there is a need for postsecondary transition support for all students and families.
Partnerships between school officials and families of APYRSES are affected by culture and language differences, becoming an additional barrier (Achola & Greene, 2016; Alverson & Yamamoto, 2019). According to Achola and Greene (2016), these barriers become more impactful in the involvement of APYRSES parents as part of the decision-making process in their children’s education and services, resulting in frequently expressed feelings of intimidation. Providing appropriate information to the family in their native language is necessary and equitable to allow the family to enhance and navigate and participate in their children’s educational processes (Reyes-Blanes, 2002).

In Wilt and Morningstar’s (2018) comprehensive review of peer-reviewed journals and exploration of culturally sustaining practices in the pertinence of strong partnerships between educators and APYRSES, the researchers found patterns in a lack of culturally relevant transition practices (i.e., a barrier to postsecondary transition), with documented frustration experienced by parents due to the limited information on transition provided to them. Additionally, Wilt and Morningstar found professionals’ negative attitudes were a barrier where parents reported feelings of disconnect with school officials. Another barrier was the limited community support for APYRSES and their families, resulting in parents feeling ignored.

**Disproportionality**

Disproportionality is the paradox of special education. Oswald et al. (1999) defined *disproportionate representation* in students receiving special education services as “the extent to which membership in a given (ethnic, socioeconomic, linguistic, or gender) group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category” (p. 198). The identification that provides services and supports to help students succeed also
leads to segregation, stigmatization, a weak curriculum with lowered expectations, and limitations to postsecondary outcomes (Donovan & Cross, 2002). According to the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD, n.d.), Black, Latinx, and Native Americans are identified for special education services at a higher ratio than White students, and Black students are placed in segregated settings more often (67%) than their White counterparts (45%). The longstanding predicament of identification disproportionality in the U.S. educational system is a complex and influential issue reflected in the subjective nature of the high-incidence disability categories (Artiles et al., 2010; Klingner et al., 2005; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Artiles et al. (2010) stressed the importance of framing disproportionality as an issue in educational research as resistance to ignoring historic and structural inequities. In their exploratory study, Sullivan and Artiles (2011) sought to understand racial inequities in special education with disproportionality. The researchers stressed the need for assessments at the local school to prevent the means of continuous disproportionality (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011).

In looking at the overrepresentation of Black students in special education, poignant is the perpetuating cycle of coping with the burden of acting White (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; National Research Council, 2002), where Black students “struggle to achieve success while retaining Black community support and approval” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986, p. 198). Fordham and Ogbu (1986) further highlighted the contradiction between academic success and the collective identity of the Black community, deeming exclusion from the group. The dominant hegemonic society has historically intellectually oppressed Black communities and the development of Black identity (Ogbu, 1978, 2004), and has opposed ideals of the White society as a defense and survival mechanism,
developing the perception and association of academic success as acting White. Researchers have demonstrated the negative impact of this conflict resulting in Black students undervaluing and underestimating their identities and intellectual abilities, along with an internal identity conflict requiring them to choose academic success or community acceptance (Bonner, 2000; Comer, 1988; Fryer & Torelli, 2006; Kauffman et al., 2001; Peterson-Lewis & Bratton, 2004).

In a study researching the impact of the burden of Black students acting White on school and postsecondary outcomes, Goff et al. (2007) found the existence of this belief to hold true within students as a form of seeking help in self-control. Although the teachers in their study agreed that the burden of acting White impedes academic achievement, special education placement, failure, school dropout rates, and adverse postsecondary outcomes, they were also not equipped with the necessary skills to intervene with such results (Goff et al., 2007). Such findings exemplified an evident lack of awareness; teachers needed to discuss transition programs focused on self-determination to improve in-school and postsecondary outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds (Goff et al., 2007). Contrarily, in a study examining the relationship between achievement and internalized racial identity, Spencer et al. (2001) determined the only contributor to acting White’s burden is self-hatred, as it lacks the integration of the developmental status and character culturally diverse responsiveness. The burden of acting White negatively impacts academic success in the Black community and contradicts the values of their collective identity, as many collectivist cultures can relate.

Harry et al. (2005) conducted a 3-year ethnographic study under the auspices of the Office for Special Education (OSEP) on the overrepresentation of APYRSES in
special education, a consistent concern for more than 3 decades. Home visits and ethnographic interviews with student guardians were conducted with three students being referred to special education services. Harry et al. (2005) found the overrepresentation of APYRSES in special education included complex interactions and was influenced by many levels of social ecology linked to most levels of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecological systems model. A pattern in the ethnographic interviews demonstrated consistent agreement among teachers, with themes surrounding parent and community influences and negative teacher attitudes toward families, family structure, and experiences. This pattern further demonstrated more positive attitudes toward immigrant families than Black individuals (Harry et al., 2005). Interestingly, a consistent disagreement on themes focused on teaching skills was also prominent. The discrepancy between school personnel’s beliefs about APYRSES and their families is often based on limited, stereotypical information, demonstrating the need to prepare educators for the complexities of communities in a more culturally responsive-sustaining way to support APYRSES effectively.

Students with diverse backgrounds are more likely to be misidentified and placed in more restrictive educational settings in special education (Artiles et al., 2010). Artiles et al. (2010) furthered this metric by asserting the importance of taking U.S. racial and socioeconomic patterns that support the prejudiced and stereotyped views of “the other” into consideration (Artiles et al., 2010) in the reproduction of inequalities in special education. Black students who receive special education services have been consistently overrepresented in special education. In contrast, Asian American students remain underrepresented (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Moreover, APYRSES are more
likely to experience exclusionary disciplinary actions (e.g., suspension or expulsion) than their White peers (Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). These disproportionate rates extend to the adverse outcomes of APYRSES when compared to their White counterparts. Skiba et al. (2014) examined literature on schools’ exclusionary practices related to the school-to-prison pipeline. Their findings suggested exclusionary disciplinary practices (e.g., suspensions) can negatively impact the development of children (Skiba et al., 2014). Similarly, Morris (2016) highlighted the scrutiny experienced by Black girls in how they are negatively perceived and their subjectiveness through the “school-to-confinement pathways” (p. 12) that impact the opportunities they will have.

**Racial Inequity in Special Education Eligibility.** According to the most current national data on public school teacher demographics (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2017, 2018), White and non-Hispanic teachers accounted for 79% of teachers across the United States and the District of Columbia; however, Hispanic teachers accounted for 9%, and 7% were non-Hispanic, with 2% of educators indicating two or more races and less than 1%. Given the referral process for special education begins with teachers, these figures raise concern of disproportionality in achievement, disciplinary actions, and dropout rates (Cooc, 2017). Factors such as (a) biases in the referral and assessment process for the eligibility for special education services; (b) cultural, ethnic, and linguistic differences; and (c) systemic inequities present in the educational system contribute to racial inequity and stratification in special education. Cooc (2017) analyzed data based on survey results to determine the extent to which racial disparities in teachers’ perceptions of student disabilities reflected disproportionality trends in special education and the referral and placement decisions made. Data collected
for this study included students from 752 public and private schools that began in 2002, with follow ups in 2004, 2006, 2012, and 2013. Cooc (2017) found in teacher comparisons between similar academic and behavioral profiles with students of color and White students, teachers were less likely to consider difficulties resulting from disability. Additionally, teachers were more likely to associate Black, Hispanic, and Native Americans with having a disability. By the same token, Asian Americans were less likely to be related to having a disability, contributing to the under-identification of Asian American students receiving special education services (Cooc, 2017).

The overrepresentation of marginalized populations of students can have long-lasting negative impacts on the educational experiences of students. These impacts include minimal access or exclusion from participating in the general education curriculum and environment and lowered expectations, which perpetuate constant societal “othering” and minimize academic and postsecondary opportunities for the future. APYRSES have continued to be overrepresented in special education, being twice as vulnerable to discrimination labeling them by their race, along with the second label of “disabled;” APYRSES are also more likely to be placed in a more restrictive educational setting after special education identification (Losen & Welner, 2001).

Moreover, students from diverse backgrounds are often less likely to be appropriately identified than their White peers and less likely to receive adequate educationally related services. In addition, Black students are more likely to be placed in special education at a higher rate with the identification of intellectual disability (ID) or emotional–behavioral disorders (EBDs) as opposed to learning disabilities or other conditions (e.g., ADHD, speech impairment; Figlio et al., 2019; Fish, 2019; Shifrer,
Centering the effects of disproportionality in the experiences of historically marginalized groups require examining structural and systemic factors (Oswald et al., 2001) that create barriers to obtaining successful postsecondary transition outcomes for APYRSES.

**Disciplinary Action.** Researchers have suggested that exclusionary discipline disproportionality is a reoccurring issue (Hines-Datir, 2015; Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Smith & Harper, 2015). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), APYRSES are twice as likely to be disciplined with an out-of-school suspension as their peers without disabilities. In the 2013–2014 school year, 15.5% of all U.S. public school students were Black, and Black students accounted for 39% of suspensions (Government Accountability Office, 2018). Hines-Datiri and Carter Andrews (2020) presented a case for examining zero-tolerance policies and their effects on Black female students through the use of critical race feminism. Examining the implementation of such policies allowed for insights into their effects on the development of Black girls, and how anti-Blackness in the discipline may not align with White identification in schools (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020).

Researchers have similarly posited the overrepresentation of Black girls who experience exclusionary discipline and school policing—paired with educators’ negative views, implicit biases, and low expectations of these students—calls for a culturally responsive and sustaining approach to discipline (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020). Consequently, Gregory et al. (2011) conducted a study that involved 5,035 ninth graders who completed a survey regarding school climate and student attitudes and perceptions of school climate. Students reported low support levels, high suspension rates, and a gap in
Black–White suspensions. Noteworthy was Morris’s (2016) qualitative, phenomenological, and action-oriented study, which explored the experiences of Black girls and reflected the exploitation of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices that emphasize the role education systems play in the reproduction of oppression and views students as “social deviants rather than critical respondents to oppression” (p. 11).

As previously mentioned, Black students are more likely than their White peers to be placed in special education under a high-incidence disability identification (e.g., EBD; Bal et al., 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013). In researching exclusionary patterns for APYRSES over long periods, Bowman-Perrott et al. (2013) analyzed data from the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS). Bowman-Perrott et al. found students identified with EBDs were at the most significant risk for suspension, followed by ADHD and SWDs. Moreover, Black male students were found to have a greater probability of exclusionary discipline over time (Bowman-Perrott et al., 2013).

Disparities among combining factors (e.g., race and disability) are concerning in correlation to the policies and practices used in schools that “decrease the probability of school success for children and youth, and increase the probability of negative life outcomes, particularly through involvement in the juvenile justice system” (Skiba et al., 2014, p. 546). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2014), nearly 63% of 2.6 million students suspended and 110,000 expelled in the 2013–2014 school year were Black, Latinx, pacific islander, American Indian/Alaskan, or students of two or more races. Moreover, SWDs were twice as likely to be given out-of-school suspensions compared to students without disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2014). The
disproportionality and disciplinary gap is continuous and in need of a paradigm shift that is humanizing, culturally sensitive, integrated, and outcome oriented.

**The Opportunity Gap**

The nation’s cultural makeup has continued to expand in its diversity, with research purporting 55% of the population in 2025 to be of culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds (U.S. Department of Education, 2014), with the demographics of educators are predominantly White (80%) and female (76%; NCES, 2019). High-poverty urban schools remain underfunded, under resourced, and have high pushout rates (Darling-Hammond, 2004, 2010; Morris, 2016). Unsurprisingly, APYRSES have historically had the lowest academic performance outcomes of all students, maintaining what society believes is the “achievement gap” in education that blames the students and communities from which they come (Irvine, 2010). Focusing on the “achievement gap” normalizes White supremacy ideology in viewing White students as intellectually superior, forcing the comparison of all other students (Foster, 1999), fueling the deficit perspective of APYRSES and families.

This gap can be attributed to the denial of moral, economic, and sociopolitical opportunities that manifest in the reproduction of oppressive hierarchical structures, creating an opportunity gap (Ladson-Billings, 2006). White rage is at the center of inequitable opportunity (Love, 2019) for APYRSES. White rage is defined as “the conditions that preserve dark suffering because of hundreds of years and multiple continents’ commitment to creating and maintaining destructive, insidious, racist ideals that uphold White supremacy and anti-Blackness” (Love, 2019, p. 22). The history of the U.S. educational system has a long history with laws that protect the racist views of
White supremacy and the suffering of people of color. Ladson-Billings (2006) argued an educational debt has accumulated over time, where a perceived achievement gap is analogous to a national debt through the outcomes of Black and Latinx students. The educational debt has contributed to a logical understanding of educational and economic disparities as national decisions through the profiting of the educational survival complex (Love, 2019), where education was developed from decades of suffering of students of color who have been underserved and who have had to survive in the world around them. The U.S. education system has been built on the premise of White supremacist ideology, where students of color are viewed as “lacking” and needing to be fixed (Howard, 2010; Love, 2019). This deficit-based mindset can be attributed from an ecological viewpoint, where APYRSES are not on the same level playing field as their counterparts (Foster, 1999; Ladson-Billings, 2006).

Irvine (2010) highlighted the need to move on from the notion of the achievement gap and focus on opportunity gaps to combat inequities for historically marginalized populations. Opportunity gaps that need attention to promote equity include teacher training and quality, school funding, the digital divide, curriculum gaps, income and wealth, employment opportunity, health care, affordable housing, housing integration, nutrition gap, and quality childcare (Irvine, 2010). Gaps in educational achievement can improve if these societal gaps are addressed.

Eurocentricity is at the forefront of the U.S. educational system. Eurocentricity is particularly prominent in postsecondary transition planning (Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013). With the support of dominant hegemonic representation (i.e., 80% of educators are White; NCES, 2019), educators oftentimes struggle with a transition
process unsuited to support or value APYRSES and their families (Black et al., 2003; Kochhar-Bryant et al., 2015).

**Students Benefit From: Hope**

Recognizing the experiences of students, families, and teachers necessitates understanding the sociocultural ecological systems in which students and educators live and are impacted (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lee, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). Living in multiple systems and environments affects youth and educator development as to the relationships and interactions between the biological, individual, and social complexities of society that impact their thinking (Lee, 2017). Sociocultural ecological systems influence teachers, students, families, communities, and postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES. This section outlines what APYRSES benefit from in education theories encompassing a sociocultural lens to better understand students’ and educators’ dissimilar sociocomplexities. I also address developmental factors that contribute and impact postsecondary outcomes. Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) theory of ecological systems was used to examine self-determination and the social and cultural influence it has on the development, opportunities, and risks associated with education and transition specifically (Abery & Stancliffè, 2003; Garrels & Palmer, 2020; Raley et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2018). Lastly, scholarship in this section covers antiracism toward deconstructing oppressive educational systems.

**Sociocultural Lens**

According to sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), cultural values, beliefs, and problem-solving skills are acquired through social interactions and collaboration between children and more knowledgeable members of society. Sociocultural theory emphasizes
the effects of culture on cognitive development, as parents pass on the goals and practices valued in their culture. Such cultural and social interactions include community needs, goals, and experiences that contribute to the development of the mind.

Building off sociocultural theory, ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) asserts the cognitive development of a child is directly impacted by the interrelated structures of the environment in which they live and the interactions with people in these structures. These structures are interrelated and include the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and the chronosystem. The structural layers demonstrate how the child is at the center, with intersecting, ecological layers of their life—immediate, expansive, and continuities over time that influence the child’s development. The microsystem level of the ecological system is defined by the individuals and activities a child experiences through direct contact (e.g., parents, teachers, peers). This level involves the child’s most immediate environment, those with whom they interact, and their relationships with those individuals. The mesosystem involves the interactions between the various interconnected influences of a child’s microsystem that indirectly affect the child. Factors in the mesosystem include a child’s relationship with the student’s school and teachers, and communication between parents and teachers. The components of a child’s microsystem must work together for a more positive outcome. When these components work against each other, the result can negatively affect a child’s development (Campos-Gil et al., 2020).

In the mesosystem, barriers arise due to a lack of interagency collaboration in difficulties connecting with critical service and support agencies necessary for the development of youth with disabilities. A lack of knowledge can be associated with a
challenge in the mesosystem. The exosystem consists of “one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant but in which events occur that effect, or are affected by, what happens in that setting” (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). In other words, this level does not include a child as an active participant in the decision-making process, but directly affects them. These settings traditionally involve services designed with dominant hegemonic ideals and values that exclude marginalized groups and create deterrents that negatively impede success. The macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) can be thought of as the “social blueprint” that culminates all ecological system layers through activities (Trainor et al., 2008). This layer encompasses societal and cultural factors, with barriers that include multiple layers of marginalization and biases affecting interagency coordination (i.e., APYRSES living in poverty). Societal systems, policies, and expectations perpetuate racism and stereotypes about marginalized groups, setting low expectations of abilities.

Finally, the chronosystem was added to Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) original theory as “the influence on the person’s development of changes (and continuities) over time in the environments in which the person is living” (p. 724). Students may experience disadvantageous sources in the chronosystem level, including (a) historical factors of when a child grows; (b) the age in which a child experiences trauma; (c) starting and ending school; and (d) parent divorce.

**Culturally Responsive-Sustaining Education Framework**

*Culture* is defined as understanding the various intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991) of an individual’s race, ethnicity, gender, language, sexual orientation, nationality, religion, economic background, and ability (New York State Education Department,
Whereas the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) recognizes the importance of equal opportunity for all students for the improvement of student outcomes, the culturally responsive-sustaining framework (New York State Education Department, 2018) posits the desired results for all students are not possible without a student-centered, equitable, and inclusive lens toward pedagogy and educational environments that affirm the cultural identities of all students; foster positive academic outcomes for every child; develop students in their abilities to connect across differences; elevate the voices of those historically silenced and marginalized; empower students as social change agents; and cultivate critical thinking for student learning, growth, and achievement.

The culturally responsive-sustaining framework is rooted in asset-based pedagogy to “disrupt the circularization of racism” (Paris, 2017, p. 4). Moreover, the framework engages learners by supporting the development of their identities and challenging social inequalities using culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Additionally, the culturally responsive-sustaining framework channels students’ community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) through culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2013) to build off previous learning experiences. Lastly, the framework recognizes the evolution of students’ identities and the need to sustain students’ culture with the explicit goal of “supporting multilingualism and multiculturalism in practice and perspective for students and teachers” (Paris, 2012, p. 95) through culturally sustaining pedagogy while contributing to educators’ better understanding of culture and the power held in disadvantaging some students while privileging others (Kirkland, 2012). The culturally responsive-sustaining framework is grounded in four principles: a welcoming and affirming environment; high expectations and rigorous instruction; inclusive curriculum
and assessment; and ongoing professional learning. Guided by these principals, the culturally responsive-sustaining framework provides stakeholders with a culturally responsive-sustaining approach to teaching practices that allows for growth in educators’ sociopolitical consciousness and sociocultural responsiveness (New York State Education Department, 2018). Educators can also engage in critical pedagogy for academic achievement that empowers students’ identity development and catalyzes action for social change (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008).

