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General Education Teachers' Self-Efficacy to Teach Autistic Students in Kindergarten
through Fourth Grade General Education Classrooms

By
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Approval Page

This dissertation was submitted by Tanya M. Wynn under the direction of the persons listed below. It was submitted to the Gardner-Webb University School of Education and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education at Gardner-Webb University.

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Abstract

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Children are being diagnosed with autism at an alarming rate; and as these students enter schools to be educated alongside their peers, general education teachers need to feel prepared to teach them. Many years ago, students with autism were placed in separate classrooms and were not in general education classrooms. As times have changed and autistic students enter into general education classrooms that are taught by general education teachers, this study examined the self-efficacy of those teachers when it comes to educating these students.

This research was done in a rural school district, and kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers from three schools in the same district were used. Teachers were asked to fill out survey statements and teacher information forms and to attend a focus group. The research compared teacher education, preparedness, and training to see if they made a difference when it came to the self-efficacy of teachers.

The main findings of the research indicate that teachers who had more training, experience, and education were the teachers who showed a higher level of self-efficacy when it came to teaching autistic students in their general education classrooms.

Additionally, the research showed that teachers with a greater sense of self-efficacy were also teachers who were able to share strategies and successes when it came to teaching autistic students in their general education classrooms. Strategies and successes were shared in this study by all participants involved.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and autism are two terms given to a group of complex disorders of brain development. There are varying degrees of these disorders; and they can be categorized by difficulties in social interaction, repetitive behaviors, and verbal and nonverbal communication. Autism was once known as a rare disorder; but according to the Center for Disease Control's (CDC, 2016) Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network, it is estimated that one in 150 children in the United States is now diagnosed with autism. Autism and ASD have increased at an alarming rate in recent years. Autism appears to show its roots in very early brain development with obvious signs emerging between the ages of 2 and 3 years old (Autism Speaks, 2016).

In order to estimate the number of students with ASD, the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network was put into place. This monitoring network is a "group of programs funded by CDC and monitors children with autism and other developmental disabilities living in different areas of the United States" (CDC, 2016, para. 2). The Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network's goals are to

- Describe the population of children with ASD,

- Compare how common ASD is in different areas of the country,

- Identify changes in ASD occurrence over time, and

- Understand the impact of ASD and related conditions in U.S. communities (CDC, 2016, para. 1).

According to Spencer and Simpson (2009), there is not a single definitive cause of ASD; however, most authorities do agree that autism has a neurological basis. There are brain structures that have been found that differ in individuals with autism, specifically smaller size of the cerebellum; abnormalities in the limbic system with decreased Purkinje neurons; and a smaller facial nucleus which controls facial expression. There is definitive research that indicates a genetic component in 5-10% of all autistic cases. When a family has one child who has autism, there is an increased chance of the same family having an additional child with autism (Spencer & Simpson, 2009).

There was a time not long ago that if asked what causes autism, the answer would be as simple as "there is no way to know." With increased research and autism showing up in such alarming numbers, researchers are delivering answers needed to these questions. In the last 5 years, scientists have found a number of rare gene changes or mutations that are associated with autism (Autism Speaks, 2016). Most cases of autism appear to be caused by a combination of autism risk genes and environmental factors influencing the brain.

When soon-to-be parents find out they are expecting a child, they do whatever they need to do to ensure a healthy baby.

> That includes doing what they can to lower the risk of their child being born with ASD. Research done by The New England Journal of Medicine found differences in the brains of children with autism as early as the second trimester of pregnancy. (Roth Port, 2016, para. 3)

There is not much at all that can be done about genetics, but there are things that can be done to alter exposure, if pregnant, to certain environmental factors that are said to be linked to ASD (Roth Port, 2016). According to "Daniele Fallin, Ph.D., director of the

Wendy Klag Center for Autism and Developmental Disabilities at the John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, pregnant women need to take some safe, proactive steps that can potentially protect their babies" (Roth Port, 2016, para. 1).

According to McDonnell (2010), "emerging research points to the effects of gestational and perinatal environment on the developing neural and immune systems as they may pertain to autism" (p. 2). There are many gastrointestinal (GI) problems common in children with autism, so there are women who choose to address their own GI-related conditions prior to conceiving. One of the things mothers do during pregnancy to prevent GI problems is to reduce or eliminate white foods such as sugar, bread, pasta, and bagels. "If a woman has a history of candida (yeast), for instance overgrowth, or digestive problems, gluten intolerance, food allergies, bloating, constipation, or parasites, they treat these conditions before becoming pregnant" (McDonnell, 2010, p. 2).

Developing infants are social by nature, showing signs by gazing at faces; turning toward voices; grasping fingers; and smiling. There are some children who develop autism who have difficulty engaging in the give and take of everyday human interactions. According to Autism Speaks (2016), by the age of 8-10 months, there are infants who develop autism and show signs and symptoms such as failure to respond, reduced interest in people, and delayed babbling. These are the children who become toddlers and exhibit difficulty when it comes to playing games that require them to be social. They often like to play alone instead of with other children. Research has shown that children with autism are attached to their parents. To the parents, it can seem as if the child is disconnected by the way the child expresses the attachment. Children and adults who have autism have difficulty at times interpreting what others are thinking and feeling.

According to Raising Autism Awareness (2014), part of a child's well baby checkup is when a "child's doctor performs developmental screenings where specific questions are asked about a baby's progress. The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) lists five behaviors that may warrant further evaluation:

- Does not babble or coo by 12 months.

- Does not gesture (point, wave, grasp) by 12 months.

- Does not say single words by 16 months.

- Does not say two-word phrases on his or her own by 24 months.

- Has any loss of any language or social skill at any age. (p. 2)

Displaying these five signs does not mean that a child is autistic, but it does mean that an evaluation by a pediatrician is merited.

The use of evidence-based methods and effective preparation is necessary to educate students with autism as they enter public schools. According to Doehring and Winterling (2011), most children with ASD begin receiving specialized instruction in public schools. The authors went on to describe that "evidence-based practices would have limited impact in school programs unless there is a cycle of continuous professional development" (Strong, 2014, p. 1). The professional development that was discussed should include training and professional development that magnifies evidence-based practices that can be used to close the research-to-practice gap (Strong, 2014).

The Evaluation Process

A full individual evaluation is required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) to establish if the child meets the criteria for one of 13 types of disabilities that are addressed by this federal statute. The definition of autism according

to IDEA is as follows.

> Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and
> nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3,
> which adversely affects a child's educational performance. Other characteristics
> often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and
> stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily
> routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. (Autism Spectrum
> Disorder, 2016, p. 1)

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association (DSM-IV-TR) establishes the diagnostic criteria for autism. The first diagnostic category is qualitative impairment in social interaction based on problems with nonverbal behaviors. These behaviors include eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, body postures, and lack of peer relationships at the child's developmental levels. Teachers in a classroom may see many behaviors such as children who do not look at their peers and smile or a child who seems as if he/she is a loner (Spencer & Simpson, 2009).

The second category DSM-IV-TR addresses in the diagnosis of autism is qualitative impairment in communication. This communication problem includes delayed or even absent speech in some cases that is accompanied by lack of gestures and nonverbal communication. The children who cannot speak will need specific training in using gestures and nonverbal means of interacting to help with communication (Spencer & Simpson 2009).

The third category in the DSM-IV-TR involves restricted and repetitive patterns of interest and behavior. In this area, there are oftentimes exceedingly restricted patterns

of interest and repetitive stimulatory movements often referred to as "stims." A delay from typical development in the areas of socializing, communicating, and imaginary play can be noticed before the age of 3 in some cases. It is usually at an early age that the family notices these differences. As a result, most of the children with autism or ASD are enrolled in early childhood intervention programs with special education services or in private programs (Spencer & Simpson, 2009).

There is a significant demand for qualified personnel when it comes to helping autistic students in a general education classroom by maximizing their educational, social, and communicative skills. Autism now affects 1% of youth from ages 3-17 years old and is the fastest growing developmental disability in the world, with a growth rate of 1,148% in the last 20 years (Autism Speaks, 2016). In order to receive the education essential to meet the needs of students with autism, there are specialized degrees offered.

ASD specialists, like other behavioral counselors, usually begin their education by acquiring a bachelor's degree in psychology, social work, special education, or a related field. According to Fredericks (2005), "an undergraduate degree program in psychology may include courses in child development, cognitive science, speech-language pathology and neurology, while a degree program in social work emphasizes the study of human behavior" (p. 1). Special education students can expect to take classes that explain how humans learn and how to teach individuals with learning disabilities (Fredericks, 2005).

In 2007, the U.S. Department of Education and the Office of Special Education Programs funded the National Center on Autism Spectrum Disorder. The National Autism Center was formed the next year, 2008. According to several independent researchers and many leading experts, there are "personnel preparation programs in higher education [that] remain inadequate in the area of training teachers to use effective

programming for students with ASD" (Strong, 2014, para. 3).

A teacher who receives a child with autism in their classroom will hopefully receive excellent and thorough assessments, and the full results will be available for the teacher to properly plan for the child's education. Sometimes, parents and school administrators feel it is better for the teacher not to be privy to the child's medical diagnosis or evaluation reports because they might lead to lowered expectations or fixed attitudes about the child's capacity, either consciously or unconsciously (Fein & Dunn, 2007).

There are certainly pros and cons associated with the inclusion of students with autism. When it comes to the classroom as a whole, teachers have experienced the benefits as well as the consequences of autistic students in a general education classroom. The type of disability and the way the behaviors are manifested seem to play a major part in the overall attitudes of teachers to the inclusion.

There are many different educational goals set by teachers when a child enters their classroom with autism. According to the National Research Council (2001), "at the root of these goals are societal desires and expectations about the benefits of education for all children, and assumptions about what is important and what is impossible to teach children with autism" (para. 2). Education provides opportunities for knowledge and skills used to support independence as well as social responsibility (Kavale & Forness, 1999, p. 413). It was found that the majority of teachers are not fully receptive to inclusion because they do not know how to differentiate instruction or what kind of support to provide to the children with disabilities (Kavale & Forness, 1999, p. 413).

Purpose of the Study

This study reviewed the research pertaining to autistic students in kindergarten

through fourth grades and their general education teachers. Teacher modifications in the classroom settings were discussed based on research and interventions to facilitate developmentally appropriate strategies. Teacher self-efficacy was explored as it relates to autistic students in a general education classroom. Self-efficacy refers to individual judgment of one's capabilities to meet specific environmental demands (Bandura, 1997).

