A HERMENEUTIC PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS IN INCLUSION CLASSROOMS

by

Julie Elise Brown

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers in inclusion classrooms. The theory which guided this study was Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory as it related to the lived experiences of teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. Successful inclusion-setting outcomes were attributed to a teacher's perception and attitude toward disabilities and their ability to teach them. This study was designed to answer the following central research question: What are the lived experiences of teachers regarding their preparation for teaching in elementary-level inclusion classrooms? Three sub-questions were used to understand the lived experiences that impact teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. A qualitative methodology was used to understand participants' personal experiences in a natural setting. Two elementary schools in the southeastern United States served as the sites from which participants were selected. The study included 10 participants from the elementary schools. Data was collected from interviews, focus groups, and journaling. Data analysis occurred through the transcription and codification of emerging keywords with the codes becoming the themes. Four themes were identified from data analysis: (a) preparation for inclusion, (b) co-teaching experiences, (c) educational experiences, and (d) collaboration experiences. Results indicated that classroom experience most prepared participants for teaching in an inclusion classroom. Participants cited a lack of understanding of co-teaching styles as a problem in preparation for co-teaching. All participants agreed their educational experiences challenged their preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. Collaboration experience had both positive and negative aspects; however, both aspects were necessary for preparation for teaching inclusion.

Keywords: teacher preparation, inclusion education, co-teaching, collaboration, instructional practices

Copyright Page

Dedication

Above all, I want to dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. His unfailing love, promises, strength, and wisdom have been my foundation throughout this journey. I have learned He truly is Jehovah Jireh!

To my children, Stephen, Simon, and Taylor, may you pursue knowledge throughout your lives. “The person who stops studying merely because he has finished school is forever hopelessly doomed to mediocrity, no matter what may be his calling. The way of success is the way of continuous pursuit of knowledge.” -Napoleon Hill

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This dissertation would not be possible without the love, support, and encouragement of certain people and it is my honor to acknowledge them.

I am thankful for my parents, who pushed me to excel in all areas of my life. They have supported me through the best and worst times of my life, always encouraging me to pursue God. Dad, I am proud to follow in your footsteps. You truly are a Godly example! Mom, you have carried me and our family exhibiting the true meaning of a Proverbs 31 woman. I can only hope to be half the woman you are!

I am thankful for my boys' father. Tim, you have supported me and picked up the slack throughout this entire process. There is no way I could have done this without you. Your support, encouragement, and friendship mean more to me than you will ever know!

I could not have made it through this without the love, support, and encouragement of my co-workers. You motivated me, encouraged me, and celebrated the milestones with me. Thank you for being my sounding board and my cheerleader!

To my best friend, you provided me with respite, laughter, love, encouragement, and support during this journey. I am forever grateful!

Finally, I am so thankful to my dissertation committee. Dr. Schechter, your grace, encouragement, and support have been unfailing!

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List of Abbreviations

Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP)

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individuals with Disabilities Act Improved (IDEAI)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Lived Experience Description (LED)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers in inclusion classrooms. Adequate preparedness for teaching in an inclusion classroom involves having a solid foundational knowledge of and the ability to implement co-teaching models, collaboration, and high-leverage instructional practices (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; McLeskey et al., 2019). Successful integration of knowledge and implementation relies on strong preparation programs, professional development, and teachers' self-efficacy. Increasingly, schools place students with disabilities in general education classrooms, and teachers need to be prepared to teach in these inclusive environments. However, teachers report feeling unprepared for teaching in inclusion classrooms (Alsarawi & Sukonthaman, 2021; Gavish, 2017; Gottfried et al., 2019). Chapter One provides a background of the study, including the historical, social, and theoretical background. The problem and purpose statement sections in Chapter One establish the foundation for the study. In addition, research questions, definitions relevant to the study, and the summary of Chapter One further explain the participants' lived experiences.

Background

For students with disabilities, education originated in segregated institutions (Francisco et al., 2020). Students with disabilities were viewed through the lens of their medical diagnoses which superseded the students’ humanity and rendered them incapable of real achievement (Francisco et al., 2020). Today, education for students with disabilities is making strides toward inclusion and achievement for all, regardless of ability (Francisco et al., 2020). The problem is teachers are unprepared to teach in inclusion classrooms (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Stites et al.,

2018). The historical background explores how the evolution of teacher preparation programs failed to implement coursework and experience that would prepare teachers for work in inclusion settings. The social background explains how the inadequacy of preparation affects not only the teacher but also students, parents, schools, and the community. Finally, the theoretical background discusses how the social cognitive theory drives teacher perceptions of inclusion.

Historical Context

Special education originated in institutions that resulted in segregated schooling policies and practices (Winzer, 2014). The institutions created for the education of students with disabilities predate the common school movement of the 19th century; however, the institutional schools continued through the beginning of the 20th century. Education for students with disabilities focused on care and containment with the premise that the students were feeble-minded and helpless (Francisco et al., 2020). The early 1900s fluctuated between isolation and segregation for students with disabilities (Francisco et al., 2020). Proponents of isolation believed individuals with disabilities were unable to learn or improve, which gave rise to the philosophies of eugenics and the medical model of disability (Francisco et al., 2020). Proponents of integration believed individuals with disabilities were able to learn however they needed the support of individualized instruction with a small teacher-to-student ratio (Francisco et al., 2020). Segregated classes or separate schools enabled teachers to give the needed support to students with disabilities. The education the students received resulted in a sub-par curriculum, inadequate special education resources, and social segregation (Francisco et al., 2020).

Brown vs. Board of Education (1954) initiated a movement for students with disabilities that encouraged equal education. This landmark Supreme Court decision reversed a separate but equal doctrine that allowed schools to remain racially segregated. The decision set a precedent

that inspired parents of children with disabilities to push for change. Through parent advocacy, litigation, research, and legislation, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EAHCA) dismantled segregated facilities and classrooms for students with disabilities (Winzer, 2014). The EAHCA (1975) allowed students with disabilities to have educational rights and permitted them to be educated in the same schools as their non-disabled peers. The EAHCA (1975) evolved into the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Improved of 2004 (IDEAI) which initiated progress toward the development and implementation of programs and services for early intervention, special education, and related services (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). A part of the evolution involved the creation of the least restrictive environment (LRE), which requires students to be educated with their non-disabled peers rather than in separate schools and institutions. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022), more than 66% of students with disabilities were in general education settings for 80% or more of the day during the 2020-2021 school year. This is a seven percent increase since 2009.

Teacher preparation programs have yet to ensure teachers are adequately prepared for inclusion environments (Harvey et al., 2010). Although early teacher education efforts occurred in the United States, it was formalized at the beginning of what is known as the common school era of the mid-1800s (Francisco et al., 2020). Efforts for both redesign and reform began in the 20th century. Teacher preparation programs moved to higher education with degree standards. As the quality of teacher preparation programs came under scrutiny, accreditation programs became the standard for colleges and universities. Also, during this time, the process of teacher education was examined. Changes were made to allow for a division of degrees and certificates. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, created in the mid-1980s, published five core suggestions to describe accomplished teaching, setting standards for teachers to know

what knowledge is needed and how to implement the knowledge (Francisco et al., 2020). While these standards produced highly qualified general education teachers, the evolution of special education created a delay in special education teaching standards. The passage of EAHCA (1975) created an increased need for qualified special education teachers; however, the standards for special education teachers to be highly qualified were not set until IDEA (1990) along with its subsequent amendments (Francisco et al., 2020).

Even with education reform measures for teacher preparation courses, a gap persists in general and special education preparation (Bruno et al., 2018; Cannon et al., 2012; Francisco et al., 2020). At the time of reform efforts in the mid-1980s that pushed for accreditation and division of degrees and certificates, inclusion classrooms for students with disabilities were almost nonexistent (Francisco et al., 2020). Even though LRE was established in 1975 with the EAHCA, students with disabilities were still excluded from general education classrooms. The Board of Education v. Rowley (1982) solidified the LRE movement enforcing students' rights to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and LRE within schools. Education reform has progressed in the past decade. Changes to EAHCA (1975) through IDEA (1990), NCLB (2001), and ESSA (2015) have added to qualifications and requirements for teacher preparation program standards. Harvey et al. (2010) explored a subset of the 1,190 nationwide teacher education institutions of higher education to determine whether training efforts focused on preparing teachers for inclusion. They determined that while some offered introductory classes in special education there was not a significant difference in group means concerning experiences in collaboration, team teaching, and resources to develop collaborative initiatives and courses (Harvey et al., 2010). In 2015, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) released a set of high-leverage practices for special education teachers (*News for CEC: High-leverage*

practices in special education, 2017). The development of these practices was requested by the Professional Standards and Practice Committee and funded by the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education. While these practices have not been fully incorporated into teacher preparation program standards, the CEC, the U.S. Department of Education, and the CEEDAR Center at the University of Florida provide professional development courses for teachers (*News for CEC: High-leverage practices in special education*, 2017).

Educational reform measures for special education teachers have slowly progressed (Francisco et al., 2020; Harvey et al., 2010). There is a need for changes to teacher preparation programs to adequately prepare teachers for inclusion classrooms. Professional development helps with teacher training; however, it cannot replace the teacher preparation program. There is a paucity of information as to the current extent of teacher preparation programs for teachers in inclusion classrooms. This study sought to add to the body of knowledge.

Social Context

While the federal government mandates through IDEAI (2004) how students with disabilities are educated, the state and local governments are responsible for ensuring schools meet the requirements of IDEAI (2004). IDEAI (2004), together with the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), set the standards for state and local governments, school districts, teachers, parental rights, and students' rights. Standards require accountability for student outcomes, highly qualified teachers, evidenced-based practices, interventions, testing, and standards. These mandates required schools to allow students with disabilities into general education classrooms.

School districts must hire highly qualified general education and special education teachers to fill the need created by the federal mandate (Bruno et al., 2018; Cannon et al., 2012;

Francisco et al., 2020). A highly qualified teacher must have a minimum of a bachelor's degree, a state teaching certificate, and demonstrated subject matter competence in the academic subject for which the teacher teaches (Cannon et al., 2012; Francisco et al., 2020). In 2002, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated the requirement for all teachers to be highly qualified. Unfortunately, approximately 82% to 99% of special education teachers did not have content area certificates, forcing schools to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms (Francisco et al., 2020).

Students educated by highly qualified teachers show higher academic outcomes (Brown et al., 2019; Cannon et al., 2012). Francisco et al. (2020) pointed out that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms may not fully benefit from the general education curriculum due to the low quality of the inclusion program. The ability to modify curriculum and provide the necessary instructional accommodations for students with disabilities requires knowledge of special education disabilities, in which general education teachers have inadequate training (Brown et al., 2019; Cannon et al., 2012; Francisco et al., 2020).

Theoretical Context

Teacher perceptions of preparedness focus on teacher attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion environments. The EAHCA (1975) created the mandates for special education, including LRE and FAPE, on the medical model of disabilities. With the changes made over the years, IDEAI (2004) still uses the medical model requiring schools to evaluate students for placement under 14 disability categories. Under the medical model, the non-disabled society perceives students with disabilities by their impairment (Swain & French, 2000). This perception limits the student's ability to perform and achieve. As the EAHCA (1975), IDEAI (2004), and

ESSA (2015) guide the standards for teacher preparation programs, the foundations of the standards are built on the medical model of disabilities.

Recently, there has been a move toward a social model of disabilities where two school schools of thought have arisen. The social model was established in 1975 by Mike Oliver and is based on the insights of the Union of the Physically Impaired against Segregation (Berghs et al., 2019). Although the model viewed individuals as medically impaired, proponents of the social model of disabilities believed it was not the only way to view disabilities. The social model encourages independence but also interdependent living. The transition toward a social model influences teacher preparation programs and professional development through instructor influence and individual activism (Berghs et al., 2019).

