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# Perspectives of General Education Teachers Who Work with Students with Autism

Beth Jolene Walters

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PERSPECTIVES OF GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS WHO  
WORK WITH STUDENTS WITH AUTISM

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

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In partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of

Doctor of Education

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December  
2012

This dissertation, submitted by Beth Jolene Walters in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education from the University of North Dakota, has been read by the Faculty Advisory Committee under whom the work has been done and is hereby approved.

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Beth Jolene Walters  
November 28, 2012

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .....	ix
ABSTRACT.....	x
CHAPTER	
I.    INTRODUCTION .....	1
Significance of the Study .....	1
Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorders.....	2
The Stakeholders.....	4
Need for the Study .....	5
Conceptual Framework.....	6
Purpose of the Study .....	7
Research Question .....	7
Delimitations of the Study .....	8
Definition of Terms.....	8
Organization of the Study .....	9
II.   REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE .....	11
History of Inclusion of Students With Special Education Needs in the General Education Classroom.....	11
The Education for All Handicapped Children Act .....	11
IDEA 1997 and 2004 .....	13
Inclusion Today .....	13

The Inclusion Debate .....	16
History of Inclusion of Students With Autism in the General Education Classroom .....	17
Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders.....	18
Communication Deficits .....	19
Social Skill Deficits .....	19
Restricted, Repetitive, and Stereotyped Patterns of Behavior .....	19
Other Characteristics.....	19
Difficulties in the Inclusion of Students With Autism.....	20
Successful Inclusion of Students With Autism.....	22
Attitudes of General Education Teachers Who Have a Student With Autism in Their Classrooms .....	23
How General Educators Feel About Inclusion .....	23
Variables Affecting Attitudes of General Education Teachers.....	27
Demographics .....	27
Teaching Experience.....	27
Knowledge of Special Education Practices .....	28
Severity and Type of Disability .....	28
General Education Teachers' Thoughts Regarding Making Inclusion Successful .....	29
Summary.....	31
III. METHODOLOGY .....	32
Phenomenological Approach.....	32
Van Manen's Phenomenological Research Methods .....	35

Turn to the Nature of Lived Experience .....	35
Existential Investigation.....	36
Phenomenological Reflection .....	36
Phenomenological Writing .....	36
Protection of Human Subjects .....	36
Participant Selection .....	37
Description of the Setting .....	37
Participants.....	37
John.....	37
Jill.....	37
Holly .....	38
Carrie.....	38
Bruce.....	38
Amber .....	38
Data Collection and Analysis.....	39
Rigor and Trustworthiness.....	40
Gathering Codes and the Formation of Categories and Themes .....	42
IV. PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS WITH REFERENCE TO THE LITERATURE.....	43
Theme One: Awareness of Diagnosis.....	43
Theme Two: Preparation for Supporting Inclusion .....	45
Theme Three: Descriptions of Students.....	49
Theme Four: Experiences Teaching Students With Autism.....	51

Theme Five: Impact of Inclusion.....	56
Theme Six: Formation of an Educational Philosophy .....	60
Final Assertions .....	65
V. SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....	67
Summary.....	67
Overview of the Methodology .....	68
Theme One: Awareness of Diagnosis.....	69
Theme Two: Preparation for Supporting Inclusion .....	69
Theme Three: Descriptions of Students.....	70
Theme Four: Experiences Teaching Students With Autism.....	70
Theme Five: Impact of Inclusion.....	71
Theme Six: Formation of an Educational Philosophy .....	72
Limitations .....	72
Conclusions.....	72
Recommendations.....	73
Recommendations for Teacher Preparation.....	73
Recommendations for Administrators and School Districts.....	73
Recommendations for General Educators .....	74
Recommendations for Further Research.....	74
Closing Statement .....	74
APPENDICES .....	76
Appendix A: Research Consent Form: Subject Participation.....	77
Appendix B: Teacher Interview Questions.....	78



Appendix C: Interview Transcription Form .....	80
Appendix D: Formulated Meanings Form.....	81
REFERENCES .....	82

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand how general education teachers perceive their experiences working with students in their classrooms who have been diagnosed with autism. The study addressed the following research question: How do secondary school general educators perceive their experiences working with students in their classroom who have been diagnosed with autism?

Six secondary general education teachers were interviewed by the researcher, and the audio-recorded interviews were later transcribed by her. Initially, she analyzed the data to determine codes and categories. Next, she worked collaboratively with her doctoral advisor to discern themes and assertions.

Six themes emerged from data analysis. These secondary general educators (a) were unaware of the diagnoses of their students; (b) felt they needed more preparation for supporting the inclusion of students with autism; (c) gave thoughtful, truthful descriptions of the abilities of their students with autism; (d) had good experiences teaching students with autism; (e) saw and understood the impact of inclusion on the parties involved; and (f) formed an educational philosophy with regard to the inclusion of students with autism through their experience teaching students with autism.

General education teachers held predominantly positive attitudes with regard to teaching students with autism. They often were not knowledgeable with regard to information surrounding the diagnoses of their students, but were aware of how students

with autism can benefit from being educated alongside their general education peers and how they add to the classroom community. If the general education teachers could improve one area of their experience teaching students with autism, it would be to have more preparation with regard to teaching and accommodating students with autism in their classrooms.

*Keywords:* General Educators, Autism, Inclusion, Pervasive Developmental Disorders, Asperger's Disorder, Special Education

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### **Significance of the Study**

In this study, my hope was to understand how general education teachers perceive their experiences working with students in their classrooms who have been diagnosed with autism. I was interested in this topic because of my professional background as both a special education teacher and general education teacher, as well as through my work with students who have been diagnosed with autism. Through this study, I hoped to gain greater understanding of the perceptions of general educators who work with students with autism in order to potentially improve the inclusion experience for both general education teachers and the students with autism they teach.

When my career in education began, I was teaching Family and Consumer Sciences at the middle school level. At the time, I was not experienced in how to properly accommodate for students with disabilities, especially not those students on the autism spectrum. During my first two years of teaching, I became familiar with students with both autism and Asperger's disorder. These students sparked my interest in special education, prompting me to pursue a degree in the area.

After obtaining a Master's Degree in Special Education with certification in the areas of learning disabilities, emotional disturbances, intellectual disabilities and a certificate in Autism Spectrum Disorders, I taught special education for eight years,

including three years working exclusively with students having various forms of autism. I currently have returned to teaching general education, specifically Family and Consumer Sciences, in the hope of gaining greater insight into the world of general education with regard to its acceptance and nurturing of all students, but specifically those with special education needs, such as autism. To begin, it is important to take a brief look at the diagnostic characteristics of autism.

### **Overview of Autism Spectrum Disorders**

Autism today is described as a spectrum disorder, with characteristics ranging from mild to severe (Boyd & Shaw, 2010). The cause of autism has historically been mysterious, as it remains today. There is, however, evidence which points to autism as a central nervous system impairment, although specifics have not been agreed upon among those studying this (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008). Experts in the field, along with special education professionals, have begun to stress the possibility that rather than being purely a set of impairments, autism involves unique mental processing with learning strengths as well.

Recently, the American Psychiatric Association (2000) has been planning revisions to the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) that will affect how autism is diagnosed. Previously, the diagnoses autistic disorder; Rett's disorder; childhood disintegrative disorder; Asperger's disorder; and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified were separate, yet contained under the category of pervasive developmental disorders. Should the proposed changes occur, these diagnoses will all be contained under the category of autism

spectrum disorder (Kondro, 2012). According to a statement from the American Psychiatric Association released January 20, 2012,

The proposal asserts that symptoms of these four disorders represent a continuum from mild to severe, rather than a simple yes or no diagnosis to a specific disorder. The proposed diagnostic criteria for autism spectrum disorder specify a range of severity as well as describe the individual's overall developmental status—in social communication and other relevant cognitive and motor behaviors. (para. 2)

The changes to how autism is diagnosed will most likely occur with the adoption of the fifth version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. Until that time, the descriptions of pervasive developmental disorders, according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual IV* (DSM-IV) (American Psychiatric Association, 2000), are as follows:

Autistic disorder: The presence of abnormal or impaired development in social interaction and communication and a restricted repertoire of activity and interests. The disorder varies depending on the age and developmental level of the individual.

Rett's disorder: The development of "multiple specific deficits" following a period of normal functioning after birth. All of the following characteristics appear after the period of normal development: slowing of head growth, loss of hand skills, loss of social engagement, appearance of abnormal gait and severely impaired language.

Childhood disintegrative disorder: A "marked regression in multiple areas of functioning" following at least two years of normal development. The areas of functioning affected include language, social skills, bowel and bladder control, play and motor skills.

Asperger's disorder: "Severe and sustained impairment in social interaction and the development of restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities." Different than autistic disorder, Asperger's disorder is not characterized by language impairments.

Pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified: This term is utilized when social ability is impaired, associated with deficits in communication skills or with the presence of "stereotyped behavior, interests, and activities, but the disorder's characteristics do not constitute the diagnosis of another disorder."

People with autism display impairments in areas of functioning that include social interaction, communication, learning, and behavior (Horrocks et al., 2008). Zhang and Griffin (2007) also point out that people with autism have significant difficulty in the processing of sensory information. Due to the many characteristics individuals with autism may have and the resulting educational challenges, the inclusion of students with autism in general education classes has been difficult (Zhang & Griffin, 2007). As a teacher with over 10 years of teaching experience and with a great deal of that time spent working with students with autism in the general education classroom as well as the special education classroom, I agree that challenges and promise exist in the education of students with autism.

### **The Stakeholders**

Those involved with the education of students with special needs include the student, parents, family, general education teachers, special education teachers, school counselors, school administration, special education administration, and other professionals. Although the inclusion movement has been largely undertaken by the



special education profession, those greatly affected by inclusion and increasingly responsible for the education of children with special needs, the general educators, have had little input (DeSimone & Parmer, 2006; Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003; Snyder, 1999). According to Hamre and Oyler (2004), “expecting teachers to meet a wide range of learning needs emanates also in the United States from the reaffirmation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act’s (P.L. 105-17, Amendments of 1997) commitment to general education placements for students with disabilities” (pp. 154-155). Consequently, general education teachers, now commonly experiencing the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms, are faced with greater expectations with regard to their beliefs about and attitude toward inclusion as well as their ability to skillfully teach students with various ability levels (Berry, 2008; Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011).

### **Need for the Study**

DeSimone and Parmar (2006) reviewed literature on the topic of teachers’ beliefs and attitudes on inclusive practices and found that most of the existing research has been focused on teachers in elementary schools. DeSimone and Parmar also found that existing research has focused on inclusion in general and seldom on the inclusion of a specific disability group. It is often difficult for special education teachers, administration, and other stakeholders to view inclusion from the perspective of the general educator, although the general education teacher is central to the inclusion process. “One thing is certain, and that is that we can’t know what people think and feel about inclusion until we hear and begin to feel what they say” (Sikes, Lawson, & Parker, 2007, p. 367). Through my experience as both a general education teacher and special

education teacher, I agree with the statement that general education teachers, integral to the inclusion process, are often an overlooked or underrepresented party in the scheme of successful inclusion.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Theory of Planned Behavior, or TPB, was designed to predict and explain behavior across contexts (Ajzen, 1991, 2002). The theory states that human behavior is guided by three factors: beliefs regarding the consequences of a specific behavior (behavior beliefs), the beliefs regarding the expectations of others (normative beliefs), and the beliefs regarding factors that may affect performance of the behavior (control beliefs). Behavior beliefs form either a positive or negative attitude toward the behavior, normative beliefs take social pressure into account, and control beliefs affect the perceptions of the difficulty of the behavior (Ajzen, 1991, 2002). Hersman and Hodge (2010) employed TPB as a theoretical framework in their study interpreting the beliefs of general education teachers with regard to the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms. In the context of this study, the Theory of Planned Behavior was applied in the following way: Beliefs regarding the consequences of teaching a student who has been diagnosed with autism are the behavior beliefs, the beliefs regarding the expectations of the stakeholders are the normative beliefs, and the beliefs regarding factors that may affect how the general educator teaches a student (who has been diagnosed with autism) are the control beliefs. These components of the Theory of Planned Behavior as it relates to this study have provided a theoretical foundation from which I drew interview questions and guided the interview process.

Ammah and Hodge (2005) also employed the Theory of Planned Behavior in their study regarding the beliefs and practices of secondary physical education teachers. Their study was based upon two main research questions: What were the behaviors of experienced high school GPE teachers toward students with severe disabilities in their classes and what were the beliefs of experienced high school GPE teachers on inclusion and teaching students with severe disabilities (p. 41)?