A Cultural Proficiency Continuum

Cultural proficiency is “a mindset, a worldview, a way a person or an organization makes assumptions for effectively describing, responding to, and planning for issues that arise in diverse environments” (Lindsey et al., 2018, p. 5). Viewing the differences and values between cultures and what they bring to classrooms can be viewed as assets and opportunities to build on educational experiences. Lindsey et al. (2018) provided a cultural proficiency continuum to understand the shifting understanding of one another’s differences. The cultural proficiency continuum contains six tenets that identify how individuals move along the continuum, view and respond to differences, with the first three leaning toward more deficit-based behaviors and the last three indicating inclusive behaviors. Lindsey et al.’s (2018) six tenets include:

1. *Cultural destructiveness*, which “seeks to eliminate the cultures of others in all aspects of the school and relationship to the community served” (p. 8);

2. *Cultural incapacity*, which involves “trivializing and stereotyping other cultures: seeking to make the cultures of others appear wrong or inferior to the dominant culture” (p. 8);
3. *cultural blindness*, which includes “not noticing or acknowledging the culture of others and ignoring the discrepant experiences of cultures within the school; treating everyone in the system the same way without recognizing the needs that require differentiated interaction” (p. 8);

4. *cultural precompetence*, which necessitates “increasing awareness of what you and the school don’t know about working in diverse settings; at this level of development, you and the school are moving in a positive, constructive direction, or you are faltering, stopping, and possibly regressing” (p. 8);

5. *cultural competence*, which involves “aligning your values, personal and behaviors and the school’s policies and practices in a manner that is inclusive of cultures that are new or different from your and the school’s and enables healthy and productive interactions” (p. 8); and

6. *cultural proficiency*, which entails:

   Holding the vision that you and the school are instruments for creating a socially just democracy; interacting with your colleagues, your students, their families, and their communities as an advocate for lifelong learning to serving effectively the educational needs of all cultural groups. (p. 8)

Lindsey et al.’s (2018) cultural proficiency continuum can be used to cultivate the cultural proficiency of special education teachers by helping them identify their own areas of growth needed to be culturally proficient and to reflect on their attitudes and beliefs about APYRSES, and their practices to support them succeed. Furthermore, the continuum can be used as a guide for professional development focusing on moving toward cultural proficiency by recognizing and valuing the diverse cultures of student
populations. Consequently, the continuum can foster more effective collaboration between school personnel and students’ families, particularly for students receiving special education services.

**Deconstructing Oppressive Educational Systems**

I have never encountered any children in any group who are not geniuses. There is no mystery on how to teach them. First, you treat them like human beings, second, you love them.

—Asa Hillard

Hate crimes across the United States have been at an all-time high rate. According to the latest reported data released by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in 2019, 3,963 crimes were targeted based on race from a total of 7,314 bias-motivated incidents documented. Racial hate crimes were deemed the highest in the report, followed by religious identity, sexual orientation, gender identity, disabilities, and crimes pertaining to gender (FBI, 2019). The use of modern technology and live documentation on the internet have inundated media with divisive rhetoric, dispositions, and narratives of premeditated violent acts. Racism is at the intersection of ideologies normalizing racial inequalities (Kendi, 2019).

Education that fosters individuals’ critical thinking and activated skills work together to eradicate prejudice and discrimination and build a diverse and just society through a journey of antiracism (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011). To be antiracist, one needs to support antiracist policies through actions (Kendi, 2019). Given the majority of K–12 educators are White women, the idea of colorblindness is prominent (Lindsey et al., 2018). Educators oftentimes lack the framework for understanding how students of color
are marginalized, resulting in blaming the families for struggling students. Educators need to recognize and reflect on their belief systems, internalized racism, and biases to disrupt traditional systems favoring White supremacy and work toward equitable approaches to education rooted in antiracism (Madda, 2019; McClintock & Rauscher, 2007; Simmons, 2021). Oftentimes, defensiveness is evident in the reactions of White educators when their perspectives of race are questioned, commonly known as White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018). To disrupt systems, such as the commonly practiced colorblind approach, action must be strategic, intentional, and courageous. This disruption requires educators to address Whiteness and White supremacist culture and examine their role in the consistent inequitable patterns in education through the dominant created social order and superiority (DiAngelo, 2018).

Educators should create spaces for children to feel empowered and participate in their education through discussions around their lived realities (Love, 2019). It is necessary to prepare students for the world they will inherit. At the center of these spaces should be love as a foundation in reaching all students represented in a community and engagement through embracing the culture and bringing in the social realities of students into their educational experiences to use as assets to build on (Williams-Johnson, 2016). Educators must provide the space to openly discuss issues relating to inequity to highlight the populations that have been left behind (Zimmer et al., 2012). Pedagogy rooted in antiracism serves as an alternative discourse to traditional Eurocentric processes by assisting in developing a critical lens and helping students learn how to address their daily injustices through education for liberation (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970). Young people must understand other experiences as global citizens to
make connections that build upon empathy and impact the world to truly understand injustices (Osler, 2016). Furthermore, educators must analyze their practices to ensure racism is addressed and to avoid creating oppressive hierarchical structures in their classrooms (Paris & Alim, 2017).

Teacher guidance in antiracist education is necessary for the successful development of APYRSES. Biased and racist educational practices rooted in White supremacy impede and harm youth development from diverse backgrounds. In Galloway et al.’s (2019) qualitative study, 18 educators participated in inquiry teams created to counter the persistent inequities experienced by marginalized students. Participants described the differences between culturally responsive pedagogy and antiracist or anti-oppressive pedagogy (Galloway et al., 2019). Researchers found a need for an increased translation of theory-to-practice in the concepts that often get lost in translation in K–12 schools and can counter the author’s original intent. When discussing culturally responsive pedagogy, participants associated the concept with individualized inclusive practices in the classroom by drawing in the voices and cultures in their curriculum. When talking about antiracism and anti-oppression, participants related practices to a more critical dialogue of systemic racism and practices. Galloway et al. (2019) recommended educators teach about white privilege and oppression, identify and critique structural inequalities, highlight racialized students’ lived experiences in schools and other institutions, and call out and address acts of racism.

**Effective Ways to Approach Transition**

Efforts have been made to increase equitable ways to improve postsecondary transition outcomes (Kohler et al., 2016), which I reviewed in the following literature.
First, I review Thoma et al.’s (2009) work, which explained the universal design for transition in its efforts to combine academic preparation with functional preparation for adulthood. Second, *Taxonomy for Transition 2.0* (Kohler et al., 2016) applied literature and effective programs to implement transition-focused practices. Lastly, Achola and Greene’s (2016) family–student-oriented transition planning is reviewed, with its focus on empowering APYRSES and their families in the postsecondary transition process.

**Universal Design for Transition**

Some of the most challenging intricacies in preparing students academically and for adulthood are gaps between the standardization of instruction in a result-oriented approach (i.e., No Child Left Behind) and the individualized approach to educational services and transition goals (IDEIA). In efforts to bridge this gap through a unified method of combining academic and transition ideals (Kochhar-Bryant & Bassett, 2002), the universal design for transition (UDT) framework guides practitioners in revamping academic instructional planning to include a more functional approach to preparing SWDs in transitioning to adulthood (Thoma et al., 2009). The UDT builds on the foundational core components of universal design for learning for all learners (UDL; CAST, 1998): multiple means of representation; multiple means of expression; multiple means of engagement, and the self-determination for all learners (Wehmeyer, 2006) and includes four additional components to the framework to prepare students both academically and for their transition to adulthood:

- multiple transition domains;
- multiple assessments;
• self-determination; and
• multiple resources and participants

**Taxonomy of Transition**

Using transition-focused education in a broad perspective as the basis of a collaborative approach between organizations, educators, families, and community members contributes to improving postsecondary outcomes. Kohler’s (1996) *Taxonomy for Transition Programming* served as a foundation to critically guide support and service delivery for students with disabilities in the general education population. This framework was later revised in the *Taxonomy for Transition Programming 2.0* (Kohler et al., 2016) to provide transition-focused practices deriving from the literature pertaining to successful postschool outcome predictors, graduation improvement versus dropout rates, vocational, and rehabilitation services in five primary categories:

• student-focused planning;
• student development;
• interagency collaboration;
• family engagement; and
• program structure

Subsequently, the framework was adopted and further revised in 2019 via *Taxonomy for Transition Programming for Systems Involved Youth* to address high recidivism and disproportionate rates of APYRSES represented in the juvenile justice system worldwide (Kohler et al., 2019); this framework sought to help youth achieve their goals and disrupt the school-to-prison pipeline. The five primary categories remained the same in the 2019, version but with a focus on youth rather than students.
More specifically, when supporting students through transition practices in the category of family engagement, Kohler et al. (2019) emphasized the importance of cultural relevance, empowerment, and family preparation for adequately addressing the needs of students with culturally diverse backgrounds.

**Family–Student-Oriented Transition Planning**

APYRSES struggle with postsecondary outcomes, which can contribute to the challenges they face (Artiles et al., 2010; Gothberg et al., 2019; Kochhar-Bryant et al., 2009; Lindstrom & Bullis, 2010; Newman et al., 2009). The Eurocentric focus on independence is prominent throughout the transition process, rather than empowering culture and language, resulting in disappointing experiences for APYRSES and their families. The person–family interdependent approach highlights family empowerment, sustainability, and transition adaptation to include family values that differ from traditional U.S. societal views (Achola & Greene, 2016). This framework benefits postsecondary outcomes of this unique population by considering the youth’s future role in their familial and communal expectations and meeting those collective needs through parental involvement, which has traditionally been lacking (Alverson & Yamamoto, 2019).

U.S. demographics have rapidly changed as families of color have become the majority, along with the continuous challenge of poverty. According to NCES (2020), the U.S. government asserts by 2029, students from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds will make up over 56% of the student population in the country. Interestingly, there has been a continual pattern of poorer postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES, specifically among Black and Latino SWDs from low socioeconomic status.
Researchers have captured the impact and the implications of marginalization in postsecondary transition for APYRSES (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014), which emphasizes the significance of looking past the “white gaze” (Paris & Alim, 2017, p. 2) and considering the role of culture in matching transition activities that best suits and honors students’ experiences and family values.

Achola and Greene’s (2016) person–family independent approach to transition aimed to empower families by reinforcing their capabilities, building on their strengths, and facilitating meaningful student-directed changes by considering the relationship between the family’s quality of life and the future of their child with a disability. Often, APYRSES have household responsibilities such as contributing to the financial security of their families (Lerman, 2000) and caring for siblings. These roles extend to their adult lives and responsibilities in caring for in-laws and older relatives, with the highest rates being Asian, followed by Latinx and Black (American Association of Retired Persons, 2001). Achola and Greene (2016) addressed the need for IEP teams to align transition goals to students’ roles in familial support and their roles in their broader cultural community.

Contrarily, the empowerment model asserts families are empowered when they have a high degree of motivation, knowledge, and skills when engaging in the transition planning process (Turnbull et al., 2006). However, the notion of family empowerment is entangled in the macro cultural values of equity and participation associated with western views, deeming such models inappropriate for use with families with diverse backgrounds (Achola & Greene, 2016). Although researchers have found family centered
practices are necessary for improving APYRSES postsecondary outcomes (Dunst & Trivette, 2005; King et al., 1999), opposing research (Callicot, 2003; Hasnain & Sotnik, 2003) has indicated the need for child-centered practices for APYRSES postsecondary outcome improvement. Alternatively, Achola and Greene’s (2016) person–family independent approach to transition merged both techniques to create more culturally responsive transition practices to lead to better postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES.

**Critical Guiding Praxis: A Conceptual Framework for Special Educators**

My philosophical conviction is that we did not come to keep the world as it is. We came to the world in order to remake the world. We have to change reality.

—Freire, 1996

Traditional practices supporting student transition into adulthood have primarily focused on self-determination skills (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2002; Wehmeyer, 1992) and social–emotional learning skills (CASEL, 2021). However, postsecondary outcomes have continued to demonstrate disparities between APYRSES and their White counterparts (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014; Wagner et al., 2014). I conceptualized the critical guiding praxis framework for special educators to guide special education teachers in the postsecondary preparation of APYRSES by deconstructing traditional views on postsecondary transition preparation and combining theories for a deeper, social–emotional framing that humanized pedagogy. Using a critical guiding praxis framework can assist special education teachers in gaining a critical way of thinking and knowing to approach postsecondary transition with APYRSES by including their multicultural views and addressing the sociocultural complexities of their lives for more equitable opportunities for their learners. This section
outlines the theories drawn and the rationale used in developing the conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Critical Guiding Praxis Framework for Special Educators

**Reciprocal and Cultural Understanding in Postsecondary Transition**

Self-determination theory asserts that developmental resources and the right social conditions are needed for children to become growth orientated, active participants in their environment (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan et al., 1997). To ensure the quality of life, student growth, and the development of their identity, three basic needs are necessary: autonomy, belonging (relatedness), and competence, which are essential (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Ryan et al., 1997). Ryan and Deci (2000) highlighted one’s motivation, given its association with production, mobilizes students to perform. Cavendish et al. (2020) examined high school students’ perceptions of staff members’ roles in developing student intrinsic motivation and self-determination in three urban public high schools in
in a northeastern city. Cavendish et al. determined two critical areas for supporting the development of self-determination for students with disabilities: (a) students being heard in their IEP planning and having input in their course selection, and (b) the importance of feeling cared for and supported through student progression toward graduation. In conditions where autonomy, competence, and relatedness are supported, students are more likely to develop self-regulation and goal-setting skills, resulting in enhanced performance and overall well-being, as opposed to conditions that prevent these basic needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Wehmeyer (1992) expanded the original application of self-determination to special education. He referred to self-determination as “acting as the primary causal agent in one’s life and making choices and decisions regarding one’s quality of life free from undue external influence or interference” (p. 7). In a study conducted by Wehmeyer et al. (1996), 407 individuals with disabilities responded to a series of self-reporting questions in group meetings to measure and determine the characteristics of self-determination. Wehmeyer et al. concluded the following four essential characteristics of self-determination theory: (a) the individual acted autonomously, (b) the behaviors were self-regulated, (c) the person initiated and responded to the event(s) in a psychologically empowered manner, and (d) the person acted in a self-realizing manner.

Although research has shown a positive association between self-determination and more optimistic postsecondary adult outcomes compared to individuals who experience lower levels of self-determination (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003; Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1997), much of the research has dismissed relevancy and effectiveness for youth, families, and communities from culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse
backgrounds whose values differ from those of the mainstream U.S. values (Bui & Turnbull, 2003; Leake & Black, 2005a, 2005b; Luft, 2001; Trainor, 2005; Zhang & Benz, 2006). Various definitions and components of self-determination in special education literature have been developed after the originating theory, which has been synthesized as the understanding of strengths and limitations in an individual through the combination of knowledge, skills, and beliefs to be goal oriented and self-regulated for control of one’s own life and successful adult outcomes (Field et al., 1998). This understanding, however, cannot be applied universally (Leake & Boone, 2007) and has continued to systematically silence through a Eurocentric curriculum.

Lacking attention to the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic aspects in transition often places an “equity blindfold” (Harry, 1992) on professionals, resulting in mainstream informed practices that center Eurocentric values on independence. These practices often contradict the values and beliefs of diverse populations, which focus on the collective approach to interdependence, family, orientation, and familial systems (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996). Although the desire is for APYRSES to become independent, function socially, and pursue postsecondary education or employment, the idea of independence varies across family cultures (Kalyanpur & Harry, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 1996). Black et al. (2003) described individualism as “standing out from the crowd, independent enterprise, and personal accomplishments” (p. 20). On the other hand, collectivism is the interdependency of a group where all members contribute to the common good of the group and collective success (Black et al., 2003). In comparison, individualistic transition planning is child centered and emphasizes meeting goals based on individual needs and growing independence from their family. A
collective approach, conversely, centers on the family. This approach encourages meeting goals based on the parameters set by the student’s family, which speaks to their culture and is vital in developing culturally competent teachers.

The traditional notion of self-determination must be acknowledged as a dominant narrative that focuses on a fixed, “one size fits all” approach to transition that oppresses and sustains the status quo by replicating predictable outcomes. Kalyanpur and Harry (2012) noted the importance of cultural reciprocity in the relationships between school officials and parents when making decisions to support their children and their family through the inequitable factors impeding their ability to succeed. Reciprocity allows for congruence between educational and familial expectations to show students they matter rather than contribute to school culture and pedagogy that murders the spirits (Love, 2019) of APYRSES. Practices must expand to include multicultural views, including family and educational systems dynamics, by shifting educators’ perspectives from the fixed individualistic approach to pedagogy to a collective approach that includes familial and community perspectives through culturally responsive-sustaining pedagogy.

**Critical Self-Reflection Through an Intersectional View**

Female, White educators and the traditional hegemonic practices which do not allow for holistically getting to know the child continue to dominate K–12 public education classrooms across the United States. APYRSES carry multiple labels with them daily, which are often perceived as lacking in academic abilities. These educators then play the role of savior to poor Brown and Black students, strengthening and enabling their deficit mindsets and practices (Gay, 2013; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Love, 2019). Researchers have indicated the need for educators to reflect on their belief
system as a first step to practicing cultural responsiveness with their students (Baumgartner et al., 2015; Gay, 2002; Harry & Klinger, 2005, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Suk et al., 2020). Suk et al. (2020) expanded on this notion as it relates to IEP meetings and the transition planning process for APYRSES. The traditional focus on White cultural norms is exemplified in the documentation of postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES (Indicator 14 of the State Performance Plan) which is used to highlight the efforts made in the competitive nature of employment and postsecondary education participation of APYRSES. Imperative to the transition planning process, Suk et al. (2020) stressed the importance of educators to center the student, consider the viewpoints of all stakeholders, and value their cultural backgrounds in the unique planning of all APYRSES.

*Intersectionality* can be defined as the separation or categorization of individuals by the interaction between the various components that make up one’s identity, such as culture, ethnicity, race, gender, language, abilities, sexual orientation, and religion (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). APYRSES who live and learn while situated on the intersectional margins of poverty, sexism, anti-Blackness, and other forms of oppression (hooks, 2014) have traditionally been unacknowledged through Eurocentric-focused educational practices. Freire (1973, 2000) theorized his perspective of *Conscientizacão*, or critical consciousness, as a pedagogical tool that serves as an ongoing self-reflexive practice through dialogue in recognizing the oppressive social forces that shape society and take action against them. Educators’ self-awareness of the perspectives seen through a narrative of privilege and its position in this work provides the intersectional competence (Boveda, 2016) to empower the community’s cultural wealth perspective.
(Yosso, 2005) and bring students into the classroom and guide them in combating racism in their daily lives. When teachers ignore or negate the political nature of their work with APYRSES who have traditionally been marginalized, teachers reproduce the status quo and low status of students and legitimize schools’ discriminatory practices (Bartolome, 1994).