However, the social model still views students with disabilities' experiences through the lens of a disabling society (Swain & French, 2000). Swain and French's (2000) affirmative model of disabilities rejects personal tragedy and allows people to maintain a positive identity that transforms how others view the differently abled. When teachers view students with disabilities through the lens of the affirmative model, they focus on their potential for academic growth, thereby making the environment inclusive. Therefore, preparing teachers for an inclusive environment through the affirmative model of disabilities is critical to the teacher's perspective.

The second aspect of teacher perceptions lies in self-efficacy. Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory provides the foundation for self-efficacy. Self-efficacy drives teachers' actions, efforts, and resolve with students. Teacher self-efficacy is a significant predictor of student achievement (Dahl, 2019; Schunk, 2020). Adequately preparing teachers for inclusion builds self-efficacy. A teacher's belief in their capabilities to produce the desired student outcomes is

critical to inclusion settings. Giving a voice to teachers' lived experiences on preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms provides meaning and direction for teacher preparedness.

Problem Statement

The problem is when teachers enter the workforce, they are inadequately prepared to effectively teach in an inclusive environment (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Stites et al., 2018). Teachers may understand the theoretical concepts of inclusion, co-teaching, collaboration, and differentiating instruction but need help with the practical application (Stites et al., 2018). According to Gottfried et al. (2019), only 11% of students with disabilities spent 80% or more of their instructional time in general education classrooms in 1989. By 2015, that percentage had increased to 68% (Gottfried et al., 2019). The significant increase in students with disabilities spending most of the school day within a general education setting requires general education and special education teachers to work collaboratively (Gavish, 2017; Gottfried et al., 2019; Lindacher, 2020).

Lindacher (2020) found most inclusion general education and special education teachers disagree on co-teaching responsibilities. The general education teacher views the special education teacher as an assistant responsible for the students with disabilities. Gavish (2017) agreed and pointed out there are stages of evolution in the interpretation and implementation of inclusion. Both general and special education teachers receive little to no instruction in teacher preparation programs on the application of co-teaching and collaboration (Cate et al., 2018; Gavish, 2017; Lindacher, 2020; McLeskey et al., 2017; Stites et al., 2018). For special education teachers, research pointed to feelings of unpreparedness to perform with high-leverage and evidence-based practices (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017). For a special education teacher preparation program to be effective, it must synthesize theory, behavior

management, content pedagogical knowledge, and practice (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). The program must utilize theoretical concepts and field experiences, allowing teachers to gain the knowledge and skills to be prepared. Incorporating evidence-based practices and strategies into coursework will prepare teachers to effectuate those practices and strategies in the inclusion classroom (Cate et al., 2018; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Likewise, effective general education teacher preparation programs must synthesize theory, co-teaching models, understanding of disabilities, and evidence-based instructional strategies (Gavish, 2017; Lindacher, 2020). Exploration of this phenomenon helps us understand teacher preparedness by describing teachers' experiences in an inclusion setting. This exploration allowed for developing themes to guide teacher learning collaboratives, future research, and teacher preparation programs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Teacher preparedness was defined as the awareness and understanding of having the necessary training, skills, and resources for teaching in a classroom with special and general education students. The theory that guided this study is Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory. Social cognitive theory suggests the critical factor of preparedness to teach in an inclusion classroom lies in the teachers' self-efficacy (Bandura, 2006). Therefore, the success of teaching students with disabilities in an inclusive environment included the teacher's perceptions of personal preparedness in their abilities to work with students with disabilities and their perceptions, potential biases, and beliefs that surround an inclusive environment (Bandura, 2006).

Significance of the Study

This hermeneutic phenomenological study has theoretical, empirical, and practical significance. The theoretical significance of this study included the application of Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory to understand how teachers increase their sense of self-efficacy and to explore the lived experiences of teachers' preparedness related to inclusive classroom environments. Additionally, this study contributed to the existing body of empirical research by the examination of perceptions of teaching preparedness as it related to teaching in elementary inclusion classroom environments. Finally, the practical significance of this study may improve teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms by gaining a better understanding of the role of teacher self-efficacy, as well as ascertaining the role education plays in teacher preparedness.

Theoretical Significance

Bandura's theory of social cognitive theory (2006) served as the foundation for this study. The social cognitive theory is a perspective built on individuals' power to control their goals, actions, and destinies. As teachers seek control in and over their teaching and classrooms, self-efficacy develops. Bandura (2006) defined self-efficacy as an individual's belief in their ability or power to succeed in prospective situations. Teachers who develop high self-efficacy tend to persevere with students who have learning disabilities. Whereas teachers who develop low self-efficacy avoid helping students succeed (Schunk, 2020). Teacher perception is a fundamental part of whether a teacher believes he or she is prepared. Therefore, teacher preparedness must factor into social cognitive theory. The foundations of the theory give a platform for self-efficacy to guide perspectives and influence the beliefs that bring about student outcomes. The framework allowed for an understanding of in-service elementary teacher perceptions regarding preparedness for inclusive teaching and will help understand teacher efficacy in inclusion

classrooms. Current research has explored Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-efficacy with preservice teacher perceptions; however, this study sought to examine the framework with in-service teacher perceptions for teaching inclusion (Ahsan et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2019; Dahl, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Schunk, 2020; Wu et al., 2019).

Empirical Significance

Implementation of inclusive education is a part of the general education teacher's responsibilities regardless of training, education, and confidence (Chu et al., 2020). While teachers support inclusive education, inadequate training leaves them unprepared to teach students with disabilities. For general education teachers, courses in inclusion and special education are optional during their teacher preparation program, requiring them to seek professional development for inclusion training. In a study by Chu et al. (2020), in Alberta, Canada, teachers were surveyed using four international and national surveys or assessments in which 83% of teachers indicated no specific training or only an overview of special education during their teacher training program. For special education teachers, content-area and pedagogical knowledge courses are not a requirement for their teacher preparation programs. Cornelius and Nagro (2014) pointed out that for a special education teacher program to be effective, it must require courses in theory, discipline, content-area pedagogy, and field experience. Forlin and Chambers (2011) agreed with Chu et al. (2020) and Cornelius and Nagro (2014), attributing teacher preparation programs as a reason for teachers' inadequate preparedness for inclusion classrooms. Forlin and Chambers (2011) surveyed 67 pre-service teachers on their perceptions of inclusion. Out of the six items on the survey related to concerns about inclusive education, teachers were most concerned with their lack of knowledge and skill base. The study also found a strong link between perceived levels of confidence and knowledge

and their attitudes and concerns about inclusion. This study sought to build on previous research and contribute to the existing body of qualitative literature that focuses on in-service elementary teachers' lived experiences of preparedness to teach in inclusion classrooms.

Practical Significance

Inclusion classroom environments are strengthened when teachers and support staff are specially trained (Ajuwon et al., 2012). Inclusion settings require teachers to recognize and respond to a multitude of needs of their learners. Teachers must service and accommodate different learning styles and rates while providing quality education that meets grade-level standards. The school needs to cultivate positive attitudes and increase self-efficacy among teachers. Universities are starting to implement practices that foster and improve understanding and positive attitudes toward inclusive education. Teachers with positive mindsets toward inclusive education can adapt and meet the demands of inclusion (Ajuwon et al., 2012). Locally, this study was essential to my work as a special education teacher because it provided me with a deeper understanding of teachers' understanding of students with disabilities and perceptions of preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. Through this study, I can apply what I learn to modify and improve my school's professional learning collaboratives to promote preparedness for teaching inclusion and an understanding of special education. On a broader scale, the results of this study can be used to add to the existing body of knowledge on the aspects of in-service elementary teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. As teachers' mindsets and actions become positive, general and special education students benefit. Their academic achievement improves as well as their potential for transition into adult living. The information gained from this study could impact preservice teachers and universities, especially within the area of curriculum design.

Research Questions

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A central research question with three sub-questions led this hermeneutic phenomenological study to describe the lived experiences of elementary teachers in inclusion classrooms (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research questions were essential because pre-service teachers reported feeling unprepared to teach students with disabilities; therefore, it was necessary to explore the phenomenon with in-service teacher populations (Gottfried et al., 2019; Stites et al., 2018). The exploration of the phenomenon allowed for improvement in teacher preparation (Mueller et al., 2019).

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of teachers regarding their preparation for teaching in elementary-level inclusion classrooms?

Sub-Question One

What educational experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Sub-Question Two

What collaboration experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Sub-Question Three

What co-teaching experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Definitions

1. *Co-teaching* – the collaboration between general education and special education teachers working together to meet the needs of a diverse group of students, including those with disabilities (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018).

2. *General Education Teacher* – the teacher who provides access to content by contributing to how the content is taught, the management of the large group class, and developing a steady pace of instruction (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018)
3. *Inclusion* – providing equal opportunities to receive effective educational services, with supplementary aids and support services as needed, in age-appropriate general education classes in their neighborhood schools, to all students, including students with severe disabilities, to prepare all students for productive lives as full members of society (Francisco et al., 2020)
4. *Special Education* – instruction specifically designed to meet the learning needs of an individual with disabilities regardless of the environment, whether in a classroom, home, or hospital (Francisco et al., 2020)
5. *Special Education Teacher* – the teacher who provides access to the content by providing accommodations, modifications, strategies, remediation, and tools that facilitate learning for all students, including those with disabilities, who has an understanding of each student's individual needs and focus on mastery learning (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018).

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. The overview provided information on the background of teacher preparedness by exploring the historical, social, and theoretical contexts, and it developed the current problems surrounding teacher preparedness. As the federal government issued laws protecting the rights of students with disabilities, teacher preparation programs failed to evolve and adequately prepare teachers (Francisco et al., 2020). Not only does this affect students,

parents, and schools, but it also invites negative perceptions of students' ability and low self-efficacy in teachers (Schunk, 2020). The problem is when teachers enter the inclusion classroom, they need to come prepared to effectively teach (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Stites et al., 2018). The overview also provided information on the theoretical, practical, and empirical significance. Focusing on teacher perceptions of preparedness through self-efficacy and attitudes toward disabilities helps gain perspective on teacher preparedness. Finally, the overview explored the study's research questions, the answers of which analyze teacher preparedness and may allow for improvement in the area of inclusive education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Teacher preparedness was defined as the awareness and understanding of having the necessary training, skills, and resources for teaching in a classroom with special and general education students. A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore teacher preparedness for inclusive education. Chapter Two offers a review of the research on this topic. The first section discusses social cognitive theory which is the belief that a person can control their goals, actions, and future (Bandura, 2006), followed by a review of recent literature on teacher perceptions of preparedness in co-teaching and collaboration, and teacher perceptions of preparedness on instructional practices for inclusion teaching. Finally, the literature identifies a need for more research on understanding the lived experiences of elementary teachers in inclusion classrooms.

Typically, teachers in the United States attend teacher preparation programs by way of a traditional or alternative pathway (Schles & Robertson, 2019). Elementary general education teachers receive training in all core content areas (e.g., math, language arts, science, and social studies (Schles & Robertson, 2019). On the contrary, special education teachers receive training for K-12 grade levels in content related to law, disability, behavior, and IEPs (Bledsoe et al., 2016; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). A teacher forms their efficacy or level of confidence in a specific content area during their pre-service program. When they begin teaching, their self-efficacy is reflected in the beliefs, actions, and motivations of the instruction of the content (Bandura, 2001; Schunk, 2020). Teachers find it difficult to change once their beliefs have been

established (Bandura, 2001). While teacher preparation programs require internships or field experience, educator supervisors spend a limited amount of time observing student teachers so low self-efficacy may go unnoticed (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014).