When it comes to inclusion, it is important to identify a teacher's attitude towards it. The reasoning for this is that a teacher's attitude can impact the success of the autistic student in his/her classroom due to it affecting the teacher's performance in the classroom. According to Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000), "Professionals' attitudes may act to facilitate or constrain the implementation of policies. . . . The success of innovative and challenging programs must surely depend upon the cooperation and commitment of those most directly involved" (p. 2). Soodak, Podell, and Lehman (1998) also supported this finding, reporting that "teachers who embraced the responsibility to be inclusive have also elevated the quality of instruction, and the instruction was deemed more effective than that of teachers who had dissimilar beliefs concerning inclusion" (p. 492).

The study was conducted using three elementary schools with kindergarten through fourth-grade students who have been diagnosed with autism and are in general education settings. All the schools used in the study are in the same district. Outcome data were used to identify the modifications needed for general education teachers to be better prepared for students with autism. Determining factors needed to assist students in adjusting in a general educational setting were also studied. Teacher education and experience were researched as they relate to their classroom strategies with students with autism.

The study was conducted in a rural school district that includes 16 schools from prekindergarten through twelfth grades. For the 2015-2016 school year, the school system where the study was conducted had a total population of 9,145 students and 609 teachers. The gender ratio was 52% male and 48% female. The demographic group makeup was White, 38%; Hispanic, 34%; Black, 27%; American Indian, 1%; and Asian-Pacific Islander, 0%. The median household income in the county was $34,787, compared to $46,693 for the state in 2015. The poverty rate in the county was 27.7%, compared to 17.2% for the entire state.

This study examined teacher self-efficacy when dealing with the academic standards and the inclusion of autistic students in general education. Teachers involved in the study were asked to discuss students and experiences they have encountered when teaching autistic students in their general education classrooms. In this study, the participants were asked to complete a survey based on teacher self-efficacy when teaching autistic students in a general education classroom. Participants were also asked to participate in a focus group. The focus of this study was to determine the preparedness of teachers in a general education classroom when dealing with students identified with autism.

The survey consisted of two parts, Part A and Part B. Part A (Appendix A) gathered teacher demographic information; gender, age, educational level, how many years teaching, and how many years teaching autistic students in their classrooms. Part B (Appendix B) consisted of 20 statements (Anderson, 2015) that assessed participant opinions regarding the benefits of including students with autism and their beliefs about how prepared they feel when doing so (Kern, 2006). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statements on the survey (Appendix B). Participants had

discussions in the focus groups regarding these statements and the research questions.

The survey was conducted to evaluate the experiences teachers have regarding the inclusion of autistic children in their classrooms. This was done to gauge whether the teachers felt confident when teaching autistic students in their general education classrooms and what their attitudes were when it came to meeting the needs of these students. The focus groups were used to discuss teacher self-efficacy when dealing with the inclusion of autistic students in general education settings.

After administering the survey statements, the data were compiled to reflect the answers given by the participants. The answers to the survey were used as a guide for the direction of the focus groups, and results from the survey were shared during the focus group to guide the discussion without using each participant's name.

Qualitative Method

"The strategy of inquiry employed in this qualitative study was grounded theory" (Creswell, 1998, para. 1). According to Creswell (1998), grounded theory is a theory generated from data systematically obtained and analyzed through the constant comparative method. There are "multiple stages of data collection and refinement and interrelationship of categories of information involved in the process" (Creswell 1998, para. 5). There are two primary characteristics of this design that are the constant comparison of data and have emerging categories and theoretical sampling of different groups to maximize the similarities and the differences of information (Creswell, 1998).

There is considerable significance when it comes to grounded theory because it (a) provides explicit, sequential guidelines for conducting qualitative research; (b) offers specific strategies for handling the analytic phases of inquiry; (c) streamlines and integrates data collection and analysis; (d) advances

conceptual analysis of qualitative data; and (e) legitimizes qualitative research as scientific inquiry. (Charmaz, 2003, para. 3)

Statement of the Problem

Educating students with autism can be an intense undertaking, depending on the needs and modifications necessary for the student. This can be a difficult task with proper training but an even more challenging situation if a classroom teacher does not feel prepared. Most students with autism will likely need some form of modifications when it comes to a general education classroom.

Knowledge is power, and that is especially true when teaching students with ASD. There are several questions that can be asked concerning effective teaching in general education classrooms with students with autism (Davis, 2011). Do the teachers in the general education classroom feel prepared when it comes to these modifications and adjustments? Do they know how and where to get the support needed to ensure the success of the autistic students they will be teaching? Experience in teaching comes with time. Does the number of years a teacher has been teaching affect their self-efficacy when it comes to autistic students in their general education classroom? These are the areas that were addressed in this study.

Research Questions

1. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on years of experience?

2. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on preparation and training?

3. What success have teachers had when working with autistic students in their general education classrooms?

Definition of Terms

Inclusion. An approach to educating students with special needs. Under the inclusion model, students with special needs spend most or all of their time with nondisabled students. Inclusion rejects the use of special schools or classrooms to separate students with disabilities from students without disabilities.

IDEA. The federal law that outlines rights and regulations for students with disabilities in the United States who require special education. This law mandates that the state provide any eligible child with a free, appropriate public education (Autism Speaks, 2016).

Individual education plan (IEP). A plan or program developed to ensure that a child who has a disability identified under the law and is attending an elementary or secondary educational institution receives specialized instruction and related services. The IEP includes a current level of functioning, a set of goals, and objectives that will be addressed in the upcoming year (Kluth, 2003).

Handicapped Children Act of 1975. This act required all public schools accepting federal funds to provide equal access to education. Public schools were required to evaluate handicapped children and create an educational plan with parent input that would equate as closely as possible to the educational experience of nondisabled students.

Mainstreaming. The practice of educating students with special needs in regular classes during specific time periods based on their skills. This means regular education classes are combined with special education classes (Vaughn, Shay, & Forgan, 2016).

Least restive environment (LRE). IDEA provides that students with disabilities are entitled to experience the "least restrictive environment." School districts are required to educate students with disabilities in regular education classrooms with nondisabled peers. The less restrictive a student's setting, the greater the opportunities for a child with autism to interact with the school population outside the special education environment (Autism Speaks, 2016).

Academic modification. Any adaptations to the content or format of an assignment to meet the specific needs of a student. Academic modifications make the scholastic environment easier to navigate while still ensuring that a student learns the necessary content (Understanding Autism & Autistic Disorders, 2011).

Self-efficacy. Refers to a person's beliefs about his or her capabilities to affect particular outcomes. Self-efficacy beliefs may influence a person's feelings about success prior to engaging in a difficult or arduous task (Bandura, 1997).

Teacher self-efficacy. A teacher's judgment of his or her capabilities to bring about desired outcomes of student engagement and learning, even among those students who may be difficult or unmotivated (Bandura, 1997; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

Professional development. A comprehensive, sustained, and intensive approach to improving teacher and principal effectiveness in raising student achievement. It includes coherent, evidence-based learning strategies and provides job-embedded coaching or other forms of assistance to support the transfer of new knowledge and skills to the classroom.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Strategies for Effective Inclusion

Congress enacted Public Law 94-142 on November 19, 1975. This law was also known as The Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Congress intended that all children with disabilities would "have a right to education, and to establish a process by which the State and local educational agencies may be held accountable for providing educational services for all handicapped children" (Wright, 2010, p. 4). This law has been amended and renamed several times since 1975. On December 3, 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Act was amended again, and the reauthorized statue is known as IDEA 2004 or the Individuals with Disabilities Act (Wright, 2010).

This law has led to students with special needs being included in general education classrooms. This is done so the students are taught alongside their nondisabled peers. This legislation holds schools accountable for every child's progress and ensures the access to general education classes for students with disabilities. There are many things to consider with the inclusion of students with autism and other disabilities, beginning with the arranging of the physical environment (Spencer & Simpson, 2009).

Physical environment is important to autism in classrooms because it influences behavior. The goal is to shape an environment that discourages destructive behaviors and encourages positive ones. "The physical structure and lay-out of the classroom needs to thoughtfully and intentionally designed in order to maximize physical space while meeting the needs of all learners" (Peters, 2016, p. 2). Spaces should be well defined for learners with autism or other types of developmental disabilities. The environment needs to give students a clue about what he/she will be doing and what the expectations are while the student is in the area (Peters, 2016, p. 2).

Students with autism have been known to present some challenges for educators when it comes to inclusion. This may be in part because there is no single autistic student who appears characteristically the same. According to Pilewskie (2009), many students with ASD have a difficult time processing language auditory, especially when it includes metaphors, innuendoes, and jokes. Many of

> these students will struggle in a classroom environment where most of the information is presented verbally. It is these same students who may have a great visual memory and able to use it productively in the classroom. Students with ASD (as well as visual learners) will benefit from instruction delivered in picture icons or written sequentially. (Pilewskie, 2009, para. 3)

There are many different approaches teachers can use to modify instruction. Teachers can visually deliver instruction in the following ways.

- **Use multisensory delivery.** Dramatic presentations, comics, PowerPoint presentations, overheads, movies, and online resources involve both auditory and visual processing.

- **Use color.** Color-coded notebooks or colored markers and pens can help students differentiate subjects. Color can also be used to highlight directions.

- **Use visual cues.** Schedules, calendars, timetables, and lists of items to complete can be placed on students' desks. These can take a variety of forms: written, pictures or symbols, and photos. Alphabet and number lines or mnemonic devices also provide visual cues for students. Bulletin boards, banners, posters, and flashcards reinforce content area knowledge (Pilewskie, 2009, para. 4).

Describing behavioral characteristics of children and youth with autism can be a

difficult task because every child on the autism spectrum is a unique individual, and no two cases are alike. There are common behaviors that include stereotypic behavior; self-stimulatory behavior; distractibility; impulsivity; obsessive insistence on routine; and the need for sameness, perseveration, and aggression (Pilewskie, 2009, para. 2).

According to a report by the CDC released in March 2016, less than half of the children identified with autism (43%) had received comprehensive developmental evaluations by the age of 3. The vast majority of these children had developmental concerns noted in their medical records before the age of 3. Early intervention of autism is crucial when it comes to how it impacts a child's behavior and future well-being. The symptoms of autism can worsen and result in more costly care over the course of a lifetime. There are innumerable challenges for a child with autism as they reach school age, but this can also be seen as an incredible opportunity for growth (Autism Speaks, 2016).