Based on the understanding and knowledge of history, educators need to be given the opportunity to critically self-reflect on their pedagogy and question if educational practices are new notions of the continual perpetuation of systemic inequities for APYRSES. Freire’s (1968) *dialogical cultural circles* provide the space for adults to gather together and problem solve through dialogue about relevant topics to raise awareness of their reality and transform it. Cultural circles allow for the coconstruction of knowledge and practice through dialogue as opposed to the traditional banking approach, depositing knowledge to individuals (Freire, 1968). In cultural circles, educators constantly reflect on their pedagogy (Bahruth & Steiner, 2000) so that it can continue to evolve and respond to all students’ needs, particularly those historically disenfranchised.

**Critical Mattering**

CASEL (2021) defined *social–emotional learning* as the process in which young people and adults apply knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, establish and maintain relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions. Cultural values and beliefs are often excluded from current social–emotional learning practices due to colorblindness and deficit-based approaches. Additionally, social-emotional learning as been used as a weapon to (a) further marginalize APYRSES (Horton-Williams, 2020; Hughey, 2007), (b) foster the “blaming the victim” ideology (Ryan,
1975), and (c) expostulate the lack of values as poor parenting, less competent, and overall less human. Traditional interventions rob students of color of promising opportunities due to the deficit frame of thinking focused on interventions rooted in the belief that students lack knowledge in educational areas that can be targeted and fulfilled through exposure to adult advocates, supplemental academic programming, curriculum designed to improve students’ behavioral skills or individualized instruction (Dynarski et al., 2008; Freeman & Simonsen, 2015).

Popular social–emotional learning approaches promote relationship skills while lacking attention to hate crimes, racial inequities, and the “stress, anxiety, and trauma caused by racism” (Mayes et al., 2022, p. 180). Practitioners working with APYRSES are faced with difficulties in effectively teaching social–emotional learning skills through an antiracist lens to address prominent challenges in the transition process. Simmons (2019, 2021) emphasized the need for social–emotional learning skills development in a way that teaches students how to converse courageously about topics affecting their lives. By engaging in activities that include confronting injustices, students become equipped with the tools needed to navigate daily injustices (Simmons, 2019). Mayes et al. (2022) combatted decades of harm caused by the whitewashing of social–emotional learning through CASEL’s suggested emergence of SEL in 1995 (Jagers et al., 2019), erasing foundational research examining systemic racism and its impact on youth (Comer, 1969, 1971, 1985; Comer & Hill, 1985). Results of social–emotional learning are seen through the deficit-based approaches to social–emotional learning that continue to perpetuate the oppressive racial hierarchical school cultures that maintain the status quo (Mayes et al., 2022). The antiracist social–emotional justice learning framework promotes student
growth through empowerment, hope, and joy through five principles: critical theoretical frameworks, antibias building blocks, student and family voice, strengths-based empowerment, and homeplace (Mayes et al., 2022).

As social–emotional learning continues to be a buzzword in education, disregard for the true potential of social–emotional learning runs the risk of being problematic. Teaching social–emotional learning in a sociopolitical and racial consciousness that confronts the daily injustices experienced by historically marginalized students in a culturally affirming, sustaining environment that is safe and non-triggering is necessary to ensure mental and physical well-being (Horton-Williams, 2020; Simmons, 2019, 2021). Discourse in antiracism steers away from the notion of toleration and focuses on the power imbalances that perpetuate systematic racism. Antiracist research has centered on the lived experiences and the “simultaneity of their oppressions” (Brewer, 1993, p. 16) by challenging the ideological stance of equality in resources and access analogous to the realities of marginalized communities, thereby manifesting societal problems into issues rooted in hate, exclusion, and violence (Dei & Calliste, 2000). Deconstructing inequitable social–emotional learning competencies must assure that students of color are seen through their asset-based abilities, as opposed to needing to be “fixed” (Love, 2019; Mayes et al., 2022). Without an antiracist and equity lens, the dangerous potential of becoming “White supremacy with a hug” (Simmons, 2021, pp. 2–3) is prevalent. Social–emotional learning alone will not prepare youth for the inequitable world they will inherit. Collective healing begins with eradicating racism through practices that value and empower APYRSES and families in schools.
Summary and Gaps in Literature

Many factors influence the postsecondary transition experiences and outcomes for APYRSES. The overrepresentation of APYRSES in special education programs (Artiles et al., 2010; Harry et al., 2014) increases the likelihood for APYRSES to receive their education in segregated, restrictive settings, limiting their options and opportunities than their White counterparts (Coutinho & Oswald, 2000; Keller-Bell, 2021; Maximoff et al., 2017; Snyder & Dillow, 2015). Will’s (1984) call for transition through the OSERS paved the way for mandating preparation for life after high school to improve postsecondary outcomes for SWDs in the areas of education, employment, and independent living. As outlined in the reauthorization of PL 94-142/EAHCA to the IDEIA of 1990, transition services sought preparation and support for the school to adulthood for youth with disabilities. Postsecondary transition preparation through IEPs focused on the Eurocentric value of independence (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; IDEIA, 2004; Suk et al., 2020) have fallen short on collectivist values (Harry, 1992). Moreover, APYRSES are faced with racism and social stigma (Artiles et al., 2010) through inequitable power imbalances in society, leading to disparities in postsecondary transition outcomes (Newman et al., 2009).

Various resources found in literature (Achola & Greene, 2016; Kohler et al., 2016; Thoma et al., 2009) have been created by scholars for a more culturally responsive approach to postsecondary transition; yet, disparities in postsecondary transition outcomes remain an equity issue. APYRSES and their families face challenges and negative experiences with the postsecondary transition process and outcomes (Gil-Kashiwabara et al., 2007; Goff et al., 2007; Trainor & Bal, 2014; Wagner et al., 2014).
Given a quickly increasing population of students with diverse backgrounds and the disproportionate representation of APYRSES (Artiles et al., 2010; Liscomb et al., 2017; Musu-Gillette et al., 2017; NCLD, n.d.) and because the majority of educators dominating the U.S. educational system are White (80%; NCES, 2019), it is essential to note the urgency in cultivating critical understanding for special education teachers.

Literature has shown inequities in the postsecondary transition process exist; however, educators lack historical knowledge of how and what has led to these disparities in postsecondary transition outcomes for APYRSES. The humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework was conceptualized as a humanizing aspect of postsecondary transition through a critical lens needed to combat the disparities, create more equitable opportunities, and better prepare APYRSES for adulthood. Specifically, special educators need deep cultural connections to foster cultural reciprocity with their students and their families to help them develop self-determination skills. Moreover, special educators need ongoing self-reflection to develop critical awareness and knowledge about how pedagogy can be used for social awareness. Lastly, students’ lives need to be affirmed as an active resistance through social–emotional learning in a sociopolitical and racial consciousness that humanizes and teaches APYRSES they matter.

A humanizing pedagogy with a critical stance on mattering centered the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework (Love, 2019). This pedagogy was grounded in love and understanding of how historical issues have continued to live in the bodies and minds of APYRSES, their families, and their communities. As generations of people of
color constantly participate in renegotiating systems of oppression, these experiences
continue to live in them. Special educators must have a guiding praxis that guides them
through theory and gives them the sensibility to understand that APYRSES carry the
weight of their histories on their shoulders every day. Special educators must build on
these connections to their families, the people they love and know the best, and
constantly reflect on their pedagogy and evaluate if their practices fit in the cultural
dynamics and lived experiences of APYRSES to better prepare them for life after high
school. In diving deep into scholarship and theory, I realized as a researcher and a
practitioner that the theories drawn from to conceptualize a critical guiding praxis
framework for special educators also guided me in the process. The critical and
humanizing stance of the framework that guided the metacognition existed in my critical
knowing and in the reimagining of how to approach postsecondary transition for
APYRSES.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Pedagogy should work in tandem with students’ own knowledge of their community and grassroots organizations to push forward new ideas for social change, not just a tool to enhance test scores or grades. Pedagogy, regardless of its name, is useless without teachers dedicated to challenging systemic oppression with intersectional social justice.

— Bettina Love, *We Want to do More than Survive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom*

**Theory as the North Star**

Polaris, also known as the north star, is known for being the brightest star in the sky, always situated in the North. Love (2019) used theory as the north star as a metaphor for educators’ understanding of the world around them and a guide to their educational practices. As I reflected on special education practices, how inequities have continued to persist, and how I could make the most impact in the lives of multiply marginalized students and communities, I often found myself running to theories that provided the understanding and the language to make sense of the incomprehensible world that surrounded me and to begin a journey of healing through critical guidance needed for resisting against inequities. Theory gives continual hope and motivation in times when it becomes easy to derail from purpose and beliefs. The phenomena of learning calls into question how and what we think we know if the context of the material has a hidden agenda. Students are taught from a young age to comply while not questioning the
learning projected onto them through a system that produces predictable outcomes by maintaining the status quo.

A foundational understanding of the historical and legal components leading to transition is critical to humanizing the preparation process for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES). Central to this study was the question of “why?” in pursuit of understanding through a critical lens. Lacking this understanding can make it challenging for educators to take into consideration the factors that influence inequitable outcomes of postsecondary education, employment, and independent living for APYRSES. These disparities can be addressed by including a culturally responsive and sustaining approach to transition that builds on self-determination and social–emotional learning from an antiracist lens, which is necessary for collective action through solidarity. Theory must be the constant, the north star, that guides educators (Love, 2019).

**Introduction and Overview**

This chapter elucidates the methodology used in the study and the reasons behind the methodology’s selection. Using the existing relationship between myself and the participants established beforehand through ongoing collegial mentorship, I designed this study by drawing from specific theories and frameworks to develop a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources, with the addition of a group dialogue for special educators to bring the group together in a space through relationship building to openly discuss the topics as an intervention for preparing APYRSES for postsecondary transition. This qualitative study used a descriptive case study approach to describe the attitudes and beliefs of three special education teachers regarding the postsecondary
transition process for APYRSES in one urban public high school after they participated in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a dialogical cultural circle for group authentic discourse (Freire, 1968). This discourse was framed by a critical guiding praxis framework focused on critical self-awareness through individual and group dialogue. This study involved an in-depth exploration of an intricate phenomenon of critical epistemologies and was designed to explore the possibility of introducing a new transition framework to support more equitable postsecondary transitions for APYRSES and opportunities for life after high school. The humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework was conceptualized in this study for three reasons:

- Teachers need deep cultural connections to foster cultural reciprocity with their students and their families to help students develop self-determination skills (Gay, 2013; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012).
- Educator self-reflection that is ongoing is necessary in the development of critical awareness and how pedagogy can be used for social change (Boveda, 2016; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Freire, 1973).
- Recent literature upon which I drew heavily framed that students’ lives need to be affirmed as an active resistance through social–emotional learning in a sociopolitical and racial consciousness that humanizes and teaches APYRSES they matter (Love, 2019; Mayes et al., 2022; Simmons, 2019, 2021).

The approach to this qualitative case study began with a baseline to understand the beliefs and attitudes of special education teachers prior to participating in a
humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. Existing literature surrounding postsecondary transition for APYRSES guided the design of this study, including a focus on two traditional practices that are currently used in the field to prepare students for postsecondary transition: self-determination and social–emotional learning skills. Participants of this descriptive case study answered three essential questions describing their special education experiences and perspectives on postsecondary transition practices throughout the study by which they were affected as active participants in effecting changes necessary for a more equitable opportunity for APYRSES. The research questions were designed to encourage the educators to reflect further on their consciousness and pedagogy in serving APYRSES across various educational settings.

The research questions aimed to understand how three special education teachers derived meaning of their practice after experiencing a critical guiding praxis to help shape the future (Hasse-Biber, 2017; Yin, 2009). The research questions were:

1. What are three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?

2. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?
3. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?

**Research Paradigm**

I approached this study with the intent of delving into the nuances of relations and examining how the three special education teachers related to the diverse backgrounds of their students and to my role as researcher of this study, along with my role as a mentor and as a colleague in the field of special education. With a previously established relationship between myself and the study participants, I was interested in drawing from theories and frameworks in scholarship from my lived experiences, identity, culture, and social practices to develop an intervention for a humanizing stance to practice and more equitable preparation and opportunities for APYRSES. As such, I designed a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework, drawing from these theories and frameworks and bringing together the three special education teachers for deep, authentic dialogue. The design of this study allowed for an understanding of how this intervention could influence how special education teachers assist in the postsecondary transition process for APYRSES by building on their self-determination and social–emotional learning skills.

**Designing the Study**

The qualitative approach to methodology was used as an investigative strategy for a rich description of special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes (Merriam & Tisdell,
2015) regarding postsecondary transition. More specifically, a descriptive case study
(Charmaz, 2006; Maxwell, 2005) was used for this study as an in-depth examination of
intricate phenomena (Wolcott, 2008) to describe the patterns of meaning and the
epistemologies of three special education teachers in the context of their culture to
understand the power relations and inequities existing in postsecondary transition for
APYRSES. This study followed how other qualitative case studies (Audley, 2020; Farrell
& Lim, 2005; Lane et al., 2019) have supported deep examinations on analyzing
educators’ experiences, perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs across multiple instances
(Bhattacharya, 2017).

For example, Farrell and Lim (2005) conducted a qualitative research study to
investigate the relationship between beliefs of classroom practices between two
experienced English language teachers about grammar teaching, allowing them to dive
deep into the cognitive process of their participants. Farrell and Lim’ (2005) study
heavily focused on how teachers’ complex beliefs regarding pedagogy, students, and
classroom practices deriving from their prior experiences and individual personalities
impacted their instructional decisions in the classroom. Analogous to this study’s design
in that teacher beliefs are difficult to examine and construe, Farrell and Lim (2005) opted
for an instrumental case study research design for examination, given the teachers’
beliefs were not directly observable. Moreover, Lane et al. (2019) used a qualitative case
study approach in their investigation of teachers’ morals to identify commonalities and
differences in their experiences, which shed light on the importance of the inclusion of
teacher experiences for teacher retention and the transformation of schools. Relatedly to
this study, Lane et al. (2019) adopted a qualitative case study for inductive data
collection, exploration, and analysis in the examination of the participants’ experiences, given the challenges in the circumlocutory investigation of the experiences and perceptions of teachers’ morale.

The research design selected for Lane et al.’s (2019) study and its rationale were influential in the designing stages of my study, given the similarities in how the beliefs and attitudes of special education teachers were examined in depth and impactfully. More recently, Audley (2020) used a comparative case study to examine the nuances of two novice teachers’ beliefs and experiences regarding teacher–student respect in a novel relational respect framework. Because respect is a lived and relational concept that considers a cultural perspective, it is difficult to understand how teachers think and experience; therefore, Audley’s (2020) study used qualitative methodology using an instrumental comparative case study research design to holistically examine their experiences and identify commonalities and differences in real-world situations. Audley’s (2020) study was influential in the design of my study, given its similarities in examining the complexities of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes in the nuances of a relational context. Using a descriptive case study for this research study allowed for a profound qualitative approach to the examination of epistemologies of three special education teachers after participation in the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators.

In this qualitative case study, I aimed to obtain an abstruse understanding of how three special education teachers derived the meaning of their practice after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators as an intervention
through in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2013). The narrative of the special education teachers’ personal beliefs and attitudes (McLeod, 2013), while being organically bounded by the physical parameters of the participants’ environments (Merriam, 2002), were used to examine for dialogue toward social action with the “explicit intention of collectively investigating reality in order to transform it” (Maguire, 1987, p. 3).

An objective, unbiased, and deductive survey was used to understand the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to them experiencing the humanizing intervention that was based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. I sought to gauge what the participants were using as their current practices in preparing for their students’ postsecondary transitions. Subsequent data included two feedback forms, one completed after Part A and Part B of critical guiding praxis videos, a whole-group dialogical cultural circle reflection (Freire, 1968), and an individual interview with each special education teacher participant. The individual interviews were used to include the teachers’ voices and to find common themes through analytic induction of the data collected. This single instrumental case study allowed me to center the three special education teachers as active participants in the study throughout its entirety. This process was necessary in the analysis because “there are times we wish to know not how many or how well, but simply how” (Shulman, 1988, p. 7).

**Determining the Whom, How, and Size**

I used Creswell’s (2013) three considerations in selecting a purposeful sampling approach to this qualitative study: (a) the decision as to whom to select as participants,
(b) the specific type of sampling strategy, and (c) the size of the studied sample. Table 1 includes information about the participants for the overall synthesis, followed by the participant profiles, which facilitated effective and robust interaction between myself and the participants in the process of humanizing the research (Paris, 2012).

Table 1

Participant Demographics

<table>
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<th>Participants</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years teaching</th>
<th>Grade level taught</th>
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<td>9–12</td>
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<td>Hispanic/Latino</td>
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<td>9–12</td>
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<td>White</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9–12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Whom.** In this deep qualitative study exploring teacher epistemologies, it was essential for the participants to have experience in the phenomena being studied (Creswell, 2013). The selected participants for this study were April, Tessa, and Anna (pseudonyms). Their years of teaching experience varied, and they were responsible for case managing and teaching multiple content areas to students with an array of mild to moderate disabilities across various educational settings. Each special education teacher had an individual caseload with 24–28 students.

**How.** Volunteer participants for this study were purposively chosen (Creswell, 2013). Heterogeneous selection (Patton, 2014) through criterion sampling was used in consideration of participants, because the criteria included (a) having a previously established relationship with me as colleagues in the field of special education; (b) status as an education specialist credential by the State of California in the area of mild to
moderate disabilities; and (c) status as an employed teacher in the urban high school location where the study took place at the time of data collection. The three participants also represented diverse cases from multiple perspectives as their race, ethnicity, and years of experience varied. Because I worked in the same public school district as the participants, convenience sampling was used to recruit participants on a voluntary basis. Participants were able to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. An email to the special education teachers was sent with an explanation of the study and a request for voluntary participation. The participating teachers were interested in the information provided in the context of the study for their own professional growth.

**Size.** This study focused heavily on the nuances of relations as it related to how the special education teachers related to their students and their families and the researcher as a mentor. Given that teacher beliefs and attitudes are difficult to examine and construe, a small number of participants were selected for a holistic examination of phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Dukes, 1984). The participants did not represent a greater population of special education teachers; rather, I intended to attain in-depth perspectives and breadth of understanding of their beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES.

**Participant Profiles**

The participant profiles emulate how their lived experiences led them to a career in special education. The narratives present extensive detail about each participant to elucidate specifics of each (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007).
April

April was a mother, wife, and self-identified her race as Caucasian and of Italian American ethnicity. April was the most veteran of all three participants, with 13 years of experience teaching secondary school Grades 9 to 12. April was previously a tenured, single-subject credentialed general education teacher in northern California and moved to southern California and taught at a private school despite always wanting to work at public schools. Concurrently, April served as a substitute teacher in various public school classroom settings, including classrooms providing special education services for students with an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

Exposure to various classroom settings and teaching modalities sparked what April described as an “eye-opening experience,” (having taught high school general education English for many years. April became drawn to special education given the close connections and relationships she could make with students receiving special education services through a smaller class environment, which allowed for intimate community building. When sharing her story of what led her to special education, April’s facial expressions and intonation of voice demonstrated happiness and excitement as she described how the relationships established and the intimate community of her classroom became a safe space for genuine group dialogue rather than scripted large group lessons. She followed this description by stating, “I just loved it so much, I don’t even know exactly what it was, but I really loved it.”