The potential for a relationship exists between teachers' perceptions of preparedness and their self-efficacy in teaching inclusion (Bandura, 2001; Dahl, 2019; Schunk, 2020). Current literature focuses on pre-service teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. By examining the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers about inclusion, this study sought to reveal specific experiences that influence how the perceptions developed. A better understanding of how in-service elementary teachers perceive preparedness to teach inclusion may potentially help teacher preparation programs provide improved instruction and help school administrators structure professional development for in-service teachers.

Theoretical Framework

This research had a theoretical framework based on Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory. Bandura (2006) theorized that people are contributors to their life circumstances. Humans are not just products of life but also a combination of self-development with adaptation and change. The theory provided insight into elementary teachers' lived experiences in inclusion classrooms. In addition, the theory provided the framework that explored the perceptions of in-service elementary teacher preparedness for inclusive education, formatted the research questions, and analyzed the data, which allowed the results to conform to the framework.

Social Cognitive Theory

Bandura (2006) described social cognitive theory as a perspective built on individuals' power to control their goals, actions, and destiny. The social cognitive theory was previously

Bandura's social learning theory. He changed the name in 1986 to reflect changes to his theory from a learning focused on observation and interaction with other people to a social context learning with the additives of interactions with people, the environment, and behavior. The idea behind the theory was that individuals intentionally influence their function and circumstances in life. Bandura (2006) pointed out that we are self-organizing, proactive, self-regulating, and self-reflecting. He said we function by exchanging intrapersonal, behavioral, and environmental influences. As we become our own agents, we intentionally act on our beliefs (Bandura, 2001). The role of agency allows people to direct self-development, adaptation, and self-renewal (Bandura, 2001). Bandura (2001) discussed the core features of agency. He posited that personal agency involves intentionality, forethought, self-reactiveness, and self-reflection (Bandura, 2001). Our intentions guide our actions. Forethoughts set our goals, expectations, and motivations, and therefore guide our actions. Self-reactiveness gives meaning and purpose to our actions. It shapes our goals and standards through decisive action, self-monitoring, and correction. Self-reflection allows for the evaluation of our motivations, values, and meaning. It is through our self-reflection that self-efficacy influences our cognitions (Bandura, 2001).

Self-efficacy plays an important part in social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy is a belief in what one can do (Bandura, 2001; Schunk, 2020). Through self-efficacy, we use our beliefs to decide how well we can conduct a task or goal. It can decrease fears, increase expectations, motivate actions, and determine effort. Brown et al. (2019) defined teacher self-efficacy, based on the work of Bandura, as a teacher's belief in their capabilities to bring the desired student outcomes. As self-efficacy is influenced by personal accomplishments and shared experiences, teacher self-efficacy is shaped by experiences during their time as students, in pre-service programs, and the first years of in-service teaching.

Bandura (1997) suggested four sources for self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2019; Goddard et al., 2004). First, mastery experiences are essential because success raises efficacy and failure lowers efficacy beliefs. Second, affective states contribute to efficacy in that a person's mood or stress level will impact how they feel about their ability in a situation. Third, vicarious experiences allow for efficacy by allowing observation. These experiences strengthen the skill in question. Finally, social persuasion through constructive feedback helps an individual succeed, leading to high efficacy. Brown et al. (2019) suggest that teacher self-efficacy is the most significant predictor of instructional practice and student outcomes.

Social cognitive theory gives meaning to teachers' perceptions about their beliefs, attitudes, and actions (Bandura, 2006). The difference in efficacy for teachers can determine their perspective on preparedness for teaching inclusion. In this study, social cognitive theory and self-efficacy undergirded the exploration of the four research questions. Self-efficacy provided the framework to examine their preparedness to teach inclusion through co-teaching, collaboration, and instructional practices. The framework allowed for an understanding of in-service elementary teacher perceptions regarding preparedness for inclusive teaching and will help understand teacher efficacy in inclusion classrooms. Current research has explored Bandura's social cognitive theory and self-efficacy with preservice teacher perceptions; however, this study sought to examine the framework with in-service teacher perceptions for teaching inclusion (Ahsan et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2019; Dahl, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Schunk, 2020; Wu et al., 2019).

Related Literature

This review of literature explored co-teaching, collaboration, and instructional practices regarding the lived experiences of teacher preparedness. A description of in-service elementary

teachers' lived experiences teaching in an inclusion setting allowed for developing themes to guide teacher learning collaboratives, future research, and teacher preparation programs. This study sought to understand the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers regarding preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms by exploring their experiences with co-teaching, collaboration, and instructional practices. Most of the studies on teacher perceptions regarding inclusion focus on preservice teachers and those studies that do include in-service teachers have conducted surveys (Ahsan et al., 2013; Allday et al., 2013; Brownell et al., 2005; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Gavish, 2017; Kim & Pratt, 2021; Ricci et al., 2017; Scarparolo & Subban, 2021).

School Reform

With the passage of the ESSA (2015) and the changes made with IDEAI (2004), inclusive learning has been the focus of special education for the past decade (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Guise et al., 2016). This move brought students with disabilities out of segregated settings into general education settings. As a result, schools have had to restructure learning environments to accommodate inclusive education. School reform placed students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms which required special education teachers and general education teachers to co-teach, collaborate, and utilize high-leverage instruction (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Francisco et al., 2020; Gavish, 2017; Gottfried et al., 2019; Kent & Giles, 2016). When students with disabilities are educated in inclusive environments, they have more opportunities to socialize with peers their age and their learning is more aligned with grade-level standards (Zagona et al., 2017).

The practices, policies, and procedures of teacher preparation programs, inclusion laws, and education leaders have led to the insufficiency of teacher preparedness in inclusive learning

(Esposito et al., 2018). Over the past 40 years, the educational system has grown significantly in developing, refining, and implementing inclusive education within public schools. This growth is attributed to a series of laws enacted, PL 94-142, the IDEA (1997), and the IDEAI (2004). These laws mandate that students with disabilities be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. In addition, two landmark federal court cases reinforced inclusive education. *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District* (1993) made inclusion a right, not a special privilege, for a select few. *Cedar Rapids School District v. Garret F*. (1999) gave students with disabilities the right to receive health services to gain meaningful access to public schools (Esposito et al., 2018). Federal changes to promote inclusive environments also came with NCLB (2004) and ESSA (2015). These laws required the use of evidence-based practices for instructional content and for all special education teachers to be highly qualified teachers.

The rates for inclusive education of students with disabilities have increased significantly due to federal laws and court cases. For example, Esposito et al. (2018) found that in 2016 almost 63% of students with disabilities were educated in a general education classroom for 80% of the school day compared to 1990 where only 33% of students with disabilities were educated in the same environment 80% of the school day. While not all schools comply with inclusive education, Esposito et al. (2018) identified the emphasis for increasing inclusive education has been on the setting, not on the quality of instruction or its impact on academic achievement. With the increase in schools implementing inclusion environments along with the demands of increased accountability for students with disabilities to increase academic performance, special education attrition rates rose to create a deficit of teachers (Mastropieri et al., 2017). This deficit

led to the creation of emergency or provisional licensures, in which teachers were not fully credentialed or highly qualified (Mastropieri et al., 2017).

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs have two separate curriculum paths for general and special education teachers (Kim & Pratt, 2021). The differences in the paths focus on the roles and responsibilities of each teacher (Kim & Pratt, 2021). The special education teacher's responsibility is to manage student caseloads, ensure the accommodations and modifications are implemented, service each student on caseloads, and manage student behavior, instructional content, and assessments (Kim & Pratt, 2021). The general education teacher is accountable for the pedagogical, instructional, and curricular content (Kim & Pratt, 2021). The differences in responsibilities for teachers created separate requirements for certification; however, as inclusion environments increase, both teachers need training in pedagogy, content instruction, disabilities, and behavior management (Kim & Pratt, 2021).

Quigney (2010) found that there are differences reported in the way teachers are certified. When compared, teachers who completed preparation programs by way of alternative certification rather than traditional certification showed no difference in measures of instructional behaviors, student performance, and teacher perceptions (Goldhaber & Brewer, 2000; Miller et al., 1998). In contrast, Nougaret et al. (2005) reported teachers certified through traditional programs measured higher in planning and preparation, classroom environment, and instruction than those certified through alternative programs. The lack of emphasis on courses related to pedagogy and methodology in alternative certification programs creates a critical flaw in teacher education (Mastropieri et al., 2017; Quigney, 2010) The focus of the alternative programs tends to be on subject or content area matter. For special education teachers, the

content area focus is on federal law, IEP writing, understanding disabilities, and behavior management (Mastropieri et al., 2017; Kim & Pratt, 2021; Quigney, 2010). For general education teachers, the content area focus tends to be on reading or math (Mastropieri et al., 2017; Kim & Pratt, 2020; Quigney, 2010). The legal mandate for high-quality teachers requires teachers to be experts in their content area (Quigney, 2010). Special education teachers need core content knowledge in math and/or reading (Quigney, 2010). Having core content knowledge allows special educators the opportunity to efficiently provide instructional support in the inclusion classroom (Mastropieri et al., 2017; Kim & Pratt, 2021; Quigney, 2010). Quigney (2010) pointed out that general and special education teachers need to be trained collaboratively, and through their collaborative educational experience, they are given the opportunity to practice co-teaching, differentiating instruction, and behavior management.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2022) in 2015-2016, approximately 18% of teachers entered teaching through an alternative certification program and approximately 80% through the traditional certification path. Of the 18% that entered through alternative certification, 20% of the teaching assignments were special education. In 2022, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) updated institution standards to include candidates' ability to provide diverse students with a fair and inclusive learning experience. CAEP's annual report released in 2020, reported 330 CAEP-accredited institutions, 264 NCATE-accredited institutions, and 64 TEAC-accredited institutions. As of 2016, NCATE and TEAC had merged with CAEP. While most colleges and universities are governed by CAEP, which sets the requirements for standards and curricula, classes on inclusive education and diversity are not necessarily offered or included in education programs. For the programs to add inclusion or diversity training classes to the curriculum would involve the removal of other

courses considered essential to initial training (Forlin, 2010). Until full compliance with the updated CAEP standards is implemented in institutions, teacher candidates will continue to lack instruction in inclusive learning which leads to inadequate preparedness in the classroom.

For a special education teacher preparation program to be effective, it must synthesize theory, behavior management, content pedagogical knowledge, and practice (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). They must utilize theoretical concepts and field experiences, allowing teachers to gain the knowledge and skills to be prepared. Incorporating evidence-based practices and strategies into coursework will prepare teachers to effectuate those practices and strategies in the inclusion classroom (Cate et al., 2018; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Livers et al. (2021) examined teacher candidates' sense of preparedness for teaching, they reported that teacher candidates felt inadequacy in understanding and ability to differentiate lessons, provide classroom management, accommodate, and modify instruction, and assess students. The candidates cited large classrooms, ineffective mentors, lack of classroom time and experience, and not enough whole-group instruction (Livers et al., 2021). Allday et al. (2013) identified four teacher preparation areas that teachers need to ensure successful elementary inclusion environments. The first is that teachers must understand the characteristics of disabilities and have a basic understanding of the special education process. A second area is for teachers to be able to differentiate instruction, providing accommodation and modification to the general education curriculum that meets federal standards. The third area is classroom and behavior management, in which teachers often feel unprepared due to the wide range of challenging behaviors (Allday et al., 2013). The fourth and final area is collaboration which involves interpersonal and professional skills that allow for co-teaching, co-planning, and communication (Allday et al., 2013). In a different study, Finkelstein et al. (2021) identified five areas that make inclusion successful. They posit that

collaboration, determination of progress, instructional support, organizational practices, and behavioral support ensure success (Finkelstein et al., 2021).