In a similar way, the Theory of Planned Behavior guided this study. First, what were the behaviors of general education teachers toward students with autism? What instructional strategies did they employ? How did their training (or lack thereof) affect how they approached teaching students with autism? Second, what were the beliefs of these teachers regarding the inclusion of students with autism? How did they describe students with autism? What kind of impact did they see inclusion making? What were their educational philosophies with regard to including students with autism in the general education classroom?

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand general educators' perceptions of their experiences working with students in their classrooms who have been diagnosed with autism. Specifically, it was of interest to interview middle and high school teachers in the Midwest to ascertain how teachers at the secondary level experience working with students with autism.

### **Research Question**

How do secondary school general educators perceive their experiences working with students in their classroom who have been diagnosed with autism?

## **Delimitations of the Study**

The following delimitations were identified in this study:

- Participants in the study were general education teachers who currently have, or have had in the past, students on the autism spectrum in their general education classrooms for students ranging from grade 7 through grade 12.
- Participants were selected from three small school districts with enrollment ranging from 500 to 2,500 students within two upper-Midwestern states.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE):* A part of both the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act that ensures a free public education appropriate to the needs of each individual with disabilities. Specifically, the United States Department of Education states,

The term “free and appropriate public education” means special education and related services that (a) have been provided at public expense, under public supervisions and direction, and without charge; (b) meet the standards of the state educational agency; (c) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the state involved; and (d) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, Section 300.17)

*Individualized Education Program (IEP):* According to the U.S. Department of Education (2012), an Individualized Education Program, or IEP, is a “written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised” (Section 300.22).

*Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA):* Legislation originally passed in 1997 and reauthorized in 2004 ensuring services (including early intervention, special

education, and related services) for children through age 21 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):* The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) states,

Each public agency must ensure that (i) to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and (ii) special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (U.S. Department of Education, 2012, Section 300.114)

*Education of All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142):* A federal law passed by Congress in 1975 which states that all public schools receiving federal funding must provide equal access to education for individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

*The Rehabilitation Act of 1973:* A federal law that authorizes grant programs in the areas of vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, independent living, training, and client assistance for people with disabilities. This act also involves the rights of, advocacy for, and protections of people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

### **Organization of the Study**

In Chapter I, the significance of the study, an overview of autism spectrum disorders, the stakeholders, and need for the study were described. This chapter also included information regarding how the conceptual framework guided this study in terms of its purpose, as well as the formation of the research question, delimitations, and

definitions of key terms. A review of the literature follows in Chapter II, including more information regarding the characteristics of autism spectrum disorders, an overview of the history of inclusion of students with special education needs, an overview of the history of inclusion of students with autism, and an examination of the perspectives held by general education teachers with regard to inclusion. Research methodology will be discussed in Chapter III, followed by the research findings with support from the literature in Chapter IV. Finally, a summary of the study, conclusions, and recommendations for future research will be presented in Chapter V.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

In this chapter, the literature pertaining to autism and inclusion will be reviewed. The focus will be on the history of inclusion of students with special education needs in the general education classroom, the history of inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom, and the attitudes of general education teachers toward inclusion.

#### **History of Inclusion of Students With Special Education Needs in the General Education Classroom**

##### **The Education for All Handicapped Children Act**

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142), passed in the mid-1970s, created greater potential for inclusion and changed the practice of both special education and general education teachers (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, p. 163). In fact, before the passage of the act, students with disabilities were not guaranteed the right to attend public schools as their nondisabled peers were (Kerzner Lipsky & Gartner, 1998, p. 78). Students with moderate to severe disabilities, prior to special education legislation being enacted, were sometimes educated in “segregated special schools” and not with their same-age peers (Parasuram, 2006, p. 231). Since the inception of Public Law 94-142, special education has improved a great deal from the time when students with disabilities were “severely underserved” (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010, p. 279) or not served at all.

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act specifically defines that no matter what kind of disability students have or how severe their handicaps are, they are entitled to a “free appropriate public education,” or FAPE (Kerzner Lipsky & Gartner, 1998, p. 78). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 also mandates FAPE. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal law that authorizes grant programs in the areas of vocational rehabilitation, supported employment, independent living as well as training and client assistance for people with disabilities. This act also involves the rights of, advocacy for, and protections of people with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

FAPE does not equate to full inclusion for all individuals; rather, it mandates that all students be educated in their least restrictive environment, or LRE. The least restrictive environment, in simple terms, can be thought of as the most inclusive setting possible for any student given his or her particular needs. This, in turn, created and/or perpetuated the “resource model” (Kavale & Forness, 2000, p. 281). The resource model involves students being educated primarily in the general education setting with specialized instruction provided by a special education teacher in a resource room or other setting (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Zigmond & Baker, 1996). The amount of time spent in the resource room and the amount of time spent in the general education classroom is determined primarily by the nature and severity of disability.

Before the inception of Public Law 94-142, there were inclusive educational situations even though inclusion was not mandated by law. Bricker (2000) describes observing children with and without disabilities learning alongside one another as she was working in an inclusive setting in the 1970s:



We observed that including children without disabilities offered the children with disabilities relevant and appropriate models for learning new skills and information. Indeed, when stumped about assisting a child with a disability on how to acquire a developmental skill, the staff learned to watch the performance of a child without disabilities for ideas and teaching strategies. (p. 15)

As Bricker described, even before inclusion was fully put into action, the benefits and potential of inclusive education were being seen in some environments.

### **IDEA 1997 and 2004**

In 1997, Congress reauthorized the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, this time named the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA. IDEA emphasizes that both general education and special education students should experience educational outcomes “expected for students in general” and students with disabilities should be educated with their general education peers (Kerzner Lipsky & Gartner, 1998, pp. 78-79). The law was updated again in 2004 and continues to support the education of individuals with special education needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

### **Inclusion Today**

In recent decades, the inclusion question has turned from whether or not to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms to how to make inclusion successful for those involved (Berry, 2008). The language surrounding inclusive practices has also changed, evolving from “mainstreaming” and “integration” to “inclusion.” Avramidis, Bayliss, and Burden (2000), in reference to the difference between the terms “integration” and “inclusion,” state,

By contrast, inclusion implies such a restructuring of mainstream schooling that every school can accommodate every child irrespective of disability (accommodation rather than assimilation) and ensures that all learners belong to a community. Such an argument locates the discussion in a social-ethical discourse which is strongly focused on values. The concept of inclusion thereby becomes

part of a broad human rights agenda that argues that all forms of segregation are morally wrong. (pp. 191-192)

The value of inclusion as a social ideal has become popular and widely accepted in recent years, as segregation of students with special needs has been compared to other forms of oppression and discrimination (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). The way schools approach inclusive practices also continues to vary and evolve. Kozleski & Waitoller (2010) view inclusive education as a global movement combating educational inequality (p. 655). Education professionals may indeed view inclusion as a large-scale social awareness issue, but they also deal with the everyday “ins and outs” of making inclusion work.

Teaching practices for students with disabilities formerly involved individualized instruction delivered outside of the general education classroom (usually in a resource room setting), while today the model involves interventions, accommodations, and modifications made and delivered inside the general education classroom (Baker & Zigmond, 1995, p. 163). Hunt and Goetz (1997) state that full inclusion is becoming increasingly common (p. 3); this can be seen in the recent popularity of intervention models that focus on the general education classroom setting.

From a social standpoint, a clear goal of inclusion is the building of relationships among special education and general education students, or at least the generation of positive interactions between the two parties (Robertson et al., 2003). Mesibov and Shea (1996) describe the benefits of inclusion to be numerous, including greater academic expectations of included students, increased social skill development, increased learning opportunities, increased self-esteem, peer acceptance, less isolation, and less disability-associated stigma (p. 338). In comparison to segregated students with

disabilities, Eldar, Talmore, and Wolf-Zukerman (2010) found that fully included students with special needs exhibit higher levels of social interaction and social support, have a larger social network, and have more advanced goals on their Individualized Education Programs. Jordan (2008) describes education for students with autism (and all individuals) as the vehicle through which people become citizens, adopting the “values, understanding, knowledge and skills that enable their full participation in their community; it is the gateway to full social inclusion” (p. 11).

Bricker (2000), who has worked in early intervention programs for children with disabilities for years, views inclusion today as prevalent, though not necessarily effective. She sees many “mainstream options” available for young children with special education needs but believes quality of instruction and social interaction is lacking (p. 16).

Although inclusive practices have become more commonplace, Avramidis and Norwich (2002) contend that inclusion is still not fully realized by all students with disabilities. Even as public and professional opinions become more supportive of inclusive practices, there is no indication that this will necessarily lead to greater numbers of students being educated in the general education classroom environment. Their explanation of this situation follows:

Although the Integration movement strongly advocated the placement of children in the “least restrictive environment,” there was no expectation that every pupil “with special needs” would be functionally integrated, but rather that children will be integrated in the manner and to the extent that is appropriate to their particular “needs” and circumstances. (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p. 131)

One must conclude that although inclusion has come a long way in the last decades, it is not free from controversy.

## **The Inclusion Debate**

Inclusion has been a topic of debate spanning at least the last 35 years, and possibly longer, since greater acceptance of students with disabilities into the general education classroom has taken place (Kavale & Forness, 2000, p. 290). Lynch and Irvine (2009) posit that advocates of inclusion not only believe all students have the right to be included in the general education classroom, but that all students should be fully supported academically and have the chance to learn alongside their friends, while developing social relationships and self-esteem (p. 846). In fact, according to Kavale and Forness (2000), whether or not students with special needs should be included in the general education classroom is not a matter of question.

The controversy arises because inclusion involves students of varying disability types and levels of severity and also “seeks to alter the education for all students and hence general education” (p. 279). In other words, inclusion may seem more successful when the student has a mild disability than when the student’s disability is more severe. Another piece of the controversy relates to how the education of general education students is affected by inclusion. Bricker (2000) points out that “many of the outspoken advocates for inclusion are not in the classroom or community delivering services” (p. 18). She believes in the importance of understanding “the problems, challenges, and barriers that teachers and other professional personnel, parents, and importantly, children face in inclusive programs” (p. 18).

Although it is a hotly debated topic, there is much to be said about the promise of inclusion for students with severe disabilities. Hunt and Goetz (1997) believe that students with severe disabilities can achieve academically in inclusive settings and

“realize acceptance, interactions, and friendships in inclusive settings” (p. 25). Kozleski and Waitoller (2010) similarly state that “inclusive education that conceptualizes learning as culture work anchored in everyday communities of practice offers a transformative counterpoint to efforts to track, sort and categorise students by what they cannot do” (p. 655). Zigmond and Baker (1996), in reference to students with learning disabilities state,

[T]here are skills and strategies that need to be acquired if instruction in the mainstream is to be meaningful and productive, and these skills and strategies must be taught explicitly and intensively. Providing a venue and the resources for delivering this instruction is not only our moral obligation to students with LD, it is also our obligation under the law. (p. 33)

The general consensus on the topic of inclusion is that students with disabilities should indeed be educated alongside their nondisabled peers. The debate arises when one takes into account the varying abilities of students and the actual logistics of inclusive education.

### **History of Inclusion of Students With Autism in the General Education Classroom**

The number of students with autism spectrum disorders continues to grow, challenging educators and schools and spurring the inclusion debate (Cammuso, 2011, p. 1). Cammuso (2011) describes the challenge the inclusion of students with autism creates:

On the one hand, many families are concerned that full inclusion in the mainstream may not afford the full range of necessary supports to promote success. Alternately, students who are in small special education (self-contained) classrooms have a more limited range of social and educational opportunities. (p. 1)

As emphasis is placed on greater levels of inclusion of students with special needs, it is quite probable that general education teachers will have students with autism included in their classrooms as well (Chandler-Olcott & Kluth, 2009; Leach & Duffy, 2009). The history of the inclusion of students with autism can be compared to the history of inclusion in general, except that autism spectrum disorders is a new area of study and one with increasing prevalence in today's public schools. Although increasing numbers of students with autism are being served in the general education classroom, few procedures have been established to facilitate the successful inclusion of these students (Simpson, de Boer-Ott, & Smith-Myles, 2003). Given the unique social, communicative, and behavioral characteristics that accompany autism spectrum disorders, including students with autism can be challenging or, at best, different than educating students with other disabilities.

Early on, the techniques used to teach students with autism were largely individualized and carried out in one-on-one or small group settings. As more became known about autism spectrum disorders, it was found that many students with autism were being educated in the general education classroom (Jordan, 2008, p. 12).