According to Autism Speaks (2016), "there are numerous treatment approaches when it comes to school aged children with autism" (para. 3). Some of these approaches include applied behavior analysis; occupational therapy; and a range of supplemental therapies, dietary regimens, and so much more. There are educational programs that provide learning experiences to children with different needs and different abilities (Autism Speaks, 2016).

It was only a few decades ago that many people, children and adults, were placed in institutions when it was discovered that they had autism. That is not the case as we deal with autism today. It is now known that with appropriate services, support, training, and information, children who have autism will grow, learn, and flourish even if it is at different developmental rates than others who are without this disability. When it comes

to the services, support, training, and information these students need, the schools and those involved in the process are the ones who are held accountable (Understanding Autism & Autistic Disorders, 2011).

Professional attitudes toward the inclusion of students as it relates to autism can be caused by many factors. One of those factors can be the level of confidence a teacher has when it comes to teaching these students. The support they are receiving and opportunities for collaboration can be other factors that affect teacher attitudes. In Avramidis et al. (2000), it was reported that

> regular teachers' attitudes reflected lack of confidence in their own instructional skills and quality of support personnel available to them. They were positive about integrating only those whose disabling characteristics were not likely to require extra instructional or management skills from the teacher. (p. 4)

Researchers and administrators as well as policymakers "have called for appropriate inclusionary modifications and other supports for general education teachers who assume primary instructional responsibility for children and youth with disabilities for years" (Spencer & Simpson, 2009, p. 484; Miller & Savage, 1995; Myles & Simpson, 1989). Modifications and support are essential when it comes to students with autism because of their unique needs. Some of these needs "include availability of appropriately trained support personnel, reduced class size, and access to collaborative problem-solving relationships" (Autism Speaks, 2016, p. 4). Teacher efficacy also plays a pivotal role in classroom management and positive outcomes for autistic students (Welch & Newton, 2010).

Teacher efficacy is described as a teacher's confidence in his/her ability to promote student learning (Protheroe, 2008). According to Protheroe (2008),

when it comes to a teachers' level of confidence about their ability to promote

learning it can depend on past experiences or on the school culture. Principals

can help develop a sense of efficacy for individual teachers and for the entire

school. (p. 21)

Goddard and Skria (2006)

looked at school characteristics reported by 1,981 teachers and correlated them

with teachers' reported levels of efficacy. Less than half the difference in efficacy

could be accounted for by factors such as the school's socioeconomic status level,

students' achievement level, and faculty experience. Based on this, they suggest

that principals have the opportunity to build collective efficacy through the

experiences they provide for teachers. (p. 4)

There are some researchers, according to Goddard, Hoy, and Hoy (2000), who

have taken the concept of teacher efficacy to another level and have developed a

complementary construct called collective teacher efficacy. Goddard et al. defined this

as,

the perceptions of teachers in a school that the efforts of the faculty as a whole

will have a positive effect on students, with the faculty in general agreeing that

teachers in this school can get through to the most difficult students. (p. 7)

In the view of these researchers, "teachers' shared beliefs shape the normative

environment of schools . . . [and] are an important aspect of the culture of the school"

(Goddard et al., 2000, p. 4).

By its very nature, teaching involves solving defined problems that may be

complex and dynamic. Teacher effectiveness is largely dependent on how teachers define

tasks, employ strategies, view the possibility of success, and ultimately solve the

problems and challenges they face. According to Bray-Clark and Bates (2003), "it is the capacity of teachers to be self-organizing, self-reflective, self-regulating and proactive in their behavior that underlies the importance of self-efficacy as a critical component in teacher effectiveness" (p. 4). According to Bray-Clark and Bates, there is a link between personal agency and a teacher's efficacy beliefs that lies in their personal experience and a teacher's ability to reflect on that experience and make decisions about future courses of action.

There is research that suggests that teacher self-efficacy is important for overall school effectiveness. There is evidence that teacher self-efficacy may be the key to mediating factors between a school's climate and professional culture. This may lead to teachers with high self-efficacy, which may also lead to higher performing schools (Olivier, 2001). According to Clark (2005), "this raises interesting questions about the possibility of important and substantial cross-level efficacy-performance relationships in which individual self-efficacy levels of teachers may both be affected by and influence the collective efficacy of departments or schools as a whole" (p. 4).

Measures of teacher self-efficacy that have been used with educators include the Teacher Efficacy Scale (TES; Brouwers & Tomic, 2001). The original TES is a 30-item questionnaire with a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). The TES is made up of two dimensions identified as personal efficacy and general efficacy. Personal efficacy taps into teacher beliefs about their own ability to create positive student outcomes. General efficacy taps into one's belief that education provided by *any* teacher can bring about positive change, regardless of environmental factors such as family background, home environment, and parental influences. The second measure, Teacher Interpersonal Self-Efficacy Scale, is a 24-item questionnaire

that assesses teacher perceptions of their abilities to manage their classroom, elicit

support from colleagues, and elicit support from their principal. Items are measured with

a 6-point Likert-type scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree.

The Autism Self-Efficacy Scale for Teachers (ASSET) was developed to help

understand the self-efficacy of teachers responsible for the educational programs of

students with autism and how self-efficacy might influence student outcomes (Ruble,

Toland, Birdwhistell, McGrew & Usher, 2013). Recent research suggests that students

with autism, in particular, may impose more stress on teachers when compared to other

groups of students such as those with emotional or behavioral problems, attention deficit

hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), or cognitive disabilities. For example, the characteristics

associated with ASD such as impaired social and communication skills as well as

repetitive patterns of behavior impact all areas of learning and interactions with others,

which might thereby lower a teacher's sense of efficacy for working effectively with such

students (Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011).

Knowing the general characteristics of autism is key, but teaching strategies for

students with autism still should be individualized; and it is essential for teachers to

realize what their expectations of their students are and to feel as comfortable as possible.

Special education teachers are equipped with the knowledge of what these strategies are

and what a successful plan looks like for these students. A method special education

teachers use is discrete trial teaching (DTT). According to Smith (2001) in Educate

Autism, one of the most important instructional methods for students with autism is DTT.

DTT is a method of teaching in simplified and structured steps and allowing skills to be

broken down and "built-up" using discrete trials that teach each step one at a time (Smith,

2001). DTT targets skills and behaviors based on an established curriculum. Each of the

skills is broken down into small steps and taught to the student using prompts until mastered. There is also a learning system that allows children with little or no verbal ability to communicate using pictures (Autism Speaks, 2016).

Public education in this country has long worked to address the needs of all students with various disabilities. One of the most pivotal changes in public education as it relates to disabilities in general education classrooms dates back to 1975 with the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. One of the changes to this law has been the addition of autism to the disability category. This was a significant revision and pertinent to autism because previously it was not included in the law.

While IDEA has done a lot for change when it comes to educating students with disabilities, there is also another federal law that has contributed to educational changes: the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). NCLB requires not only access to the general curriculum but also state-mandated assessment in the major subjects of math, reading, writing, and science (Krueger, 2002). General education teachers are required to adapt their instructional strategies to accommodate students with disabilities in the general education classrooms across the country.

Mainstreaming, sometimes referred to as inclusion, refers to educating children with special needs in regular education classrooms for part of or, in some cases, all of the school day. "It is according to the federal guidelines that children with special needs are to be placed in the 'least restrictive environment,' meaning that they should be given the benefits from being with other students who do not have disabilities" (Ross-Hill, 2009, para. 4).

When it comes to adapting instruction to fit the needs of students with autism in the general education classroom, there are many things that the teacher needs to consider.

Some teachers may feel apprehension when it comes to the idea of inclusion. Ross-Hill (2009) explained that "not offering frequent and substantial training brings about tension, stress, and strain for both teachers and students alike in inclusive settings" (para. 2).

The degree of intervention needed varies from student to student. Modifications require that the teacher make adjustments and changes to assignments and what is being taught to fit the needs of the student. Socialization may be hard to attain for some of the students with autism due to unusual behaviors they may exhibit. According to Robertson, Chamberlain, and Kasari (2003), "the hyperactivity/impulsivity and opposition/defiance were rated as having highly conflictual effects in the classroom" (p. 3). Emam and Farrell (2009) reported that "these behaviors are detrimental in an inclusive classroom because they may cause frequent disruptions and distractions, which decreases learning time and restricts their opportunities for participation to school activities and affect their relationships with teachers and peers" (para. 2).

Autism and the Inclusion Mandate

Less than 10 years ago, children were rarely, if ever, placed in general education classrooms to learn alongside their nondisabled peers. Autistic children and children with any disability were more likely to be found in separate classrooms isolated from their peers without disabilities if not in a different classroom altogether (Dybrik, 2004). The result of the inclusion movement has made it possible for students with autism to be included in regular education classrooms. The idea behind the inclusion is very clear; every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture.

"The number of school-aged children with disabilities declined between 2004 and 2013 but the percentage of those identified as having autism soared by as much as 258 percent across age groups over the 10 year period," according to the U.S. Department of

Education (Heasley, 2016, p. 7). There were 95% of special education students who spent at least some of their day in general education classrooms in 2013, according to federal data (Heasley, 2016). Despite this, students identified as having intellectual disabilities or multiple disabilities were least likely to spend the majority of their time in inclusive environments (Heasley, 2016).

According to Dybrik (2004), more than 95% of students with physical, emotional, learning, cognitive, visual, and hearing disabilities receive some or all of their education in regular classrooms. This is a result of evolving legislation and educational initiatives that have been set in place for those students. In 2000-2001, 47% of students with disabilities spent at least 80% of their school day in the general education classroom. That number was up from 31% in the late 1980s. Today, as we look at those numbers, there has been a significant jump, especially for students with autism. Autism is the fastest growing disability in the country. It was during the 1990s that the numbers began to rise more than fivefold (Dybrik, 2004).

There have been challenges along the way with the proponents of inclusion stressing the importance of all children and their value as members of the human community. All parents would love to see their child have friendships with classmates and to have the opportunity to participate in all regular activities. There are those who doubt that inclusion can work but not generally those who question the values that lay behind it. Certified special education teachers receive formal training in ways to suit each child's unique needs, and it is argued by some that the regular education teachers are geared towards the norm and they are not equipped to handle issues for children with special learning needs.