Tessa

Tessa was an educator, student, and self-identified her race as White and of Hispanic, of Mexican American/Chicana ethnicity. Tessa was raised in Mexico and lived
with her mother and older sister after learning of her father’s drug addiction. At the age of 6, her father came back into their lives. Tessa went to school in Mexico until the age of 16, and she expressed always having financial hardships in her upbringing. The family dynamics of Tessa’s life shaped her experiences and her trajectory. Her father suffered from drug abuse and bipolar, causing constant mood swings and anxiety leading to emotional and psychological abuse; Tessa, stated, “It seemed like whoever screamed the loudest, won the fights.” According to Tessa, this experience resulted in a negative perception of love due to the constant emotional abuse and threats of physical abuse between her father, mother, and older sister.

After moving to the United States for a college education, Tessa faced many challenges as a first-generation student who was not fluent in English. In her 1st semester of college, Tessa took a Black studies course that opened her mind to U.S. history through Black Americans’ perspective, which changed her outlook on the United States. Subsequent classes she took introduced her to topics such as patriarchy, sexism, shaming, poverty, and classism. She realized these “isms” had always been present in her life and she lacked the language and terminology to articulate, understand, and recognize them. Tessa decided to double major in sociology and critical gender studies because, as she noted, “Sociology was wonderful but missed the touch of intersectionality” in which she was most interested.

Tessa did not know she wanted to become a special education teacher until she became one. She became part of Teach for America, where her master’s-level studies helped her realize her previous learnings about intersectionality also applied through the lens of disability. Although Tessa was unsure of her career path and did not plan to
become a special education teacher, her lived experiences led her path to her career.

Starting with her upbringing and childhood experiences in Mexico and becoming a first-generation college student, her love for learning and understanding the world around her through a critical lens guided her to the field of education, where she has continued to be a part of her growth in her current studies.

Anna

Anna was a mother, wife, and self-identified her race as White and of Hispanic ethnicity. Anna grew up in San Diego with her mom, whom she identified as White, and her father, who is from Mexico. Anna’s childhood experiences with her Mexican side impacted her worldview, as violence and constant visits from the police surrounded her. Having an older brother and sister who struggled with their education in the United States resulted in persistent out-of-school suspensions and parents who worked all day. Her older brother and sister had nowhere but the streets to spend their time alongside youth with similar exclusionary experiences. In addition, Anna’s older brother was clinically diagnosed with the neurodevelopmental disorder of ADHD, causing difficulty with attention, focus, and listening at school. His learning difficulties, paired with exclusionary discipline, eventually led to expulsion from high school and dropping out of school entirely.

Comparatively, Anna’s older sister joined gangs and began to influence Anna at 6 years old; Anna recalled her sister teaching her “how to throw up gang signs.” The regular arguing between Anna’s parents led to divorce, leaving Anna’s mom to take her and her younger brother to live with their family in an affluent, very high socioeconomic status suburban area in southern California. As articulated by Anna, her experiences were
far from ideal. She felt as though she did not fit in and began to assimilate more than ever, given the demographics of the affluent suburban neighborhood. She described herself as quiet and never interjected ideas or comments among her “White friends” because she felt she could not. She also disconnected entirely from her Mexican cultural roots, never having learned Mexican native language, cultural values, beliefs, or traditions.

Anna’s mom reunited with her father and his children and lived together in the suburban neighborhood where the violence picked up where it had left off. This period was a poignant time in Anna’s life when she soon experienced heartbreak in seeing her older sister expelled from the new high school she was attending, soon after becoming pregnant and being incarcerated for domestic violence. As if these challenges were not difficult enough, Anna’s family watched the older sister eventually become homeless, and she continues to live on the streets. Anna’s lived experiences with the combination of her older siblings’ learning and disciplinary experiences in school led her to pursue a career in special education as she expressed, “had my brother and sister been given support in high school, they could have had other options or paths to take.”

**Educational Setting**

This study took place in a public high school serving Grades 9–12 in a comprehensive urban district in southern California. The district uses both inclusive and self-contained classrooms for students who have been identified as having mild to moderate disabilities. The district comprises three traditional high schools, one academy specializing in the sciences, and one continuation high school. The traditional comprehensive site selected for this study was in San Diego, California, serving 91.2% of
a student population considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, 19.7% English language learners, 15.4% students with disabilities (SWDs), 3.3% homeless youth, and 0.3% identified foster youth (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.). The three participating special education teachers provided instruction and services to students ranging between the ninth–12th-grade levels in two types of classrooms:

- **Coteach classroom**: A c-teach approach to teaching where two teachers plan and organize instruction to implement a general education curriculum in a general education classroom for students with and without disabilities. Students receiving special education services in these classrooms are served by the special education teacher in the form on accommodations and or modifications to the general education curriculum without changing its objectives.

- **Specialized academic instruction (SAI) class**: A self-contained classroom in the comprehensive high school is a separate classroom with fewer students, all of whom have disabilities and have an IEP. The students receiving their education in the SAI education setting are taught by a special education teacher providing an embedded, modified content instruction, usually along with support personnel, alongside their peers also receiving special education services.

The three special education teachers in the high school setting of the study are given one period in their schedule called *monitoring period*, where they continuously check their caseload of students for progression or regression. During this period, the special education teachers keep track of the students’ grades on their caseloads and how
they are academically performing in all their classes. These records include logging work completion toward graduation, making sure their students’ class schedules align with their graduation track, and outlining the services on their individualized transition plan (ITP). Moreover, special education teachers collaborate with students’ teachers and anyone else to help meet students’ individual needs to progress in the general education curriculum. Another use of the monitoring period allows special education teachers to check in with the students themselves and work with them in preparation for updating their IEPs. For the purpose of this study, the three special education teachers used their monitoring period to meet with their students to support and prepare them for the postsecondary transition process.

**Data Collection**

Researchers have demonstrated a need for a more equitable postsecondary process in a sustainable manner that honors the values of APYRSES, their families, and communities (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Suk et al., 2020). The research questions in this current study were developed to recognize how special education teachers’ attitudes and beliefs regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES derived meaning of their practices after experiencing a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. For this study, the data collection focused on a survey for a baseline of the teachers’ attitudes and beliefs regarding postsecondary transition at the beginning of the study. The results of the survey also assisted me in conceptualizing the two-part critical guiding praxis videos that were presented to the participants. The second data set included two feedback forms completed by the participants, one after each part of
the critical guiding praxis videos. The third data set involved a group reflection of a dialogical cultural circle (Freire, 1968), which occurred shortly after the critical guiding praxis videos. For the fourth and last data set, the participants engaged in a one-on-one focused, semistructured interview (Yin, 2014) with me to capture their thoughts after having experienced the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. Figure 2 presents a chronological timeline for this study’s data collection. The subsequent sections outline how the data were collected in detail over the course of the study.

Figure 2. Data Timeline for Data Collection

Procedure

After approval was granted by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) with the certification for human subject’s research (see Appendix A), the initiation of the study’s procedures began. The study’s special education participants were recruited via email, provided an introduction of my role as researcher and the focus of the study, and indicated the time commitment required of the participants and the preservation of confidentiality of the participants (see Appendix C). The time required of participants first included a 30-minute asynchronous online survey (see Appendix D). Next,
participants were to engage in a researcher-presented, two-part, individual online asynchronous video that provided research-driven resources that equated to 45 minutes each (see Appendix E). Next, participants participated in a 60-minute dialogical cultural circle (see Appendix F). Lastly, participants had a 60-minute, one-on-one interview with me (see Appendix G). The total time requested for participant participation amounted to 4 hours over the course of 4 months.

After confirmation of the voluntary participants, I sent a University of San Diego IRB consent form to each participant, which outlined the purpose of the study; what participants would be asked to do; foreseeable risks or discomforts, benefits, and confidentiality; compensation; voluntary nature of the research; and contact information. The participants were asked to sign the consent form and return it to me before beginning the study.

Instrumentation

Survey

The start of data collection began as three participants completed a 30-minute survey that included demographic, Likert-type, and open-ended questions based on the four main topics informed by the literature review of this dissertation. The survey was completed via Google form by three special education teacher participants and took approximately 30 minutes to complete. The survey questions were informed by various topics found in the literature that assisted in extracting the themes necessary. Based on the scholarship, a cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey et al., 2018) was used to gauge a baseline of the special education teachers’ attitudes and beliefs regarding the postsecondary process of APYRSES at the beginning of the study. Information from the
survey was also used to inform a two-part individual online asynchronous video that provided research-driven resources informed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

**Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part A: Feedback Form**

Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part A provided educators with a 45-minute historical overview of laws leading to transition, including the current federal policies and mandates (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015; IDEIA, 2004) and the factors influencing transition (legal and societal) that have historically impacted the successes of APYRSES. Specific topics included in Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part A were:

- **Discrimination**: Family involvement (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007; Lo & Bui, 2020) and Eurocentrism (Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013).

- **Disproportionality**: Historic, structural, and racial inequities (Artiles et al., 2010; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011); lack of skills to combat disparities (CASEL, 2021; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Goff et al., 2007; Horton-Williams, 2020; Jagers et al., 2019; Leake & Boone, 2007; Love, 2019; Mayes et al., 2022; Shogren et al., 2018; Simmons, 2019, 2021; Wehmeyer, 1992); overrepresentation in restrictive placements (Artiles et al., 2010); and disproportionate rates in achievement, exclusionary discipline, and drop-out rates (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Skiba et al., 2014).

- **Opportunity gap**: Deficit views (Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Love, 2019) and lack of teacher training and resources (Suk et al., 2020; Trainor et al., 2019).
To enhance and enrich the qualitative data for this research, the Post-Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part A feedback form was given to the participants as an immediate opportunity to reflect on the information provided and its potential relatability and application with their own students. Participants also used the form to represent their making meaning of their practices regarding the postsecondary preparation process for APYRSES (Merriam, 1998).

**Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part B Feedback Form**

Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part B provided educators with a 45-minute video overview of research-driven resources including culturally responsive-sustaining transition and self-determination (Gay, 2013; New York State Education Department, 2018; Paris, 2012; Yosso, 2005); cultural reciprocity (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012); intersectionality and positionality (Artiles et al., 2010; Boveda, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991); and antiracist social–emotional learning (Derman-Sparks & Ramsey, 2011; Kendi, 2019; Love, 2019; Mayes et al., 2022; Rauscher & McClintok, 1997; Simmons, 2019, 2021). This video also provided teachers with research-based, effective ways to prepare students for postsecondary transition, such as universal design for transition (UDT; Thoma et al., 2009); taxonomy for transition (Kohler et al., 2016); and family–student-oriented transition planning (Achola & Greene, 2016).

To enhance and enrich the qualitative data for this research, the Post-Critical Guiding Praxis Video Part B feedback form was given to teachers as an immediate opportunity to reflect on the information provided, its potential relatability and application with their own students, and to understand how the special education
participants were making meaning of their practice regarding the postsecondary preparation process for APYRSES (Merriam, 1998).

**Dialogical Cultural Circle**

Using Freire’s (1968) idea of dialogical cultural circles, the third source of data consisted of participants and me gathering together for a 60-minute dialogical cultural circle to discuss the relevant topics shared in the Critical Guiding Praxis Videos Parts A and B and to reflect as a group on current practices and the evolution of special education pedagogy to meet the needs of APYRSES. The dialogical cultural circle followed prompting questions for reflection and dialogue. The dialogical cultural circle provided space for an in-person meeting for participants to dialogue about where they saw themselves in their pedagogy and where they would like to see themselves. Further, participants discussed how they could coconstruct knowledge based on the students with whom they work daily to collectively prepare them for life after high school and for community change.

The dialogical cultural circle allowed for the examination of the participants’ authentic voices and discourse and allowed for me to qualitatively “uncover the meaning structures that participants use to organize their experiences and make sense of their world” (Hatch, 2002, p. 91). The reflections served as a catalyst in understanding how the participants derived the meaning of their pedagogy and find out what they used with their students in preparation for their postsecondary transition during each stage of the study. These forms of data collection were valuable sources of information to analyze to make deductions gleaned upon the study’s parameters to interpret and gather meaning through participant voices (Stage & Manning, 2003).
Focused, Semistructured Interview

According to Yin (2014), “One of the most important sources of case study information is the interview” (p. 110). The three special education teachers participated in a 60-minute, one-on-one interview with me, as I inquired about their experiences in the application of knowledge in the postsecondary transition process with their students after having experienced a humanizing intervention that was based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue that was framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The interview included reflective questions about teachers’ thought processes with the new knowledge gained and participation in the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The purpose of the interview was to reveal the participants’ meaning making of their pedagogy as they simultaneously prepared their APYRSES for the postsecondary transition process. The interview questions were driven by various topics covered in the literature of this dissertation.

Data Analysis

According to Yin (2009), analyzing evidence from a case study is one of the most challenging ways to analyze and interpret collected data. As a special educator, I possessed an emic stance in the research because I was an insider to the special education profession, employed by the same school district as the special education teacher participants in this study. Although my emic stance allowed me to build rapport and trusting relationships with the participants in the study, this position had the potential to have a negative impact through participants’ feelings of distrust in the confidentiality of their voice as it pertained to their careers. It was my impression, however, that the
participants were more trusting in the fact that I was one of them, one who understood without judgment and felt assured their confidentiality would be kept secure.

Four informational sources were collected and triangulated (Wolcott, 1994) for analysis: a survey; Critical Guiding Praxis Videos Feedback Forms A and B; a group dialogical cultural circle; and a focused semistructured interview. The initial data set (i.e., the survey) was gathered to be used as a benchmark in understanding special education teacher participants’ beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

The general process of analyzing data for qualitative research involves preparing and organizing the data, reducing the data into themes through coding, then creating a representation of data (Creswell, 2013). Data collection, analysis, and description do not follow separate steps; instead, they are intertwined and go hand in hand in research studies. Huberman and Miles (1994) supported this notion as they referred to the process of data analysis as not being “off the shelf,” but rather, custom-built, revised, and “choreographed.” Analyzing data in qualitative research is not linear; analysis is more of a spiral process as the researcher moves between archaic analytic circles where the data enter through text and exit with a narrative (Creswell, 2013). In this study, I used Creswell’s (2013) spiral approach to data analysis. Figure 3 demonstrates an adopted visual from Creswell (2013) and includes the procedures taken in this study with the rationale behind its selection. The following are the four “loop” procedures in the data analysis spiral approach and the ways in which a researcher accomplishes each stage (Creswell, 2013):
1. Data managing → files; units; organizing
2. Reading; memoing → reflecting; writing notes across questions
3. Describing; classifying, interpreting → Context, categories, comparisons
4. Representing; visualizing → Matrix, trees, propositions

Figure 3. Data Analysis Spiral

**Data Managing**

Once all data were gathered for this descriptive qualitative research study, the volume of information was overwhelming (Patton, 1980). This amount of data necessitated the organization of the multiple sources of information gathered from the participants. Additionally, because this descriptive case study aimed to understand the inner workings of three special education teachers’ thoughts throughout the study, I needed to organize the data sets per participant to have a clear, sequential way to read and analyze the data. The organization of data began with careful consideration to separate all
forms of data per “data set Google folder” as I worked through one set at a time to examine each participant’s thoughts through every stage of the study.

The data collected from the participants were an individual survey, and Feedback Forms A and B. The data was collected through Google forms and audio recordings of the dialogical cultural circle and individual interviews. First, the survey and feedback forms were converted into individual Google spreadsheets that separated each question and response per column. Next, I downloaded the audio recording transcriptions of the group dialogical cultural circle and individual interviews available through the Zoom recording. I then created one large spreadsheet per data set that included each question per column and its corresponding responses from all three participants per row. Doing so allowed me to have one central location of information per data set to begin reading and analyzing each specific area of interest.

**Reading and Memoing**

After the organizing stage of data analysis, I immersed myself in the data by reading the transcripts multiple times to get a sense of the whole data picture before attempting to break it down into parts for meaning making (Agar, 1980) and reading the transcripts through this exploratory stage allowed emergent thoughts, ideas, and reflections to occur, which I recorded through analytic memoing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I reflected on the larger context of the data and formed initial categories based on the reoccurring evidence found in the multiple perspectives for each category (Stake, 1995).

The data analysis focused on special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES at the beginning of the study and how
they viewed self-determination and social–emotional learning after participating in a humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework conceptualized by drawing from theories to building special educators’ critical awareness through individual and group dialogue. The process of analysis occurred in three cycles.

**Cycle 1**

The first cycle involved reading the initial transcriptions from the survey and Part A and Part B critical guiding praxis video feedback forms via Google sheets and listening to the dialogical cultural circle recordings and the interviews, and writing analytic memos of first impressions. Because the survey and Parts A and B of the videos were in the form of Google sheets, the initial analytical memo process was directly highlighted in the text, and I provided comments to the text on the margins of the document. For the recordings of the dialogical cultural circle and the interviews, I downloaded the transcriptions from Zoom and paused the recording, typed my reactions in the margins of the transcription, and documented my reactions as new experiences through interpretation.

**Describing, Classifying, and Interpreting**

In the describing, classification, and interpreting data stage of the data analysis spiral, I developed emerging themes deriving from the theories and literature and the data used to conceptualize the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The data were grouped into codes and categories from the themes and provided directly *in situ* of the three special education participants and the high school in which they worked (Creswell, 2013). In winnowing the data (Wolcott, 1994), the codes for the data were reduced from 21 to 10. I reduced the initial list of codes by looking at the number of themes and their
descriptions associated with the codes. The list was reduced as an indication of participant interests in the code and information that can be used to describe information into themes and become a narrative for each participant in response to the humanizing intervention. Three indicators were considered during this process (Creswell, 2013):

- information that I expected to find before the study;
- surprising information that I had not expected to find; and
- conceptually interesting or unusual information.

Classifying the information into themes derived from several coding cycles’ evidence of common information or ideas. Additionally, I took a deconstructive stance by creating themes that focused on the social justice issue of power and analyzed the data using the following information to assist in the analysis (Czarniawska, 2004):

- dismantling dichotomies to expose false distinctions;
- examining silences as to what participants do not say or information excluded; and
- paying attention to contradictions or disruptions where information did not make sense or continued.

In the interpretation stage of data analysis, I was able to make sense of the “lessons learned” (Lincoln & Guba, 1982) in the process of developing greater abstract thoughts beyond the codes and themes to have a better understanding and description of the beliefs and attitudes shared by each special education teacher regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES throughout the entirety of the study. Making sense of the data was achieved by developing codes, formulating themes from the codes,
and organizing the themes into larger units of abstraction in my data meaning-making process (Creswell, 2013). Coding Cycle 2 became emerging data themes in Cycle 3.