### **Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders**

According to the DSM-IV and IDEA, the three main characteristics of autism spectrum disorders include communication deficits; social skill deficits; and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior and interests (American Psychiatric Association, 2012). Behavioral issues can range from minor to major in terms of their effect on the social abilities of individuals with autism. How those with autism develop over time also varies. According to Schall and McDonough (2010), the development of

individuals with ASD through adolescence does not follow a common path (p. 82). In some individuals, skills may be developed and troublesome characteristics may improve, while other individuals may experience no real changes, or even experience greater difficulty.

### **Communication Deficits**

Communication deficits include lifelong language delays, idiosyncratic and echolalic language, and significant difficulty in the use and understanding of non-verbal communication (Schall & McDonough, 2010, p. 83). Even when language ability is present, such as in individuals with Asperger's disorder, communication is not necessarily successful.

### **Social Skill Deficits**

Schall and McDonough (2010) note that many people with autism continue to struggle with social skill development, but those individuals who have been engaged socially with peers without disabilities show more improvement in this area (p. 83). As with other characteristics of autism, social skills deficits can range from mild to very severe.

### **Restricted, Repetitive, and Stereotyped Patterns of Behavior**

Patterns of behavior in people with autism include unusual motor movements, resistance to changes in routine, engagement in rituals, and intense interests (Schall & McDonough, 2010, p. 83). These characteristics may seem "quirky" in some individuals but can be debilitating in others.

## **Other Characteristics**

Cognitive and intellectual disability is often found in individuals with autism spectrum disorders. According to Schall and McDonough (2010), cognitive ability in individuals with autism varies from gifted to severely impaired, while cognitive ability in individuals with Asperger's disorder generally ranges from gifted to mildly impaired, and in individuals with PDD-NOS, cognitive ability runs the entire range (p. 83). It is important to note that because of the communicative impairments experienced by individuals with autism, it may be difficult to pinpoint cognitive ability.

Other secondary characteristics include aggression, self-injury, over activity, fleeing, anxiety disorders, depression, and problems with sensory stimulation (either being over or under sensitive to various stimuli) (Schall & McDonough, 2010, p. 83). Again, these characteristics range from mild to severe.

## **Difficulties in the Inclusion of Students With Autism**

One particular difficulty in developing a successful inclusion model for students with autism comes from the diversity within the population (Guldberg, 2010, p. 169). Given the array of impairments individuals with autism experience, it is not surprising that inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom can be complex. "Of children with disabilities, children with autism may pose particular challenges to the general education teacher" (Robertson et al., 2003, p. 123). Emam and Farrell (2009) found that tensions exist for teachers "due to the inclusion of pupils with ASD" and are affected by differences in "social and emotional understanding," and "the mentalising difficulties of pupils with ASD and their struggle with recognition of embedded emotions" (p. 418). In general, individuals with an autism spectrum disorder have



difficulty socially, have problems with language, and problems with sensory integration (Friedlander, 2009, p. 141).

Another reason that the inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom is difficult may relate to behavioral issues. Findings from a study conducted by Robertson et al. (2003) regarding the relationship between general education teachers and their students with autism concluded that, in general, teachers had positive relationships with the included students with autism. These positive relationships were, however, negatively affected when behavior problems were present (p. 128). The unusual behaviors exhibited by students with autism not only interfere with their relationships with teachers, but also their relationships with peers (Robertson et al., 2003).

In fact, not all professionals are confident that students with autism should be educated in inclusive settings at all, as noted by Simpson et al. (2003):

The authors are not convinced that every student with ASD should be included in general education classes. Nonetheless, it is recognized that many children and youth with ASD can and should be integrated into general education classroom settings, and that inclusion will likely continue. (p. 132)

Thus, debate continues regarding the inclusion of students with autism in general education settings (Simpson et al., 2003). Yianni-Coudurier et al. (2008) feel that students with autism miss out on much needed instruction in today's inclusion model:

Interventions in specialized settings only partially make up for the insufficient or non-existent time spent in school, especially for those children having one or more of the following characteristics: low level of adaptation, major behavioural problems or low socioprofessional category of parents. (p. 861)

It seems that those individuals who do not fully support the inclusion of students with autism feel that these students are not receiving an adequate education when not provided

the individualized, specialized instruction that is difficult to provide within an inclusive setting.

### **Successful Inclusion of Students With Autism**

“The inclusion of children with autism into the general education classroom affords teachers gifts and responsibilities; like all students, however, instruction and environmental considerations must be differentiated for them to reach their potential as learners” (Friedlander, 2009, p. 143). The education of students with autism requires a thorough understanding of the deficit areas commonly presented by students with autism, such as cognitive, social, sensory, and behavioral impairments; more specifically limited language skills; difficulty with or abnormal sensory processing; difficulty thinking in an abstract manner; and difficulty tolerating change (Mesibov & Shea, 1996, p. 342).

Generally speaking, the traditional teaching techniques appropriate for most general education students are not effective for students with autism. Language deficits, combined with the inability to mimic appropriate behavior modeled by others and the social behaviors usually present, make for difficult classroom experiences (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). Guldborg (2010) points out that besides only looking to the personal needs of the particular student with autism learning within a general education classroom, one must also “make adjustments to the learning environment or the way that staff work” (p. 168). “Without a needs-based focus in educational programme planning, ‘inclusion’ is nothing more than another label and students will continue to experience exclusion when placed in the regular classroom” (Lynch & Irvine, 2009, p. 846).

Although the inclusion of students with autism can be problematic and is not fully embraced by all, “a positive aspect of full inclusion is that it may succeed in producing

more appropriate models of support in general classrooms for students who could function there with proper assistance” (Mesibov & Shea, 1996, p. 344). According to Hart and Whalon (2011), the success of students with autism in the general education classroom depends on general educators using student strengths to their advantage, being aware of the characteristics of students with autism in general, but also characteristics of each particular student, and eliciting participation and communication from students within the classroom (p. 274). Guldberg (2010) states that inclusion takes into account the needs of the child while occurring in an “environment where staff are willing and able to be flexible in terms of how the curriculum is delivered and to adapt the routines and physical environment within which the child is being educated” (p. 169). Jordan (2008) describes an effective inclusion model as being flexible and managed by properly trained, professional teachers (p. 13).

### **Attitudes of General Education Teachers Who Have a Student With Autism in Their Classrooms**

#### **How General Educators Feel About Inclusion**

“Teachers are pivotal in implementing integrated education. Their perception and evaluation of the nature, value and feasibility of integrated education is of paramount importance in the furtherance of this educational ideal” (Pearson, Lo, Chui, & Wong, 2003, p. 506). Special education teachers are obviously important to the inclusion process as well (Taylor, Smiley, & Ramasamy, 2003); nonetheless, as Rakap and Kaczmarek (2010) point out, general education teachers are the professionals serving children with special needs alongside typically developing students. Because of this, it is

very important to better understand the thoughts of general educators concerning inclusion.

Understanding the thoughts and feelings of general education teachers who accommodate for students with special needs is not only interesting, it could be one of the most fruitful avenues for the improvement and continued growth of inclusive practices (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Dedrick, Marfo, & Harris, 2007; Parasuram, 2006; Sikes et al., 2007). Sikes et al. (2007) state that while “policy, structure, and culture might shape the broader social and institutional contexts” in which teachers work, it is “their personal interpretations and understandings, their day-to-day enactments, how they perform inclusion, their *agency* which determines how the policy is formulated and reformulated in practice” (p. 366). The truth is, without researching the attitudes of educators to determine their feelings regarding inclusive practice, it will be difficult to improve the efficacy of inclusion due to harbored negativity left unaddressed.

Glazzard (2010) found “attitudinal barriers” common in his research (p. 56). “It is clear that inclusion will remain a significant challenge if practitioners are not committed to its principles and it will be impossible if practitioners fail to embrace their responsibilities for the education of all children” (p. 56).

Some researchers have found it difficult to pinpoint the overall attitudes of general education teachers regarding inclusion because of the variety of attitudes. According to Kavale and Forness (2000), evidence has been inconclusive regarding attitude about inclusion because of wide variance in opinion (p. 284).

Other research indicates that the attitudes of general educators are mixed when it comes to inclusion. A study by Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) indicated that the attitudes

held by general educators both toward the inclusion of students with special education needs in general education settings and toward the overall philosophy of inclusion were positive, yet not overwhelmingly so (p. 380). The study also indicated that these same teachers were anxious with regard to the difficulties of the successful functioning of an inclusive classroom (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). Rae, Murray, and McKenzie (2010) found “staff attitudes were more positive than negative” toward the inclusion of students with learning disabilities (p. 17).

The positive or “generally” positive attitudes of general education teachers are often coupled with anxiety regarding the time and resources they will need in order to make inclusion work in their classrooms. Avramidis et al. (2000) found that although many teachers are supportive of the ideal of inclusion, many are also concerned about having enough time, training, resources, and skills to be successful (Avramidis et al., 2000; Kent-Walsh & Light, 2003). In support of this finding, Jerlinder, Danermark, and Gill (2010) found that the teachers who possessed positive attitudes were those who also noted “having adequate training, having general school support from management and colleagues and having a physical environment (resources) conducive to inclusion” (p. 55).

Although inclusion most definitely has supporters, it seems that among general education teachers, attitudes tend to be negative (Alghazo & Gaad, 2004; Coutsocostas & Alborz, 2010). The negativity can be attributed to the extra work associated with making accommodations. Cheuk and Hatch (2007), for example, noted that “many teachers develop the belief that children with disabilities are extra burdens who should be excluded from their stressful working environments” (p. 418), while Lohrmann and

Bambara (2006) revealed that teachers are negatively influenced by what they hear about their students from other teachers. In a study conducted by Wong, Pearson, and Lo (2004), teachers were not confident that inclusion was beneficial for students with disabilities or their general education peers (p. 274). Still other teachers, although primarily holding negative attitudes toward inclusion, demonstrated willingness to learn new skills and develop strategies that could help them work more effectively with students with special educational needs.

In a review of literature concerning physical education and inclusive practices, Hersman and Hodge (2010) found that:

Teachers expressed both favorable and unfavorable or wavering beliefs about inclusion, teachers spoke of complexities to class organization and management, especially in teaching students with severe disabilities, and teachers voiced concerns about inadequate professional preparation, which troubled their confidence in teaching students with severe disabilities. (p. 731)

Ammah and Hodge (2005) conducted a similar study with physical education teachers, finding that the attitudes of the teachers were predominantly positive, but they lacked confidence, because they did not feel prepared to successfully accommodate for students with severe disabilities (p. 49).

When teachers feel that they can teach and accommodate for students with special education needs, they are not only more positive, they are also less anxious about inclusion and more accepting of these students (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999; Soodak, Podell, & Lehman, 1998). Increased positivity and acceptance can result in better teaching, as evidenced by Bender, Vail, and Scott (1995), who found that teachers who doubted their ability to effectively teach students with disabilities were

also less likely to implement teaching strategies found to be beneficial to students with diverse learning needs (p. 94).

### **Variables Affecting Attitudes of General Education Teachers**

#### **Demographics**

In a review of the existing literature on teacher attitude and demographic variables such as age and gender, the evidence was mixed. Alghazo and Gaad (2004) found that female teachers had more positive attitudes toward inclusion than male teachers did. Parasuram (2006) found positive attitudes toward inclusion were held by the youngest teachers and oldest teachers studied. However, Avramidis et al. (2000) report that in their study, demographic variables such as gender, age, and years of teaching experience did not impact the attitudes of general education teachers in any significant way (p. 207).

#### **Teaching Experience**

Although there may not be a correlation between years of teaching experience and formation of positive attitudes toward inclusion, there is a link between years of teaching experience *in inclusive settings* and positive attitude development. One survey found there to be a clear difference between teachers who had experience with inclusion and those who did not, ultimately leading to positive changes in attitudes toward inclusion for those teachers who had experience in inclusive environments (Avramidis et al., 2000). Alghazo and Gaad (2004) also found that as teachers gain experience in teaching they also increase their acceptance of students with disabilities. In support of this finding, Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) found that when general educators were asked what they felt were barriers to inclusion, they stated lack of experience with inclusion and special education practices (p. 382).

## **Knowledge of Special Education Practices**

Similar to teaching experience, with more educational preparation comes greater levels of confidence and positive attitudes (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007). According to existing studies on the topic, the problem is that many general education teachers do not feel that they have received adequate training to undertake inclusion (Buell et al., 1999; Cheuk & Hatch, 2007; Chhabra, Srivastava, & Srivastava, 2010; Glazzard, 2010). Specifically with reference to the inclusion of students with autism, Eldar et al. (2010) state that when general education teachers are prepared to teach students with autism, and when they have support throughout the process, the teachers are more accepting of students with autism in their classrooms (p. 107).