Diane Twachtman-Cullen is a speech pathologist at the Autism and

Developmental Disabilities Consultation Center in Connecticut and specializes in autism, Asperger Syndrome, and related conditions. Dr. Twachtman has a "list of what she describes as the worst practices in inclusion" (Dybrik, 2004, p. 23). Included in that list are

- Insisting on inclusion at all costs.

- Settling for a mere physical presence in the classroom.

- Giving priority to the inclusive education model over the individual needs of children.

- Providing little or no training to staff.

- Keeping paraprofessional out of the loop.

- Teaching rote information so the student can pass mandated tests instead of teaching needed skills.

- Watering down curriculum.

- Failing to teach peers about the nature of disabilities and how to interact with peers who have a disability (Dybrik, 2004).

Disadvantages of Inclusion

There are many known benefits of inclusion of students with autism in regular education classrooms, but there are also some challenges. A special education teacher has been provided training on working with students with various disabilities; "they can tailor their teaching to the specific needs of each child" (Dybrik, 2004, p. 21). In a regular education setting, that is not always the case. The general education teacher oftentimes has a higher number of students, and these teachers do not have specialized training in autism or any other disability.

Autism is a spectrum disorder, which means these students can range from high functioning to severely disabled; some of the students do not even speak. In situations where a student cannot speak or has a limited way of communicating, teachers are asked to change their teaching methods to accommodate these students. There are times when children with autism may need intensive and focused instruction that may not be available in regular education classrooms (Autism Spectrum Disorders, 2012).

As there are many advocates for students to be included in regular education classrooms, there are also those who feel it is a disadvantage to the child with autism. There are opponents of inclusion who feel that general education teachers are not equipped to handle student diversity. There are many fears; one of the biggest fears being that the performance of general education students will suffer because students with disabilities such as autism will consume too much of the teachers' time. According to Vaughn et al. (2016), parents of high achieving students worry that their child will be relied upon too much as peer tutors of lower achieving students. Some teachers worry that if emergencies arise in the classroom, they will be unable to handle the students with disabilities (Vaughn et al., 2016).

Inclusion needs to be based on the child, not the diagnosis. There are some students who are included in general education classrooms who are extremely successful and others who require more specialized instruction and individualized lessons. Whether students with autism are in regular education classrooms or smaller specialized classrooms, parents and teachers need to work closely together to ensure student success (Dybrik, 2004).

Mainstreaming Benefits

When it comes to mainstreaming students into regular education classes, each student must be assessed to determine the amount of the day that can be spent in regular education classes, even if there is required support. One of the many advantages of mainstreaming is that it will assist in preparing students for the life outside of school as well as college and work. When it comes to life beyond school years, children and adults will need to adjust to interacting with students with and without disabilities.

The lack of quality preschool programs has been known as one of the challenges of inclusion (Barnett & Hustedt, 2011). Educators of preschoolers aim to develop and acquire the skills students need to be successful in school and later in life. According to Epstein (2008), this is done "through thoughtfully designed environments and intentional, structured interactions that scaffold children's growth and learning" (p. 6). There has been a recent push in early childhood that prepares young children to be more academically successful. There are several milestones that must be reached to "effectively apply their knowledge in a kindergarten classroom" (Epstein, 2008, p. 44).

There are national technical assistance and research centers such as the Center for Social Emotional Foundations of Early Learning, the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Interventions, and the National Center on Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness that have focused on collecting and disseminating research about the importance of development in early childhood (Barnett & Hustedt, 2011). According to Barnett and Hustedt (2011), "the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) researchers reported a $715 per student cut in state-funded prekindergarten, or a 15% decrease in state pre-school program funding, over the last decade (para. 3). These cuts come despite evidence that strong social and emotional beginnings reduce the

achievement gap by the time children begin kindergarten and can lead to academic success and future employment.

There are proponents who have pointed out those children with autism who interact with their peers show tremendous growth. Children with autism often have difficulty when it comes to social interaction, and inclusion allows for friendships with children without disabilities. One positive benefit inclusion provides for regular education students is that it fosters an environment of tolerance and friendship. Students without disabilities learn to accept, relate to, and become friends with those who may otherwise be considered different than them.

Fein and Dunn (2007) described a recipe for success when it comes to a happy and productive school year for an autistic child. The first step that was discussed was to be realistic and set achievable goals for the child. The second step would be understanding that there will be ups and downs, challenges, and problems that even the best teacher will encounter. Chances are that a teacher will need to do more curriculum modifications and be aware that the child will probably make slower social and academic gains if he/she does not have these characteristics:

- Cognitive abilities that test in or near the average range.

- Communicative language present by the age of 5.

- Absence of seizures.

- Diagnosis of autism in the preschool years or earlier and placement in intensive intervention (Fein & Dunn, 2007, p. 128).

Building Classroom Communities

Teachers can build classroom communities that will foster and encourage

relationships for students with autism who struggle to make social connections. More than an inclusive classroom is needed for these students to feel successful, so teachers are often expected to facilitate friendships to provide these students with social opportunities (Autism Speaks, 2016). According to Autism Speaks (2016),

> developing and sustaining a school community often requires that educators use strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and respect. Teachers may encourage community by using cooperative learning experiences, conflict resolution opportunities, games, class meetings, and service learning. (p. 4)

There are times when individuals with autism are asked to make accommodations to use typical behaviors that we may expect in the general education classroom. What must be understood is that what was once typical is not anymore. There are students with varying disorders and needs in classrooms; and instead of expecting them to display typical behaviors, we should rethink our ideas and concepts and question whether students with autism conforming is always the best way to support them (Latham, 2016). Ten positive ways to support students with autism and their behaviors are listed by Kluth (2003):

- If possible, ask the student about the behavior.
- Talk to the student's family.
- Make the most of the school community.
- Focus on connection and relationships.
- Be gentle in a crisis.
- Consider perception and language.

- Teach new skills.

- Be willing to adapt.

- Do something else.

- Take care of yourself.

These 10 ways are used to help understand, cope with, and learn about student behaviors in inclusive classrooms. There are specific students and examples that are discussed that may assist a teacher who has a student with autism in their inclusive classroom. The Autism Spectrum Disorder Inclusion Collaboration Model was described in an article by Simpson, De Boer-Ott, and Smith-Myles (2003). According to Simpson et al., the Autism Spectrum Disorder Inclusion Collaboration Model is designed to support general educators who assume responsibilities for teaching children and youth with autism. The following assumptions regarding the appropriateness of many students with autism for general education placement form the philosophic core of the model.

- Students with ASD and their nondisabled peers benefit from planned contact with one another.

- Given appropriate support and resources, the majority of general education teachers, staff members, and administrators are agreeable to having qualified students with ASD in their classrooms.

- General educators are willing and able to effectively assume primary teaching responsibility for many students with ASD, contingent on special educator and ancillary staff support and other resources (Simpson, 2004).

According to Teffs and Whitbread (2009), "little is known about the status of personnel preparation for teachers of children with ASD" (p. 134), but recent studies

have shown that providing teachers with professional development specifically designed for serving students with ASD has a positive impact on student outcomes (Browder, Trela, & Jimenez, 2007). Harrison (1998) believed that "for successful inclusion of children diagnosed as having autism, teachers need to develop an understanding of the disability and adapt the curriculum to meet the students' individual needs" (p. 181). Harrison agreed that in order to adapt the school environment to promote greater inclusion, general education teachers need to develop a greater understanding of autism and how it affects the individual student.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this qualitative research was to study teacher self-efficacy when it comes to autistic students in a general education setting and to determine if there were factors that influence self-efficacy for K-4 teachers. According to Ruble et al. (2011), "teacher self-efficacy refers to the beliefs teachers have regarding their capability to bring about desired instructional outcomes. Teacher self-efficacy may also be helpful for understanding and addressing critical issues such as teacher attrition and teacher use of research-supported practices" (p. 12).

There was a detailed description of the study sent to 15 teachers along with an invitation to participate. The teachers who received the invitation were kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers employed at three different elementary schools in the study district.

The district, according to the latest census and community surveys, is home to nearly 26,000 adults who work in a variety of industries. All three of the elementary schools used in the study are located in rural areas. In 2014,

> the number of employed person(s) in the county totaled 25,783 while unemployment figures were at 1,206. Over 94% of the available population is currently employed giving the county an unemployment rate of 5.9%, which is slightly higher than the nation's average of 6.7.

"Nearly 70% of the county's workforce has received their high school diploma, while those seeking higher education is closer to 10.5%. The median household income for county residents is $35,885 with a median home value of almost $97,521." The rural area is home to many factories and farms. The three elementary schools used in the study are all in the same district.

School A serves 917 students in kindergarten through eighth grades. School A is the largest elementary school in the district. School A has 75.1% of the students receiving free lunch and 7.2% receiving reduced lunch. The student-teacher ratio in School A is 16:1. The minority enrollment is 70% of the student body, higher than any other school in the district. There are 59 teachers employed at School A. Seventeen percent of the students at School A have learning disabilities.

School B serves 699 students in kindergarten through sixth grades. School B has 64.5% of the students receiving free lunch and 6.2% receiving reduced lunch. The student-teacher ratio in School B is 16:1. The minority enrollment is 64% with the majority being Hispanics. There are 43 teachers who are employed at the school. Ten percent of the students at School B have learning disabilities.

School C serves 564 students in kindergarten through sixth grades. School C has 72.9% of the students receiving free lunch and 6.8% receiving reduced lunch. The student-teacher ratio in School C is 14:1. The minority enrollment is 53% in School C. There are 37 teachers employed at School C. Eleven percent of the students have learning disabilities at School C.

The State Board of Education released North Carolina's second annual school performance grades. The grades were calculated using 80% student achievement on certain end-of-grade and end-of-course scores and 20% student growth data for the 2014-2015 academic year. The scale used for the performance grades were A=85-100, B=70-84, C=55-69, D=40-54, and F=39 or less. School A received a 49, School B received a 63, and School C received a 58.

Participants were sent an email requesting their participation in the study and in the focus group. The study was explained, and the survey statements were emailed to all

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participants. The participants were also given a list of expectations.

The research questions directly correlate to the survey statements participants were asked to complete. The survey statements were used to gather additional information regarding teacher self-efficacy and how it benefits the autistic students they serve.

1. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on experience?

2. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on preparation and training?