Teacher Self-Efficacy

A trend emerged to evaluate student-teacher skill sets and capabilities while they are student teaching (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019). This shift parallels Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory on self-efficacy (Dahl, 2019). Self-efficacy drives a person to act. When a teacher lacks belief in their ability to effect positive outcomes in a classroom, they will not be motivated to perform. Teachers' self-efficacy directly influences what they do in the classroom (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019). Pre-service teachers who receive training in inclusive classrooms report higher levels of self-efficacy and positive attitudes toward readiness and preparedness for teaching students with disabilities (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019). Teacher self-efficacy should influence the teacher's activities, effort, and persistence with the students (Schunk, 2020). It influences educational attainment, teacher growth, and achievement. Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to develop challenging activities, help students succeed, persevere with students who have learning problems, have a positive classroom environment, support students' ideas, and address students' needs (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019; Schunk, 2020). Teachers with low self-efficacy are more likely to avoid planning, not persist with students who have learning problems, expend little energy to find materials, not reteach content, or help students succeed (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019; Schunk, 2020). Research points toward teacher self-efficacy being a significant predictor of student achievement (Ahsan et al., 2013; Dahl, 2019; Schunk, 2020). Dahl (2019) surveyed pre-service teachers at Stanford University in California with questions falling into four indexes: (1) teach in ways that meet the differences among pupils, (2) use a critical approach, (3) develop as a teacher, and (4) teach for a sustainable society. Those

surveyed reported high self-efficacy in the indexes of "teach in ways that meet the differences among pupils" and "use critical approach" (Dahl, 2019). The results show that these pre-service teachers do not feel capable of reflecting critically on academic, professional, or educational policy issues (Dahl, 2019). In inclusion environments, high teacher self-efficacy is important. General and special education teachers need confidence in their ability to teach, motivate, plan, collaborate, communicate, and resolve conflict.

To better understand teacher concerns and how they relate to their self-efficacy, teacher preparation programs need to be examined. Special education teacher roles and responsibilities have changed over the past decade from teachers working in secluded and/or residential settings to working with general education teachers in inclusive settings (Brownell et al., 2010; Forlin, 2010). The change led to a need for teacher preparation to evolve. Teacher preparation requires both theoretical and practical knowledge (Forlin, 2010). Practices, services, instructional strategies, and accommodations require different aspects depending on the educational setting (Brownell et al., 2010; Forlin, 2010; Zagona et al., 2017). Teacher preparation programs mostly focus on special education teachers providing services in self-contained classrooms instead of inclusion classrooms (Brownell et al., 2010). However, most elementary teachers are placed in inclusion classrooms and expected to co-teach once in the teaching field (Brownell et al., 2010). For elementary teachers to yield effective academic outcomes based on rigorous academic standards, high-stakes assessments, and individualized instruction, they need to be trained in pedagogy, content area instruction, and evidence-based practices (Brownell et al., 2010; Forlin, 2010; Zagona et al., 2017). The quality of teacher training and thereby the quality of teachers produced, affect the application of inclusive education (Ahsan et al., 2013; Carew et al., 2019). Teachers may perform inadequately in inclusion settings when the quality of teacher training is

low (Ahsan et al., 2013; Carew et al., 2019). Whereas, when the quality of teacher training is high, teachers can effectively perform in inclusion settings, benefiting both the students with disabilities and the development of the teacher (Ahsan et al., 2013; Carew et al., 2019). Most teachers are trained for inclusion during in-service rather than during pre-service (Ahsan et al., 2013). When teachers are not trained adequately, their expectations are lower (Ahsan et al., 2013; Carew et al., 2019). The success of inclusion environments depends on the content and quality of the teacher preparation programs (Ahsan et al., 2013). Elementary pre-service teachers must have access to knowledge and experience that will prepare them for teaching in inclusion classrooms (Ahsan et al., 2013). When a teacher preparation program is designed well, teachers gain the confidence and experience needed to effect positive outcomes in inclusion (Ahsan et al., 2013).

Teacher perception is a fundamental part of whether a teacher believes he or she is prepared. Teachers' perceptions and self-efficacy foundation lies in their cognitions, attitudes, and actions. Therefore, teacher preparedness must factor into social cognitive theory. The foundations of the theory give a platform for self-efficacy to guide perspectives and influence the beliefs that bring about student outcomes. When teachers enter the field with high self-efficacy, we see high student outcomes and positive teacher perspectives; however, when teachers have low self-efficacy, the opposite is true (Brown et al., 2019). Wu et al. (2019) also reported similar findings in that high efficacy beliefs are associated with successful teaching performance whereas low efficacy beliefs are associated with low teaching performance. Self-efficacy influences teacher satisfaction and retention, and student achievement (Brown et al., 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Wu et al., 2019). Davis et al. (2019) pointed out that as teacher candidates enter preparation programs, perceptions and knowledge about schools, classrooms, and the job of a

teacher have already begun to form. The experiences they encounter during their teacher preparation program and the first few years of teaching in the classroom will solidify those perceptions and influence self-efficacy (Davis et al., 2019).

Implementation of Inclusion

When teachers enter the workforce, they are inadequately prepared to teach effectively in an inclusive setting (Chitiyo & Brinda, 2018; Stites et al., 2018). Teachers may understand the theoretical concepts of inclusion, co-teaching, collaboration, and differentiating instruction but need help with the practical application (Stites et al., 2018). Teachers are unable to demonstrate the principles and practices needed for inclusive environments. Knowledge of inclusive pedagogical strategies, differentiation of instruction, and classroom management have been identified as essential areas of need by teachers working in inclusion settings. For example, special education teachers consistently report perceived unpreparedness in co-teaching and collaboration (Cate et al., 2018; McLeskey et al., 2017). According to a study by Nketsia et al. (2016), pre-service teachers were asked to rate their views of preparedness for inclusive education. Sixty-eight percent of the pre-service teachers reported feeling somewhat prepared, 15% reported feeling completely unprepared, and 7% reported feeling completely prepared. They were also asked to rate their understanding of inclusive teaching methods or instructional strategies. Most of the teachers surveyed reported little to no knowledge (80%) (Nketsia et al., 2016).

Teachers' main issues in implementing inclusion are related to a lack of support from the administration, lack of planning, lack of instruction time, and lack of training to work with students with disabilities (Ahsan et al., 2013; Ajuwon et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2019; Forlin & Chamber, 2011; Ricci et al., 2017). Teachers' attitudes and beliefs can promote or limit the

successful implementation of inclusion in the classroom. According to Finkelstein et al. (2021), inclusive pedagogy is a teacher's ability and knowledge to make inclusion work in the classroom. Inclusive pedagogy is based on the idea that a student's ability is not fixed but that all students can develop and learn (Finkelstein et al., 2021; Ricci et al., 2017). This approach allows teachers to accept ownership and commit to all students while adopting a positive attitude and belief that all students are capable of learning (Brown et al., 2019; Finkelstein et al., 2021). For inclusive pedagogy to be successful, quality pre-service teacher education and in-service teacher training are needed (Ajuwon et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Ricci et al., 2017). Given the disconnect between theory and application in the classroom, there is a need for better preparation and support for teachers (Ajuwon et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2021). A particular focus of pre-service and in-service teacher training should be on practical experiences where teachers are allowed to experience and demonstrate skills associated with inclusion (Ajuwon et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Ricci et al., 2017).

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is defined as the general education teacher and the special education teacher partnering together to provide instruction and support to a diverse group of students allowing for five or six delivery models (Battaglia & Brooks, 2019; DaFonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020; Ricci et al., 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007). The one-teach-one assist model involves the general education teacher leading whole group instruction in the classroom and the special education teacher providing individual support. The station teaching model involves both teachers setting up different learning stations and students rotating while teachers provide individualized attention. The parallel teaching model involves both teachers simultaneously teaching the same material to two groups of students. The alternative teaching model involves

one teacher (usually the general education teacher) instructing a large group of students and the other (usually the special education teacher) teaching a small group of students who need additional support. The team-teaching model involves both teachers co-leading the class (Battaglia & Brooks, 2019; DaFonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020; Ricci et al., 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007). King-Sears & Jenkins (2020) mention the sixth co-teaching model of one-teach/one-observe which involves the general education teacher leading whole group instruction, while the special education teacher observes the classroom. Teachers need to collaboratively decide on which model best works within their class; however, the student's needs and characteristics, along with instruction goals and lesson content need to factor into the decision.

History of Co-Teaching

For some teachers, the idea of co-teaching is a difficult concept to comply with and implement (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020). However, co-teaching is not a new concept. In 1964, David Beggs described team teaching as an innovative approach to teaching that utilizes teams of interdisciplinary groupings with diversified specialties. The teams focus on specific content areas and curricular development (Beggs, 1964). Forty years later, co-teaching was eventually formalized in response to federal laws. IDEA (2004; 1997; 1990), NCLB (2001), and ESSA (2014) required students with disabilities to have access to the general education curriculum in the least restrictive environment in which their needs can be met and be serviced by highly qualified teachers (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020). Co-teaching set the foundation for the federal law requirements to be met (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022; King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020). When the concept of co-teaching began in the 1990s, schools' inclusive goal was to integrate students with disabilities into general education classrooms not only for academic opportunities

but also to foster social interactions (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022). The focus was more on fostering social interactions than academics therefore inclusion failed to meet federal inclusion guidelines.

Purpose of Co-Teaching

The purpose of co-teaching is to expose and provide students with disabilities access to grade-level academic standards taught by qualified teachers (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022). It also reduces the stigma of students having disabilities by creating a diverse classroom community (Forlin & Chamber, 2011). Instructional consistency is maintained as students with disabilities are not moved from classroom to classroom. Co-teaching allows the strengths of the general and special education teacher to be combined which benefits students and teachers (Ploessl et al., 2010). Co-teaching requires teachers to work as equal partners to develop and create competence in new areas and share lesson plans while communicating effectively. For co-teaching to be successful, teachers must have an open and honest line of communication. Communication is vital to planning and preparation. Another aspect of successful co-teaching is when the two teachers involved actively teach and monitor students (Ploessl et al., 2010). The goal of co-teaching is to improve student academic and behavioral outcomes (Ploessl et al., 2010). When the co-teachers utilize communication for planning, analyzing data, and reflecting on lessons, they are better able to benefit the needs of students (Ploessl et al., 2010). Co-teachers need to be compatible (Scruggs et al., 2007). The teachers involved need to build a positive relationship that is based on trust and respect. Co-teaching success is also dependent on weekly planning, discussion of lesson delivery, resources, student outcomes, teacher roles, and areas of concern (Scruggs et al., 2007).

Implementation of Co-Teaching

Co-teaching requires both teachers to understand instructional content, strategies, assessment, differentiating instruction, behavior management, and instructional planning. The design allows teachers to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities and provides various learning tools to meet their unique academic needs (Battaglia & Brooks, 2019; Kim & Pratt, 2021). Scruggs and Mastropieri (2017) maintained that for co-teaching practices to be truly effective, what the teachers do and how they do it are what matters. The framework for instructional delivery and specialized services makes a difference in student academic outcomes (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 2017). As co-teaching has become the instructional method used for inclusion classrooms, teachers feel they need to be adequately prepared to use this method (Battaglia & Brooks, 2019; DaFonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017). Co-teaching allows for the shared experiences of teachers' reflections on strengths and weaknesses as well as collaboratively making decisions on instruction and student learning (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022). Their attitudes about co-teaching influence the classroom environment and working relationship. Their greatest challenge to overcome is the differences between teacher preparation and the actuality of the job (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022). Jurkowski et al. (2023) found during class observations of co-taught classes that general education teachers spend less time engaged with special education students when special education teachers are present. This defeats the purpose of the inclusion environment as exclusion practices exist during the occurrence. General education teachers report a need for training in instructional strategies for accommodating and modifying curriculum and assessing students with disabilities (Chatzigeorgiadou & Barouta, 2022).