**Cycle 2**

Once all data were collected, read several times, and analytic memos were documented, I uploaded all initial transcriptions (i.e., survey, Critical Guiding Praxis Video Feedback Forms A and B, dialogical cultural circle recording, and interview recordings) to NVivo (i.e., a qualitative analysis software program). NVivo allowed me to store all data sources and organize and look for insights and learnings. The analyzed responses were documented as “logs” and later cultivated into “anecdotes.” The anecdotes allowed for a better understanding and meaning making of responses in more manageable sections in relation to the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. I analyzed the data as an examination of the discrete parts to highlight similarities and differences (Miles et al., 2014). I accomplished this process through axial codes developed from the references to highlight the similarities and differences in groups and subgroups (Saldaña, 2016). A total of 15 codes were created at the beginning of the data analysis. To avoid overlapping codes, I refined them into nine codes. Three keywords and phrases were created from these nine codes that emerged during the data analysis process.

**Cycle 3**

After creating analytic memos in all data sets to capture my understanding of the three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES in the sequential data throughout the study, I used words and phrases from the memos and created vignettes as reflections of the themes that emerged from the data
in response to the humanizing intervention. Three emerging themes resulted from the analysis of the data: a mechanical approach to practice, cultural collective partnership, and a reimagining of love and humanity. These themes are discussed in the following chapter across all data, and the emerging themes were accumbent to the research questions. Although years of experience, classroom teaching settings, and characteristics of the participating special education teachers differed, similar experiences were reported among the three and are demonstrated in their quoted responses showcased in Chapter 4 of this study.

**Representing and Visualizing the Data**

In the last stage of the data analysis spiral, I drew from the new insights and interpretation of the data to create a visual representation that included the categories used while engaging in the analytic process. This step began with the raw data from multiple sources of information, and I associated the data with relationships among the categories described to represent the qualitative data (Creswell, 2013). The visualization of data that I created is included in Chapter 4 of this dissertation to provide a clearer picture and tell the story of the occurrences in this dissertation.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

The humanizing methodological approach in this study employed the building of relationships between participants and myself, which were effective and based on dignity and care (Paris, 2012). Given that I worked in the same school district as the participants in this study, this descriptive case study occurred through an ethnographic lens, allowing participants and me to have effective interactions as a genuine dialogue that encouraged personal experiences. This dialogue, in turn, enhanced the validity of the research
findings. Establishing trustworthy relationships between myself and the participants was essential in humanizing the research process because it ethically deepened the research and enhanced the validity of the information found (Paris, 2011).

Additionally, Lincoln and Guba’s (1982) criteria were used as a basis to promote trustworthiness and credibility, which included credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. When analyzing the data to describe the three special education teachers’ attitudes and beliefs in the postsecondary transition process for APYRSES, I ensured that I met Lincoln and Guba’s (1982) criteria to provide authenticity and quality to the research. To ensure credibility, tactics to ensure participant honesty were used, particularly during the interview. Identifying special education teacher participants and giving them the opportunity to refuse to participate allowed for a genuine interest to contribute to data via participation. Furthermore, member checks took place throughout every step of the process through multiple critical friends forums (CFF), which provided valuable feedback from educational researchers with backgrounds and perspectives not primarily focused on special education. Specifically, CFF members suggested spelling out and defining terminology or special education jargon that is not commonly used in other aspects of education on a daily basis. Doing so allows more readers to follow and better understand the context of the study.

To promote transferability, the participants and the setting of this analysis were clearly stated in the research methods section of this study using the exact demographics of the research site. To ensure the dependability of the analysis, various studies were included in the literature review to provide background knowledge of the topic and clarify the gaps in theory and practice. Additionally, literature was linked to all points of
instrumentation. Lastly, analytic memoing and a journal log were used to ensure confirmability by documenting my thoughts, biases, or ideas throughout the data analysis process (Miles et al., 2014).

**Limitations and Delimitations**

As disparities in postsecondary outcomes continue for APYRSES, special educators play a significant role and responsibility in implementing critical pedagogy and preparation that helps APYRSES and their families find their own power. Through an emic, insider lens as a special educator and practitioner working alongside participants in this study, trust facilitated the ability for participants to be interviewed. Paradoxically, an emic status has the potential to instill fear of the use of participant information. I focused on confidentiality, and my belief and intuition supported participants’ confidence in securing their confidentiality.

One limitation of the study is that some researchers may argue more participants are needed for more generalizability; however, I purposefully designed this study to examine, compare, and contrast various different beliefs of special education teachers based on the conceptualized framing of the critical guiding praxis that I believe is needed in postsecondary transition. I sought to make a case for future research to include a humanizing intervention grounded in liberatory educational frameworks to foster equitable opportunities for all students. This goal required an in-depth examination of the beliefs and attitudes of special education teachers after being introduced to the humanizing intervention. Such an examination relied on the professional relationships established with the three special education teacher participants and the school setting in which the study took place. As such, I argue a more nuanced understanding than cultural
assessments of teachers is needed when looking for not only culturally proficient special educators, but also seeking critical, lovingly understanding, and humanizing by following lines of scholarship that prioritize humanizing research designs.

A second limitation of the study included my positionality in the study through an insider–outsider perspective. I was an insider as a current practitioner in the department of special education of the study’s site selection, and an outsider as the researcher conducting the study. A third limitation of the study was the narrowing of the scope of the study. As a novice researcher, I was interested in a vast amount of literature pertaining to multiple topics. Narrowing the topics to a smaller unit of focus can be helpful when conducting an in-depth case study seeking rich information. As topics of interest unfolded, they could be used in future research.

A fourth limitation occurred because this study was conducted in schools during the COVID-19 global pandemic. Attendance had been an ongoing issue since the reopening of schools during the pandemic that likely affected teacher attendance throughout the study. The participants in this study were ongoing participants, which necessitated their commitment to completing all data points throughout the study. Although the study stayed in the projected timeline for data collection, meeting dates and times were modified to fit the needs of the participants. One delimitation in the study was determining inclusionary and exclusionary criteria for selecting participants. Setting the boundaries through characteristics in whom to include and who not to include can help define the population of interest in an intentional way.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to describe the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers in their postsecondary transition preparation process for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES). I aimed to understand how these teachers derived the meaning of their practice after practice after experiencing a humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis. Three special education teachers engaged in the study and provided their perceptions and understandings regarding their practice through authentic discourse. The following research questions guided the dialogue:

1. What are three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

2. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

3. What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-
driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?

Using the aforementioned methods, the following four research findings arose from the data:

● Special education teachers’ convergent attitudes resulted in a mechanical approach to postsecondary transition for APYRSES informed by traditional notions of self-determination and social–emotional learning, with the Eurocentric value of independence at the core of their practice.

● Edification of critical perspectives influenced the unity of special education teachers and families, centering families’ cultural dynamics and creating intentional postsecondary transition planning for APYRSES.

● Special education teachers revealed the exploitation of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices.

This chapter follows the organizational order of Chapter 3 as a qualitative case study. The subsequent section includes how the data were analyzed and the emergent themes that arose in the transcriptions to serve as a roadmap to the body of work. The presentation of findings includes three main sections broken down by research question. The first section and analysis serve as a baseline for three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The second section and analysis describes the analysis and findings specific to self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The last
section and analysis describes the findings significant to social–emotional learning after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

**Research Question 1**

Research Question 1 asked: What are three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

The survey aimed to obtain a baseline of three special education teacher participants’ current practices and processes to prepare for their students’ postsecondary transitions. Initial findings emulated special education teachers’ convergent attitudes resulted in a mechanical and monochromatic approach to postsecondary transition for APYRSES, informed by traditional notions of self-determination and social–emotional learning. Findings demonstrated how the special education teachers modified transition planning for their students as well as their views regarding self-determination and the application of social–emotional learning skills in their high school setting.

**Finding 1**

Finding 1 was: Special education teachers’ convergent attitudes resulted in a mechanical and monochromatic approach to postsecondary transition for APYRSES informed by traditional notions of self-determination and social–emotional learning, with the Eurocentric value of independence at the core of their practice.
**Self-Determination**

**April.** As April noted:

All of my activities within the classroom are student centered, and the voices of the students guide every aspect of my instruction. We are a family, and everyone is equal. (August 2022, April, Survey)

In describing the process taken for preparing for a student’s postsecondary transition, April believed it was essential to get to know her students and learn about their interests and what they want for their futures. April shared she supports the development of self-determination by including activities to teach her students the components of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) process related to the students’ individual needs and student-related goals. She mentioned continuous journaling and reflection activities, along with questionnaires to understand their needs better and work with her students and outside resources to create action plans to reach her student’s goals. April described the preparation process she took when she stated:

> For me, it’s all about getting to know the student and hearing about what they want in life. Through both conversation, reflection, research and interest inventories, we work together as a team to further learn about their strongest interest for after high school; and in many situations, discover more about the student’s shared interests, but work together to help carve out the strongest path for the student to realize those dreams. (August 2022, April Survey)

This quote by April demonstrated her student-centered approach and interest in gaining a deep understanding of her students and her prioritization in helping them reach their future goals and aspirations. April’s reference of “working as a team” with her
students showcased the collaborative approach she takes with her students in including them in their education and involving them in the decision-making process of their educational planning. In doing so, April promoted student empowerment and agency (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2006).

Additionally, using conversation and interest inventories, April’s student-centered focus helps educators understand their students; however, the individualistic approach upholding the values of Eurocentrism dismisses the values and beliefs of collective cultures and communities (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Suk et al., 2020). Recognizing and understanding the diverse experiences of students and their families necessitates knowing the sociocultural and ecological systems in which they inhabit and are affected (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lee, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). This approach to preparing APYRSES does not consider the various factors and inherent systemic barriers faced by APYRSES and their families that impede their progress in attaining their goals (Artiles et al., 2010; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011).

April expressed challenges working with insufficient assistance and inadequate resources when working with students, families, and outside agencies during the postsecondary transition preparation process. These challenges were described by April when she stated:

Outside agencies are inflexible with the process of paperwork and providing adequate immediate support for providing help to families to where it feels like they are just calling a number. I have experienced transition agencies being a part of meetings where they did not take the time to review the student’s current
interests, do not share strong suggested pathways during the meeting, and honestly give the impression that the student is just another number in their line of meetings. (August 2022, April, Survey)

In this quote, April identified the disconnect when working with various stakeholders to prepare her students for postsecondary transition. Educators are often not provided with the framework to make sense of the continuous marginalization of APYRSES, which often results in colorblindness (Lindsey et al., 2018) and unintentional blame toward families for struggling students (Madda, 2019; McClintock & Rauscher, 2007; Simmons, 2021). These challenges are more impactful when involving students and families from diverse backgrounds in the decision-making progress, often resulting in student and family feelings of intimidation (Achola & Greene, 2016). With most educators in the United States being predominantly White and female (National Center on Educational Statistics [NCES], 2019), and the majority demographic will soon become APYRSES (Sullivan et al., 2012). There is an urgent need to support educators in adequately helping APYRSES in their transition to adulthood (Suk et al., 2020; Trainor et al., 2019).

The ways in which April involved families in the postsecondary transition process were expressed as, “Families are an integral part of the process. They help to guide the voice of the meeting. There is no ‘I’ in the IEP meeting without the student and their family” (August 2022, April, Survey).

This quote demonstrated April’s understanding that families are a vital component of the IEP team. Families provide crucial information about their children that is invaluable in successfully planning and delivering special education services.
Conversely, the Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA, 2004) strongly emphasizes parental involvement in the development of their child’s IEP. As such, it is essential to recognize that parental knowledge and participation in the planning process differ between families from European and culturally diverse backgrounds. Recognizing levels of differences in parental knowledge and participation aligns with research (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007) identifying the challenges, most notably in parents’ knowledge regarding the legal requirements and challenges with the special education legal jargon educators use.

**Tessa.** According to Tessa:

I do not feel that I am provided with opportunities to reflect on my work. There may be opportunities offered by my school, but the work is already so much that I feel I could not survive an additional meeting. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey)

When asked about the process taken for the postsecondary transition preparation of her students, Tessa believed in having one-on-one conversations with them to learn about their plans after high school. She also believed in talking with parents to identify resources needed for students to meet their post-high school goals. Tessa’s attitude toward challenges that she experienced in the postsecondary transition preparation process was evident when she expressed:

There is no clarity about the resources available for transition planning for special education teachers. I have had to complete independent research and send out multiple emails in an attempt to locate the resources available and community supports that my students can benefit from. This is a great challenge for me because I am currently embracing multiple roles that entail several
responsibilities, and it is difficult to remain consistent when it comes to finding resources and knowing how to appropriately coordinate those resources with the students I work with. There has been minimal training or support when it comes to postsecondary transition. As I mentioned, whatever information I have located is by having conversations with individuals who are invested in this type of conversation; however, I haven’t received any training on this. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey).

Tessa’s response emulated how special education teachers often feel ill-prepared to support APYRSES in the postsecondary transition process (Catone & Brady, 2005; Ketterlin-Geller et al., 2007; Landmark et al., 2007; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015). As a result, special education teachers are left independently seeking resources to assist their students. The prior quote highlighted the pressing need for special education teacher preparation and resources to support students’ postsecondary needs and dismantle the status quo in postsecondary results for APYRSES to promote more equitable outcomes (Suk et al., 2020; Trainor et al., 2019).

Tessa shared she involves families in the postsecondary transition process in an IEP-compliant manner, given the question on the IEP requesting parental concerns. Tessa demonstrated this compliance by stating:

Before scheduling any meetings, I always assure myself that I have selected a time and date that works for families. Prior to the meeting, I contact the family to ask for their concerns to document any questions they have so that they can be addressed in the meeting. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey)
This statement from Tessa reflected a compliance stance in procedures by setting up meetings for parents to participate with prior notification and include questions or concerns they may have (IDEA, 2004). Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize that meaningful participation of families goes beyond asking them for their input. Doing so indicates the assumption that parents understand the navigation of educational systems and the IEP process. Researchers have demonstrated disparities in the understanding of the transition planning process of culturally and linguistically diverse families (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007; Lo & Bui, 2020; Salembier & Furney, 1997); yet, the educational system has continued to focus on the compliance aspect of educational processes. These approaches to practice taken by special educators reflected systems and procedural approaches rather than humanizing partnerships between families and school officials based on dignity and care (Achola & Greene, 2016; Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012; Paris, 2011).

Interestingly, in examining how Tessa promoted student growth and active participation in their environment, she noted the lack of guidance she experienced, along with fear of discussing topics such as intersectionalities with her students. This sentiment was demonstrated when Tessa stated:

I am actually quite disappointed in myself with my poor performance when it comes to discussing dis/ability, ethnicity, race, language, gender, or socioeconomic issues . . . I have never observed another educator who incorporated such topics into their lessons or received any training that could educate me on this, I do not know what are the expectations when it comes to these conversations. Even though staff at my school claim that we are driven by
antiracism, there is no clear examples as to what that would look like or trainings as to how we can navigate such difficult conversations. I honestly don’t know if I am able to have such conversations. I do not want to lose my job because I make mistakes when having these conversations. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey)

Tessa’s statement reflected the difficulties she has faced in her methodological approach to teaching students in ways that are relevant to the lives of all students and their backgrounds. Although self-determination asserts the conditions needed for students to become growth-oriented and active participants in their lives (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wehmeyer, 2006), making the relevant and responsive connection to their lives (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Mireles-Rios et al., 2020) for sustainable efforts (Paris, 2012) is challenging when teachers are not supported.

**Anna.** Anna noted, “[The] challenges I experience when working with students is that many students do not follow up contacting their resources” (August 2022, Anna, Survey).

Anna’s postsecondary preparation process included pretransition questionnaires before her students’ yearly IEP meetings. Depending on the responses to the questionnaire, Anna said she provides students with assistance and resources, such as connecting them to the school’s college and career center. In examining the way Anna involved the families of her students in the postsecondary transition process, Anna believed in constant communication with families, as exemplified when she stated, “I stay in touch with the families, informing them on the steps taken while supporting students with postsecondary things” (August 2022, Anna, Survey).
Anna’s response to how she involves the families of her students in the postsecondary transition process highlighted her active support and constant communication with families to keep them informed about their children’s educational experiences. Comparable to the other participants, it is important to consider the level of access of all students’ families, depending on their diverse backgrounds, to improve postsecondary outcomes (Achola & Greene, 2016; Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013; Suk et al., 2020). Considering and addressing the various factors impeding familial involvement (Katsiyannis et al., 2016; Kim & Morningstar, 2007; Landmark et al., 2007; Lo & Bui, 2020) will allow for active and meaningful participation in the educational planning process of APYRSES.

Anna also highlighted her use of questionnaires with her students in the postsecondary transition preparation process, as she mentioned:

I give students pretransition questioner prior to their IEP meeting each year. Then depending on what they say, I give student resources such as helping them set up meetings with college and career center. (August 2022, Anna, Survey)

Although using questionnaires in the preparation stages of postsecondary transition can facilitate the planning of adulthood (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017), questionnaires are not universally accessible to all students with disabilities (Katsiyannis et al., 2016), which also raises concerns about equitable practices. Additionally, giving APYRSES resources and helping them set up meetings with college and career centers uplifts the notion and expectation of individualism (Black et al., 2003) when students may need additional accommodations to access and succeed.
in various postsecondary settings (National Technical Assistance Center on Transition, 2017).

**Social–Emotional Learning**

*April.* Delving into how April assisted students in developing social–emotional learning skills exposed traditional ways of building healthy relationships among peers. April provided details regarding these skills when she stated:

> I always meet students where they are. I do group work every class and encourage sharing both within group setting as also amongst the entire class, but respect their space when they do not want to work. However, I do create situations over the course of the semester to strengthen the bond of students within the classroom sphere so that students who feel that they need to work in isolation generally become more open to accepting our peers into their space. I would never want a student to enter my class after a very traumatic experience and feel like I would not meet them where they are at and support them through the process of modifying work as needed to meet them where they are in the process of learning and coping. (August 2022, April, Survey)

April’s quote reflected practices in which students and adults work toward applying the skills and attitudes to develop healthy and caring relationships among one another (CASEL, 2021). Although well-intentioned, such practices can create the absence of opportunities that bring attention to racial inequities and lived realities of APYRSES (Mayes et al., 2022; Simmons, 2021). These beliefs may inadvertently perpetuate the marginalization of APYRSES.
In examining what April saw as unfair practices at the school she works, she expressed, “There is a need for more involvement of workability in the classroom setting at all grade levels” (August 2022, April, Survey).

Interestingly, when asked about the inequitable practices witnessed on the school campus, April brought up the need for more involvement in workability. In special education, particularly in high school settings, workability refers to the practice of individuals presenting opportunities for students with disabilities (SWDs) to gain experiences and skills that are valuable in adulthood (California Department of Education [CDE], n.d.). April’s statement highlighted the inequitable access experienced by students with disabilities, which can hinder opportunities for their futures.