## **Severity and Type of Disability**

In a comprehensive review of literature studying teacher attitudes toward inclusion, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) found that “overall, systematic variability in support for mainstreaming appeared to be due mostly to the *degree of intensity* of mainstreaming, and the *severity* level of students with disabilities who are mainstreamed” (p. 62). Teacher attitude is greatly influenced by the severity and type of disability of the included students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Campbell, Gilmore, & Cuskelly, 2003; Jobe, Rust, & Brissie, 1996).

Soodak et al. (1998) found that teachers were not as accepting of students with mental retardation, learning disabilities, and behavior disorders as they were of students with hearing impairments or physical disabilities (p. 491). Avramidis and Kalyva (2007) found that teachers felt that students with mild to moderate learning difficulties, speech disabilities, and physical disabilities were the easiest to accommodate, while students



with sensory impairments such as vision or hearing impairments, autism, brain injury, and neurological disorders were the most difficult to accommodate.

The negative feelings some general education teachers have toward accommodating students with disabilities such as autism and neurological difficulties could be due to the challenging behaviors some students exhibit and the severity of the characteristics of their disability. “In harmony with previous research, which has been carried out in other countries, students with special needs who are less demanding in terms of teachers’ time and skills are viewed more positively as candidates for inclusion than students with challenging behaviors” (Ntinis et al., 2006, p. 89). The preference toward including students without challenging behaviors may be

attributed to the participants’ limited skills and their concerns about the impact of inclusion on their emotional well-being and time, the flow of learning in the classroom and the restriction of opportunities for learning and peer acceptance for the student with challenging behaviors. (Ntinis et al., 2006, p. 89)

### **General Education Teachers’ Thoughts Regarding Making Inclusion Successful**

General education teachers also possess attitudes regarding what they feel does or will make inclusion successful for both teacher and student. Some teachers believe that inclusive education may be supported through professional development (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007), while others feel that lack of time to provide accommodations is the major issue standing in the way of success (Cheuk & Hatch, 2007). Bricker (2000) states that the three main factors affecting successful inclusion include attitudes, professional skills and knowledge, and support systems (p. 18).

When general education teachers find themselves teaching in inclusive classroom settings, do they feel ready and are they truly prepared to teach students with disabilities?

DeBettencourt (1999) states that general education teachers need more information and training regarding students with special education needs (p. 28). This may be the responsibility of teacher preparation programs or school districts, but it is not of concern in the present study. Kozleski and Waitoller (2010) feel that “consequently, teacher preparation programmes for inclusive educational systems must develop teachers who have the skills, contextual awareness and critical sensibilities to teach diverse groups of students that are being denied full participation in society” (p. 655).

Students with disabilities are naturally the focus of most of the inclusion debate, but what about the general education students? Students without disabilities can be impacted positively by an education alongside peers with special education needs (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). The attitudes and actions of general education students can also impact how students with disabilities function within the general education classroom. Ochs, Kreme-Sadlik, Solomon, and Sirota (2001) state that the peers of students with autism are not adequately educated about the characteristics of individuals with autism and how to effectively navigate the social “idiosyncrasies” of children with autism (p. 399). A study conducted by Ochs et al. found that students with high functioning autism, or HFA, were ignored or treated negatively by their peers and children whose diagnosis of autism was not shared with their peers had more negative experiences with peers than those students whose diagnosis was known by their peers (p. 412).

Overall, however, one might conclude that support is what general educators are looking for (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2009, p. 20; Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006). In reference to his study on the attitudes of teachers in England toward inclusive practices, Glazzard (2010) reported that support within the classroom, particularly support specific

to students with behavior problems, was crucial to the success of inclusion (p. 59). Similarly, in a study of the attitudes of Italian teachers toward inclusion, Cornoldi, Terreni, Scruggs, and Mastropieri (1998) found that while general education teachers supported the idea of inclusion, they were not satisfied with the level of support they received, specifically with regard to time, training, support from other professionals, and relevant instructional materials (p. 352). DeBettencourt (1999) describes the relationship between general educators and special educators in an inclusive teaching and learning environment as being a collaborative one in which general and special educators share the responsibilities of planning and delivering instruction, evaluating, grading, and disciplining (p. 27). “Collaborative efforts among school personnel are essential to achieving successful inclusive schools” (Hunt & Goetz, 1997, p. 25).

### **Summary**

It is important to understand the history of inclusion; although inclusion has been in place in the public schools of the United States for close to 40 years, it has not been perfected and may never be. Educators may improve the success of inclusion for students with autism by understanding how general education teachers, primary stakeholders in the inclusion process, feel about inclusion and what they suggest for its success.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

The purpose of this study was to understand how general education teachers perceive their experiences working with students in their classrooms who have been diagnosed with autism. The study addressed the research question: How do secondary school general educators perceive their experiences working with students in their classrooms who have been diagnosed with autism? Qualitative research methods, specifically interviews, have allowed the feelings, opinions, and attitudes of regular education teachers to be better understood. Phenomenology was chosen as the orientation of this study. Throughout Chapter III, the following topics are presented: an overview of phenomenological research; procedures, including participant selection, protection of human rights, and the description of the setting; data collection and analysis, including procedures, participants, as well as rigor and trustworthiness; and a conclusion.

#### **Phenomenological Approach**

The phenomenological method seeks to fully describe an experience lived, or what an experience means to the person who lived it (Sadala & Adorno, 2001, p. 289; Van Manen, 2007). As Bogdan and Biklen (2002) state, researchers who employ phenomenological methods “attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (p. 25). Phenomenology

approaches the study of humans, their experiences and culture in a way that takes into consideration the distinctive aspects of human existence, exemplifying human experiences, most notably values, meanings, intentions, morals, feelings, and life experiences (McPhail, 1995, p.160). Phenomenology uses the lived experiences of individuals to expose the structure of experience, studies action rather than behavior, and is focused on how consciousness gives meaning (McPhail, 1995, p 162). Instead of explaining or seeking correlations, phenomenology describes (Sadala & Adorno, 2001, p. 283). Dall’Alba (2009) describes the impact phenomenology has had:

It has challenged taken-for-granted assumptions and prompted new insights into what it means to live, work, play and learn in our world. A more recent resurgence of interest in phenomenology can perhaps be understood in the context of its potential contribution to re-thinking our understanding of the complex phenomena we encounter in the dynamic, and sometimes confronting, world in which we find ourselves in this 21st century. (p. 7)

Willis (1999) describes phenomenology as an approach to research used by those wishing to describe their experiences living in the world (p. 94).

Willis (1999) also outlines the basic tenets of phenomenology as intentionality, knowing stances, objectivity, and subjectivity. First, the aspect of phenomenology that is described by Willis as intentionality states that the act of thinking affirms there is a strong connection between the “thinking subject and the object of thinking” (p. 96).

Phenomenological research, therefore, seeks to reveal the experiences of people and how the experiences form reality for them (Willis, 1999). Peters (2009) also writes of the intentionality of phenomenology, describing it as the study of consciousness as experienced from the first person perspective (p. 1). Consciousness is comprised of

components such as imagination, remembrances, and perceptions, and the role these elements play in bringing significance to experience (McPhail, 1995, p. 161).

Second, Willis (1999) states that there is not a clear distinction between objective and subjective knowing stances in phenomenology (p. 99). Phenomenology employs a combination of objectivity and subjectivity when seeking to understand human experience. “The phenomenological project seeks what can be called objectivising subjectivity—focusing on the thing being experienced but still as experienced *by me*—as apart from subjectivising subjectivity” (Willis, 1999, p. 99). In phenomenology, there is not a clear differentiation between subjectivity and objectivity, because consciousness is rooted in the world as it is experienced and each conscious undertaking has both objective and subjective aspects (McPhail, 1995, p. 161). Before objective reality, someone must experience the reality; before any knowledge is formed, it must be based on life experience (Sadala & Adorno, 2001, p. 283). When individuals reflect upon their thinking, they are apt to be faced with both proactive and contemplative modes of processing information; the proactive is being seen as a set of processes interpreted, ordered, and categorized within one’s mind (Willis, 1999). In contrast, the contemplative mode can be characterized as contemplative. As Willis (1999) states, “The mind does not ‘seize upon’ the object to analyse and subdue it but attempts to behold it, to allow its reality, its beauty and its texture to become more and more present” (p. 98).

McPhail’s (1995) description of phenomenology goes on to include two more components: consciousness and culture. First, consciousness is molded by both the past experiences of the individual as well as anticipation of the future. “Essentially, there is no stopping point to consciousness in that along with its historicity and futurity, it is

always being reconstituted in new experiences” (p. 162). Sadala and Adorno (2001) state, “The core of phenomenology is the *intentionality of consciousness*, understood as the direction of consciousness towards understanding the world” (p. 283). Second, culture affects and is affected by one’s lived experience. Culture is defined by the experiences an individual has within various contexts and “cultural institutions are the creations that have emerged out of life activities” (McPhail, 1995, p. 162).

### **Van Manen’s Phenomenological Research Methods**

Van Manen (1984) asserts four main procedures associated with phenomenological research, which I will use to guide this study: exploring the experiences lived by the individuals studied, the investigation of experience as we live it (the descriptions of experiences given by participants), the reflection on themes (what it is that gives meaning to particular experiences imparted by participants), and phenomenological description through the writing process. “Phenomenology aims to come to a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of our everyday experiences” and “offers us the possibility of plausible insight which brings us in more direct contact with the world” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 1).

### **Turn to the Nature of Lived Experience**

Turning to the nature of lived experience, according to Van Manen (1984), involves identifying what is occurring (the phenomenon), formulating questions, and then discerning assumptions and understandings of the phenomenon. “So phenomenological research is a being-given-over to some quest, a true task, a deep questioning of something which restores an original sense of what it means to be a thinker, a researcher, a theorist” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 3).

### **Existential Investigation**

Existential investigation involves the generation of data and exploration of the phenomenon itself, while also consulting literature. The researcher must exist “in the midst of the world of living relations and shared situations” while he or she “actively explores the category of lived experience in all its modalities and aspects” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 3).

### **Phenomenological Reflection**

In phenomenological research, reflection is carried out through thematic analysis. Unlike other forms of research, phenomenology “makes a distinction between appearance and essence, between the things of our experience and that which grounds the things of our experience” (Van Manen, 1984, p. 3).

### **Phenomenological Writing**

Phenomenological writing is characterized by the use of examples, writing, and rewriting (Van Manen, 1984, p. 5). Specifically, it is the application of language and thought to the lived experience, to what shows itself (Van Manen, 1984, p. 4).

### **Protection of Human Subjects**

Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the Institutional Review Board at the cooperating university. The protection of all study participants was assured (see Appendix A). Participants were fully informed regarding the purpose of the study, as well as any risks or benefits to them. Anonymity was assured through the use of fictitious names. No identifying information has been included within the study. Participants were given the choice to take part in the study and also the option to withdraw at any point. Written consent was obtained from all participants.



## **Participant Selection**

The participants in this study consisted of six general education teachers who were currently teaching at the middle and high school level and had students with autism in their classrooms, or previously had students with autism in their classrooms. I utilized gatekeepers in three school districts to identify these educators. After obtaining the contact information for said educators, I recruited these individuals to participate in the study.

## **Description of the Setting**

This research study was conducted in three public secondary schools within two upper-Midwestern states. Contact with participants occurred in their respective schools after the school day had ended or at neutral locations arranged by them.

## **Participants**

### **John**

John has been a science teacher for 21 years. Across these years of classroom experience, he has taught many students with autism. He recalls that early in his teaching career, although he most likely did have students with autism, these students were not necessarily diagnosed as such. John believes that sometime in the late 1990s autism began being identified in students to a greater extent, and educators started becoming more aware of the disorder.

### **Jill**

Jill has taught English for 24 years, including a basic English course which served as an inclusive setting for many students with various disabilities. Jill believes that she has taught students with autism throughout her teaching career, although has not been

aware of specific diagnostic information. At the time of our interview, she was teaching two students with autism, one in a higher level English class and one in the regular English class. Jill suspects that both students have Asperger's disorder.

### **Holly**

Holly has been a teacher for 13 years. Across her career in education, she has taught Business and Office Technology, Reading, and also English Language Learner courses. Holly thinks that she probably has taught students with autism in the past, but is not certain. At the time of our interview, she had a student with autism who has been in her classroom for the past three years.

### **Carrie**

Carrie has taught English for the last 20 years and believes that she probably began teaching students with autism between 8 and 10 years ago. At the time of our interview, Carrie had one student with autism who is very high functioning. While she does not think he has Asperger's disorder, she is not sure of his exact diagnosis.