Pre-service teachers seldom receive field experience in co-teaching skills in teacher preparation programs (Kim & Pratt, 2021). When teachers are insufficiently prepared for inclusive instructional models, teachers use the one-teach-one assist model exclusively (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020; Scruggs et al., 2007). This model reduces teachers' ability to meet all students' needs in the inclusive setting. When teachers are adequately prepared, they utilize team, alternative, parallel, and station instructional models according to student needs, enhancing student learning (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020; Scruggs et al., 2007). These four models allow both teachers to actively deliver instruction so that students benefit from the expertise of both teachers. The co-teaching models of instruction can be implemented at higher rates when teachers are prepared, effectively rendering special needs students an abundance of possibilities regarding good general education instruction and accommodations. In their research, Scruggs et al. (2007) found that only a few students failed to succeed in effectively co-taught classes. Students benefited from the exposure to peer models for appropriate behavior. Another commonly expressed benefit of co-teaching was the additional attention received by students with disabilities. Students felt that their academic and social needs were being met better. The benefits of co-teaching improve the outcomes for students with disabilities (Kirby, 2017; Murawski, 2006; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2013).

Another by-product of sufficient teacher preparedness is the delivery of effective co-teaching instructional strategies such as peer mediation, strategy instruction, mnemonics, study skills training, organizational skills training, hands-on curriculum materials, test-taking skills training, comprehension training, self-advocacy skills training, self-monitoring, and general principles of effective instruction (Kirby, 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007; Tang, 2021). When teachers are prepared to co-teach effectively, these classroom instructional practices will be observed as

part of the daily routine (Kirby, 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007; Tang, 2021). Inclusive education must provide an accessible environment for students with disabilities that allows access to general education standards, appropriate teaching aids and equipment, and differentiated instruction and that allows for parental involvement. (Kirby, 2017; Scruggs et al., 2007; Tang, 2021). Effective instruction requires true collaboration between general education and special education teachers. Collaboration on curriculum needs, innovative practice, and appropriate individualization between the partners will be met (Scruggs et al., 2007; Strogilos & Avramidis, 2013). This study aimed to examine the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers' perceptions of preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms which may give insight into effective co-teaching practices.

Challenges of Co-teaching

Teacher preparation programs for general education teachers focus on pedagogy and content knowledge, whereas special education programs focus on disabilities, special education law and documentation, behavior management, and collaboration (Kim & Pratt, 2021; Livers et al., 2021). The co-teaching models require the general and special education teachers to work collaboratively, providing instruction, accommodations, and assessments for all students in the inclusion classroom (Kim & Pratt, 2021). When the teacher preparation programs have yet to train the teachers to perform in the classroom adequately, the teachers are at a disadvantage. Special education teachers must have a favorable view of inclusion to be effective (Stites et al., 2018; Zagona et al., 2017). Stites et al. (2018) point out that Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory drives a teacher's belief in influencing the learning environment to promote growth and achievement effectually. When teachers fail to embrace a belief in preparedness and self-efficacy, they lose the ability to organize and execute high-leverage practices needed in an

inclusive environment (Stites et al., 2018). Self-efficacy for special education teachers begins in their teacher preparation programs. Teaching practices are essential, ensuring explicit and meaningful experiences are provided and are required to change beliefs and efficacy (Alsarawi & Sukonthaman, 2021; Kim & Pratt, 2021). Kim & Pratt (2021) point out two primary issues that influence teachers' beliefs. The first is that pre-service teachers have gained experience by being K-12 learners. The second is that during teacher preparation programs, they form beliefs and inconsistencies between what and how they are taught (Kim & Pratt, 2021).

Stites et al. (2018) surveyed pre-service teachers for perceived levels of preparation for work in inclusive settings. They needed to improve their understanding of the meaning of inclusion. Pre-service teachers need the opportunity to learn co-teaching skills (Kim & Pratt, 2021). This deficit revealed that the pre-service teachers' foundation might need to be more vital to base the perception of preparedness (Stites et al., 2018). When asked what they felt was needed to make them better prepared to teach in inclusive settings, 54% reported more field experience, and 40% reported that differentiated training was needed in pre-service coursework (Stites et al., 2018). Zagona et al. (2017) surveyed in-service teachers for perceived levels of preparation for work in inclusive settings. Their findings showed feelings of unpreparedness in co-teaching, specifically among general education teachers (Zagona et al., 2017). Teachers dually certified in general and special education reported feeling more prepared for co-teaching and implementing instruction within the inclusive environment (Zagona et al., 2017).

Teacher perceptions of inclusion and co-teaching are critical to the success of student achievement in inclusion environments (Forlin, 2010). When teachers were underprepared, the instructional strategies that promoted academic and social achievement for students with disabilities were underemployed or rarely observed in the classroom (Alnasser, 2021; Brown et

al., 2013; Scruggs et al., 2007). Two areas that Duran et al. (2021) identified as issues that cultivate negative teacher attitudes toward co-teaching are lack of support and lack of knowledge by teachers and schools that help with the implementation of successful co-teaching. Alnasser (2021) reported special educators cited a lack of content area knowledge, negative attitudes of general educators, and a lack of trust and shared responsibility as barriers to effective co-teaching. In Alnasser's study of a Colorado Elementary School (2021), four co-taught classrooms were observed. All four classrooms utilized the one teach/one assist model, in which the special educator was the teacher assisting. The themes that emerged from the study were (1) that too many students with IEPs were in a class resulting in disproportionate numbers of students with disabilities in a class, (2) the implementation of accommodations, modifications, and differentiated instruction was the responsibility of the special educator, and (3) a lack of shared vision of co-teaching (Alnasser, 2021). When teachers are trained effectively on how to co-teach, a shared vision moves the inclusive class toward academic achievement through shared responsibilities, the utilization of appropriate teaching models, and collaborative planning. Research must examine the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers regarding their perceptions of preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms to see how their experiences in co-teaching may impact the current training of preservice teachers and the development of professional learning collaboratives.

Collaboration

Collaboration is essential to special education. Not only has the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) listed it as a high-leverage practice, but IDEA (2004) also requires that special education teachers collaborate with general education teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, IEP team members, and parents (McLeskey et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al.,

2015). In addition, the CEC identified collaboration as the practice of jointly working with professionals to increase the success of students with disabilities, organizing and carrying out meetings with professionals and families, and working with families to support student learning (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2022; McLeskey et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al., 2015). Collaboration between teachers is viewed as an important part of the equation to help meet the needs of students with disabilities (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2022; Pellegrino et al., 2015). It relieves the instructional burden of one teacher or the other keeping up with all knowledge and skills needed to meet the individual needs of students (Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

Students with disabilities made up 15 % of total public school enrollment during the 2020-2021 academic school year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Academic achievement outcomes increase as teachers communicate and work together to deliver high-quality curricula that provide differentiation options for students with disabilities (Pellegrino et al., 2015). When teachers collaborate, there is an improvement in classroom management, curriculum adaptation, instruction, and assessment, leading to improved schools and school systems (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2022)

Several factors identified are said to be required for effective inclusive education: (1) appropriate training and education for general education teachers that will allow them to respond to the needs of all students consistently; (2) creation of rights for general education teachers to choose whether or not they teach inclusive classes; (3) support and encouragement of teachers to develop plans for the implementation of inclusion.; (4) the promotion of collaborative relationships between general education teachers and special education teachers; (5) a focus on the needs of students and not on ideology; (6) a standards-based, specialized curriculum to meet the needs of all students; (7) involvement and participation of parents in the educational process

and decision-making; (8) a guarantee of equal social and academic potential for all children (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017). Also explored was the development of teachers' pedagogical practices and learning relationships upon the inclusive education of children with special educational needs and disabilities (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017). Pugach and Peck (2016) suggest dividing practices between the special education teacher and the general education teacher to the point that they receive different teacher performance assessments. This division of practices requires teachers to engage in collaborative reflection (Efthymiou & Kington, 2017; Pugach & Peck, 2016).

While these factors promote effectiveness, they need to be implemented consistently. Stites et al. (2018) found that general education teachers often reported feeling unprepared to support students with various special needs. While the assumption is that special education teachers will service and support the students, this is only sometimes the case (Stites et al., 2018). Research shows that general and special education teachers rarely engage in joint planning for curricular modifications (Stites et al., 2018). Few studies explore the lived experiences of in-service elementary general and special education teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. To fully grasp perceptions of preparedness regarding collaboration, it was necessary to explore general and special education teachers together.

Collaboration between General Education and Special Education Teachers

An increase in collaboration between special and general education teachers has developed with the implementation of co-teaching. Co-teaching requires both teachers to collaborate to meet the needs of students (Garderen et al., 2012). For successful collaboration, teachers need to communicate their personal philosophies of learning, behavior, assessment, and

grading. While the need for collaboration is great, the differences in the training of special educators and general educators make it difficult to effectively coordinate (Garderen et al., 2012; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). Jortveit & Kovač (2022) also point out that the teachers have a different common knowledge base and theoretical underpinning that leads to difficulty in collaboration. Collaboration requires special and general education teachers to rely on their strengths and communicate effectively (Garderen et al., 2012; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). Collaboration helps teachers feel less isolated and leads to innovation in the classroom (Garderen et al., 2012; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022). The lack of collaboration can lead to teaching without differentiated instruction (Garderen et al., 2012; Jortveit & Kovač, 2022).

Challenges reported regarding collaboration within co-teaching are time, communication issues, and content knowledge (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Daniel et al., 2018; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). Creating time for collaboration is a significant issue for teachers and service providers (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Daniel et al., 2018; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017). In a study by Mulholland and O'Connor (2016) 78% of elementary school teachers indicated their school had guidelines on collaboration however 66% of those teachers reported not practicing collaboration. While time constraints are listed as the biggest impediment to the lack of collaborative practices, other reasons listed pertain to a lack of training and inclusion of practice during preparation programs (Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). When these areas are neglected, the students suffer. As a result, little to no academic progress will be achieved, especially for students with disabilities and exceptional students (Daniel et al., 2018; Mulholland & O'Connor, 2016). When collaboration fails, roles in teacher relationships are undefined, leaving more work for the general education teacher and the special education teacher only providing accommodations while attempting to manage in a

traditional class environment. Administrators attempt to help by building schedules or planning time for collaboration, but when special education teachers have multiple classes to attend, large caseloads, along with increased paperwork and responsibilities, finding time for collaboration is complex (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017). In addition, when collaboration takes place, teachers need to plan effectively for their student's academic success (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017).

In a study by Ricci et al. (2017), 57 pre-service special education teachers participated in a survey about collaboration and co-teaching beliefs. Pre-service teachers who had not previously taught in a classroom rated their collaboration skills lower than those with previous classroom experience. The themes that emerged from the data collected within the study focused on the relationship between special education and general education teachers. Pre-service teachers believed fieldwork in collaboration and co-teaching with their partners led to their success as effective educators. They reported that good working relationships with their co-teachers were necessary for a successful classroom. Finally, they believed co-teachers must have a partnership based on equality (Ricci et al., 2017). However, there is limited research concerning in-service teacher perceptions regarding preparedness in collaboration.

Collaboration with Parents

Teachers not only must efficiently collaborate concerning student instruction and services but also with parents. Collaboration with parents is upheld by IDEA (2004) to ensure that the student’s due process rights, instruction, learning outcomes, and FAPE are supported (Strassfeld, 2019). Strassfeld (2019) points out that many teachers leave their teacher preparation program unable to collaborate with parents, provide them with resources under IDEA, or advocate and facilitate parental involvement. Pre-service teachers report that a challenge is collaborating with

parents, specifically during IEP meetings (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017). While IDEA reauthorizations have been aimed at strengthening the role of the parent, obstacles still exist regarding parent collaboration and communication (Mueller et al., 2019). For example, researchers point out that special education teachers tend to use excessive jargon and acronyms associated with special education, attempt to control, or display power over parents at meetings, focus more on the paperwork than on parent input or involvement, and often exclude parents from discussions during the meetings (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Mueller et al., 2019). As a result, parents report feelings of distrust, relationship issues with their student's teachers, and communication issues with the school (Mueller et al., 2019). Mueller et al. (2019) further point out that effective parent communication, collaboration, and involvement in the IEP process have the potential to prevent many due process hearings.