**Tessa.** In understanding how Tessa assists her students in developing social–emotional learning skills, she demonstrated the conflict between practices the school pushes versus individualizing approaches that she believed will empower student growth. Tessa also believed she was unequipped with the knowledge necessary to help students grow in their social–emotional learning skills. Tessa demonstrated this sentiment in the following excerpt:

The current stance of the social–emotional learning skills that have been promoted in campus place all responsibility for emotional well-being, social development, and empowerment on the individual. While I of course do my best effort to support students by implementing classroom management strategies, routines, and making the content as accessible as possible, I do not have the training to deal with mental health issues or trauma. I would refer the student to social workers and contact the admin team if I were to notice personal challenges
that are impacting student involvement and academic achievement. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey)

In this quote, Tessa brought awareness to the challenges special educators face regarding student mental health concerns or diagnoses and their impact on self-determination, along with the social and cultural influences these challenges have on student development and their opportunities on transition (Abery & Stancliffè, 2003; Garrels & Palmer, 2020; Raley et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2018). Traditional social–emotional practices (Jagers et al., 2019) erase foundational research (J. P. Comer, 1969, 1985; J. P. Comer & Hill, 1985, S. Comer, 1971) and lack attention to the “stress, anxiety, and trauma caused by racism” (Mayes et al., 2022, p. 180).

Tessa continued to share her attitude regarding what she believed were unfair practices in her school. Tessa expressed frustrations with student behavior and the blame placed on special education teachers. Tessa stated:

I have noticed at my school students are allowed to behave in certain ways that negatively impact their education, and yet, it is not acknowledged or the blame is put on the educator. I think it is a disservice to students when damaging behaviors are allowed instead of focusing on how to support the student and how to provide additional supports to ensure that those behaviors do not affect student achievement. I believe that putting all the responsibility on the educator who is attempting to work with the student is not very beneficial and puts too much stress on one single individual when the entire IEP team should be involved. (August 2022, Tessa, Survey)
Tessa’s statement reflected the lack of support she was given when presented with behavioral challenges in her classes. This lack of support demonstrated the crucial need for developing strategies that address students’ individual needs through the collaborative approach of the IEP team to avoid the reoccurring and inequitable result of exclusionary discipline (Hines-Datir, 2015; Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Smith & Harper, 2015).

**Anna.** Anna believed the school practices were adequate for students, and she did not believe any inequitable practices were occurring at the studied school. Anna’s beliefs informed her approach to teaching, which entails always making content relevant to students’ lives, particularly their interests. In understanding Anna’s approach to the social–emotional learning skills of her students, Anna highlighted classroom activities and interventions in providing access for students by expressing, “I do check ins and SEL activities, frequently review similar activities, upload links onto canvas so that students have the assignments we did, and I have office hours” (August 2022, Anna, Survey).

Anna’s statement demonstrated insufficient standardized beliefs and approaches to students’ social–emotional development. Social–emotional learning in education continues to be a buzzword, lacking the sociopolitical and racial consciousness needed to confront the daily injustices faced by APYRSES (Simmons, 2019, 2021). Anna’s statement highlighted the constant centering of Whiteness rather than the lived experiences of APYRSES and the “simultaneity of their oppressions” (Brewer, 1993, p. 16).
**Research Question 1 Summary**

The survey data provided a baseline for understanding three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding the postsecondary transition for APYRSES before participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. More specifically, the survey focused on their perspectives regarding self-determination and social–emotional learning for APYRSES. Results indicated mechanical and monographic attitudes and belief systems resulting in a Eurocentric approach to the special education teachers’ pedagogy and application of self-determination and social–emotional learning.

**Research Question 2**

Research Question 2 asked: What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

The intention of this question was to capture how the participating special educators shared their perspectives on self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The response to the research question presented the emerging theme of cultural collective partnership. The emergent theme was detailed with supporting extractions from the data collected.
Finding 2

Finding 2 was: Edification of critical perspectives influenced the unity of special education teachers and families, centering families’ cultural dynamics and creating intentional postsecondary transition planning for APYRSES.

*Cultural Collective Partnership*

Cultural collective partnership emerged through the data as a theme of how educators understood and worked with their students, their families, and implementation of pedagogical practices. This finding included educators’ role of culture in learning and understanding the world around them and how their perspectives influenced their practices. Cultural collective partnerships contributed to the attitudes the special educators gained through their understanding of how interrelated systems of inequity affect individuals and maintain the status quo.

**April.** After participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators, April began to question special education services in considering the legal and societal factors leading to transition. This questioning was demonstrated after April’s initial engagement with the humanizing intervention when she stated, “The first video made me think further about whether the high percentage of students in special education at my current school site is a reflection of carried-over racist practices that on paper, have ended” (September 2022, April, Critical Guiding Praxis Video A).

After engaging in the first stage of the humanizing intervention, April demonstrated her reflection and association of the historical roadmap leading to transition. She began questioning how historical and systemic racism plays a part in the
current overrepresentation of marginalized populations receiving special education services. The beginning critical questioning of her beliefs regarding the educational system was essential in the researcher’s attempt to understand her consciousness.

The least restrictive environment (LRE) law mandates that SWDs receive education alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible (Katsiyannis et al., 2001; Taylor, 1988). Disproportionality occurs when there is a higher probability of a group characterized by ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, or gender receiving special education services (Oswald et al., 1999). During the participation in the critical guiding praxis, April reflected on the school district’s continuum of special education services. She connected to historic and structural inequities and demonstrated a shift in beliefs, stating:

At this school, for many years, there were solely self-contained classes, where students required specialized academic instruction and were educated in a separate classroom, away from the general education students. From what I am learning, I am thinking that the districts that only offer self-contained classrooms as educational placements for students with IEPs spring into a very gray area of illegal, and keep certain kinds of students in very restrictive placements. (October 2022, April, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

April’s statement illustrated the continued questioning of special education practices in the school and its association with historical inequities faced by APYRSES. April described the continuum of special education services at her school and questioned the segregation of settings for particular populations from the general education students. As April developed an understanding of the educational experiences of diverse
populations, she furthered her critical questioning with the normalization of segregating multiply marginalized students (Annamma, 2018).

April’s ways of learning and understanding continued to evolve when she further demonstrated her critical curiosity about the relationship between students receiving special education services who are also English language learners (ELLs). During the interview, April stated:

At this school site, we have a very large number of students in special education. Reflecting on the research provided in the critical guiding praxis videos made me think . . . do students identified as eligible for special education services really need them? Or are these students identified due to misperceptions of students due to language barriers? This led me to think about all the students we have at our school with IEPs that have to take the language test every year, and how that works in conjunction. (November 2022, April, Interview)

In this statement, April highlighted the inequitable challenges for students with various intersectionalities (Crenshaw, 1991), particularly ELLs. Linguistic diversities can often be mistaken for learning disabilities, contributing to the disproportionality in special education (Artiles & Ortiz, 2002). Practices resulting from Eurocentrism aim to create a monocultural and monolingual society based on dominant hegemonic language and cultural norms. April’s questioning illustrated her edifying consciousness, which is needed to deconstruct the dominant hegemonic ideologies that have been normalized in education.

In reflecting on her past practices in learning about students on her caseload, April’s beliefs in student and family involvement changed to understanding the role of
parents and school staff as a collective. She began to consider communication with the family as a partnership as an integral part of the student’s success. April explained:

This week, the mom of a student of mine came to the school, demanding to speak only to me. My communication with this family has increased exponentially. This form of communication has been very needed, and I feel like this is why they refuse to speak to anyone but me now. (November 2022, April, Interview)

The experience with the parents of a student described by April in this statement was significant. Although families from diverse backgrounds have historically been “othered” in the U.S. education system (García et al., 2022; Tushnet, 1987), April began to value the reciprocal partnership with the families with whom she worked (Kalyanpur & Harry, 2012). In collectively working with families, April was able to genuinely involve parents in the participation of their child’s education.

April’s shift in attitude was most notable when she became emotional in thinking of her upbringing and her intersectionalities in proximity to her students. She shared personal experiences that she preferred not to be documented, giving her a sense of relatability and compassion. April expressed how she related to the struggles students experience and shared some experiences in her family dynamic that had influenced her care and protective demeanor toward students, which she has used to guide her pedagogy.

April expressed frustration with structural inequities she was experiencing with a student throughout this study as she became more invested in his life and education. April explained:

I feel comfortable now in saying this, so I am just going to. By this time of the semester, my student should have already been assessed for social–emotional
well-being. When I ask the school psychologist about this, I am told, “this is what we do,” despite being illegal. When I was told this early on, I did not become upset. However, during this time in the study and working with this student, I feel like I am the one representing him. Therefore, I am experiencing this with him and his family. I thought to myself, what kind of support is this student getting? Why is the assessment being delayed? Does this have to do with money? Does this have to do with the school psychologist having to write the assessment report? (November 2022, April, Interview)

**Tessa.** Participating in the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special education teachers demonstrated growth in consciousness with Tessa, beginning with reflecting on her practices up to this point of her career. She reflected, “I realized all of the gaps that I have when it comes to postsecondary transition and how I am unfamiliar with what being culturally responsive sustaining really is, let alone implement in my classroom” (November 2022, Tessa, Interview).

In this statement, Tessa reflected on how the humanizing intervention allowed her to examine her practices as a special education teacher and consider the biases in which she brings that impact her work. Self-awareness is vital in understanding intersectionality and positionality and their impact on the lives of APYRSES (Artiles et al., 2010; Boveda, 2016; Crenshaw, 1991).

Tessa questioned how she promoted self-determination with her students and began to analyze the thoughts and feelings students bring to her classroom and her role in
taking the social context of her students’ lives and making it conducive to their learning for psychological and functional growth (Wehmeyer, 2006). She noted:

Students lack a lot of confidence. They enter my class with the ingrained belief that they are dumb and stupid. They say to me, “Why do I have to do this if I’m stupid?” and I feel like I lack the skills to combat this, it’s difficult. (October 2022, Tessa, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

Tessa’s statement illustrated the importance of assisting students in developing self-determination skills, which leads to higher levels of student motivation and is positively associated with positive postsecondary outcomes for SWDs (Wehmeyer, 2006). This agency is emphasized in the self-determination of SWDs. Special educators and the learning environment must be conducive to the psychological growth of students (Wehmeyer, 2006). Examining the belief system of special education teachers such as Tessa allows for transformative possibilities in equity based approaches to creating learning environments for APYRSES that connect relevancy and meaning making for all students.

Participating in the critical guiding praxis also helped Tessa realize how she generalizes based on culture. Her beliefs and attitude on her pedagogy shifted in taking a critical stance in her reflection and the importance of involving students’ families in conversations and practices with their children. She stated:

I have come to the realization that I’m not that culturally aware when it comes to postsecondary transition. I began to realize that because I’m Mexican and most of the families I work with are also Mexican or Hispanic, I feel like I automatically have a good understanding of what they’re going through because we share the
same history. At the same time, their experiences are so different than mine, so I should not assume that I know what they are going through or what the best supports for them are just because we have the same cultural background. This was very eye opening for me. I now realize that I am making assumptions that I understand them when they have their own personal struggles and issues that I cannot begin to understand unless I start to involve them in the conversation and work together as a team to help their child succeed. (November 2022, Tessa, Interview)

Tessa’s reflection highlighted her awareness to the shortcomings of educational practices when generalizing experiences in cultural similarities. This sentiment also brought forth the importance of building relationships with students and their families to understand differences in experiences, even when teachers are of the same culture. Various factors impact the social and cultural backgrounds of students and their families that play a foundational role in the development of students (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lee, 2017; Vygotsky, 1978). Culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogy (Gay, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris, 2012) enables meaning making and facilitating learning while supporting and empowering the cultural, ethnic, and linguistic identities of APYRSES (Paris & Alim, 2017).

The theme of collective partnership was most prominent when it emanated from the transcriptions during Tessa’s interview as she began by describing her beliefs and attitudes after participating in the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators. Tessa’s beliefs and attitudes shifted into understanding a partnership between
students, families, and her as an integral part of creating opportunities for her students.

Tessa shared:

This experience allowed me to center the student and parents a lot more than I previously have, particularly when it comes to the families. Before, I would have conversations with just students about what they wanted to do after high school and move on. I wouldn’t involve parents in the preparation, and I was always just focused on getting everything done. Now, I am seeking more input from parents to center the conversations around both the student and his or her family. Instead of just telling the parents what the student’s plans are after high school during IEP meetings, I am now involving them in what their thoughts and feelings are regarding their child’s plans for after high school in terms of their culture and family dynamics. This experience has helped me realize that I need to center students and their families more for better understanding and help support them with more opportunities geared to what they are looking at as a family.

(November 2022, Tessa, Interview)

Tessa further demonstrated how her thinking shifted when she spoke about a specific activity she implemented in the postsecondary preparation process, recalling:

One resource I always used to prepare my students for postsecondary transition is a questionnaire. While this continues to be a practice for me, the way that I use it has changed. Before, it was just a handout questionnaire that I would have all of my students fill out on their own to turn back to me. I now use this questionnaire and prompting questions when meeting 1:1 with my students for conversations and learning about them. We work through the questions together, and the
dialogue allows me to learn more specifics about students and about their families outside of their school life. (November 2022, Tessa, Interview)

Tessa’s shift in beliefs and attitude toward family involvement in the postsecondary transition process went from “checking off” the parental involvement compliance checkbox to speaking to the cultural relevancy and response of their future planning, considering the roles they take in their families. After experiencing the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis, Tessa’s beliefs and attitudes began to shift. She began to use practices that involved the students and families and got to know the specific context of their lives and how her postsecondary transition preparation process could include these factors. Doing so, Tessa began to create more opportunities for her students that reflected the values and beliefs of her students’ families and community as a collective. She noted she stated to partner with families in the preparation of the student’s transition to adulthood.

Anna. Anna’s beliefs and attitude shifted after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework to a level of awareness. She shared, “The transition practices I use have not been as individualized as I had hoped for” (September 2022, Anna, Critical Guiding Praxis Video A). Interestingly, Anna demonstrated a notable shift in her beliefs when she spoke about the future discriminatory experiences of her students. Anna stated:

The school I work at mostly has a Hispanic population, and I don’t really consider the students having barriers because they are a certain race or culture. What I do see is that when they are out in the real world, they are going to experience barriers. This makes me think about how I need to prepare them for the
experiences they will have, which isn’t something I hadn’t thought about before the critical guiding praxis videos. (September 2022, Anna, Critical Guiding Praxis Video B)

At first glance, Anna’s statement was concerning because she did not believe her students experienced any barriers based on their cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds. Colorblindness was prominent in this excerpt, as Anna’s belief system represented one where she did not acknowledge the cultural experiences of others without recognizing the need for differentiated interaction (Lindsey et al., 2018). However, she realized her students would face adversity in adulthood. This awareness came to light in having an open mind in learning student differences.

In reflecting on her practices as a special education teacher, Anna began to question her role as a special educator when she stated:

This experience made me think differently about what it means to be a case manager and special educator. I realized that this role involves more than just sharing IEP at a glance to general education teachers to implement accommodations and modifications. I also now see that viewing differences and values between cultures can be assets that students bring into the classroom. (November 2022, Anna, Interview)

This statement from Anna further showcased her open mindedness, allowing her to reflect on her practices as a case manager. Anna’s belief system was shifting toward a critical stance as she questioned her role in the lives of APYRSES and how she could advocate for more than just the compliance and procedural components of her practice.
During Anna’s interview, she continued to demonstrate conscious awareness and interest in growing in a collective partnership with her students’ families. She noted:

Involving the families of my students in the postsecondary preparation process is something that I am working on more now after this experience because it really helped me realize that I need to grow in this area. When I call to schedule meetings with my students’ parents, I ask them if they have any questions or concerns to address during meetings. In breaking down the explanation of goals for students, parents are also about to better understand them, leading to more questions on their end and more productive conversations as a team to help their child. (November 2022, Anna, Interview)

Anna’s statement represented a slight departure from the traditional compliance-based practices of postsecondary transition preparation. After participating in the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis, Anna realized the involvement of families included more than going through each procedure in being compliant; this involvement marked an area of growth in her professional career. To create more equitable opportunities for APYRSES, Anna realized the one-size-fits-all approach to postsecondary transition would not suffice.

**Research Question 2 Summary**

The second research question sought to understand the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding self-determination learning after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. Results indicated an improvement in the consciousness of the three special education teachers. Specifically, the special education
attitude toward purposeful postsecondary transition for APYRSES necessitated a collective and collaborative partnership between school staff and families.

**Research Question 3**

Research Question 3 asked: What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?

Reimagining through love and humanity arose as an emergent theme in the data as the beliefs and attitudes shifted of the three special educator participants. Education is built upon the dominant narratives and structures that view APYRSES as lacking and needing to be fixed (Howard, 2010; Love, 2019). When schools view students through this deficit lens, inequitable outcomes are cyclically reproduced for APYRSES.

**Finding 4**

Finding 4 was: Special education teachers revealed the targeting exploitation of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices.

**Reimagining Through Love and Humanity**

April. Freire (1968) spoke to false generosity as the “oppressor manipulated through inauthentic forms of organization and social welfare programs that distract the oppressed from the true problem and the concrete solutions of those problems” (p. 152). As April shifted her beliefs and attitudes, reflexive thoughts on social and political contradictions began to arise. She noted:
From what I’ve heard this year, there is a very high number of suspensions, specifically of students in education, which honestly, really surprises me. At the beginning of the school year, our administration team was very forward about how they would not be rushing to defend or to put out fires because we would be engaging in restorative practices. This is something to reflect upon for me as I think, why is this still happening if we are engaging in restorative practices? why are the suspension numbers for special education students still so high? (October 2022, April, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

April’s reflection showed her awareness of the contradiction between what her school said they will do and what she witnessed. Buzzwords such as restorative practices in education are often presented as the approach taken, when in actuality, these practices can be a form of false generosity (Freire, 1968). These practices appear socially responsible, yet avoid the root systemic issues perpetuating inequities for APYRSES. In this quote, April’s beliefs represented a shift in understanding because the practices presented that were implemented to mitigate disciplinary action did not consider the cultural context nor individual needs of APYRSES. The critical lens of April’s perspective is necessary for challenging the dominant narrative that upholds the inequitable structures in education (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Throughout the study, April began to use her practice in the classroom to empower students to understand the structural inequities that exist and are prominent in their lives. April explained how she implemented this practice when she said:

I have incorporated political cartoons to get students to write essays and reflections on their political views in regard to immigration, freedom of speech,
money and wealth, healthcare, and so forth. The cartoons help to draw out different conversations that wouldn’t have happened as much when looking at an isolated poem. This has been helpful because students can relate the work to their lives and help make better decisions and planning for their future. (November 2022, April, Interview)

April’s use of political cartoons exemplified her action as a form of resistance in teaching APYRSES of the current political structures and where the students’ lives fit in these structures, and encouraged questioning societal issues. April demonstrated an awareness of the political nature of her work and implemented activities to deconstruct social orders (Bartolome, 1994).