### **Bruce**

Bruce has taught geography for the past seven years. During this time, he has had numerous students with autism in his classroom, even a group of five together in one class. Bruce finds himself personally connected to the topic of autism because he has a cousin with autism to whom he is very close. Therefore, his perspective is unique as both educator and family member.

### **Amber**

Amber has taught social studies for the past eight years and had little experience with students having autism. At the time of our interview, she was teaching a student

diagnosed with autistic disorder. In the past, she believes that she worked with a student who probably had Asperger's disorder.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data were gathered through interviews with participants. In Donalek's (2004) description of phenomenological research, interviewing is a common method of data collection, requiring engagement and sensitivity. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the interviewer. Open-ended educator interview questions (see Appendix B) were utilized as a guide to the interviews. These questions included:

- How many years have you been teaching?
- What subject/classes do you teach?
- Is this the first student with autism who has been included in your classroom? If not, how many years have you been working with students with autism? Does the student have autism or Asperger syndrome?
- Thinking of either the student(s) you currently have in class or the student(s) you most recently had in class, did the student(s) have assistance from a paraprofessional while in your classroom? What specific forms of accommodations and/or modifications to classroom material did the student receive? Are these accommodations taken care of by you, the para, or the special education teacher primarily?
- Have you had any formal special education training? If so, what kind?
- How well do you feel your undergraduate teaching program prepared you for teaching in an inclusive classroom?
- What kind of instructional strategies do you prefer to utilize when working with students with autism in your classroom?
- What resources do you feel you have access to that help you teach students with autism?
- What have been your greatest successes working with students with autism?
- What have been your greatest challenges working with students with autism?

- How has teaching a student/students with autism in your classrooms affected you as a person?
- Do you feel that the student(s) with autism benefit from being educated in the general education classroom setting?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If not, why?
- Do you feel that general education students are affected by the fact that there are students with autism in the classroom with them?
  - a. If so, how are the general education students negatively affected?
  - b. How are the general education students positively affected?
- What is your educational philosophy in regard to the inclusion of students with autism in general education classes?
- What is your educational philosophy in regard to the inclusion of students with other special needs in general classrooms?
- Do you feel that you have sufficient time to teach students with autism in your classroom?
- Do you feel that you have sufficient skills and/or training to teach students with autism in your classroom?
- Do you feel that you have sufficient assistance from special education professionals and/or administration to teach students with autism in your classroom?
- Is there anything else you would like to tell me about teaching students with autism that you did not get the chance to?

An interview transcription form (see Appendix C) and a formulated meanings form (see Appendix D) were utilized when gathered data were analyzed.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

In a study based on personal interviews, it is important to recognize that the instrument used to gather data is the interviewer, and due to human nature, it is

impossible to guarantee that threats to validity were not present in this phenomenological context (Seidman, 2006, p. 23). As Seidman (2006) states,

Although the interviewer can strive to have the meaning being made in the interview as much a function of the participant's construction and reflection as possible, the interviewer must nevertheless recognize that the meaning is, to some degree, a function of the participant's interaction with the interviewer. (p. 23)

The following strategies were utilized to ensure that the findings of this study are as free of researcher bias as possible:

- Triangulation—involves using multiple sources of data to increase the accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2005, p. 252). Data were gathered from six different individuals from three different public schools.
- Member checking—the process of presenting one or more study participants with study findings in order to assure the validity and rigor of the account, including such things as accurate themes and fair interpretations of data (Creswell, 2005, p. 252; Donalek, 2004). Each of the six interview participants was given a copy of his or her interview transcript to read through as well as an explanation of the study findings.
- Peer examination or external audit—presenting the study to an individual or individuals outside of the study (in this case, special education and/or general education professionals) to review aspects of the findings (Creswell, 2005, p. 253). Study findings were given to a special education director, special education teacher, and a regular education teacher. Their opinions regarding the study findings and logic of inferences made were solicited.

- Relevant literature comparison: As data were reflected upon and themes emerged, literature relevant to the topic was utilized in order to compare and contrast findings.

The validity of the research is also supported by a description of how I came to discern themes and assumptions from the data along with quotes from interview participants (Donalek, 2004). As Van Manen (2007) describes, phenomenology must be a thought-filled process but also a process free from bias (p. 12).

### **Gathering Codes and the Formation of Categories and Themes**

Reflection upon the analysis of data is fundamental to phenomenology. “Good phenomenologic research is more than a simple synthesis of the contents of a group of interviews. Research is not truly phenomenological unless the researcher’s beliefs are incorporated into the data analysis” (Donalek, 2004, p. 516). At the conclusion of my research, in line with the fundamentals of phenomenology, a detailed, thorough description of the attitudes of regular education teachers toward the inclusion of students with autism in their high school classrooms was obtained, allowing stakeholders to easily access what is key to the topic (Donalek, 2004, p. 517).

**CHAPTER IV**  
**PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION OF**  
**THE FINDINGS WITH REFERENCE**  
**TO THE LITERATURE**

In this chapter, the study findings are presented with reference to literature relevant to these findings. Formulated meanings from the data gathered from participant interviews are presented. After analysis of the data, six themes emerged. These themes include awareness of diagnosis, preparation for supporting inclusion, descriptions of students, experiences teaching students with autism, impact of inclusion, and formation of an educational philosophy. The chapter culminates with three final assertions.

**Theme One: Awareness of Diagnosis**

Throughout the process of interviewing general education teachers, it quickly became apparent that many were unaware of the specific diagnoses of the students with autism they teach or had taught in the past. All of the six educators had questions regarding the diagnoses of their students with autism. Four of the six educators were not aware of the diagnosis of their student(s), one educator was not sure if she had taught students with autism in the past, and one educator was not aware of the exact number of students with autism she had in class during the past school year. Jill spoke about the students with autism in her English classroom:

I think I had two of them, two completely different students, one in the college [credit] classroom, one in the regular classroom, one much more motivated than the other one. I believe they had Asperger's, I think, I didn't really ask.

Holly recalled whether she had taught students with autism in the past in these words:

Ya know, when they're in special ed, we don't always know, we don't always get told that this is what they are labeled as, so she is probably the first one that I know of for sure.

Amber spoke of a student she had in the past this way:

I don't know what the other one would have been categorized as, it could have been Asperger's, but I don't know what the diagnosis was.

The educators were aware that they did have students with autism in their classrooms, but they were not aware of specific diagnostic information. Pervasive developmental disorders, as discussed earlier, is a group of disorders with definite characteristics, yet with great variance. Do general education teachers focus on the immediate needs of the student in relation to their classroom and not focus on the specific diagnosis of the student? Are they included in the planning process for the student(s) and fully informed by the special education case manager? General education teachers must be a part of the IEP planning and decision making process in order to “feel effective,” given that decisions made will ultimately affect their classrooms (Buell et al., 1999, p. 153). John described the diagnoses of students past and present:

I'm trying to think, the first time somebody ever...it was probably the late nineties before someone said, “This person has autism.” I don't know what else they called it at that point. I've got a couple that are on the spectrum...they're, I don't know which way you'd go, they're not really autistic, just a little.

Carrie described one of her students as follows:

Ya know, I'm not really sure, he's very, very high functioning, and I don't, from what I know of the characteristics of Asperger's, it doesn't fit, but I don't know what his diagnosis for sure is...he's very high functioning and he's probably, the first three quarters he was an A student and if you would walk into the classroom while he's in there, you would not even have a guess that he has autism. I haven't had any of the severe cases that come to my classroom.



A common theme among educators was opinions or personal ideas regarding the type or severity of disorder their students had. Comments included knowing that students were diagnosed with autism, but appeared “normal” and stating that students were “throughout the spectrum.” Descriptions of the type or severity of students’ disabilities included “high functioning,” “low functioning,” “severe,” “classic” autism, and “very autistic.”

### **Theme Two: Preparation for Supporting Inclusion**

Buell et al. (1999) found that general education teachers do not feel as confident as special education teachers in their ability to support inclusion (p. 153). This is not surprising, but it is a troubling finding, given that making curricular adaptations and managing behavior are critical components to a successful classroom (p. 153).

Ideally, all secondary teacher candidates should develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions to educate students with disabilities in included classrooms. But many new teachers still lack the expertise to teach all students and fail to fulfill their role in the inclusive process. (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011, p. 96)

Daane et al. (2000) found that general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators all agreed that general education teachers were not prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities (pp. 334-335).

None of the six educators interviewed had any formal special education training. They felt that their skill and ability to work with students with autism was developed through experience. Bruce described how he learned and is learning to work with students with autism:

Nothing prepares you like actually being in the classroom and being involved in that, it was good to get an introduction to it [in college], but I didn’t learn anything until I was actually there doing it.

Bruce felt that he does possess the skills needed to work with students with special education needs although he has not been formally trained:

As far as the training goes, formal training, no, but the training I've gotten through life has more than sufficiently gotten me to that point [of feeling comfortable teaching students with autism].

Carrie described her feelings with regard to her own skills in this way:

Training, probably not, skills, just literally on the job learning as you go, and experience, yes, but also because I know I have my resources close by, I know I can go in and ask them anything I need to and the support is there from them, and we've had pretty good parents too that have been pretty supportive.

Hendricks (2011) stated that there is a need for instruction regarding autism and scientifically based teaching strategies in undergraduate teacher education programs (p. 47). The results of a study by Berry (2008) indicated that teacher education programs “can provide a principal venue for helping teachers develop the attitudes and dispositions for teaching in inclusive contexts” (p. 1157). In a study by DeSimone and Parmar (2006), one of the main issues standing in the way of successful inclusion was not enough teacher preparation, both pre-service and in-service (p. 107). In the current study, one of the six educators felt that her undergraduate teacher education program prepared her to work with students with autism. Five of the six educators felt that their undergraduate teacher education program did not adequately prepare them to teach students with autism. Jill felt that being in college in the 1980s impacted how much she learned regarding working with students with autism:

I was in school between 1984 and 1988 so it's been quite a while and I think a lot of that too [not being educated on the topic] is because autism wasn't that well understood back then.

Amber described how her undergraduate teacher education program prepared her to work with students with special education needs:

Pretty good, it's hard, because you never know what you're going to encounter and they'll try to get you prepped for everything but until you are there, you just never really know.

John felt his teacher preparation program did not prepare him to teach students with autism:

Not even close; no it wasn't, they told you about the law, that was about all we got.

It seems that general education teachers' undergraduate teacher education programs have not adequately prepared them to teach students with autism. Teachers, therefore, develop teaching skills in relation to students with autism through experience.

Avramidis and Kalyva (2007), in a study of Greek teachers, found "lack of experience of inclusion" and "limited knowledge of the special education field" as the largest barriers to successful inclusion with "insufficient support from the school and the local community," "limited time," "parental attitudes," and "limited opportunities for collaboration" following behind (pp. 382-383). In a study conducted by Coutsocostas and Alborz (2010), "teachers were asked to define the term 'inclusive education' in an open-ended question. One third of the participants did not give a definition, were uncertain of the term or misinterpreted the meaning" (p. 153). Carter, Prater, Jackson, and Marchant (2009) compared educating students with disabilities to a problem-solving process and pointed out that it is difficult for teachers to "collaboratively plan effective accommodations and adaptations" if they do not possess the skills needed to do so (p. 68).

In-service training and the availability of resources may impact the confidence of general education teachers with regard to inclusion. Hersman and Hodge (2010) found that teachers feel they need more professional training to support inclusion (p. 730). One third of the participants in a study conducted by Rae et al. (2010) responded that they would need more training in the management of challenging behaviors and emotional difficulties to fully embrace inclusion (p. 14). Many school districts have implemented inclusive education in their schools without providing enough professional development before doing so (Daane et al., 2000, p. 332). Professional development activities focusing on the inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom have, however, become more common in recent years (Hendricks, 2011, p. 38). When assessing what areas general educators wished to receive training in, Buell et al. (1999) found the most frequently named to be “program modification, assessing academic progress, adapting curriculum, managing students’ behaviour, developing IEPs, and using assistive technology” (pp. 153-154).

It is important to note that even with sound pre-service preparation and/or in-service training, it is nearly inevitable that general education teachers in the field will be faced with other educators who do not share their inclusive philosophy. Carter et al. (2009) add that both teacher preparation programs and professional development pertaining to inclusive education should prepare and “equip teachers with skills for addressing philosophical differences” (p. 68). Likewise, Cheuk and Hatch (2007) state that teacher preparation programs should prepare future teachers to work in schools where “program goals may be contradictory with the ideology of inclusion” (p. 417). Participants in the current study felt that they were supported by staff and administration.