Pre-service special education teachers lack adequate preparation in collaborative IEP meeting practices (Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017). Teacher preparation programs must provide this foundation for effective collaboration (Weiss et al., 2016). Many teacher preparation programs assume teachers know how to collaborate (Weiss et al., 2016). Collaborative practices comprise the skills, ethics, and facilitative behaviors needed to establish partnerships with parents. In a study by Mueller et al. (2019), pre-service special education teachers enrolled in their final semester were required to participate in a simulated IEP meeting. The results of the project identified themes that are regarded as valuable pre-service pedagogy (Mueller et al., 2019). The themes identified as providing growth were that participants gained experience in preparing for the IEP meeting, writing the IEP, and holding the IEP meeting, providing practical application to theory, allowing for a safe space to learn and make mistakes, and having an

opportunity to receive constructive feedback (Mueller et al., 2019). Providing pre-service teachers with evidence-based practices during coursework can increase their skills, knowledge, and self-efficacy upon entering the workforce, thereby having prepared, qualified teachers (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017). Exploration of the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers' perceptions regarding collaboration was necessary to provide insight into changes needed to pre-service programs and professional development.

Inclusive Instructional Practices

IDEAI (2004) and the NCLB (2001), later replaced by the ESSA (2014), highlight the importance of educators identifying and implementing scientific and evidence-based practices into instruction (Gottfried et al., 2019; McLeskey et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017; Shepherd et al., 2016). Teacher preparedness in inclusive learning directly impacts student achievement outcomes (Chitiyo, 2017). Research shows a significant gap in the report on the effectiveness of evidence-based practices and actual instructional use (Cook & Cook, 2013). Instructional strategies commonly used in the classroom are not research or evidence-based practice (Cook & Cook, 2013). The practices used to show little to no impact on academic outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2013). Unfortunately, special education teachers are not traditionally trained in content area instruction or pedagogy (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017; Schles & Robertson, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017). They generally use instructional strategies based on tradition, experience, and expert opinion (Cook & Cook, 2013). While these strategies may be effective in some cases, they are not in others. In a study by Stites et al. (2018), preservice teachers reported concerns with meeting the diverse needs in an inclusion setting. They reported that experience and training in differentiation were needed to be better prepared for inclusive teaching.

Unless special education teachers are dually certified, they do not have specific training or education in instructional strategies or pedagogy (Zagona et al., 2017). There is a push to transform the areas of preparation, induction, and assessment of prospective teachers. States are establishing new policies and standards focusing on performance-based assessments and greater choices before licensing prospective teachers (Pecheone & Whittaker, 2016). Special education teachers have several paths they can take to enter the profession. They can enter a traditional teacher preparation program or one of the alternate route programs (Schles & Robertson, 2019). As of 2010, around one-third of new teachers were being prepared through alternate certification programs (Schles & Robertson, 2019). Alternate route programs require less coursework and field training experience than traditional preparation programs (Schles & Robertson, 2019). In a time of fast-track alternatives or lower standards that ease the pathway into teaching, we are discovering a new generation of teachers underprepared to serve children with the most challenging learning needs (Pecheone & Whittaker, 2016). Choi et al. (2017) suggest four effective strategies to necessitate respect for individual needs and learning differences and allow students to learn at their level. These strategies include establishing an environment that values intellectual thinking and creativity, encouraging students to discover new learning beyond the typical acquisition of knowledge level, providing challenging opportunities to interact with adults, students, and a variety of experts, and creating a safe environment for taking risks in learning (Choi et al., 2017). As a result, pre-service special education teachers need to be prepared to understand evidence-based practices or strategies, be able to locate and utilize them, or determine if they exist (Bledsoe et al., 2016; McLeskey et al., 2019). Elementary general and special education teachers must have a conceptual understanding of the special education process and their content area to provide differentiated, evidence-based instruction. Current research

surveys pre-service teacher programs creating a missing component in understanding teacher preparedness (Bledsoe et al., 2016; Cook & Cook, 2013; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood 2017; Ricci et al., 2017; Schles & Robertson, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017). This study adds to current research through the exploration of in-service elementary teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for teaching using inclusion instructional practices.

Content Instruction

An essential component of curricular modifications and accommodations is knowledge of content area instruction. Currently, general education teachers are the ones who receive content area instruction during pre-service training. Byrd and Alexander (2020) found in their study that while general education teachers report better preparation skills in the delivery of instruction and determination of instructional adjustments, they are unable to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Pre-service teachers need to be prepared to differentiate content instruction, however, in some cases, efforts to include differentiation in teacher preparation programs are limited (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021). Pre-service teachers report a lack of differentiated instruction in teacher preparation programs. (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021). Pre-service teachers report that modeling how to differentiate content instruction is needed to help with preparation (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021).

When teachers enter the workforce, they need to be more adequately prepared to teach in an inclusive environment effectively. Battistone et al. (2019) pointed out that in 1998 the most common level of experience for an educator in the United States was 15 years. In 2013, the most common experience level had fallen to a single year (Battistone et al., 2019). This leaves new teachers with little to no time outside the student teaching experience to articulate and implement a form of assessment and grading unfamiliar to them. They are expected to be experts in special

education and understand students with disabilities; if they are not paired with a general education teacher with inclusion teaching experience, stress and disillusionment set in quickly (Battistone et al., 2019; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014).

Pre-service teachers who participated in fieldwork or internships noted that even their mentor teacher had difficulty differentiating instruction (Scarparolo & Subban, 2021). Not only do teachers report the need for preparation but also the demands and stress of differentiating instruction affect the attitude of teachers leading to negative perceptions and self-efficacy in the utilization of differentiation of instruction (Dee, 2010; D'Intino & Wang, 2021). Tomlinson et al. (2003) describe differentiated instruction as a pedagogical philosophy, instead of the focus being on a set of instructional strategies, differentiated instruction centers on learning processes, that go beyond the curriculum that targets general education students. Differentiated instruction provides a more inclusive approach to the classroom (D'Intino & Wang, 2021). Reis et al. (2011) found that elementary students' reading scores improved when differentiated instruction was utilized in the classroom. However, the study does not focus on the teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for using differentiated instruction (Reis et al., 2011).

Evidence-Based Practices

The utilization of evidence-based practices is another area teachers feel unprepared to perform (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017). Evidence-based practices use research and data to guide decisions when selecting, using, and assessing the effects of interventions and strategies on student outcomes (Markelz et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2022). The practice must be validated through multiple, high-quality research that shows meaningful effects on student outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2013; Nelson et al., 2022). While there are organizations, such as the Council for Exceptional Children and What Works Clearinghouse, that have

established formal reviews of research to determine evidence-based practices, they are very rigorous and methodological causing studies before the development of the standards to not pass requirements (Cook & Cook, 2013; Cook et al., 2020; Nelson et al., 2022). The methods that determine whether a practice is evidence-based fall under four categories: (1) research design, (2) quality of research, (3) quantity of research, and (4) the magnitude of the effect of supporting studies (Cook & Cook, 2013.) The practices need to be used whenever possible, especially when working with students with disabilities. However, while evidence-based practices elicit confidence in effectiveness, not all students will respond to the practices (Cook et al., 2020).

Evidence-based practices have a legal mandate under federal law. IDEA (2004) utilizes language related to scientific and research-based (Nelson et al., 2022). It highlights the importance of using evidence-based practices for research, intervention, instruction, and assessments. The language changed from scientific and research-based to evidence-based practices with ESSA (2015). While the practice still refers to research, intervention, instruction, and assessment, now the focus is on the practice having a statistically significant effect (Nelson et al., 2022).

However, teachers may not implement them with fidelity due to a lack of understanding and exposure (Markelz et al., 2017). Markelz et al. (2017) pointed out that while teacher preparation programs may include evidence-based practices in their preservice curriculum, there is a breakdown between teachers leaving their preparation programs where the exposure to the practices exists and actual implementation of the practices in the classroom. Teacher preparation programs focus on the theoretical foundations of education and pedagogy. The special education teacher preparation programs focus less on pedagogy and more on writing individual education plans, behavior plans, and laws regarding special education (Bledsoe et al., 2016; Cornelius &

Nagro, 2014). A misconception about evidence-based practices exists despite their ability to improve academic outcomes (Cook & Cook, 2013).

For a special education teacher preparation program to be effective, it must synthesize theory, behavior, content pedagogical knowledge, and practice (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). They must utilize theoretical concepts and field experiences, allowing the pre-service teacher to gain the knowledge and skills needed to be prepared. Special education teachers need training in instructional strategies. With IDEA and other federal mandates requiring students with disabilities to be educated in the general education classroom and meet AYP toward state standards, special education teachers must be prepared to implement evidence-based instruction and strategies (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). Research shows that students with disabilities receiving high-quality instruction that is grade-level standard-aligned are more likely to have positive student outcomes (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood 2017; Ricci et al., 2017; Schles & Robertson, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017). Incorporating evidence-based practices and strategies into coursework will prepare pre-service teachers to effectuate those practices and strategies in the inclusion classroom (Choi et al., 2017; Cornelius & Nagro, 2014). This hermeneutic phenomenological study sought to explore the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers regarding preparedness for incorporating evidence-based practices and strategies into the inclusion classroom.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Teacher preparedness was defined as the awareness and understanding of having the necessary training, skills, and resources for teaching in a classroom with special

and general education students. The literature review provided information regarding the theoretical framework based on Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory and explored the need for perceptions of teacher preparedness for inclusive education. Teachers report high unpreparedness for inclusive education (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; McLeskey et al., 2017; Ricci et al., 2017). Inclusive education has evolved, becoming the central component of special education (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Ricci et al., 2017). Researchers have explored the foundations of special education leading to inclusive education and how they affect current practices (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Mueller et al., 2019; Ricci et al., 2017; Zagona et al., 2017). Teacher preparation programs, in general, do not provide enough field experience and instructional training for special education teachers leading to low self-efficacy (Brown et al., 2019). Teachers require assistance, support, and resources in the classroom when they are not adequately prepared (Chu et al., 2020). Low self-efficacy influences the learning environment by driving the teacher's perceptions affecting achievement. When teachers begin working in inclusion classrooms, they are inadequately prepared to effectively teach in the environment (Stites et al., 2018). Special education teachers understand the concepts of co-teaching, collaboration, and high-leverage practices, but they need to gain the field experience needed to apply the concepts (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2017; Stites et al., 2018).

Research into the preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms focused on pre-service teachers through the utilization of surveys (Ahsan et al., 2013; Brown et al., 2019; Dahl, 2019; Davis et al., 2019; Schunk, 2020; Wu et al, 2019). These studies failed to explore general and special education teachers together (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2019; Stites et al., 2018). It was clear from this review of literature; that research was needed to understand

the lived experiences of teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for teaching inclusive environments.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Phenomenological studies seek to understand the lived experiences of people (Aspers & Corte, 2019). A hermeneutic phenomenological study uses a variety of data sources such as interviews, observations, personal experiences, introspection, and interactional experiences to describe and give meaning to events, experiences, and phenomena (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). In a phenomenological research study, the role of the researcher is to focus on the meanings and motivations that underlie the phenomenon, gathering a comprehensive view of the experience (Denny & Weckesser, 2022). This study sought to gather the lived experiences of teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms in elementary schools and give meaning to the perceptions. Chapter Three discusses the research design, including the research questions, setting, and participants. Next, the researcher's positionality provides context on the interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and the researcher’s role in the design. Finally, Chapter Three details the collection and analysis of data, including considerations for validity, reliability, and ethics.