Tessa. As a result of the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework, Tessa began to criticize her own practices and those of the in which school she works, seeing how the practices perpetuate injustices for APYRSES. During the dialogical cultural circle, Tessa highlighted the disparities in disciplinary action with APYRSES who experience exclusion and surveillance:

There is a discrepancy in disciplinary action at the school I work. Certain students repeatedly get in trouble with so many adults, resulting in these students being targeted by security, attendance officers, and administrators. It is like everyone is trying to get them out and justifying it by changing their educational placement in alternative schools or assigning labels like Emotional Disturbance as another disability. When one student causes interruption to multiple adults, it ends up
being “taken care of,” even when it’s not in the best interest of the student. (October 2022, Tessa, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

Tessa furthered expressed her thoughts critically when she provided an example of the constant targeting of her students. She stated:

There is a student on my caseload dealing with a lot of trauma and social–emotional challenges. One of the ways this student responds to her struggles is by not attending class. There is also a constant emphasis on targeting this student by school officials to get her back to class when she is walking in the hallways. As a result, my student becomes frustrated and responds aggressively when she is feeling cornered, but she continues to be put in situations by these officials where she doesn’t have the freedom to take a break or take a moment to step away from all of the stress that she endures every single day. Then, we are given social–emotional learning packets that are nearly impossible to connect to the curriculum because it is so alien and irrelevant to student lives. Students become upset and begin to ask . . . why are we doing this? (October 2022, Tessa, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

The critical perspective gained by Tessa is showcased in this statement as she highlights the over policing and surveillance of APYRSES and its contribution to reoccurring high statistics of exclusionary disciplinary practices (Hines-Datir, 2015; Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Smith & Harper, 2015). Tessa’s comments highlighted the targeting of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices, specifically those identified with high-incident disabilities (Bal et al., 2014; Sullivan & Bal, 2013) who are pushed out (Morris, 2016) of
schools and into juvenile detention facilities. These exclusionary practices reinforce stereotypes and continue to stigmatize APYRSES and limit opportunities in their futures.

Anna. Exclusionary discipline and disproportionality have long been an education issue (Hines-Datir, 2015; Hines-Datiri, & Carter Andrews, 2020; Howard & Navarro, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014; Smith & Harper, 2015). As Anna’s critical beliefs and attitudes came to fruition, she described the inequitable views of her students along with the targeting of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices. She stated:

Something that I have noticed is that attendance officers do not take into consideration students’ social–emotional needs, whether or not they have an IEP. They see students walking outside and immediately yell . . . where should you be? When they don’t know what the student is experiencing, if they are feeling overwhelmed and are possibly taking a break, or if they simply do not want to talk. Adults on campus continuously nag students to get them back to class without interest in them as human beings, which with my students, results in pushing them further away from getting back to class. They end up hiding in bathrooms to take breaks. (October 2022, Anna, Dialogical Cultural Circle)

Anna furthered her critical reflection as she described her observations between her students and school officials’ interactions. She stated:

My students that have gotten in trouble several times are looked down upon by school administrators and security. They are viewed and labeled as bad students. No one cares about what they are experiencing, their struggles, yet adults continue to harass them and threaten their places in their school. (November 2022, Anna, Interview)
Anna’s attitude and frustration were prevalent in her response regarding disciplinary action toward her students. She highlighted the targeting of her students that adults often face with authoritarian approaches at her school. Anna highlighted the lack of care from adults and the constant “othering” of her students. She described the school administration’s approach to interactions with her students as dehumanizing and harassing. Anna’s reflection and description aligned with the disciplinary action toward APYRSES in the role education plays in reproducing oppressive and criminalizing views of APYRSES (Morris, 2016).

**Research Question 3 Summary**

The third research question sought to understand the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding social–emotional learning after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue informed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The results demonstrated a continual shift in consciousness, and the special education teachers shared similar attitudes toward the social–emotional needs of their APYRSES. The participants spoke about how they believed the current social–emotional learning practices were irrelevant to the lives of APYRSES. Furthermore, an emphasis of constant targeting of APYRSES was present in the interactions between adults and students. All participants expressed worries and frustrations about not knowing how to help their most vulnerable students who are targeted and pushed out of the schools, indicating the need for reimagining praxis through love and humanity.
Chapter Summary

The purpose of this study was to describe the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding the postsecondary transition for APYRSES. The study aimed to understand how these teachers derived meaning from their practice after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The research questions driving this study were

1) What are three special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

2) What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about self-determination after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework in a high school setting?

3) What beliefs and attitudes specific to postsecondary transition for APYRSES do three special education teachers share about social–emotional learning practices after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis in a high school setting?

The overall synthesis of the data analysis resulted in three findings. First, special education teachers’ convergent attitudes resulted in a mechanical and monochromatic
approach to postsecondary transition for APYRSES informed by traditional notions of self-determination and social–emotional learning. Second, the edification of critical perspectives influenced the unity of special education teachers and families, centering families’ cultural dynamics and creating intentional postsecondary transition planning for APYRSES. Third, special education teachers revealed the targeting of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practice, with an emphasis of those identified with high-incident disability categories.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to describe the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers regarding the postsecondary transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES). To do so, I aimed to understand how three special education teachers acquired the significance of their practice in postsecondary transition preparation for APYRSES after participating in a humanizing intervention. The humanizing intervention was based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework conceptualized by drawing from theories for building on special educator critical awareness through individual and group dialogue. In the conceptualization of the critical guiding praxis framework for special educators, emphasis was placed on two traditional practices used in the field in preparing students for adulthood: self-determination skills (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Wehmeyer, 1992) and social–emotional learning skills (CASEL, 2021) to contend with the continual perpetuation of disproportionate postsecondary transition outcomes for APYRSES. I sought to:

a) Ascertain the beliefs and attitudes of the three special education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition prior to participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

b) Uncover the beliefs and attitudes of the three special education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition, specifically self-determination, after participating in a humanizing intervention based on
research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

c) Reveal the beliefs and attitudes of the three special education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition, specifically social–emotional learning, after participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework.

This chapter follows the overall structure of the findings chapter. It begins with a summary of the key findings. Next, I interpret and discuss the results pertaining to conceptualizing the critical guiding praxis drawing from existing literature. Then, the limitations of the study are addressed. Following this section, recommendations are made regarding the practical application of the research findings and suggestions for building on the results for future research in special education. Finally, this chapter ends with a concluding summary.

**Summary of Key Findings**

The first question of the study attempted to gather a baseline understanding of the beliefs and attitudes of the three participating special education teachers regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES before participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. The initial data suggested special education teachers’ mechanical and monochromatic approach to postsecondary transition, which was convergent in thinking and application with the Eurocentric value of independence at the core of their practice. The second research question sought to uncover the beliefs and attitudes of the special
education teacher participants regarding postsecondary transition as it pertained to self-
determination. The analysis identified an edification in critical perspectives across all
three teachers by centering familial dynamics and partnership in the intentional
preparation of postsecondary transition for APYRSES. The last question of the research
study sought to reveal special education teachers’ beliefs and attitudes regarding
postsecondary transition pertaining to social–emotional learning. The data alluded to the
targeting of APYRSES for exclusionary discipline practices through adult-centered staff
practices that often result in a change in the educational settings of APYRSES.

Lessons Learned Through a Praxis as an Intervention

Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple
identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element.

—Gloria Anzaldua, 1987

The story of this study began with my positionality, serving as a special education
administrator in the urban public school district in southern California where this research
study took place. The study’s school district was far from my home, where I grew up as a
first-generation, bilingual Mexican-American with lived experiences of a borderland
identity (Anzaldua, 1987), where my cultural intuition guided my practice as a special
educator. In this school district, the students and the community represented my identity,
and the special education teachers immediately sought mentoring from me, allowing for
strong relationships to be built among us. Much of this consultation and mentoring time
between the special education teachers and me occurred during their drives home, where
time was consumed with teacher frustrations and a heavy focus on changing the
placement of APYRSES due to what was perceived as misidentification or what they saw
as “safety concerns.” My curiosity and cultural intuition often led me to ask the special education teachers how they integrated the contexts of their students’ lives and cultures within their daily interactions and activities to support APYRSES; however, most of the time, special education teachers did not know how to respond to this question.

In the field of special education, special educators often fall into a system and procedurally-focused approach to their practice, given the focus on the legalities of students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs). Still, I have often wondered how the practices of special educators fit into the lives of APYRSES, their families, cultures, and their communities. These questions continuously fueled my curiosities about postsecondary transition, how special educators can adequately and equitably prepare APYRSES for life after high school, and how to build the bridge in which APYRSES can walk alongside their peers. The following lessons were learned through the nuanced ways of introducing frameworks in this research study and the data collected from the conversations with and between April, Tessa, and Anna to answer the research questions designed around a conceptualized practice.

A Mechanical and Monochromatic Approach to Practice

I developed a humanizing intervention for special education teachers with whom I had established relationships. This intervention was based on research-driven resources and framed by a critical guiding praxis framework. Its specific application aimed to understand the beliefs and attitudes of three special education teachers toward postsecondary transition preparation for their APYRSES. The initial findings showed the teachers commonly used practice in the field to prepare APYRSES for postsecondary transition, such as inventories, surveys, interviews, and class activities with their students.
for postsecondary transition preparation. However, the details of these practices were not provided, and no other forms of preparation were mentioned. The initial data suggested special education teachers’ mechanical and monochromatic approach to postsecondary transition was convergent in thinking and application with the Eurocentric value of independence at the core of their practice.

The reauthorization of PL 94-142, Education of the Handicapped Act, in 1990, which is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), was a significant milestone in ensuring children with disabilities have access to quality education. The reauthorization of IDEA focused on six pillars, one of which required parental participation in the IEP process. This pillar recognized and mandated parental involvement but did not consider the factors that impede meaningful parental participation for families with diverse backgrounds. This study’s initial findings highlighted the standardized and compliance-based beliefs involving families that inform mechanical and monochromatic practices; for example, when updating annual IEPs, one question asks to identify parental input and concerns relevant to their child’s educational progress. When asked how the special education teacher participants involve the families in the postsecondary transition process, Teresa stated:

Before scheduling any meetings, I always assure myself that I have selected a time and date that works for families. Before the meeting, I contact the family to ask for their concerns and document any questions they have so that they can be addressed in the meeting. (August 2022, Tessa, Presurvey)
In other words, the belief regarding parental involvement went as far as having a mutually agreed upon date and time for a meeting and documenting questions and concerns that the families are responsible for bringing up themselves.

The initial findings tied into the literature suggested that practices used to prepare APYRSES for postsecondary transition are often executed with Eurocentricity at the forefront of the belief systems of educators, regardless of cultural, ethnic, or linguistic backgrounds (Black et al., 2003; Halley & Trujillo, 2013). Preparing APYRSES for adulthood can be challenging for special educators because they may not appropriately value nor support them and their families (Black et al., 2003; Povenmire-Kirk et al., 2015). Researchers have suggested that diverse families may face issues with parental involvement mainly due to their lack of knowledge and ineffective school and family partnerships (Kim & Morningstar, 2005; Landmark et al., 2007; Lo & Bui, 2020). As such, pedagogy that empowers students and families from diverse cultural backgrounds is necessary for their engagement and active participation in the postsecondary transition preparation.

Moreover, the implementation of social–emotional learning skills in classrooms was also found to be mechanical in its focus on establishing and maintaining relationships, developing healthy identities, and making responsible and caring decisions (CASEL, 2021). April demonstrated her beliefs toward social–emotional learning when she noted how she encourages sharing in group settings and among the entire class and respects students’ spaces when they choose not to want to work. She furthered this sentiment by prefacing her efforts to “create situations over the course of the semester to strengthen the bond of students within the classroom sphere so that students who feel that
they need to work in isolation generally become more open to accepting our peers into their space” (August 2022, April, Survey). Another special education teacher participant, Tess, highlighted how her school promotes all responsibility for the students’ emotional well-being, social development, and empowerment while purporting to the lack of training to work with issues and trauma, negatively impacting student achievement. Lastly, Anna showcased her beliefs regarding SEL by highlighting her use of “check ins” with students and her efforts to make her content accessible to students when they miss school.

These beliefs and attitudes negate the political nature of their work with traditionally marginalized populations of students receiving special education services. Freire (1985) argued the mastery of content and the methodology used by educators is insufficient to educate students that are disenfranchised effectively. Freire argued political acuity is needed in teaching methodologies that honor and challenge students from all cultural backgrounds. Similarly, Bartolome (1994) highlighted the importance for educators to work toward improving their political understanding to deconstruct the social and cultural landscape of their classrooms. Otherwise, educators perpetuate the power relations that subjugate particular groups to a subordinate status.

In the research design of this study, a cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey et al., 2018) was used in the initial data collection to gauge where teachers were at in their beliefs and attitudes. The collected data confirmed the existence of colorblindness as a monochromatic belief system where individuals do not acknowledge the cultural experiences of others and treat everyone in the system equally without recognizing the need for differentiated interaction (Lindsey et al., 2018). Another question became: How...
can we continue to think through these theories in a humanizing way informed by our beliefs? I began to question how educators have deeper conversations with others about these important topics—strong relationships are needed to do heart-felt work in the field and stop harming youth with mechanical and monochromatic applications to practice. The disparities have continued to replicate disproportionate postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES. The tools used by special education teachers are not nuanced enough to impact postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES.

A humanizing and antiracist stance can inform self-determination and social–emotional learning through the lens of a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators focusing on self-awareness. The mechanical ways of packaging up the histories and creating a framework for self-determination and social–emotional learning to implement practices will not change outcomes. Establishing strong relationships with participants before the study and the dialogical cultural circle allowed me to effectively listen and understand where teachers’ beliefs and attitudes reflected after providing the humanizing intervention. The more profound ways of engaging in dialogue were vital in applying theory to practice. It was not about mechanically plastering together components of history and the theories behind self-determination and social–emotional learning in a way that political and social scientists measure outcomes, but rather building relationships as human beings and starting from this level in the space of engaging in meaningful dialogue. Educators need these spaces to discuss topics freely and have deep conversations to collectively coconstruct new knowledge and apply theory instead of these mechanical, programmatic steps to pedagogy.
Cultural Collective Partnership

After the three special education teachers participated in the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue informed by a critical guiding praxis framework, the beliefs and attitudes of the participants demonstrated an edification in perspectives regarding self-determination. April shared her newly enlightened critical view on disproportionality in special education services, indicating a beginning approach to a critical stance in response to learning about the history of special education leading to transition. As she began to reflect on the educational system as a whole, April began to question the disproportionate representation of students receiving special education services. She developed a curiosity about past racist practices in history. Artiles et al. (2010) consistently posited the importance of acknowledging the historical racism that has shaped the structural inequities in the educational system to combat the overrepresentation of marginalized students receiving special education services. The theoretical foundation for this work is addressed in the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis emphasizing self-awareness.

Tessa’s edification in her beliefs and attitude after participating in the humanizing intervention was evident in her newfound approach to working with the families of the students she serves in collectively preparing them for adulthood. She noted how her previous approaches, which valued individualism and independence, were Eurocentric and did not center the cultures and dynamics of her students and their families (Black et al., 2003). Tessa’s reflections echoed the importance of intentionally involving families in the postsecondary transition process, centering their cultures and dynamics, and
working in partnership with them—aligning with Kalyanpur and Harry’s (2012) emphasis on cultural reciprocity between families and schools for more meaningful collaboration in support of all students. The critical guiding praxis framework recognizes the notion of self-determination cannot be universally applied to all students, especially those from traditionally marginalized backgrounds (Leake & Boone, 2007). Therefore, the framework emphasizes the importance of a reciprocal cultural understanding in the postsecondary transition process to create a cultural collective partnership that prepares APYRSES and the inequities they will inherit.

Reimagining Through Love and Humanity

Despite decades of laws promising equality for all, fueled by dominant ideology, racism and capitalism have continued to triumph in education (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Freire (1968) described various manipulation tactics the oppressor presents to protect the status quo and keep the oppressed in their hierarchical place in society. He argued:

A psychoanalysis of oppressive action might reveal the “false generosity” of the oppressor as a dimension of the latter’s sense of guilt. With this false generosity, he attempts not only to preserve an unjust and necrophilic order but to “buy” peace for himself. (Freire, 1968, p. 146)

These solutions to educational challenges, as forms of false generosity (Freire 1968), impede students from reaching their greatest potential. Therefore, the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework took a close look at the historical roadmap of the U.S. educational system. This roadmap reveals how change efforts have succeeded in maintaining an oppressive system that predetermines the failure of APYRSES. Although credentialing courses may include special education laws related
to IDEA and the implementation of IEPs, educators must understand the overall roadmap of historical events that led to the current system. This understanding allows for a more critical examination of postsecondary transition and builds educators’ critical awareness of the practice, moving them toward more equitable practices for diverse learners.

Findings suggested using social–emotional learning is a “buzzword” in education (Simmons, 2019, 2021). After participating in a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework, teachers began to identify exclusionary practices in their schools. April spoke about the administration’s heavy focus on restoring relationships between students and staff after incidents occur. However, her self-reflection made her question this focus as she noticed an increase in out-of-school suspensions, specifically for APYRSES (Morris, 2016; Skiba et al., 2014). Similarly, Tessa addressed the discrepancy she saw in her students who were repeatedly in trouble. In the practitioner world, these students are called the “frequent flyers” with a “laundry list” of issues. Tessa highlighted the inequity when she expressed her belief that staff in her school attempted to push out (Morris, 2016) APYRSES and use their IEPs to justify a need for more restrictive placements. Tessa exemplified this sentiment by sharing her perception of one of her students dealing with social–emotional challenges and trauma. She noted how the student feels triggered in class and leaves frequently. School officials target her, resulting in the student feeling cornered and her anger escalating. The way staff responds becomes punitive and disciplinary, causing the student to shut down entirely.

Comparatively, Anna noticed the school staff’s dismissive stance regarding their social–emotional needs and whether or not they have an IEP. She also emphasized the
targeting of these students and their complete disregard for them as human beings, pushing them further away from the classroom and causing them to hide in bathrooms. These findings are consistent with literature addressing White supremacy ideology that upholds the views of students of color through a deficit lens, needing to be “fixed” and their need to survive in the world around them (Horton-Williams, 2020; Howard, 2010; Love, 2019; Simmons, 2019, 2021). Furthermore, social–emotional learning skill development demonstrates relationship skill building without drawing attention to racial inequities, hate, or trauma rooted in racism (Mayes et al., 2022; Simmons, 2021).

As a focal point of the critical mattering component of the critical guiding praxis framework, spaces for students need to be created rooted in love and embrace their cultures so that they feel safe and empowered to take part in the process of learning through discussions that resonate with their lived experiences (Love, 2019; Williams-Johnson, 2016). Social–emotional learning that is humanizing and rooted in antiracism serves as an alternative discourse to traditional Eurocentric processes to assist in developing a critical lens and help students learn how to address their daily injustices throughout their lives (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; Simmons, 2019, 2021).

**A Note on Continuums**

I approached this study using the cultural proficiency continuum (Lindsey et al., 2018) to examine where special education teacher voices felt in their cultural competence. However, I quickly realized this continuum was a colorblind approach in the attempt to measure cultural proficiency. Critical self-awareness is a continuous process that is not linear but constantly self-reflecting (Love, 2019). Special educators move
throughout and in spaces of various components of consciousness and application to practice like a chessboard such as Figure 4, in becoming critically conscious special educators to continue learning and growing their critical self-awareness, constantly self-reflecting, and always having room to improve. Special educators need a critical guiding praxis to inform their practice by theory as the north star (Love, 2019) that continues to shine its light of hope and direction (Gorski, 2020).