### Theme Three: Descriptions of Students

A student's "specific presentation of autism," the characteristics unique to him or her, can affect his or her success in the classroom (Boyd & Shaw, 2010, p. 214). Students with autism can be very different from each other, "ranging in IQ from profoundly mentally retarded to gifted, in behavior from passive to hyperactive, in personality from gentle to explosive" (Mesibov & Shea, 1996, p. 344). It is important for general education teachers to be aware of the specific characteristics of their students, as this may affect the success of the particular student as well as the classroom as a whole. As adolescents, students with autism may also receive a psychiatric diagnosis (anxiety and/or depressive disorders, for example) which may further impact their school experience (Boyd & Shaw, 2010, p. 214).

The six educators interviewed were able to easily identify the strengths of students with autism they had taught in the general education classroom setting. As the interviewing process progressed, the positive qualities and abilities of their students flowed from these educators. Descriptions of their students with autism included "fact-oriented," "focused," "visual learner," "creative," "good memory," "incredible speller," "organized," "motivated," "confident," "happy," and "special." John described students with autism he had taught in the past:

With any student, you just want to see them succeed, you find what they do best. We had one student that graduated back in about 1998 and he was an incredible speller and he would...I would write things on the board and he would tell me that I was wrong...couldn't do a lick of math, but could spell and had an iconic memory for movies and he was able to organize, those types of things and then when he graduated, the senior class, when he walked across the stage, gave him a standing ovation. That was the first kid that was really, that you knew was autistic. There have been a couple similar to him, there was one student who could tell you anything there was about a president, knew them in order, that was

his deal, but the ones that are here right now, I would say 80% of them you wouldn't even know, they're more of the high functioning Asperger's, there's one or two that kind of struggle a little bit academically and socially is probably the biggest thing, but the ones that we have here, I mean, he's in speech, plays and...long as you keep him focused he does very, very well.

Bruce described students with autism in these words:

They're great, they're wonderful, so much potential...there are some kids who verbally can't do it, but the heart's in them, it's just so nice and special.

The six educators interviewed also identified areas of need common to their students with autism. These included disability areas common to individuals with autism as well as behavior personal to individual students. Descriptions of negative qualities or disability areas included "literal," "off-task," "difficulty reading social cues," "inappropriate behavior," "inability to understand sarcasm," "anxiety," "problem behaviors," "obsessive behaviors," "academic difficulty," and "unmotivated." Teacher attitude has been found to be influenced by the nature of a student's disability as well as the educational problems resulting from this disability (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p. 134). John discussed the challenges he has experienced working with students with autism:

Sometimes they can get very stubborn, they don't want to do the work some days and I think attitude with them is very important. If they're in a good frame of mind they usually do pretty well, but if something is happening, whether it's at school or at home or on the bus or whatever, sometimes that'll turn them off and usually we get a little heads up from the para or the special ed teacher. That's probably the biggest thing, probably 95% of the kids we've had have been successful, they like the labs, they get to interact. There's only been a couple over my 20-some years that didn't want to say anything; most of the time they don't want to keep quiet—which is fine.

Amber described a student she currently teaches.

The student I have is pretty low functioning. She has to be on task especially like social cues, that's probably the most challenging, like what's appropriate

behavior and the sarcasm, you have to bring things like that and some of the things the kids will use and when it is appropriate and if she understands that they're joking, that they're not being serious.

General education teachers are aware of both the positive and negative qualities of students with autism. They have a firm grasp on the common characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorders, while also realizing all students are unique.

#### **Theme Four: Experiences Teaching Students With Autism**

Lynch and Irvine (2009) describe effective instructional practices for teaching students with autism to be the curriculum, adaptation and/or modification of the curriculum for the particular student, strategies that support generalization of the curriculum, and assessments that accurately measure the growth of the individual student without comparison to other students (p. 854). While general education teachers seem to willingly share their thoughts and feelings regarding inclusion, what is more difficult to pinpoint would be how teachers actually behave in the classroom and what they do as they teach students with autism. As Ammah and Hodge (2005) state, "We know far less about the *behaviors* of practicing GPE (general physical education) teachers who teach students with severe disabilities" (p. 41). Two of the six educators interviewed described specific means of differentiating instruction intended to benefit all students, but also specifically beneficial to students with autism. Two of the six educators stated that they felt they did not need to use any instructional strategies only for the benefit of students with autism, but presented material similarly to all students in the classroom.

DeSimone and Parmar (2006) found that teachers did not fully understand the definition of an instructional strategy and used terms such as "differentiated instruction" that they were unable to define (p. 107). Daane et al. (2000) found that "the presence of

students with disabilities in the general education classroom increased the instructional load of the general education teacher” and also resulted in more management problems in the classroom (p. 334). Ammah and Hodge (2005) found that teachers thought teaching students with disabilities does take more time because of the greater need for individualization (p. 48).

All of the six educators interviewed noted using some form of accommodation with the students with autism in their classrooms. Some students needed as little as extended time for tests, while other students needed extensive modifications to curriculum. A study by Bender et al. (1995) showed that teachers who support inclusion more consistently use teaching strategies (e.g., self-monitoring, behavior contracts, advance organizers) geared toward the success of students with disabilities in the general education classroom than teachers who have negative attitudes toward inclusion (p. 93).

John described the accommodations he utilizes in his science classroom this way:

I try to use everything, I try to go visual, auditory, writing, I try to get whatever is their strengths; most of the students that I’ve had—they’ve got a pretty good memory, so sometimes when they have to take tests with a para, they need a little prodding, and then they’ll do a pretty good job recalling. I’ve had a couple of the Asperger’s, and they’ve done actually very well, as long as you give them steps, they actually follow through with those steps.

Jill described accommodations made in her English classroom:

The one in the college class just needed extra time, only if he requested it; other than that he participated as much as everybody else did. The other one really didn’t need anything modified, but it was with him, he needed someone to prod him to see if he was finishing things, he had a tendency to like video games, his iPod and things, he was real taken with that.

Carrie has made different accommodations and modifications while teaching students with autism and shares this description:



It's been extended time, a little bit more freedom in the classroom to get up, sometimes they have needed to get up and walk out in the hallway, sometimes they've needed to get up and walk to the back of the room, sometimes they've needed objects in their hands to manipulate as they're sitting and listening.

Carrie also has had challenges working with students with autism:

I've had some over the years that have had more oppositional defiant behaviors and sometimes trying to deal with that in a classroom and trying to keep the other kids [on task]...and usually by the end of the year it's a little easier to deal with stuff like that, sometimes knowing how to deal with that stuff, the more severe ones have always had paras with them in the room but still even sometimes the paras struggle with it. We've struggled with them sometimes in the hallways, laying down and throwing a tantrum.

Bruce spoke about accommodating for a particular student with autism in his classroom:

I basically let him run the room, well not run the room, but whatever they needed, well, this one kid loved the Titanic, and I had this Titanic picture book—basically every day he'd end up with that and he'd look at the pictures and that was the main thing. Whenever he needed to go out and take a walk, whenever he needed to take a walk, he just left. Whatever he needed is what we did for him, he didn't really take tests, he was mostly just there to be part of the group and be around other kids.

Bruce also revealed how he believes students with autism feel about his classroom in these words:

They want to come to my room. There's only two classes that they [special education teachers] send them to—two regular education classes—and mine's always one of them and to have them want to come and participate and there are some of them that just sit there, but most of them get involved and to see the smiles on their faces.

Carrie pointed out that although teaching students with autism may take additional time, it is not that different than teaching general education students. For example:

Sometimes in classes you feel like you don't [have enough time], sometimes you might feel a little bit rushed or if they do need that additional help on something you do feel a little bit rushed but it all kind of weighs itself out in the end. I don't feel like it's a taxing thing like it takes more time than it should, there are times, but then there are times that regular ed students need the exact same thing.

Selecting appropriate interventions to use with specific students should be a part of the collaborative process (Leach & Duffy, 2009, p. 36).

Lynch and Irvine (2009) propose that for staff working with students with autism, support may include “additional preparation time, access to resources, and skill development through professional development workshops and information dissemination” (p. 854). The education of students with autism is complex, both given the complexity of autism itself but also the myriad professionals who work together to care for, instruct, and support this population (Hendricks, 2011, p. 38). Cornoldi et al. (1998) found that teachers were supportive of inclusion, but did not feel supported in their efforts to meet student needs (p. 353). Factors found to influence the attitudes of general education teachers include support from paraeducators, special education teachers, and other professionals (Avramidis & Kalyva, 2007, pp. 368-369). All six educators interviewed felt that they were supported by special education teachers and paraprofessionals.

DeSimone and Parmar (2006) found that what allowed teachers to endure the challenge of teaching in an inclusive setting was the use of “collaborative strategies and a genuine team mentality” (p. 108). Special education teachers were seen as resources for both the general education teachers and the students with autism. One educator interviewed spoke about the importance of support from both parents and peers of students with autism. Peers were seen as supportive of both the student with autism and the general education teacher. Bruce discussed his views on classroom accommodations and modifications this way:

Since I don't have the training, I always defer to the paras and the special ed department. Whatever they think their kids need, that's what we do and what they do, and for the most part, in my own opinion, the best thing for those kids is just to be in with the other kids, and it's good for other kids too. I don't know how much they ever learned about geography while they were in there, but it taught them a lot about how to do things while they were in there and with other people and I think it even taught the other kids more. Specifically, their tests were modified when they took them, I always try to do visual things anyhow, group work, they seem to like that also.

Bruce also felt that he has enough time to prepare for teaching students with autism (as far as making accommodations and modifications):

The way I've always looked at it is, the special ed teacher and paras are specifically trained for that so I figured out early that if I delegate that to them and whatever they think they need to get out of it is ok with me. I grade them S/U [pass/fail], that's satisfactory to me, so yeah, I do have enough time because I delegate all of that out.

Carrie described the support she receives from her colleagues as follows:

The teachers here are awesome. They are always very approachable, the one that case manages this particular student, she's got tons of resources herself, she's always available to answer questions.

Holly also described collegial support:

Her resource teacher is very good at informing me of what she can and can't do. The first year I had her in class she was with her so I kind of got to know her and I got to see what the teacher would let her do and what she was capable of doing. So then the last two years she has just been coming by herself.

Daane et al. (2000) found that teachers are generally not comfortable with collaboration and need more planning time in order for collaboration between general education and special education teachers to be successful (p. 334). "The creation of inclusive education practices at the secondary level requires specific attention to the creation of teacher teams that have the space, time, and knowledge to function as a team" (Dukes & Lamar-Dukes, 2009, p. 20).

## Theme Five: Impact of Inclusion

Administrators and teachers believed that students “grew socially when inclusive models of education were employed in their schools” (Daane et al., 2000, p. 335).

Inclusion creates chances for social interaction with general education peers, resulting in modeling of “appropriate classroom behaviors” (Finke, McNaughton, & Drager, 2009, p. 113). Finke et al. (2009) also found that the benefits of inclusion for students with autism include participation in the classroom, participation with peers, reduction in challenging behaviors, and skill development (p. 114). Humphrey (2008) pointed out that the relationships students with autism have with their general education peers “can be both a barrier and an enabler to their successful inclusion in school” (p. 43).

Besides providing students with disabilities with academic support, we must provide them the chance to learn alongside their peers, build social relationships, and develop self-esteem (Lynch & Irvine, 2009, p. 846). The general educators interviewed felt that inclusion provides social development, communication development, the development of vocational skills, and opportunities for interaction for students with autism. Jill spoke of a student who developed socially and academically this way:

I feel that quite a bit in his past he had been bullied and teased and to see him now—a very confident, happy young man who’s been to state as far as speech and had some wonderful accomplishments and is really very talented is just wonderful to see.

Holly enjoyed seeing her student find independence:

The fact that she can do so much of the things on the computer herself, she can copy and paste pictures from the internet, she can search for pictures, she knows how to find songs to put in, she probably would need help to convert the sound file and things like that, but just the things that she is able to do independently.

Carrie discussed her greatest successes working with students with autism:

Seeing them graduate. I can think of the one—he graduated last year—and you know, just seeing them get decent grades...the fact that he's [Carrie's current student] excited to go on this field trip...so just the rapport, and this one will graduate with a diploma, or this one will get a college degree...he has definite goals.

Amber shared how she sees students with autism benefiting from inclusion:

The social and communication...I have a child who just started kindergarten and last year he was in preschool with a child that was autistic and just the ability for him...to be exposed to other people, that there are different abilities, different things people are capable of. It's a benefit for both, maybe not all the time, maybe just during certain times of the day and sometimes kids all have tough days—to learn that you're not the only one to have a tough day or have trouble learning things, the positive is that they can see how other kids are interacting with other kids.