3. What success have teachers had when working with autistic students in their general education classrooms?

Data Collection

Since all of the teachers who were asked to participate currently work at one of three schools, focus groups were scheduled after school hours. The participants were asked to complete a survey before attending the focus group. The survey statements were rated on a typical 5-level Likert scale of 1-5 (Appendix B). In a study that was seeking to identify barriers to positive attitudes of educators who teach students with disabilities, Kern (2006) created survey statements teachers were asked to complete. Ms. Kern was contacted and gave her permission for the researcher to use her survey with modifications. The 15 survey statements rate the participant's educational background, training, and comfort level when teaching autistic students in their general education classroom.

The survey statements were designed to determine if the self-efficacy of teachers

differs depending on years of experience or preparation and training. Survey responses and discussions from the focus group were used to provide insight into the self-efficacy of the teachers involved who teach autistic students in their general education classrooms. The purpose of this study was to examine if teachers feel prepared and confident.

A focus group was scheduled for the participants. A focus group was chosen by the researcher to reveal detailed information and deeper insight by having all participants placed in one group to discuss the self-efficacy of teachers when it relates to autistic students in their general education classrooms (Eliot & Associates, 2005). Participants were asked to meet for a focus group at School A. The location was discussed with all willing participants and a location was agreed upon.

A list of expectations (Krueger, 2002) was communicated at the initial focus group meeting. The ground rules for the focus group included

- No right or wrong answers, only differing points of view.

- We are tape recording, one person speaking at a time.

- We are on a first-name basis.

- You do not need to agree with others, but you must listen respectfully as others share their views.

- Rules for cellular phones. The researcher will ask that your turn off your phones. If you cannot and if you must respond to a call, please do so as quietly as possible and rejoin us as quickly as you can.

- The role as moderator will be to facilitate the discussion.

- Talk to each other (Krueger, 2002).

Organizing Data

In this qualitative study, the researcher conducted the focus group meeting to ensure all participants had a fair opportunity to speak and share. As soon as the data were collected, the researcher immediately processed the information. It was important to do this while the information was still fresh. The researcher recorded thoughts and reactions as accurately as possible.

After data were collected, the researcher reviewed all data in order to identify and focus on what was meaningful information. When trying to discern what was meaningful data, the researcher referred to the research questions and used them as a framework. For the data to be analyzed properly, it was grouped into meaningful patterns and themes. Grouping data into themes helped answer the research questions. The themes helped to identify what was useful information that could be connected back to the research questions.

When the focus group had been conducted, the data were analyzed and organized. The researcher immediately began data grouping. Grounded theory was used as a way to think about and conceptualize data. According to Creswell (2009), grounded theory is "a qualitative strategy of inquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study" (pp. 13, 229). "This process involves using multiple stages of data collection and the refinement and interrelationships of categories of information" (Marczak & Sewell, 2016, p. 13). Analysis will begin by going back to the intent of the study and how it relates to the research questions (Marczak & Sewell, 2016). The basic elements of analyzing the data and interpreting them were done in steps.

1. **Get to know the data**. The taped recordings were listened to several times.

All information that did not add meaning or value was not included.

2. **Focus on the analysis.** Reviewed the research questions. Focus was done by question and data were organized by question to go over all responses from all participants. All data from each question were put together.

3. **Categorize information**. Identified ideas and concepts that were discussed that presented a theme or pattern (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2003).

Conclusion

After the data were collected and categorized, the answers and discussions were carefully reviewed to determine if more in-depth coding was required. By listening to the audio from the focus groups and reviewing survey statements, key issues for the study were identified. There were two general approaches to coding that were used: open coding and focused coding. Open coding is used when the researcher remains as open as possible in their attempt to "uncover" what is in the data. Focused coding is used when the researcher identified themes and looked for associated data fitting under categories of interest (Green, 2006). The researcher used both approaches during the study.

Qualitative data are rich and complex, and the researcher was looking to get the most out of the data that were received from the focus group and survey statements (Taylor-Powell, 2004). The researcher compared the data that were uncovered with those of other studies considering points of agreement and differences. When the researcher was convinced that her framework formed a theory and was an accurate statement of the matter studied, she published the results of this study with confidence.

As the researcher reviewed all data collected, she found the answers to the research questions. The information from the focus groups as well as the survey statements revealed the self-efficacy of the teachers involved in the study. Does the self-

efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in their general education classrooms? Research for this study indicated that teacher self-efficacy is important for overall school effectiveness. According to Olivier (2001), teachers with high self-efficacy may lead to higher performing schools. The answers were found in the research of the data collected.

Chapter 4: Findings*

The purpose of this study was to measure teacher self-efficacy when it comes to teaching autistic students in their general education classes. This qualitative study was done to see if the self-efficacy of teachers differed depending on a teacher's preparedness, training, and years of experience. Successes of the teachers involved in the study were reviewed and shared.

Background of Study

The researcher for this study felt there was a need to examine if teachers who did not receive training to teach children who have autism but have them in their general education classrooms felt prepared to teach those students. The self-efficacy of the teachers who teach students with autism was explored to determine if experience and preparation played a role. The successes, if any, were also a focus in the study to discover what teachers have found that may help them feel more accomplished in working with students who have autism.

Research Questions Defined

As the researcher gathered data and analyzed information, the research questions were reviewed to ensure all questions were answered. The research questions for this study were

1. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on years of experience?

2. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on preparation and training?

3. What success have teachers had when working with autistic students in their general education classrooms?

Participants

An invitation and consent form to participate (Appendix C) was sent to 15 teachers who were employed at three different elementary schools in the study district. The invitation began by explaining the purpose of the study and giving a detailed description of the expectations if the participants chose to participate. The participants were made aware that there would be survey statements to answer as well as a teacher information form to be completed. Of the 15 invitations that were emailed to teachers in kindergarten through fourth grades, there were 11 participants who agreed to be a part of the study representing these three schools.

Once the participants agreed, they were sent a survey that included demographic and descriptive information about the participants as well as the survey statements that needed to be completed. The participants were made aware that the survey statements were to be completed before the focus group. A focus group was arranged, and participants were asked to choose between three locations and notified that the location would be the one that was chosen by the majority. The participants were given the chosen location and time and asked to arrive 10 minutes early to ensure that the focus group would begin on time.

All 11 of the participants involved in the study were women. Of the 11 participants, six were White; four were African-American; and one was Hispanic. The participants involved in the study ranged from ages 26-52 years old. The teaching experience of the participants ranged from 2-26 years. The agreed location for the focus groups was School B. The time and location were emailed to all 11 participants to ensure

there were no conflicts.

Teacher 1 is 54, currently teaches second grade at School A, and has taught for 26 years. She has a master's degree in education and one day hopes to be an administrator. Her teacher information form revealed that she has attended six to eight trainings that had to deal with autistic students.

Teacher 2 is 28 years old, presently teaches kindergarten at School A, and is beginning her second year. She has a bachelor's degree in education and plans to pursue a master's degree in education in the next few years. Her teacher information form showed that she has attended four to six trainings or workshops related to autism.

Teacher 3 is 44 years old, currently teaches second grade at School A, and has been in education for the last 17 years. During the last 17 years, she has been at three different schools teaching the same grade. She has a bachelor's degree and has some special education background working as an assistant in an exceptional children's school. Her teacher information form states that she has received over eight trainings that relate to teaching autistic students.

Teacher 4 is 40 years old, currently works at School C, and has taught fourth grade for 11 years. She has a master's degree in school administration. Her teacher information form reveals that she has had four to six trainings or workshops that relate to autistic students.

Teacher 5 is 37 years old and currently teaches fourth grade at School B. She has been a teacher for 10 years and has worked in first, second, and fourth grade. She has a bachelor's degree in business. Her teacher information form shows that she has had four to six trainings or workshops that dealt with autistic students.

Teacher 6 is 26 years old and is a kindergarten teacher at School B. She has been

in education for the last 3 years. She has a bachelor's degree and wants to pursue a master's degree in social work. Her teacher information form shows that she has had one to three trainings or workshops to prepare her to teach autistic students.

Teacher 7 is 41 years old and has worked for the last 7 years as a second-grade teacher at School C. She has a bachelor's degree in education. Her teacher information form reveals she has had four to six trainings or workshops that relate to teaching autistic students.

Teacher 8 is 28 years old and currently employed in third grade at School B. She has been in education for the last 14 years and spent 6 of those years as an assistant in a prekindergarten classroom. Her teacher information form reveals that she has had six to eight trainings or workshops that dealt with teaching autistic students.

Teacher 9 is 41 years old and currently employed at School B. She has been in education for the last 12 years; prior to teaching, she was a child support enforcement officer. She has taught third grade at School B for all 12 years she has been in education. She has expressed interest in moving to higher grades eventually. Her teacher information form revealed that she has attended over eight trainings that relate to teaching student with autism.

Teacher 10 is 27 years old and currently employed at School A. She has been a teacher for 2 years and both years have been in fourth grade. She will be returning to college next year to pursue a master's degree in school administration, and her ultimate goal is to become a principal. Her teacher information form revealed that she has received one to three trainings or workshops that dealt with teaching students with autism.

Teacher 11 is 37 years old and currently employed at School B. She has been in

education for the last 11 years, and prior to that she was a stay-at-home mother. She has taught second grade for the past 5 years, and the other 6 years were spent as a kindergarten teacher. Her teacher information form revealed that she has had more than eight trainings or workshops that deal with teaching autistic students in a general education classroom.

As a group, the mean age of participants was 37 years old. The average years of experience in education was 10 years. The respondents reported a range of one to eight trainings or workshops dealing with students with autism with a mean number of trainings for the group of six. The teachers who participated in the study worked in kindergarten through fourth grades: two kindergarten teachers, four second-grade teachers, two third-grade teachers, and three fourth-grade teachers.

Survey Statement Responses

Survey statements (Appendix B) were sent to the participants prior to the focus group. The completed survey statements were tallied, and responses were transcribed into a spreadsheet to determine average responses for each statement. These survey statements were used as a guide for the focus groups, and each participant received a copy of their responses the day of the focus group. Attention was paid to the responses that were overwhelmingly agreed upon by the participants. Many questions were answered by reviewing the responses shared by the participants.

When it came to believing that their educational backgrounds had prepared the participants to effectively teach students with autism, 73% of the participants either disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. Training to appropriately teach students with autism was addressed in the survey statements. Thirty-six percent of the participants felt they needed more training to teach these students with autism.