Research Design

Qualitative research includes a set of interpretive, material practices that help distinguish the world (Creswell & Poth, 2018). They include methods such as interviews, conversations, recordings, and memos that give voice to experiences. A qualitative research design begins with an assumption and the use of a theoretical framework that informs the study of the research problem. The qualitative researcher uses inquiry through the collection of data in a natural

setting to gather experiences that contribute to patterns or themes. The use of a qualitative design allows the researcher to explore the lived experiences of several individuals while giving voice to their stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this study, extant literature pointed to a paucity of qualitative research on in-service elementary teachers. A qualitative research design was needed to develop an understanding of the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers in an inclusion setting.

A hermeneutic phenomenological design was used to conduct this study. Phenomenology designs explore and describe a phenomenon that several people have experienced (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenology originated in the early twentieth century when Edmund Husserl introduced a new descriptive philosophy (van Manen, 2014). Husserl (1970) defined the new philosophy as the essence of pure experiences (as cited by van Manen, 2014). Husserl (1983) turned phenomenological analysis toward the pre-reflective lived experience (as cited by van Manen, 2014). Martin Heidegger took Husserl's epistemological understanding and transformed it into an ontological method (Heidegger, 1982, as cited by van Manen, 2014). By Heidegger (1982) moving phenomenology into the ontological, the lived experience can be thematized and objectified by safeguarding the being of beings (as cited by van Manen, 2014). The use of a phenomenological design allows participants' experiences and perceptions to be recreated and understood (van Manen, 2017). Phenomenological designs focus on the lived experiences of the participant (van Manen, 2017). The lived experience of phenomenological design does not refer to a deep encounter or hidden source of meaning. The lived experience is the ordinary life experience carried out in its everyday routine. The researcher takes life experiences and interprets the meaning of the experiences (van Manen, 2017). Because the researcher interpreted the meaning of the experiences, the phenomenological design was

hermeneutic. The interpretation of the experiences was guided by the hermeneutic circle. Heidegger (2008) theorized that interpretations are altered by a threefold circular structure of fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception (Lengyel, 2018). The experience seen is an interpretation related to pre-given knowledge. To understand the experience, an examination of the meaning of the lived experiences directed the structure and essence of the hermeneutic circle (Lengyel, 2018). Hermeneutic designs collect the experience and reflect or analyze the meaning of the experience (Fuster, 2019). The hermeneutic phenomenological design was chosen for this study due to the researcher having the same lived experience as the participants. There are four stages to a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Fuster, 2019). The first stage is to clarify preconceptions from the researcher and recognize they could intervene in the research. The second stage is to collect the lived experience. The collection of these experiences comes in the form of interviews, observations, and writings. The third stage, which is guided by the hermeneutic circle, is to reflect and make meaning of the experiences. The fourth and final stage is to write about the reflection and meaning (Fuster, 2019).

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design allowed the researcher to conduct interviews to obtain information on what the participants felt and thought about their worlds (Fuster, 2019). The design brought to focus the lived experiences of teachers in an inclusion classroom. Interviews were a useful tool allowing the researcher to gather in-depth information from teachers about their perceptions of their experiences in inclusion classrooms. The interviews provided insight into their educational experiences, their use of academic strategies, their use of collaboration, and their implementation of co-teaching. These insights were analyzed and interpreted for teacher preparedness.

Research Questions

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. A central research question with three sub-questions guided this hermeneutic phenomenological study to describe the experiences and perceptions of teacher preparedness for teaching in an inclusion classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research questions were essential because, with pre-service teachers reporting feeling unprepared to teach students with disabilities, it was necessary to explore the phenomenon with in-service teacher populations (Gottfried et al., 2019; Stites et al., 2018). Furthermore, exploring the phenomenon allowed for improvement in teacher preparation (Mueller et al., 2019).

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of teachers regarding their preparation for teaching in elementary-level inclusion classrooms?

Sub-Question One

What educational experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Sub-Question Two

What collaboration experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Sub-Question Three

What co-teaching experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching?

Setting and Participants

In a hermeneutic phenomenological study, Creswell and Poth (2018) pointed out the participants may be located in the same setting; however, they must have all experienced the same phenomenon. The lived experiences of the related teachers included their education

experience, co-teaching experience, instructional strategies experience, and collaboration experience. The following sections describe the setting and participants.

Setting

The school setting for this study was the Gulf Coast School District on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. In the Gulf Coast School District, there are 250 teachers employed in grades PK-12. The district is located in an urban area. Within the Gulf Coast School District, there are two lower elementary schools, one upper elementary school, a middle school, a high school, a career technical school, and a center for academic training services. The setting included Gulf Coast Elementary School One and Gulf Coast Elementary School Two. Pseudonyms were given for the school district and two schools to protect the identity of all participants. Each school administration works directly with the superintendent, who works with the school board. Gulf Coast School District has a tall organizational structure, which allows for the school board and superintendent to make decisions and communicate the decisions to the building administration, which the building administrator then implements within the schools. This organizational structure results in a narrow span of control. Each school and department functions as a small team with cross-functional communication and policies and procedures. Each building administrator hires teachers with final approval from the school board. Teachers within the Gulf Coast School District are certified through the traditional pathway or an alternate route pathway. Gulf Coast Elementary School One employs 33 full-time certified teachers with a student enrollment of 367. Gulf Coast School District Two employees 37 full-time certified teachers with a student enrollment of 451. Gulf Coast School District is located within proximity of one state and one private university, from which the teachers have received their bachelor's, master's, specialists, or professional development. The setting allowed for access to elementary-

level general and special education teachers from multiple educational pathways and universities. The setting allowed for the researcher to gather data face-to-face which gives a more accurate reflection of data.

Participants

A pool of possible participants included 70 teachers from two elementary schools. The pool was narrowed down to 12-15 participants via a recruitment email to ensure participants selected encountered the shared phenomenon and to account for attrition and data saturation. The recruitment email attempted to reduce and purposefully select meaningful participants that fell within the guidelines of the study. The participants were purposefully selected because they experienced the phenomenon of teacher preparation for teaching in an inclusion classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenological designs needed three to ten participants with one phenomenon studied until saturation is met (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Liberty University required 10-12 participants to account for attrition and data saturation. The pool of possible participants ranged in age from 21 to 67. There was a possibility for both male and female participants; however, the exact number was not known until after the survey. Within the pool of participants, there were possibilities for Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian ethnicity representation. Teachers with general or special education certifications and who teach in any of the content areas were possible participants. The pool of teachers' experience ranged from zero to more than 25 years.

Researcher Positionality

Exploring the experiences of teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms was important to me. I am a special education teacher. I have worked as a special education teacher for seven years. Before becoming a special education teacher, I worked as a child and

adolescent mental health counselor for twelve years. My background held the potential to shape my interpretations of the study. Ensuring students with disabilities were understood and received services with the highest academic rigor and expectations possible was of utmost concern. General education and special education teachers must be prepared when they enter the inclusion classroom. As the researcher, I considered myself a necessary part of the situation being studied.

Interpretive Framework

Social constructivists investigate the world in which they live (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As they investigate, these experiences are subjectively cataloged. Researchers who use this framework must look at the complex view of the participants instead of narrowing down the view to a few ideas. Meanings for the experiences are subjectively determined through interactions with the participants and understanding the history and culture of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Constructivists believe that as people learn, the knowledge formed cannot be split from the environment in which it is formed (Adams, 2006). Therefore, reality is rooted in experiences cultivated and formed from social cultures and environments (Adams, 2006).

Social constructivist theory allows teachers to explore their perceptions and realities on co-teaching, inclusive education, and preparedness. To fully understand and develop themes for teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms, I understood the constructs of realities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2001) defines inclusive education; however, the experiences and perceptions of teacher preparedness are subjective. Exploring teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms requires a recreation and understanding of their experience of inclusion education, co-teaching, and collaboration.

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions of a researcher could impact the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The three assumptions are ontological, epistemological, and axiological. I address all three assumptions to help the reader understand my position as a researcher.

Ontological Assumption

As a special education teacher, my reality is based on the ideals, nature, and relationships of teaching students with disabilities. While I do believe that special education can be viewed through many different lenses, I believe there is only one reality. Our reality was created by God and made imperfect by man (New International Bible, 2011, Genesis 1-2). Because of sin, there is a distorted view of God's reality. This distorted view has happened throughout history. Judges 21:25 says "In those days there was no king in Israel: every man did that which was right in his own eyes." God created us to be social creatures, but sometimes human desires take over and distort how we view the world. While our world could continue to exist without us, we are needed for social constructs to exist. My goal as a social constructivist researcher was to delve deep into our singular reality and report the different perspectives of phenomena within reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Finding themes in the different perspectives of my reality could help advance the education of students with disabilities.

Epistemological Assumption

As a social constructivist researcher, I needed to know my participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The knowledge included the understanding of in-service teaching as well as the facts, skills, and objects needed to teach elementary students. My evidence came from their views and experiences. While the evidence was subjective, it was still able to be contextualized for understanding. Understanding the participants' experiences in terms of themes set the tone for

knowledge that was gained for research. The ability to take the experiences of other educators and use them to provide meaning and sense to the education world allows for field experience and case studies. The true value is when the researcher can maintain an objective distance yet reveal how the participants' experiences have shaped the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My role as the researcher was to gather the lived experiences of in-service elementary teachers, analyze the experiences for themes, ensure the essence of the experience was maintained, and report the themes and implications.

Axiological Assumption

As a researcher in the field of education, my values as an educator had the potential to influence my research. I am a seven-year, alternate route teacher with strong beliefs that my program did not prepare me adequately for the classroom. I have a background in mental health counseling that influences my values and views on the development of and how children learn. Communication and experiences are valued by a social constructivist researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Interpretations of stories are through the lens of my experiences and background. These influences needed to be journaled throughout my study to present an unbiased analysis of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I believed that the results of this study would be similar to my own lived experiences as an in-service elementary special education teacher.

Researcher's Role

As the researcher in the phenomenological study, I was the human instrument (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I attended a state university receiving my teaching degree through the alternate route path and have been a special education teacher for seven years. While research studies have indicated that preservice teachers feel unprepared to teach in inclusion classrooms, very few explore in-service teachers' experiences and perceptions. This study captured the experiences

and perceptions of in-service elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. The researcher conducted all data collection and analyses.

Van Manen (2016) suggested that the researcher needs to explore the phenomenon by establishing and maintaining a thoughtful and conversational relationship with the participants. I was sensitive to the subjectivity of the participants' experiences ensuring their perceptions form the foundation of the study and that my interpretation of the data was grounded in their experiences and perspectives.

Heidegger's (2008) concept of the hermeneutic circle recognizes that biases are part of the researcher's life experiences and subconscious. Biases cannot be bracketed or set aside; therefore, the researcher must acknowledge the bias and make meaning. Only the biases that are meaningful to the study need to be disclosed. A bias that I addressed was my experience and perception of unpreparedness to teach in inclusion classrooms. My preservice program perception and attitude were grounded in an inadequacy of preparedness for in-service teaching. I understood that not all teachers have the same life experience as me and looked for new understanding.