Figure 4. Data Visualization (Becoming Critically Conscious Special Educators)
Implications and Recommendations

The breadth and depth of special education teachers’ experiences in this study varied and inhibited implications for future research. More specifically, implications included reciprocal and cultural understanding in postsecondary transition, the edification of consciousness through critical self-reflection, an intersectional view, and critical mattering. The findings of this research, which derived from a small study sample, were unique to conceptualizing a humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special educators framework. These findings can inform professional learning through mentorship and guide special education teachers’ thought processes in preparing APYRSES for postsecondary transition and professional development. The following implications and recommendations were derived from the data:

● Special education teachers need to develop deep cultural connections with APYRSES and their families to foster cultural reciprocity and collectively support students in developing the necessary self-determination skills to face the inequitable factors impeding their ability to succeed.

● To grow critically conscious and community oriented, special education teachers must engage in ongoing self-reflection in their pedagogy and how it is used to inform social change.

● The lives of APYRSES need to be affirmed as an active form of resistance through social–emotional learning that draws in on a sociopolitical and racial consciousness that humanizes, heals, and demonstrates to these students that their lives matter.
Future Research

This study was designed as a way to look at the possibility of introducing a new transition framework to support more equitable postsecondary transition for APYRSES and opportunities for life after high school. Though the context of this specific study cannot be replicated given the situational and relational context, the findings shed light on how current tools used by special education teachers are not nuanced enough to impact postsecondary outcomes for APYRSES. It does not suffice to package up theories and components of history without first understanding the importance of building relationships and coconstructing knowledge through dialogue to deconstruct practices that maintain the status quo. The participants expressed an eagerness to expand on this research study.

Although the context of this study cannot be replicated, the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue, framed by a critical guiding praxis framework for special education teachers to discuss these concepts, can serve as a guide for those who seek to disrupt and deconstruct oppressive educational systems for APYRSES by envisioning and bringing about change. In the initial stages of designing the humanizing intervention based on research-driven resources and a group dialogue framed by the conceptualization of a critical guiding praxis framework, the goal was to tap into the inner workings of special educator teachers’ consciousness to understand how the adverse postsecondary outcomes continued to be replicated when ample tools were informed by research used in the field. Given the complexity of human consciousness, a descriptive case study with a small number of participants was conducted. The impact of this study led to increased interest from the participants, with
one participant pursuing further education in social justice education. Sustainable long-term change occurs in small steps and as a collective in solidarity.

Future research and application expand to myriad groups. For researchers, this study highlighted the need for further research on the impact of the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis and the conceptual framework itself in guiding educators in creating more inclusive and equitable educational opportunities for all students. This study focused on special education teacher participants who taught students with mild to moderate disabilities; however, the humanizing intervention and critical guiding praxis can be adapted for special education teachers who teach students with moderate to severe disabilities. In addition, multiple case studies can be conducted across various schools over a longer period of time to explore the impact of the humanizing intervention and the dialogical cultural circle. Furthermore, I specifically focused on one component of the various aspects of special education: postsecondary transition. Further researchers can and should expand to a humanizing approach to pedagogy on all aspects of education, including case managing students.

**Higher Education Special Education Teacher Programs**

In the field of special education, special educators often fall into an approach focused on “checking off the boxes” of compliance. The framework and intervention in this study can be included in diversity, equity, and inclusion courses or educational psychology courses in university teaching programs, specifically using the theories within the critical guiding praxis for special educators rather than the traditional Eurocentric lineage of scholarship to foster a humanizing approach to the pedagogy of future generations of special education teachers.
School District Administrators

For district administrators and educational consulting organizations, and credential-clearing programs, the humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis and dialogical cultural circle can serve as a guide in the professional development and coaching of special education teachers. The humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis framework can serve as a guide in the professional development and coaching of special education staff by promoting the self-awareness and dialogue of special educators as to how their practices can help move the needle in pedagogy and shift outcomes for APYRSES. There is an implication in how educators mentor one another, and building relationships across teaching and supervision roles is vital. Teachers need to be given the space to have conversations about their practice after historicizing through the resources provided through existing relationships built in place. Future work needs to look at this if they want teachers to engage in humanizing praxis.

At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services and Families

For APYRSES and their families, this study emphasized the importance of understanding what structural inequities in education are rooted in. The findings of this research can inform and guide the collective activism of APYRSES and their families in solidarity, to have the understanding and the language to demand what they need from their schools to be granted the same opportunities as their White counterparts.

To Conclude

The results of this study suggested the three special education teachers who participated benefited greatly from the critical guiding praxis framework and the dialogical cultural circle. Through this process, they became more conscious and
humanizing in their practice and more confident in their knowledge and advocacy for their students and families. These special education teachers appeared to have significantly benefited from participating in this study because they were products of a system that criminalizes and pushes out marginalized students, particularly Brown, Black, and disabled. This study provided participants with a space to reflect on their positionality and challenge the systems of compliance that perpetuate inequity in special education. The dialogical cultural circles provided a space for authentic dialogue on their current state as researchers, constantly battling the status quo-isms that navigate their work, personally and professionally. These spaces are needed to authentically process the tension and internal conflict between the values of humanity in practice versus compliance, which is the constant state that practitioners embark on.

In considering my positionality as an insider–outsider, social justice-oriented researcher, and practitioner in the field of special education, the process of reflexivity in seeing the data from the research through the voices of the teachers with whom I worked alongside illuminated how much deeper the issues of inequity are. Specifically, the coding process set forth my commitment to disrupt systems of compliance while simultaneously being at risk in reflection and questioning how much of a coconspirator I really was regarding the consequences that may arise. Disruption against the status quo cannot be taken on in isolation. Efforts in collective action as coconspirators in solidarity (Love, 2019) will move practitioners from traditional and standard practices that center the dominant narrative to reimagining education toward a liberatory ideology that centers humanity, antiracism, and collective healing.
Through the process of authentic dialogue, practitioners have the opportunity to explore their thoughts, question the practices they witness, and grapple with the learning and unlearning of understanding the complex world around them where their work will not be diminished, where they can set aside worries and anxieties, and become vulnerable to “knowingly engage in an elevated form of communication that will challenge and expand the horizon of knowledge and communication that exists” (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2018, p. 207). In working toward a sustainable and just educational system, this work cannot focus on simply checking off the boxes of compliance; instead, it must be about understanding, following, and living theory to guide us in the work in which we engage. The love of this work as a practitioner entails elevating the multiple-marginalized students and communities and helping in their healing as victims of continuous trauma placed on them by a constantly “othering” society. Although exhausting and emotionally harming, special education teachers must come together and create their own structures and belief systems to inform their work because the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house (Lorde, 1984).
REFERENCES


Derman-Sparks, L., & Ramsey, P. G. (2011). *What if all the kids are white?: Anti-bias multicultural education with young children and families*. Teachers College Press.


Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, H.R. 1350, 108th Congress (2004).


Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 US 537 (1896).


APPENDIX A

CITI Program Certification

This is to certify that:

Karla Sanchez

Has completed the following CITI Program course:

Human Subjects Research - SBR
(Curriculum Group)
Social & Behavioral Research - Basic/Refresher
(Course Learner Group)
  2 - Refresher 1
  (Stage)

Under requirements set by:

University of San Diego

Verify at www.citiprogram.org/verify/?wcfb4dd9f-51fe-443f-a098-0a8dca2e977e-51166308
APPENDIX B

Informed Consent Form

For the research study entitled: “Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed”

I. Purpose of the research study
Karla R. Sanchez is a doctoral student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting on equity-based approaches to postsecondary transition for at-promise youth receiving special education services. The purpose of this study is to describe the beliefs and attitudes of special education teachers regarding postsecondary transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES) after experiencing a humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an individual 30-minute asynchronous online pre-survey, two individual 45-min online asynchronous critical guiding praxis with a historical overview of laws leading to transition that have impacted the postsecondary outcomes of APYRSES and topics driven by literature with a focus on self-determination and social-emotional learning, a group 60-minute group dialogical cultural circle, and an individual 60-minute interview with the researcher. The total time of participation, which includes the survey, humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis, a group dialogical cultural circle, and post-interview, amounts to 4 hours over the course of 4 months. The survey inquires about your attitudes and beliefs regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES and how you feel in terms of postsecondary transition planning; if and how you modify your transition planning for students; who you invite to your transition meetings and how you involve them in the process; where you view yourself on a cultural competency continuum; and how if and how you discuss anti-racism with your students. The feedback forms after each workshop will ask questions regarding what you learned, how you would apply the new learnings, and if/how the information has changed your views regarding the postsecondary transition for APYRSES. In the interview, I will ask you questions regarding an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) you prepared after having completed the presurvey, critical guiding praxis, and dialogic cultural circle to identify ways that were able to make the postsecondary transition planning process and increase self-determination and social-emotional learning skills.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts
Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day: San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339
IV. Benefits
While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped teachers in learning new ways to assist all students for the world they will be entering as adults is an essential move in education. The humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis and group dialogical cultural circle provide an opportunity for participants to reflect and dialogue as a group to co-construct knowledge; connect with families on transition, educational rights, and access to resources; highlight at-promise youth receiving special education services and families assets; and explicitly fight against discrimination and other forms of adversity they may encounter.

V. Confidentiality
Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher’s office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used in data analysis. The results of this research project may be made public and information quoted in professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information and materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used for future research.

VI. Compensation
There will be no compensation for your participation in this study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate will have no effect on any benefits you’re entitled to, like health care, employment, or grades. You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Karla R. Sanchez
Email: xxxxx@sandiego.edu

Dr. Reyez Quezada
Email: xxxxx@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.

Please sign your name in the box below.
Hello,

My name is Karla R. Sanchez. I am a PhD student in the Education for Social Justice Program at the University of San Diego, San Diego, CA. I am conducting a study about special educators’ use of equity-based approaches through culturally responsive-sustaining transition, particularly building Self-Determination and Social-Emotional Learning skills titled, “Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed”. I would like to invite you to participate. This study is completely voluntary.

If you decide to participate in the study, I will invite you to complete an individual 30-minute online survey, two individual 45-min online asynchronous workshops on equity-based approaches through culturally responsive-sustaining transition, building Self-Determination and Social-Emotional Learning skills, a 60-minute group dialogical cultural circle, and an individual 60-minute post-interview (totaling 4 hours of your time over the course of 4 months). The group dialogical cultural circle and the individual interview will be audio recorded via zoom. For confidentiality purposes, the camera will not be facing you during the group dialogical cultural circle or the individual post-interview recordings.

The survey inquires about how feel in terms of postsecondary transition planning, resources, and tools; if and how you modify your transition planning for students; who you invite to your transition meetings and how you involve them in the process; where you view yourself on a cultural competency continuum; and how if and how you discuss anti-biased, anti-racism, and/or anti-ableism to your students. In the post-interview, I will ask you questions regarding an IEP you prepared after having completed the presurvey, workshops, and dialogic cultural circle to identify ways that were able to make the postsecondary transition planning process and increase self-determination and social-emotional learning skills in a culturally responsive-sustaining manner.

If you decide to participate in the study, your information will be kept confidential, pseudonyms will be used to protect your privacy.

Please see the attached consent form for additional details about the study. Please feel free to reach out to me, Karla R. Sanchez, to clarify or answer any questions you may have about the study at xxxxx@sandiego.edu. Thank you for your consideration.
APPENDIX D

Survey

For the research study entitled: “Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed”

I. Purpose of the research study
Karla R. Sanchez is a doctoral student in the School of Leadership and Education Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a research study she is conducting on equity-based approaches to postsecondary transition for at-promise youth receiving special education services. The purpose of this study is to describe the beliefs and attitudes of special education teachers regarding postsecondary transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services (APYRSES) after experiencing a humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis.

II. What you will be asked to do
If you decide to participate in this study, you will be asked to complete an individual 30-minute asynchronous online pre-survey, two individual 45-min online asynchronous critical guiding praxis with a historical overview of laws leading to transition that have impacted the postsecondary outcomes of APYRSES and topics driven by literature with a focus on self-determination and social-emotional learning, a group 60-minute group dialogical cultural circle, and an individual 60-minute interview with the researcher. The total time of participation, which includes the survey, humanizing intervention framed by a critical guiding praxis, a group dialogical cultural circle, and post-interview, amounts to 4 hours over the course of 4 months. The survey inquires about your attitudes and beliefs regarding postsecondary transition for APYRSES and how you feel in terms of postsecondary transition planning; if and how you modify your transition planning for students; who you invite to your transition meetings and how you involve them in the process; where you view yourself on a cultural competency continuum; and how if and how you discuss anti-racism with your students. The feedback forms after each workshop will ask questions regarding what you learned, how you would apply the new learnings, and if/how the information has changed your views regarding the postsecondary transition for APYRSES. In the interview, I will ask you questions regarding an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) you prepared after having completed the presurvey, critical guiding praxis, and dialogic cultural circle to identify ways that were able to make the postsecondary transition planning process and increase self-determination and social-emotional learning skills.

1. I have signed the consent form for this study. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.
2. Email
3. What race do you identify as?
4. What ethnicity do you identify as?
5. How long have you been a teacher?
6. What grade level do you teach? (select all that apply)
   a. 9
   b. 10
   c. 11
   d. 12
   e. 12+

Upon reflection as a Special Education Teacher, I would like to know where you find yourself as an educator in preparing your students with disabilities for life after high school.
7. How knowledgeable do you feel about postsecondary transition planning?
8. How knowledgeable do you feel about postsecondary transition resources?
9. Tell me about your process in preparing your students for their postsecondary transition.
10. What challenges have you experienced in the past when working with the school, with students, with families, with outside agencies around students’ ITPs?
11. Are your families involved in the IEP process? If so, how?
12. What resources do you use to help prepare for your students’ postsecondary transition process? (select all that apply)
   a. Inventories
   b. Surveys
   c. Interviews
   d. Class activities
   e. Other:
13. What training and support have you had regarding student postsecondary transition?
14. Where would you place yourself in this continuum?
   a. Cultural Destructiveness
   b. Cultural Incapacity
   c. Cultural Blindness
   d. Cultural Pre-Competence
   e. Cultural Competence
   f. Cultural Proficiency
15. What opportunities do you have to reflect on your practices?
16. Have you noticed any practices at your school that seem unfair or inequitable to your students and what do you think could or has been done to address this issue?
17. How do your teaching practices promote student growth and active participation in their environment as it relates to students’ identities (dis/ability, ethnicity, race, language, gender, socioeconomic, etc.)?
18. How do you assist students in developing self-determination skills (list)?
19. How do you assist your students in developing social-emotional learning skills (list)?
20. How do you support your students being included in classroom activities? Are there any outside factors impacting their engagement such as attendance,
disciplinary challenges (office referrals, in-school/out-of-school suspensions, expulsions), and/or personal circumstances?
21. What thoughts and procedure(s) do you take if/when your student struggles in meeting your expectations for the transition planning activities?
APPENDIX E

Feedback Forms A and B

Your responses will be kept confidential, no one will know your identity. Pseudonyms will be used to represent which category you identify with (ex. Special Education Teacher). Participants will be asked to complete four questions listed below. The study data will be kept by the researcher for a minimum of five years.

1. What did you learn?
2. How will you apply the information shared today?
3. Has this information changed the way you currently view your students?
4. Do you have any personal goals based on what you learned today?
Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed

Framing to participants:
Thank you for your participation in this dialogical cultural circle, where space is provided for adults to gather together and problem-solve through dialogue about relevant topics to raise awareness of their reality and transform it (Freire, 1968). Within dialogical cultural circles, educators constantly reflect on their pedagogy (Bahruth & Steiner, 2000) so that it can continue to evolve and respond to all students' needs, particularly those historically disenfranchised. The dialogical cultural circle is similar to a focus group but different in that it is not a systematic structure that hegemonizes thinking and learning (Hunt & Young, 2021). The group dialogical cultural circle will be audio recorded via zoom. For confidentiality purposes, the camera will be turned off, keeping the recording anonymous. The researcher will ask 5 prompting questions listed below to the group. The researcher will keep this study data for a minimum of 5 years.

1. Since taking the survey and workshop A, have you noticed any activity regarding: family involvement, eurocentrism; historic, structural & racial inequities, lack of skills to combat disparities, overrepresentation in restrictive placements, disproportionate rates in achievement, exclusionary discipline, drop-out; deficit views, lack of teacher training & resources?

2. Since taking the survey and workshop B, have you noticed any activity regarding: culturally responsive-sustaining transition; cultural reciprocity, universal design for transition, taxonomy for transition, family-student oriented transition planning, innovation configuration, culturally responsive/sustaining transition portfolio?

3. What opportunities do you have to reflect on your practices?

4. Have you noticed any practices at your school that seem unfair or inequitable to your students and what do you think could or has been done to address this issue?

5. The training and dialogical cultural circle were intentionally designed to create supportive loving guidance vs. top-down instruction. How was this [modeling of listening] praxis helpful in the “coaching” opportunities? Is this something you could apply with students and families?
APPENDIX G

Individual Interview Protocol

Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed

Framing to Participants:
Your responses will be kept confidential, no one will know your identity. This interview will be recorded through audio via zoom. Participants are not asked to use the video function during the interview. Pseudonyms will be used to represent which category you identify with (ex. Special Education Teacher). The researcher will ask twelve questions listed below to each participant. The study data will be kept by the researcher for a minimum of five years.

Upon reflection as a Special Education Teacher, I would like to know where you now find yourself as an educator in preparing your students with disabilities for life after high school.

Prompting Questions for Individual Interview:

1. How knowledgeable do you feel about postsecondary transition resources after the workshop and reflexive dialogue group session and implementation on your own student?
   - Not at all
   - Somewhat
   - Quite a bit
   - Very Much

2. How knowledgeable do you feel about postsecondary transition resources after the workshop and reflexive dialogue group session and implementation on your own student?
   - Not at all
   - Somewhat
   - Quite a bit
   - Very Much

3. Tell me about the process you took in preparing your student for their postsecondary transition (IEP). Did you experience any challenges with the school, with students, with families, with outside agencies?

4. How has family involvement shifted throughout this process?

5. What resources did you use to help prepare for your student’s postsecondary transition process?
6. How did the workshop and dialogical cultural circle help (if applicable) inform your practice and views on postsecondary transition?

7. How do your teaching practices promote student growth and active participation in their environment as it relates to their identities?

8. How are your student's postsecondary transition goals based on student self-determined behaviors and decision-making?

9. How did you teach or promote ABARAA social-emotional learning skills with your student?

10. Looking at the cultural proficiency continuum, how has your understanding and/or practice changed since you started this study?

11. What were your thoughts and what procedure(s) did you take if/when your student struggled in meeting your expectations for the transition planning activities?

12. Is there any other support I can give you in your personal awareness, reflection, or action related to transition?
IRB #: IRB-2022-507
Title: Equalizing Postsecondary Transition for At-Promise Youth Receiving Special Education Services: A Chance to Succeed
Creation Date: 7-7-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Karla Sanchez
Review Board: USD IRB
Sponsor:

Study History

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Key Study Contacts

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<tr>
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