Statement 4 referenced being able to ask colleagues for help when issues arose with autistic students in their classroom. Sixty-four percent of the participants felt comfortable asking their colleagues for help. In the focus groups, it was evident that the participants relied on each other more than they did on the administrators in their schools. When it came to working with special education teachers, the percentage of teachers who agreed was even higher. Of the participants, 73% felt comfortable asking the special education teachers at their schools for assistance and suggestions.

Teacher 6 and Teacher 9 both work at School B; and when the topic of working with special education teachers came up in the focus group discussions, they disagreed. Teacher 6 did not feel that she was assisted by the special education teachers and relied more on her other colleagues, while Teacher 9 felt that the special education teachers at her school were a help to her.

Teachers were split on if they felt students with autism need to be in special education classrooms instead of their regular education classrooms. Forty-five percent of the participants agreed that the students should be in special education classrooms, and 36% were undecided. When this topic was discussed in the group, many of the teachers thought that some of the students with autism who exhibit violent behaviors should be with special education teachers.

There was a survey statement that asked participants if they felt that students who are verbally aggressive towards others should be maintained in a regular education classroom. There were eight of 11 participants, or 73%, who disagreed and felt students who are verbally abusive should not be in the general education classroom. In the focus group, the conversation about verbal abuse and what should be done in situations where the student becomes verbally abusive led to a conversation about physical abuse. All

teachers were in agreement during the discussion that their job is to protect all students and that they would not feel it was appropriate for the autistic student to stay in the classroom if he/she was physically abusive to the other students.

Focus Groups

The focus group method was chosen in this study to allow the participants to openly express their views, opinions, attitudes, and experiences when it came to their self-efficacy with teaching students in kindergarten through fourth grades with autism. Invitations were sent to 15 participants, and 11 participants responded and were willing to participate in the study.

Before beginning each focus group, the participants arrived to refreshments and mingled with their peers; all teachers were from the same district and taught kindergarten through fourth grades. When all participants arrived, the researcher began by explaining the study and the purpose of the study. The role of the moderator was discussed as well as the use of the audio recorder. The researcher explained the ground rules for the group and reminded all participants that they could remove themselves at any time if they felt uncomfortable or did not wish to participate any further. Data collection included audio recordings and note taking.

After all ground rules were discussed, the researcher began by giving each participant a copy of the survey statements they completed when they agreed to participate. The survey statements were used as a guide by the researcher to begin the discussion.

The researcher began both focus groups by explaining to the participants the reason for the study and why the researcher believed gathering this information was imperative to this study. Self-efficacy was discussed by the researcher and defined. The

researcher shared with the participants the increasing number of students who are entering school who are diagnosed with autism. The research questions were discussed in both groups, and the researcher went through each survey statement and allowed the participants to engage in conversation reminding them at times to speak one at a time in order for the researcher to take notes as well as be able to understand what was said later as the audio recordings were reviewed.

The discussion in the group started by the researcher pointing out that seven of the 11 participants responded that they believe their educational background did not prepare them for effectively teaching students with cognitive delays and deficits in a general education classroom. Teacher 1 who has been in education for the last 26 years said that at the time she went to school she does not remember being offered any courses that would have assisted her with working with autistic students. She shared there were no students in her classroom who had autism until about 5 years ago. She admitted that she found it difficult to adjust at first.

Teacher 1 shared her first year of working with autistic students in her general education classroom. She said there was a great relationship between the child's mother and herself. She believed she had support from the mother and her coworkers. The student was often disruptive and exhibited behavioral problems. At the time this student arrived in her classroom, she had been in education for a little over 20 years and said she remembered saying to herself, "this child will not defeat me, I will win him over as I have done the rest." According to Avramidis et al. (2000), "Professionals' attitudes may act to facilitate or constrain the implementation of policies. . . . The success of innovative and challenging programs must surely depend upon the cooperation and commitment of those most directly involved" (para. 3d).

According to Bray-Clark and Bates (2003), there is a link between personal agency and a teacher's self-efficacy beliefs that lie in their personal experience and a teacher's ability to reflect on that experience and make decisions about future courses of action. From the challenges Teacher 1 experienced in her first years of teaching students with autism in her general education classroom, it was clear that she used those experiences, learned from them, and sought out ways to connect to all of her students.

All of the teachers in the study are from the same school district, so it was surprising to see that they were so divided on the survey statement that dealt with in-service training provided by their school district. There were six teachers who disagreed and three teachers who agreed that they feel they are provided with sufficient in-service training that allows them to teach autistic students in their general education classrooms. The discussion of trainings led Teacher 6 to share that she has only received one to three trainings or workshops that dealt with autism. There were teachers who work in the same school who disagreed but were reminded that Teacher 6 had only been at the school and a teacher for the last 3 years, and they had had previous trainings prior to her coming to the school.

There was an obvious connection between teachers who had been in education for over 10 years and the amount of training they had received. Teacher 3 and Teacher 9 both revealed on information sheets that they had received over eight trainings that were strictly about preparing for autistic students in their general education classrooms. Teacher 3 has been in education for 17 years, and Teacher 9 has been in education for the last 12 years. The remaining five teachers who participated in the study who had been in education longer than 10 years all revealed that they had received six to eight trainings specifically to prepare for autistic students in their general education classrooms.

There were 11 participants who were involved in the study; of those, there were seven teachers who had been in education for over 10 years. During the focus group, Teacher 3 shared an experience that she had 4 years ago when she had an autistic student in her classroom who exhibited some behaviors that were extreme. The student would come in and before she could even begin her lesson, he would begin throwing things around the room. She gave the example of crayons that were thrown around the room as she tried to redirect him every morning. She told of how she began working with a special education teacher who gave her some strategies she found helpful.

Teacher 3 shared her feelings about how the incidents that continuously happened in her classroom were not handled to her satisfaction by administration. She said when the student first began throwing things and, as she shared, "putting other students at risk," she would call to the office and the guidance counselor would come and sit and try to redirect the student. When that did not work, they would remove the student from the room for a few minutes and bring him back. She shared the concerns of the parents of the other students and how she had to reassure parents she was doing all she could do to keep everyone safe. She believed the administration could have done more to assist her instead of continuously sending the student back with no consequences. During this discussion, there were other participants who spoke of various help they had received from special education teachers who assisted them with autistic students in their classrooms.

Teacher 4 shared her experience with a student she had in her classroom last school year. This is her eleventh year of teaching, and all of her teaching experience has been in fourth grade. She did not go out and seek colleagues to assist her, but she did "look up ways" on the internet of how to get her student more engaged in her lessons.

She spoke about how the student would come in and did not have anything to say to anyone no matter how she tried. During her lessons, he would seem uninterested and often looked scared or as if he was about to cry. She began allowing him to be her helper and the one to pass out materials and made it seem as if she could not do the lesson without him. He began to get involved and gained some friends as well.

According to Kluth (2003), developing and sustaining a school community often requires educators use strategies and practices that purposefully encourage and teach sharing, learning, interdependence, and respect. "Teachers may encourage community by using cooperative learning experiences, conflict resolution opportunities, games, class meetings, and service learning" (Kluth, 2003, p. 22). Teacher 4 seemed to do just that when she researched ways on the computer to assist with helping her student as well as making a connection.

Teacher 5 shared an experience with an autistic student whose interest she could not manage to keep. He would get out of his seat and go to areas of the room he should not be in during her instruction. She was given tips from another coworker who was also in general education but had an autistic student years ago and had found it worked to keep the student seated. She began applying Velcro under his desk, and he would run his fingers over it and remain in his seat. She spoke about how that worked, and she always thanked that teacher for her assistance as she did not know what to do.

Teacher 5 also spoke about not being able to get assistance from the administrators at her school. This began a conversation about whether the participants felt they got the support they felt was needed from their principal or assistant principal. The majority of the participants disagreed on the survey statement that asked if they felt supported by the administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with

behavioral difficulties. There were two participants who were undecided and two who strongly disagreed with the statement. According to Protheroe (2008),

> when it comes to a teachers' level of confidence about their ability to promote learning it can depend on past experiences or on the school culture. Principals can help develop a sense of efficacy for individual teachers and for the entire school. (p. 4)

Goddard and Skria (2006) looked at school characteristics reported by 1,981 teachers and correlated them with teachers' reported levels of efficacy. Less than half the difference in efficacy could be accounted for by factors such as school socioeconomic status level, student achievement level, and faculty experience. Based on this, they suggested that principals have the opportunity to build collective efficacy through the experiences they provide for teachers (Goddard & Skria, 2006).

Teacher 5 and Teacher 6 work in the same school, School B. They talked about a student they both had worked with who is autistic and is now in middle school. They shared stories of him dancing during instruction and how the children loved him, but he was difficult to keep still during instruction. Teacher 5 explained how she gave him a clock with a timer on it; and when the alarm went off, he was free to dance for the students for 20 seconds. The teacher let him know that he had to be working until the timer went off for the privilege. Then it was back to work. Teacher 1 who has been in education for 26 years thought that was a wonderful idea and discussed how it was probably great for his friendships with the other students.

A teacher who has a great sense of self-efficacy when it comes to teaching autistic students knows there are modifications and adjustments required to fit the needs of these students as well as other students. According to Robertson et al. (2003), socialization

may be hard to attain for some of the students with autism due to unusual behaviors they may exhibit. It is the teacher's responsibility to ensure that all students feel they are in an environment that is safe and conducive to learning; and Teacher 1 shared many ways she made all students feel comfortable. She shared how she made it clear from the first day of school that there would be no teasing, bullying, or laughing at anyone.

Data Analysis

After both focus groups were complete, the researcher reviewed field notes and transcribed the audio recordings from both groups. The focus group tape recordings from both sessions were transcribed by the researcher and went through various stages of analysis. The initial stage was to get a sense of the data collected and reflect on what they mean. The survey statements were broken down by question and compared with all the participants. Breaking the survey statements down was done to compare thoughts and attitudes of each participant. The recordings from both focus groups were reviewed for patterns and themes discussed by the participants.

The researcher generated a list of topics discussed and compiled that information into categories and classified the key findings. There were many times during the focus groups that the participants had experiences they wanted to share, and those talks were noted and identified as to which participant shared the information. This was done so the researcher could associate the comment or thought with the participant and their age, years of experience, and education level.