Carrie described how she sees students with autism benefit from inclusion in these words:

I think that it's a benefit to them just because they are picking up whatever the other kids are getting...the social aspect of it is a huge thing.

John spoke about the social impact of inclusion on students with autism:

I think the biggest thing is, just the social aspect. We've had a couple, that's all they're here for, they're not going to do a whole lot. We've got some packets and stuff to do, it might not even have to do with what we're teaching in class, but just so they are able to interact with the other students I think has been really good.

Full inclusion for students with autism may reduce their educational options (Mesibov & Shea, 1996, p. 344). Students may be placed in inclusive environments for the sake of inclusion itself or for social development and, therefore, receive limited instruction in their areas of need. Some students with autism display “unusual behaviors and/or behavioral excesses” which may hinder their relationships with peers (Robertson et al., 2003, p. 123).

Finke et al. (2009) found that the benefits of inclusion for general education teachers include the “enjoyment of seeing progress made by all students and becoming a more effective teacher for all students” (p. 114). Robertson et al. (2003) found that teachers and included students with autism had mainly positive relationships. These relationships were affected by how well the included students with autism interacted with and were accepted by their peers (p. 128).

The general educators interviewed felt overall that they were more aware of and accepting of people with disabilities after having taught a student with autism. One general educator also felt able to advocate for individuals with special education needs. Bruce talked about how teaching students with autism has affected him:

It just makes me so appreciative of what I have and it makes me understand family members and helps me advocate for them, too. I have grandpas and great uncles and stuff who just can't understand things. Well, it's just like that, it's nothing they did, it's how it is, the better we are to them and the more we understand, the better off it's going to be.

Amber described how a student's peers accept her in these words:

It's a really small group that I have her in, it's only like six or seven so it's really easy for them to sort of work around her, work with her, help to guide her.

Carrie spoke about how teaching students with autism has impacted her as follows:

It makes me more open about it. It makes me more aware. There is such a wide range there, we've had some that have been there that I haven't even had them in the classroom because the behavior issues in the classroom have been so bad. Some are so high functioning that you wouldn't even know that their diagnosis was autism, and that everyone who sees that diagnosis, you know, that it's this horrible, terrible thing—it's not.

Jill shared how she has been affected personally by teaching students with autism in this way:

I guess it just reinforces the fact that I know that everyone's different and that they learn in different ways and that they're fun, they're just like everybody else, they just have little idiosyncracies.

Finke et al. (2009) found that the benefits of inclusion for general education students include “increased awareness and acceptance of children with ASD, and social, academic leadership skill development (p. 114). The educators interviewed saw no detrimental impact to general education students who are educated alongside students with autism. Rather, inclusive classroom experience was thought to foster acceptance and understanding of students with special needs by general education students. Jill discussed how she sees general education students impacted by an education alongside students with autism:

They would be affected like anybody else realizing that this is just a normal part of what some people are like. There are students—a few once in a while—who might want to make fun of them. For instance, when the one [student with autism] in the college [credit] class would start talking about something because he would go on and on and on and some of the other students would smile but it wasn't smiling in a nasty way, it was smiling and they would sit back and they would listen to him and some would get in on the discussion with him and he really enjoyed that. So yeah, they are affected, but I think that they become more accepting as they grow up with them.

Bruce felt that although middle school students can at times “do such awful things,” when faced with understanding and empathizing with students with autism, “they rise above” and “you see the good in them.” He elaborates:

If there's been a day when they've been a little rambunctious and I'll talk to the other kids about how wonderful they handled it and they don't understand that they did anything that special, but they're getting used to other kids. It's a big thing with me that they treat autistic kids with respect.

Bruce also talked about how general education students learn from students with other disabilities:

I think everybody needs to be included. We do have some kids who we don't include at all and there are some who are wheelchair bound who can't, but even them, if you put them in a regular classroom for a period a day, maybe it's not even for them, I mean, it would be good for them, but maybe it's so much more for other kids to see it and notice it and understand other kids.

Carrie discussed how the inclusion of students with autism affects general education students:

It's also a benefit to the regular ed kids too, because they need to learn how to be accepting of that. They need to learn that it's not that big a deal, it's not a big issue. It's good for them to be in groups with them...they become more empathetic to it.

### **Theme Six: Formation of an Educational Philosophy**

In a study by Ammah and Hodge (2005), general education teachers were found to hold “wavering beliefs about inclusion,” initially being somewhat nervous about inclusion but eventually, after gaining experience, becoming more comfortable (pp. 47-48). The “favorable beliefs” held by the educators had been the result of positive interactions and teaching experiences with students with disabilities while their “unfavorable beliefs” had been the result of “uncertainties about their own efficacy” in teaching students with disabilities (p. 48).

The research synthesis presented above reveals that teachers, although positive towards the general philosophy of inclusive education, do not share a “total inclusion” approach to special educational provision. Instead, they hold differing attitudes about school placements, based largely upon the nature of the students’ disabilities. Teachers are more willing to include students with mild disabilities or physical/sensory impairments than students with more complex needs. In particular, there is enough evidence to suggest that, in the case of the more severe learning needs and behavioural difficulties, teachers hold negative attitudes to the implementation of inclusion. (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002, p. 142)



In a study of Greek teachers conducted by Avramidis and Kalyva (2007), general education teachers were found to hold positive attitudes toward inclusion in general, and toward the academic and social aspects of inclusion, but negative attitudes toward the impact inclusion has on classroom life and instructional practices (p. 380).

Some studies have found that demographic differences can affect general educator attitude toward inclusion as well as years of teaching experience. A study conducted by Alghazo and Gaad (2004) regarding the attitudes general education teachers in the UAE (United Arab Emirates) held in regard to inclusion was that, in general, teachers held negative attitudes. Male teachers held more negative attitudes than females did (p. 97). Alghazo and Gaad found that female teachers tend to be more sensitive toward and hold more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities, as well as use appropriate language when referencing students with disabilities in interviews (p. 97). Alghazo and Gaad also found that as teachers gain experience they become more accepting of teaching students with disabilities (p. 97). Cornoldi et al. (1998), Jerlinder et al. (2010), and Parasuram (2006) found that younger teachers were more accepting of inclusion than their older peers. Coutsocostas and Alborz (2010) also found that younger teachers with fewer years of experience but more training in special education topics held more positive attitudes toward inclusion (p. 160). Parasuram (2006) found that gender does not impact the attitudes teachers hold toward inclusion. In Rakap and Kaczmarek's (2010) review of the literature, teachers were found to support the inclusion of students who "needed little or no teacher assistance"; support decreased when teachers were asked about inclusion for students who needed more attention (p. 60). In the current study, all

six educators spoke favorably regarding inclusion, four women and two men, ranging in experience from less than 10 years to more than 20 years.

The general educators interviewed held mainly positive opinions about inclusion for students with autism. Educators thought that students with autism should be in the general classroom as much as possible; that inclusion is important to the development of vocational skills, social skills, and independence; and also that general education teachers are willing to modify their curriculum for students with autism. They did feel, however, that inclusion may not be appropriate for students with autism who are severely impaired and/or display negative behaviors that interfere with the success of their inclusion in the general education classroom. Carrie shared her educational philosophy with regard to inclusive education as follows:

I think [students with autism should be included] as much as they can be. I think that most teachers are willing to modify whichever way you need to, if that means there are some kids who are a little bit more severe and they will sit in the class just for the social aspect. We don't know for sure if they're picking up what we're teaching, but at least they are getting the socialization. We don't know, they could be picking up everything we say, and that's fine, too, and usually those kids are with full time aids...unless there are extreme behavioral problems I really feel like they should be in the classrooms as much as possible and in all the areas.

Amber described her educational philosophy with regard to the inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom:

It's a very positive thing, but it has to come with a lot of support whether it's a special ed teacher, like I said when we are doing tests and stuff we go back and forth with what portions of these worksheets or assignments is that student going to be responsible for. If it's breaking down assignments or anything like that, that communication really has to be there for both teachers.

Bruce spoke about his educational philosophy with regard to inclusion in this way:

Include them. Include them as much as possible. I think we do it right, put them in one class, then take them out and do other things like life skills and stuff and

then put them back in and see how...they can't handle a full day of normal school, they need those modifications and they need to get away from it sometimes in a safe place to be sometimes, but they also need to see the real world and see other people in the world.

Bruce spoke about how his cousin, who has autism, impacted his life and his attitude toward students with disabilities. Parasuram (2006) found that teachers acquainted with someone with a disability are more likely to be optimistic regarding inclusion. Jill shared her views on inclusion of students with autism:

Students with autism, depending on their needs and stuff, can make it in a traditional classroom fine. You've got para support, you've got the special ed support, there's a lot there and it really, for the most part, doesn't take that much time, that much longer, to work with those students. If you have to work one on one with them and you're there after school; it's part of your job. This is what you're doing as a teacher—you're teaching, and some people you have to re-teach; this is normal. So I guess I personally don't see much of a difference myself.

Chhabra et al. (2010) found that educators “view the inclusion of students with severe disabilities as being inappropriate and disruptive” and also as inhibitive of the education of general education students who are present in the same classroom (p. 224). Coutsocostas and Alborz (2010) found that, overall, Greek “mainstream secondary school teachers” held negative attitudes toward the inclusion of students with severe disabilities (p. 160). Lifshitz, Glaubman, and Issawi (2004) found that negative attitudes of general education teachers were the result of a “lack of knowledge and preparation regarding instructional methods” to address the behavior problems exhibited by some students with disabilities (p. 186).

In a study of inclusion and general education teachers, special education teachers, and administrators, Daane et al. (2000) found that both general education teachers and special education teachers do not feel that the inclusive classroom is the best place for

students with disabilities, while administrators did think it was the best placement (p. 334). Emam and Farrell (2009) found that the “mentalising difficulties of pupils with ASD and their struggle with recognition of embedded emotions have an impact on their relationship with teachers” (p. 418). Lohrmann and Bambara (2006) found that students who exhibited negative behaviors caused general education teachers to question their ability to handle the students in the classroom (p. 162).

Finke et al. (2009) suggest that in order for inclusive education to be successful, teachers must possess a positive attitude toward inclusion, be knowledgeable about the needs of individual students, help general education students understand diversity, and also implement adaptations that encourage independence (p. 114). Teachers believe that in order for inclusion to be successful, schools must provide more support than they currently are, including such things as time, training, assistance, and resources (Cornoldi et al., 1998, p. 355). Teachers also state that a school-wide culture that supported and promoted inclusion helped them continue with their efforts to make inclusion successful in their classrooms (Lohrmann & Bambara, 2006, p. 163). Bruce offered words of wisdom with regard to making inclusion successful for students with autism, as follows:

You’ve got to be stern with them, but you’ve got to be flexible and understand that there’s other things going on and fight the battles that are worth fighting.

Barriers to successful inclusion do exist. Amber described how class size may affect inclusion in these words:

If I had an autistic student in a larger class it’d be much more of a challenge. Just that specific instruction that they need, and it depends on the level too...if they need a para, then that is a whole other classroom dynamic. Oftentimes paras really do know how to deal with them and if they absolutely have to leave the classroom because they won’t focus or can’t focus.

Carrie spoke about exceptions to inclusion of students with autism in this way:

There are some exceptions. There are some, if their behavior is so out of control, you can't get anything done. But otherwise, definitely, I think the rest of them should be in there [the general education classroom].

Holly shared her feelings regarding the inclusion of students with autism:

In the vocational classes I think it is good, but I can see where it might be challenging to try to have them in a regular ed English. But really any of the arts, the musics, the vocational classes are all very good classes for them to be in because they're able to do all of the things the other students can do.

Ntinas et al. (2006) found that teachers hold more positive attitudes about the inclusion of students who are less demanding of their time than those students with challenging behaviors. This can be attributed to the limited skills of some teachers and "their concerns about the impact of inclusion on their emotional well-being and time, the flow of learning in the classroom and the restriction of opportunities for learning and peer acceptance for the student with challenging behaviors" (p. 89). Rae et al. (2010) found that factors such as the nature of student disability, the severity of academic problems experienced by the student, and the professional experience of the teacher all affected teacher attitude toward inclusion (p. 14).

### **Final Assertions**

Three final assertions resulted after analysis of codes, categories, and themes drawn from interviews in this study. First, general education teachers who teach students with autism care about the welfare of these students and see the benefits of their presence in the general education classroom in terms of the development of social skills for the students with autism; empathy and acceptance of students with autism on the part of both general educators and general education students was also developed. Second, general

educators are, for the most part, not prepared to teach students with autism and therefore develop skills through experience. Finally, general education teachers hold positive attitudes toward inclusion and develop educational philosophies supportive of inclusion, but view inclusion for students with autism in terms of social development rather than academic learning.

**CHAPTER V**  
**SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND**  
**RECOMMENDATIONS**

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to understand the perceptions general education teachers hold with regard to the inclusion of students with autism in their middle level and/or secondary classrooms. Previous research has generally focused on the inclusion of students with autism in early childhood or elementary classrooms. This phenomenological study addresses the research question: How do secondary school general educators perceive their experiences working with students in their classroom who have been diagnosed with autism?

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) served as the theoretical framework and helped guide the formation of interview questions for this study. Hersman and Hodge (2010) employed TPB, as well, in their study interpreting the beliefs of general education teachers with regard to the inclusion of students with special needs in their classrooms. In the context of this study, the TPB was applied in the following way: Beliefs regarding the consequences of teaching a student who has been diagnosed with autism are the behavior beliefs, the beliefs regarding the expectations of the stakeholders are the normative beliefs, and the beliefs regarding factors that may affect how the general educator teaches a student who has been diagnosed with autism are the control beliefs. These components of the Theory of Planned Behavior as it relates to this study have

provided a theoretical foundation from which I drew interview questions (see Appendix B) and guided the interview process.

An overview of the study and pervasive developmental disorders was given in Chapter I, followed by a review of the literature in Chapter II, and an explanation of methodology in Chapter III. In Chapter IV, the analysis of the data was presented, highlighted by the six formulated meaning statements with support from interview excerpts and literature. In this chapter, a summation of the study is presented (including an overview of methodology used and the six themes that emerged from the data), in addition to the limitations, conclusions, and recommendations resulting from this study.

### **Overview of the Methodology**

In this qualitative study, the participants consisted of six general education teachers who were currently teaching at the middle and/or high school level and had experience teaching students with autism in their general education classrooms. The settings for this research project were three secondary schools within two upper-Midwestern states. The research was conducted in the public school setting (when the educator had preparation time or after school) and at neutral venues by arrangement with the participant. Interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Data analysis resulted in the formation of codes, categories, themes, and eventually assertions. These assertions were shared with three education professionals (one special education coordinator, one special education teacher, and one regular education teacher) in order to prevent researcher bias.



### **Theme One: Awareness of Diagnosis**

In the current study, the general educators were unaware of the specific diagnoses of the students with autism in their classrooms. All of the six educators had questions regarding the diagnoses of their students with autism. Four of the six educators were not aware of the diagnoses of their student(s), one educator was not sure if she had taught students with autism in the past, and one educator was not aware of the exact number of students with autism she had in class during the past school year. The educators were aware that they did have students with autism in their classrooms, but they were not aware of specific diagnostic information.

A common theme that emerged from these educators related to their opinions or personal ideas regarding the type or severity of disorder their students had. Comments included knowing that students were diagnosed with autism, but appeared “normal” and stating that students were “throughout the spectrum.” Descriptions of the type or severity of students’ disabilities included “high functioning,” “low functioning,” “severe,” “classic” autism, and “very autistic.”

### **Theme Two: Preparation for Supporting Inclusion**

In the current study, none of the six educators interviewed had any formal special education training. They felt that their skill and ability to work with students with autism had developed through experience. One of the six educators felt that her undergraduate teacher education program prepared her to work with students with autism. Five of the six educators felt that their undergraduate teacher education program did not adequately prepare them to teach students with autism.

### **Theme Three: Descriptions of Students**

Students with autism can be very different from each other characteristically and with regard to ability (Mesibov & Shea, 1996, p. 344). It is important for general education teachers to be aware of the specific characteristics of their students, as this may affect the success of the particular student as well as the classroom as a whole. The six educators interviewed were able to easily identify the strengths of students with autism they had taught in the general education classroom setting. Educators had a great deal to say regarding the positive qualities and abilities of their students. Descriptions of their students with autism included “fact-oriented,” “focused,” “visual learner,” “creative,” “good memory,” “incredible speller,” “organized,” “motivated,” “confident,” “happy,” and “special.”

The six educators interviewed also identified areas of need common to their students with autism. These included disability areas common to individuals with autism as well as behavior personal to individual students. Descriptions of negative qualities or disability areas included “literal,” “off-task,” “difficulty reading social cues,” “inappropriate behavior,” “inability to understand sarcasm,” “anxiety,” “problem behaviors,” “obsessive behaviors,” “academic difficulty,” and “unmotivated.”

General education teachers are aware of both the positive and negative qualities of students with autism. They have a firm grasp on the common characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorders while also realizing all students are unique.

### **Theme Four: Experiences Teaching Students With Autism**

In the current study, two of the six educators interviewed described specific means of differentiating instruction intended to benefit all students, but also specifically

beneficial to students with autism. Two of the six educators also stated that they felt they did not need to use any instructional strategies only for the benefit of students with autism; they presented material similarly to all students in the classroom. All of the six educators interviewed noted using some form of accommodation with the students with autism in their classrooms. Some students needed as little as extended time for tests, while other students needed extensive modifications to curriculum.

All six educators who were interviewed felt they were supported by special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Special education teachers were seen as resources for both the general education teachers and the students with autism. One educator interviewed spoke about the importance of support from both the parents of students with autism and the peers of students with autism. Peers were seen as supportive of both the student with autism and the general education teacher.

### **Theme Five: Impact of Inclusion**

The general educators interviewed for this study felt that inclusion provides social development, communication development, the development of vocational skills, and opportunities for interaction for students with autism. The general educators interviewed felt overall that they were more aware of and accepting of people with disabilities after having taught a student with autism. One general educator also felt able to advocate for individuals with special education needs. The educators interviewed saw no detrimental impact to general education students who are educated alongside students with autism. Rather, inclusive classroom experience was thought to foster acceptance and understanding of students with special needs by general education students.

## **Theme Six: Formation of an Educational Philosophy**

The general educators interviewed held mainly positive opinions about inclusion for students with autism. Educators thought that students with autism should be in the general education classroom as much as possible; that inclusion is important to the development of vocational skills, social skills, and independence; and also that general education teachers are willing to modify their curriculum for students with autism. Nonetheless, these general educators felt that inclusion may not be appropriate for students with autism who are severely impaired and/or display negative behaviors that interfere with the success of their inclusion in the general education classroom.

### **Limitations**

This is merely an account of one researcher's finding in the midst of a huge body of knowledge. As Van Manen (1984) stated, "A phenomenological description is always *one* interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer, description" (p. 3). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences and perceptions of secondary general education teachers who teach students with autism. Due to the geographical location in which this study was conducted, findings may not be representative of all secondary general education teachers.

### **Conclusions**

The general education teachers interviewed had predominantly positive experiences teaching students with autism in their general education classrooms. Although they often were not knowledgeable with regard to information surrounding the diagnoses of their students, these teachers were aware of how students with autism can

benefit from being educated alongside their general education peers and how they add to the classroom community. Many of the students educated by the general education teachers interviewed displayed negative characteristics but many positive qualities as well. If the general education teachers could improve one area of their experience teaching students with autism, it would be to have more preparation with regard to teaching and accommodating students with autism in their classrooms.

## **Recommendations**

### **Recommendations for Teacher Preparation**

As autism continues to be a prevalent diagnosis and may even become more common in the future, teacher preparation programs and in-service training programs must take into account the learning needs of general education teachers with regard to teaching students with autism. This may include an increased number of required courses and support for novice teachers in the classroom.

### **Recommendations for Administrators and School Districts**

General education teachers feel they receive support from administration and special education staff when working with students with autism. What is lacking are professional development opportunities for general educators who are teaching students with autism. These opportunities would best be implemented prior to and while teachers are working with students with autism and not necessarily given to all teachers, but only those serving students on the autism spectrum.

### **Recommendations for General Educators**

It is encouraging to find that general education teachers possess positive attitudes with regard to teaching students with autism spectrum disorders. General educators should advocate for their need of initial and continued training that will allow them to increase their confidence, skills, and ability, and in turn better educate students with autism.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The descriptions of inclusion given by the educators interviewed for this study were indicative of the presence of students with autism in the general education classroom but not always fully inclusive education. For example, students with autism were included in the general education classroom sometimes, as equal partners in the learning process alongside general education peers, but often as recipients of social opportunities, not academic learning opportunities.

The question of whether or not full inclusion is appropriate for students with autism was not sought to be answered by this research study. It is beneficial to note, however, that there exists a distinction between the integration of students with autism into the general education setting and the full inclusion of students with autism into the general education setting. Further research focused on full inclusion and students with autism would be beneficial.

### **Closing Statement**

“The idea behind inclusion is that every child should be an equally valued member of the school culture” (Eldar et al., 2010, p. 98). This hope has been realized by some but remains an elusive reality for others. Boyd and Shaw (2010) summarized the

primary focus of their study and what I believe must be the overarching goal of any similar research endeavor such as the current study:

As we learn new information it is imperative for scientists, practitioners, and families to bridge any research to practice gap to ensure that sound, empirically-based practices are being used with children at the earliest possible ages. The face of autism is changing and so too must the knowledge base of practitioners working with this population of children. (p. 217)

The current study focused on general education teachers who teach students with autism at the secondary level. It is but a small piece of the ever-growing, ever-changing puzzle that is comprised of how to effectively and whole-heartedly serve, teach, and embrace individuals with autism spectrum disorders. My expectation has been to contribute to the body of literature through this study and ultimately affect students with autism, their families, and the educators who teach them.

## APPENDICES



**Appendix A**  
**Research Consent Form: Subject Participation**

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

You are invited to participate in a research project. The information collected will be used to examine the attitudes of regular education teachers who teach students who have been diagnosed with autism in their general classrooms.

By participating in this research project, you will be interviewed at your convenience about your experiences teaching students with autism. This will take approximately 60-75 minutes of your time. Additional follow-up interviews may be needed for further clarification. The interview will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription and clarification. After completion of the study, the recordings will be stored for three years and then destroyed.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time. Your confidentiality is assured. Names will be changed to preserve anonymity. Also, all consent forms will be kept separately from the research data.

If you have questions about the study or the results of the study, please feel free to call Beth Walters at 218-779-7242 or Dr. Myrna Olson at (701) 777-3188.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or you have any concerns or comments about the research, you may contact the University of North Dakota Institutional Review Board at (701) 777-4279. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone else.

By signing this form, you are indicating that you have read and understood each of the previous paragraphs, and you are willingly giving your consent to participate in this study. Your signature also indicates that this research study has been explained to you and that your questions have been answered. You understand that you may refuse to participate now, or may withdraw at any time in the future without penalty.

You will receive a copy of this form.

I consent to participate in this research study.

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you for your participation in this study.

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## **Appendix B**

### **Teacher Interview Questions**

Questions will include, but will not be limited to, the following:

1. How many years have you been teaching?
2. What subject/classes do you teach?
3. Is this the first student with autism who has been included in your classroom? If not, how many years have you been working with students with autism? Does the student have autism or Asperger syndrome?
4. Thinking of either the student(s) you currently have in class or the student(s) you most recently had in class, did the student(s) have assistance from a paraprofessional while in your classroom? What specific forms of accommodations and/or modifications to classroom material did the student receive? Are these accommodations taken care of by you, the para, or the special education teacher primarily?
5. Have you had any formal special education training? If so, what kind?
6. How well do you feel your undergraduate teaching program prepared you for teaching in an inclusive classroom?
7. What kind of instructional strategies do you prefer to utilize when working with students with autism in your classroom?
8. What resources do you feel you have access to that help you teach students with autism?
9. What have been your greatest successes working with students with autism?
10. What have been your greatest challenges working with students with autism?
11. How has teaching a student/students with autism in your classrooms affected you as a person?
12. Do you feel that the student(s) with autism benefit from being educated in the general education classroom setting?
  - a. If so, how?
  - b. If not, why?

13. Do you feel that general education students are affected by the fact that there are students with autism in the classroom with them?
  - a. If so, how are the general education students negatively affected?
  - b. How are the general education students positively affected?
14. What is your educational philosophy in regard to the inclusion of students with autism in general education classes?
15. What is your educational philosophy in regard to the inclusion of students with other special needs in general classrooms?
16. Do you feel that you have sufficient time to teach students with autism in your classroom?
17. Do you feel that you have sufficient skills and/or training to teach students with autism in your classroom?
18. Do you feel that you have sufficient assistance from special education professionals and/or administration to teach students with autism in your classroom?
19. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about teaching students with autism that you did not get the chance to?

**Appendix C**  
**Interview Transcription Form**

Code(s)	Interview Excerpt/Quotation	Notes

**Appendix D**  
**Formulated Meanings Form**

Codes	Themes/Categories	Formulated Meaning(s)

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