The analysis of the focus group revealed a number of key findings related to teaching autistic students in a general education classroom. There were participants who worked at the same school who shared very different views on their experience with autistic students in their classrooms. Surveys indicated that Teacher 6 and Teacher 9 who

both work at School B disagreed when it dealt with working collaboratively with special education teachers when students in their general education class had an IEP. During the focus group, Teacher 6 said she believes the special education teachers in her school felt the students in her room are her concern and she does not feel comfortable asking them for assistance or strategies. Teacher 9 felt the special education teachers are willing to give assistance if they are asked.

One of the areas that was noticed immediately by the researcher is that teachers who have been in education for 10 years or more felt their educational background had prepared them to effectively teach students with special needs including autism. These teachers were the same ones who also answered that they either agree or strongly disagree those students who are 2 or more years below grade level should be in special education classrooms.

The data showed that the participants felt they received more support from their coworkers when it came to finding strategies and solutions to problems with autistic students in their general education classrooms. There were seven of the 11 teachers who agreed that when issues arise with their autistic students, their colleagues were willing to help. There were four teachers who disagreed with that, and one of the teachers shared how she cannot get any assistance from her colleagues with issues she encounters in her classroom. All of the teachers involved in the study who had over 10 years of experience and had more trainings reported no problem finding the appropriate resources to help them feel more prepared when it comes to their autistic students.

Themes

When getting to know the data and listening to the taped recordings several times after the focus group, there were themes that were revealed. One of the areas that was

revealed during the analysis was that the participants feel they do not receive support from the administration at their schools. It was the teachers who have taught 10 years or more who found solutions to problems that may arise in their classrooms dealing with students with autism even when they felt like they had little or no support from administrators.

The findings of this study produced four themes: (a) teachers with more experience felt more prepared to teach students with autism; (b) teachers who had more training about autism shared more strategies with colleagues; (c) teachers who collaborated with other teachers were more successful; and (d) teachers who had been in education longer showed more self-efficacy when it comes to teaching autistic students in a general education classroom.

Teachers with over 10 years of experience showed a higher level of efficacy when it came to reaching out and locating the proper resources to assist them when dealing with situations that arise in their general education classrooms. Of the 11 teachers participating in the study, seven had been in education over 10 years and shared stories of the assistance they needed and the in-service training tips they received. The teachers who had more years in education also had more training. The teachers with over 10 years of experience attended an average of six or more trainings and workshops. These teachers had a higher sense of self-efficacy when teaching their autistic students.

Some of the strategies shared by teachers with over 10 years of experience included being consistent, using visual schedules, teaching students social skills, and having realistic expectations. Collaborating with other teachers and getting help from the special education teachers in some circumstances were also strategies used by the veteran teachers and helped to make them feel more prepared in dealing with situations in their

classrooms.

There was a desire by all participants to emphasize that although they feel they have some challenges that may arise when teaching their autistic students and some even feel that they should be in special education classrooms, they love all their students. There was a theme that the participants felt that some of the students, not all, would be more successful with a special education teacher.

From reviewing the data from the surveys and through the discussion in the focus group, the researcher found that more than half of the participants felt they needed more in-service trainings dealing with teaching autistic students. Even the participants who seemed to show higher levels of self-efficacy felt they needed additional training. Teacher 7 expressed the need for more training when it comes to working with some of the behavioral problems that may come with dealing with autistic students in her general education classroom. She shared how an incident in her classroom left her feeling as if she was not able to deal with the behaviors of an autistic student in her classroom 3 years ago and to also keep the other students safe. She said her assistant was left to teach her class some days while she dealt with the behaviors of an autistic student who displayed violent behaviors at times.

There were many successes shared in the focus group by the participants of all grade levels regardless of how prepared they felt. It was clear among the participants that they find various strategies to use to reach their autistic students. These strategies included having real expectations when it came to their autistic students. Teacher 1 discussed how she was guilty at first of expecting her autistic students to do as she had the other students do, and that was not realistic. She explained how she began seeing changes when she changed her expectations. One of the ways she began to better relate

to an autistic student she had was to make everything visual by writing down the expectations and attaching pictures to the schedule. Teacher 4 and Teacher 7 also used the idea and loved the way it worked with their students.

Fein and Dunn (2007) described a recipe for success when it comes to a happy and productive school year for an autistic child. In that recipe, the first step was to be realistic and set goals that are achievable for the child. Oftentimes, achievable goals may mean curriculum modifications are necessary.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the self-efficacy of kindergarten through fourth-grade teachers when it comes to teaching autistic students in their general education classroom. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ depending on training, preparedness, or years of experience? This study focused on those questions. For those teachers who have experienced some successes teaching autistic students, the study looked at those successes and how the teachers obtained success.

Summary of Findings

The survey statements the participants were to complete prior to the focus groups revealed varying opinions and ideas when it comes to teaching autistic students in a general education classroom. One of the areas that was noticed immediately by the researcher is that teachers who have been in education for 10 years or more felt that their experience in education had prepared them to effectively teach students with special needs including autism. These teachers were the same ones who also answered that they either agree or strongly disagree those students who are 2 or more years below grade level should be in special education classrooms.

Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on years of experience? This question is the first research question that the researcher wanted to explore. After reviewing the teacher information as well as analyzing the data of the participants during the focus groups, this study showed that teachers with more experience have a higher level of self-efficacy when it comes to teaching students in their general education classrooms. It was clear from the research that the teachers who have worked in

education for over 10 years and have more experience were more comfortable going out and seeking the resources needed to assist them with the students in their classrooms with autism.

During the focus group discussions, the teachers who had over 10 years in education discussed the changes in education through the years while they have been a teacher. Students with autism were once in classrooms with other students with autism; and over the years, teachers reported they saw an increase of autistic students being in the population of students in their general education classrooms. According to Heasley (2016), there were 95% of special needs students including students with autism who spent at least half of their school day in general education classrooms. Teacher 3 felt that having students with autism in her general education classroom was just another change in education and that teachers are expected to adjust and figure it out along the way. She felt that her experience as a teacher who has worked for the past 17 years in education prepared her for some of the extreme behaviors she has seen with autistic students over the years.

These results validated the research done prior to the study. Goddard and Skria (2006) looked at school characteristics and correlated them with a teacher's reported level of efficacy. Less than half the efficacy could be accounted for in factors such as school socioeconomic status level, student achievement level, and faculty experience (Goddard & Skria, 2006). There is a link between personal agency and a teacher's self-efficacy beliefs that lie in their personal experience and a teacher's ability to reflect on that experience and make decisions about future courses of action (Bray-Clark & Bates, 2003).

When it came to addressing Research Question 2, "does the self-efficacy of

teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on preparation and training," the researcher first reviewed the information on the teacher information form that revealed how many workshops and trainings the participants had received over their career and paired it with their self-efficacy when it comes to teaching autistic students. From the data, the researcher discovered that teachers who had the most hours of trainings were the teachers who had been in education the longest. These teachers were more prepared to meet the needs of the students in their general education classrooms.

Of the 11 participants in the study, two (18%) had only received one to three trainings or workshops that dealt with teaching autistic students. One had been in education for 2 years and the other for 3 years. Five participants had six or more trainings directly related to teaching students with autism, and all of those teachers had been in education for over 10 years. The 55% of the participants who had more training were the teachers who showed higher levels of self-efficacy when it came to teaching these students in their general education classrooms.

The research done by Browder et al. (2007) showed that providing teachers with professional development specifically designed for serving students with autism has a positive impact on student outcomes. General education teachers who have autistic students in their general education classrooms need to develop a greater understanding of autism and how it affects the student.

Ross-Hill (2009) explained that "not offering frequent and substantial training brings about tension, stress, and strain for both teachers and students alike in inclusive settings" (p. 14). Studies such as the one done by Browder et al. (2007) have shown that providing teachers with professional development specifically designed to serving

students with autism has a positive impact on student outcomes.

The final research question that the researcher wanted to address dealt with the successes of the teachers who were involved in the focus group. The researcher wanted to know if the participants felt they had any successes they could share with the group. During the focus group, there were many stories shared that involved successes; and each teacher who shared seemed to have enjoyed his/her experience with the students, although some felt as if they received no support and some felt as if the student should have been in a special education class.

Many of the participants shared strategies they got from special education teachers and coworkers and from reaching out for resources on their own. They found success with these strategies, and many participants were seen writing notes with the intention to use the strategies in their own classrooms. One of the strategies written down by other participants was given by Teacher 3; she shared how she role plays in her classroom at the beginning of the school year as well as when she feels it is needed. The reason she gave for this is that her autistic students can see what is expected; they are not just told.

A strategy that was also shared by Teacher 3 was to make sure to schedule downtime for your autistic students. The participants agreed that some of their autistic students are unable to attend to a task for more than 20 minutes. She shared how she had a student in her classroom last school year who would stay seated and engaged for about 15 minutes. The teacher would schedule in breaks without the autistic student realizing they were scheduled. She would suggest the student do her a favor even if it was to take a book to the other side of the room or collect materials. This was a strategy that she received from a special education teacher she has worked with for years. She attributed

this strategy to success she has had building relationships with many autistic students she has had over the years.

Some additional strategies discussed included building relationships with parents and working with special education teachers. Teacher 1 found that working with parents, she was able to get to know the child better and determine what triggers the child may have. Using Velcro under the desk of some autistic students who had a hard time staying in their seats was a strategy that worked very well to keep the attention of the autistic students. Another strategy discussed was giving students who have a difficult time staying on task a clock so they can see how long until the next break and having a timer go off and allowing them a break or free time to do something they enjoy.

Recommendations for Further Study

In the study, it was found that the participants did not feel like they had the support of their administration when it came to teaching autistic students in their general education classroom. When analyzing the survey statement data, 64% of the participants did not feel they could approach their administrators about any issues in their classrooms with autistic students. In addition, 64% felt that when they were faced with challenges presented by autistic students with behavioral difficulties, they did not feel they received the support of the administrators in the school. According to Protheroe (2008), principals can help develop a sense of efficacy for individual teachers and for the entire school. Modifications and support are essential when it comes to students with autism because of their unique needs.

When beginning this research, the researcher was aware that teachers were experiencing more autistic students in their general education classrooms in the last 10 years. In research for this study, it was stated by Dybrik (2004) that it was not long ago

that children were rarely, if ever, placed in general education classrooms. They were regularly isolated from their peers without disabilities. The result of the "inclusion movement made it possible for students with autism to be included in regular education classrooms" (Dybrik, 2004, p. 42). The purpose of this study was to discover teacher levels of self-efficacy when it comes to teaching these students and if they felt they were prepared to teach them. The researcher wanted to explore if the teachers' levels of education, training, or preparedness affected that self-efficacy. Those questions were answered; and after analyzing the data and listening to the participants in the focus group, there is a question of the support from administration that teachers feel they are lacking. Further research needs to be done on the self-efficacy of principals when it comes to supervising teachers who have autistic students in their classrooms.

According to Olivier (2001), there is research that suggests that teacher self-efficacy is important for overall school effectiveness. There is evidence that teacher self-efficacy may be the key to mediating factors between a school's climate and professional culture. This may lead to teachers with high self-efficacy, which may also lead to higher performing schools (Olivier, 2001). Finding out how principals feel when it comes to supporting teachers of autistic students in their general education classroom could be essential to the climate of the school.

Change in Practices

During the focus group, it was evident that the teachers who had been in education for over 10 years were a great resource for other teachers. They were offering suggestions and sharing strategies, and one of the suggestions for further research would be to examine if the mentoring of the veteran teachers would assist teachers who have not been in education long. Would their guidance and support add to the self-efficacy of the

teachers who had difficulties with finding ways to make connections with the autistic students?

Being a beginning teacher, there are many things to consider. They have to adjust to lesson plans, meetings, curriculum, and meeting the needs of all students. With the inclusion of autistic students in the general education classrooms, new teachers may feel overwhelmed if they do not feel supported. There should be consideration for the principal to assign a more experienced teacher to be there as an extra resource. In the focus group, there were teachers who seemed very comfortable sharing strategies and ideas they have picked up over the years. One of suggestions could be to have the administrators find teachers who would be willing to train staff on strategies and share successes to assist the others in the school.

Some of the ways to allow teachers time to discuss their autistic students and strategies to deal with any challenges would be to discuss these issues at professional learning community meetings. In these meetings, teachers can feel supported and encouraged and that will lead to greater self-efficacy when dealing with the autistic students in their classrooms.

Summary and Conclusion

This qualitative study explored the self-efficacy of teachers in kindergarten through fourth grades who teach autistic students in their general education classrooms. The study examined whether the self-efficacy of teachers depended on their years of experience, training, and preparedness. The successes of these teachers were also studied by allowing the participants to share stories of their experience. Further, the study sought to identify successful practices used by teachers in serving students with autism. According to the 11 participants in this study, teaching autistic students in a general

education classroom can be challenging but rewarding. There were varied ideas of what success in these classrooms looks like; however, the underlying conclusion from the study was that teacher self-efficacy differs with education, training, and preparedness.

The research data regarding the self-efficacy of teachers differing when it comes to their education, training, and preparedness were clear from the survey statements and the focus group discussion. Of the 11 participants, the years of experience ranged from 2-26 years in education. The teachers who worked in education the longest were the teachers who found success when it came to autistic students in their classrooms. According to Protheroe (2008), a teacher's level of confidence about their ability to promote learning depends on past experiences or on the school culture.

Teachers who had taught over 10 years showed greater self-efficacy than teachers who had only been in education for 10 years or less. Teachers with more education and trainings were able to deal with situations that may arise in their classrooms with autistic students.

Research Questions

1. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on years of experience?

Yes. The self-efficacy of teachers when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students does differ depending on years of experience according to this study.

2. Does the self-efficacy of teachers differ when it comes to inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom, depending on preparation and training?

Yes. The self-efficacy of teachers when it comes to the inclusion of autistic students does

differ depending on preparation and training.

3. What success have teachers had when working with autistic students in their general education classrooms?

Success was seen, and the evidence was shared in this study. Teachers who have been in education for over 10 years and attended more workshops and trainings have achieved more success than other participants in this study. Strategies that helped these teachers achieve success included visual schedules, modeling expectations, having realistic expectations, scheduling downtime in the schedule, and being consistent.

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Appendix A: Teacher Information

1. Gender: (please circle) Male Female

2. Your age range: (please circle)

below 25

 25-35

36-45

46-55

55+

3. Educational level _____

4. Current grade level you are teaching: _____

5. Number of years teaching _____

6. Number of years teaching current grade_____

7. How much experience do you have teaching students with autism?

0-3 years

3-5 years

5-8 years

8+ years

8. How many workshops/trainings have you attended that deal with teaching students with autism? (please circle)

1-3

4-6

6-8

8+

Appendix B: Survey Statements

Please carefully read the statements below and rate them on a scale of 1-5. 1 being that you strongly disagree and 5 that you strongly agree. Please put an X in the box of the answer you choose.

1= Strongly Disagree
2=Disagree
3=Undecided
4=Agree
5=Strongly Agree

	Statement	1	2	3	4	5
1	My educational background has prepared me to effectively teach students with cognitive delays and deficits in a general education classroom.					
2	I need more training in order to appropriately teach students with an IEP for learning problems.					
3	I am encouraged by my administrators to attend conferences/workshops on teaching students with special needs.					
4	My colleagues are willing to help me with issues which may arise when I have students with an IEP in my classroom.					
5	[feel comfortable in working collaboratively with special education teachers when students with an IEP are in my classroom**.**					
6	I welcome collaborative teaching when I have an autistic student with an IEP in my classroom.					
7	Students who are 2 or more years below grade level should be in special education classes.					

8	I feel students who are diagnosed as autistic need to be in special education classrooms.					
9	All efforts should be made to educate autistic students in the regular education classroom**.**					
10	I am provided with sufficient in-service training through my school district which allows me the ability to teach autistic students.					
11	Students who are verbally aggressive towards others can be maintained in regular education classrooms**.**					
12	Collaborative teaching of children with special needs can be effective, particularly when students with an IEP are placed in a regular classroom.					
13	Special education teachers should teach students who hold an IEP					
14	I can approach my administrators with concerns I hold regarding teaching students who have special needs**.**					
15	I feel supported by my administrators when faced with challenges presented by students with behavioral difficulties in my classroom					

(Kern, 2006)

Appendix C: Informed Consent Form

Gardner-Webb University IRB
Informed Consent Form

<u>Title of Study</u>
General Education Teachers Self Efficacy to Teach Autistic Students in General
Education Classrooms Kindergarten-Fourth Grade

<u>Researcher</u>
Tanya Wynn/ Fourth Grade Teacher

<u>Purpose</u>
The purpose of the research study is to determine if the self-efficacy of teachers when it
comes to the inclusion of autistic students in a general education classroom differs
depending on years of experience, or preparation and training. The study will also look to
see if there are any strategies that have assisted the teachers when it comes to teaching
students with autism.

<u>Procedure</u>
What you will do in the study: (Outline what will be expected of the participant. Be
specific, as described in your research procedure. If the participant will be photographed,
audio taped, or videotaped, include this in the description. If your study involves an
interview or survey, inform participants that they can skip any question that causes
discomfort and that they can stop the interview or survey at any time. If your study
involves deception, please give as much information as possible without compromising
your research.)
Participants will be invited to participate in the study and given a description of the study.
For the participants who are willing, they will be asked to answer survey statements and
turn back in to the researcher. If the participant feels that any of the questions make them
uncomfortable or they are unsure how to answer they may skip over the statement and
continue on to the next. After the survey statements are received the participants will be
asked to join a focus group with their peers and will be audio taped and given a list of
guidelines for the focus group. All participants will be informed that the group discussion
will be used for the purpose of this survey and at any time during the process if they are
uncomfortable or no longer wish to participate they can choose not to.

<u>Time Required</u>
It is anticipated that the study will require less than 2 hours total of your time. The survey
statements should take between 15-20 minutes to complete. The focus group session will
be limited to an hour.

<u>Voluntary Participation</u>
Participation in this study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw from the research
study at any time without penalty. You also have the right to refuse to answer any
question(s) for any reason without penalty. If you choose to withdraw, you may request
that any of your data which has been collected be destroyed unless it is in a de-identified

state.

Confidentiality
(Provide an explanation of how data will be kept private and confidential and how researcher will protect the anonymity of the subject. This should include a brief statement about 1) How you will collect data 2) How you will store data and 3) How and when data will be destroyed.)
The survey statements will be viewed by the researcher only and will be kept confidential. Your name and personal information will not be included in the study. When attending the focus group, the information will be used in the study without using name and any information that may identify you. The audio tapes used will be destroyed after researcher has time to analyze the data and you will be informed when and how they are disposed of.

Anonymous Data
The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your data will be anonymous which means that your name will not be collected or linked to the data.

Confidentiality Cannot be Guaranteed
A focus group will be done, in which case I cannot guarantee that the discussion will be confidential that is discussed in this session.

Risks
There are no anticipated risks in this study.

Benefits
This study may help us to understand if teacher self-efficacy when it comes to teaching autistic students in a general education classroom is linked to their experience or education and if they feel prepared. It will also help us to understand some strategies they may use to make their autistic students more successful.

Payment
You will receive no payment for participating in the study.

Right to Withdraw From the Study
You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw from the study all of your personal information will be destroyed.

How to Withdraw From the Study
If you want to withdraw from the study prior to the focus group, please contact the researcher. If you would like to withdraw during the focus group, please inform the researcher and you are free to leave. There is no penalty for withdrawing.
If you would like to withdraw after your materials have been submitted, please contact the researcher at the number below or email.

If you have questions about the study, contact the following individuals.

Tanya Wynn
XXXXXXXXX

Bruce Boyles
School of Education
Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, NC 28017
704-473-6721
bboyles@gardner-webb.edu

If the research design of the study necessitates that its full scope is not explained prior to participation, it will be explained to you after completion of the study. If you have concerns about your rights or how you are being treated, or if you have questions, want more information, or have suggestions, please contact the IRB Institutional Administrator listed below.

Dr. Jeffrey S. Rogers
IRB Institutional Administrator
Gardner-Webb University
Boiling Springs, NC 28017
704-406-4724 jrogers3@gardner-webb.edu

Voluntary Consent by Participant
I have read the information in this consent form and fully understand the contents of this document. I have had a chance to ask any questions concerning this study and they have been answered for me.

_____ I agree to participate in the confidential survey.
_____ I do not agree to participate in the confidential survey.
_____ I agree to participate in the focus group.
_____ I do not agree to participate in the focus group.
_____ I agree to participate in the interview session(s). I understand that this interview may be video/audio recorded for purposes of accuracy. The audio/video recording will be transcribed and destroyed.
_____ I do not agree to participate in the interview session(s).

_____ Date: _____
Participant Printed Name

_____ Date: _____
Participant Signature