Procedures

After securing approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the local school district, the elementary school-level teachers received an email invitation to request voluntary and confidential participation in this study. The email invitation included separate attachments of informed consent, an explanation of the study, and a recruitment questionnaire. The recruitment questionnaire served as the channel for purposeful sampling. The questionnaire was created using Survey Monkey while complying with IRB requirements regarding informed consent. To be eligible, the participants needed to meet the following criteria: (1) taught or currently teaching

in an inclusion classroom setting; (2) willing and able to share their experiences; (3) willing to successfully participate and complete participant expectations (i.e., interview, focus group, LED, and member checking sessions). After receiving the participants' consent forms, interviews were scheduled within two weeks. Each interview was allotted 45 minutes. The interviews were audio recorded and afterward transcribed by the researcher. The researcher began to memo and track data codes and themes. Once the interviews were transcribed, the researcher checked with the participants to ensure the authenticity of the interview. Themes were developed from the interviews and used during the focus group. The focus group was scheduled so that participants could attend without having to drive long distances. If needed, an online option was provided. The focus group was allotted one hour. The focus group interview was audio-recorded and transcribed by the researcher. The participants were given a copy of the focus group interview to check for authenticity. The LED journal was given to participants as they left the individual interview with instructions to complete it and email it on or before their scheduled focus group appointment. The findings are discussed in Chapter Four.

Permissions

This study sought approval from the IRB (see Appendix A). IRB approval is required for all studies involving human subjects. The approval ensured the privacy, confidentiality, and safety of participants. Site permission was needed to send a survey to potential participants (see Appendix B). The approval to conduct this research was requested from the school district's superintendent before data collection. Permission in the form of consent was obtained from the participants before the interviews began, explaining that participation is voluntary and can be ended at any time (see Appendix C). Once granted, an email was sent to the general and special education teachers with a recruitment questionnaire to determine participation eligibility in the

study (see Appendix D). I expected to receive ten to twelve favorable and willing participants from the survey. Once the participants were selected, the qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and lived experience descriptions (LEDs).

Recruitment Plan

After I gained approval from the school district and the IRB, the elementary-level teachers from the Gulf Coast School District received a recruitment questionnaire via email. The email was sent to Gulf Coast Elementary School One and Gulf Coast Elementary School Two by the administrators for the schools. The recruitment questionnaire, the description, purpose, and reason for the study were included in the email, along with informed consent and confidentiality. The participants were given two weeks to respond. If they did not respond, they were not contacted further. When a questionnaire was returned, the potential participant was sent a confirmation email with a participant selection date of two weeks. I reviewed the returned questionnaire to ensure all selected participants met the criterion outlined for study participation. A pool of possible participants included 70 teachers from two elementary schools. Purposeful sampling provided a group of participants that would inform the researcher about the phenomenon being examined (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling allowed the selection of participants to meet a predetermined criterion (Patton, 2015). The sample size consisted of 10 to 15 participants who met the criterion of the study. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggested 10 to 15 participants are needed to meet saturation. The pool of possible participants ranged in age from 21 to 67. There was a possibility for both male and female participants; however, the exact number was not known until after the survey. Within the pool of participants, there were possibilities for Caucasian, African American, Hispanic, and Asian ethnicity representation. Teachers with general or special education certifications and who teach in any of the content

areas were possible participants. The pool of teachers' experience ranged from zero to more than 25 years. The selected participants received a consent form notifying them of the study. The selected participants were notified through informed consent that participation is voluntary and could be ended at any time (see Appendix C). Participants were given pseudonyms to provide a level of confidentiality to their identity.

Data Collection Plan

Data collection methods are critical to qualitative and phenomenological design studies. Phenomenological methods are descriptive and interpretive (van Manen, 2016). The methods question is looking for insights into a lived experience. Data collection aims to reveal a hidden experience, giving it meaning and foundation (van Manen, 2016).

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

Interviews are an integral part of the phenomenological data process. Interviews allow the researcher to understand and make meaning of the participants' experiences. Semi-structured interviews allow for freedom of conversation; however, they are not without boundaries (Vagle, 2018). I needed a clear idea of the phenomenon. I needed to keep the phenomenon at the forefront while designing interview questions and interviewing participants. During the interview, I was responsive to the participant and the phenomenon. Using the interview allowed me to learn from the participant without agreeing or disagreeing with the experience (Vagle, 2018). The interviews for this study consisted of open-ended, semi-structured questions that built relationships and trust with the participants while gathering information about their educational experiences, collaboration experiences, and co-teaching experiences (see Appendix E).

Interviews began with a description of the research goals and the ethical considerations that include the participants' right to not respond to any question or the right to withdraw from

the study. Participants were given my contact information and the activities they would be asked to complete. Interviews consisted of eight open-ended questions with follow-up questions designed to gather experiences from the participants on the phenomenon. The interviews took place at a school within the Gulf Coast School District. All interviews were audio-recorded for transcription. Audio recordings were recorded on two devices for quality assurance. Before the interviews began, the participants were assigned numbers for identification purposes. The interviews lasted an hour and remained confidential.

Table 1

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience teaching in an inclusion classroom. CQ
2. Based on Bandura, teacher self-efficacy has been defined as a teacher's belief in their capabilities to bring the desired student outcomes. What experiences teaching inclusion have shaped your self-efficacy? CQ
3. Please tell me about your educational experience. SQ1
4. What educational experiences prepared you to teach in an inclusion classroom? SQ1
5. What continuing education practices are you doing to prepare you to teach in an inclusion classroom? SQ1
6. Please tell me about your collaboration experience in an inclusive environment. SQ2
7. What experiences prepared you to collaborate with the inclusion team? SQ2
8. What experiences prepared you to co-teach in the inclusion classroom? SQ3

Interview questions were designed to explore experiences in teacher preparation for teaching in an elementary-level inclusion classroom. Questions one and two were designed to explore the inclusion classroom experience. They are aligned with the central research question to describe

the central phenomenon. Questions three through five were designed to explore the participants' educational experience. These questions are aligned with sub-question one to describe the phenomenon of educational preparation for inclusion. Questions six and seven were designed to explore the collaboration experience. The questions align with sub-question two to describe the phenomenon of preparation for collaboration. Question eight was designed to explore the participants' co-teaching experience. This question aligned with sub-question three to describe the phenomenon of preparation for co-teaching.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis plan aimed to organize and elicit meaning from the interview data. After the interviews were conducted, I transcribed the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). Transcription of interviews requires analyzing individual interviews by reading and deleting irrelevant information such as filler words and discourse markers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A copy of the interview transcripts was emailed to the participants for them to review and provide feedback. This allowed for the verification of the accuracy of the transcriptions and provided for member-checking. Once the transcriptions were verified, they were analyzed for meaning. The analysis was completed via a qualitative research software tool, Delve. Transcriptions were uploaded to Delve to search for units of meaning and code each transcript based on the units. Using Delve and the hermeneutic circle, data was analyzed for meaningful statements, words, or phrases. These meaningful statements, words, or phrases became the codes for the study. Codes were assessed for similarities and groupings. I grouped common codes into focused codes that became themes relevant to the phenomenon. Once the themes were identified, a spreadsheet was used to notate the themes and create a narrative that included all major themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). When data saturation was established, a member-

checking session occurred when I emailed the themes to participants to validate themes with experiences (Schreier, 2014).

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

Focus groups elicit information as a collective conversation (Ryan et al., 2014). While I functioned as the moderator, the participants were allowed to have a free-flowing conversation. The purpose of the focus group was to bring the participants together to examine the experience of the phenomenon and the diversity of the phenomenon. Patton (2015) discussed the use of focus groups as a means to confirm and expand on patterns and themes revealed in the analysis of initial data. The similarities and differences of the phenomenon can be seen in a focus group. This study viewed the focus group from the social constructionist perspective. I focused on the social dynamic processes and the participants' meanings and understandings of the phenomenon (Ryan et al., 2014).

The focus group participants met as one group via video conference on Google Meet. The group meeting consisted of four open-ended questions designed to gather experiences from the participants on the phenomenon (see Appendix F). The meeting was video recorded for transcription. The focus groups lasted an hour. Two recording devices for quality assurance recorded the group.

Table 2

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe a time that you and your co-teacher were prepared to teach in an inclusion classroom environment. CQ
2. Give me a word or short phrase that describes your experience in teaching in an inclusion classroom. CQ

3. What positively impacts your experience in teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms? CQ
4. What negatively impacts your experience in teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms? CQ

The focus group questions were designed to gather different experiences for the interviews (Ryan et al., 2014). Questions one through four aligned with the central research question and were designed to gather participants' lived experiences. In addition, the questions allowed the participants to discuss their experiences as a social group sharing commonalities and differences (Ryan et al., 2014).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I transcribed the focus group session interview. A copy was emailed to the participants who were in the session. A member-checking session allowed participants to read and provide feedback on the transcription. Participant feedback was needed to validate the accuracy of the transcription. After accuracy verification, the analysis was completed via a qualitative research software tool, Delve. Transcription was uploaded to Delve to search for units of meaning and code each transcript based on the units. Using Delve and the hermeneutic circle, data was analyzed for meaningful statements, words, or phrases. These meaningful statements, words, or phrases became the codes for the study. Codes were assessed for similarities and groupings. I grouped common codes into focused codes that became themes relevant to the phenomenon. Once the themes were identified, a spreadsheet was used to note the themes and create a narrative that included all major themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). A member-checking session occurred when I emailed the themes to participants to validate themes with experiences after data saturation was reached. (Schreier, 2014).

Journaling Data Collection Approach

The purpose of having participants complete lived experience descriptions (LEDs) was to describe a specific experience (Vagle, 2018). They were told not to make any interpretations while describing the moment. They were to think of a moment and follow the guidelines for describing it. Van Manen (2016) described the rewards of phenomenology as "the moments of 'in-seeing' into 'the heart of things.'" LEDs provide the "in-seeing." They give us a picture of a specific moment in time that describes the experience (van Manen, 2016). The LEDs were a journaled writing assignment given to the participants asking them to recall a specific experience they wished to share. The writing prompt aligned with the central research question to gather a description of a specific event participants recall being prepared to teach an inclusion instructional class (see Appendix G).

Table 3

LED Writing Protocol

The purpose of this writing is for you to describe a specific time you recall an inclusion class for which you felt prepared. You are not asked to interpret how you think teachers should be prepared or to characterize your teaching. Instead, the goal is to think about the specific moment. This moment can be an everyday experience. It does not have to be an innovative experience. Once you have chosen a specific moment to describe, consider the following as you write (adapted from Vagle, 2018).

1. Think about the event chronologically.
2. Describe what you saw, what was said, what you heard, how you felt, and what you thought.
3. Describe the experience as you lived through it.

4. Please assign each person a pseudonym if you use names in your description.

With these suggestions in mind, please write a description in response to the following writing prompt.

Write a description of a specific time you recall an inclusion class for which you felt prepared.

Journaling Data Analysis Plan

Participants' LEDs were read to ensure they were everyday experiences. If participants added thoughts, feelings, opinions, or perceptions to the experience, I had the participant clarify the experience. This ensures the LEDs accurately reflect the everyday experiences described. Once I validated the accuracy of the LEDs, the data was analyzed for themes and coded. The analysis was completed via a qualitative research software tool, Delve. Transcriptions were uploaded to Delve to search for units of meaning and code each transcript based on the units. Using Delve and the hermeneutic circle, data was analyzed for meaningful statements, words, or phrases. These meaningful statements, words, or phrases became the codes for the study. Codes were assessed for similarities and groupings. I grouped common codes into focused codes that became themes relevant to the phenomenon. Once the themes were identified, a spreadsheet was used to note the themes and create a narrative that included all major themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Patton, 2015). A member-checking session occurred when I emailed the themes to participants to validate themes with experiences after data saturation was reached. (Schreier, 2014).

Data Synthesis

Phenomenological data collection uses empirical and reflective methods (van Manen, 2016). The empirical data collection comes with the experiential material of interviews, focus

groups, and LEDs. The reflective methods come in the analysis of the data. Thematizing and meaning analysis must be integrated with journaling and the acknowledgment of biases. Researchers ask each text line when analyzing, “How does this speak to the phenomenon?” (van Manen, 2016). The themes create a type of shorthand that is descriptive of the text (van Manen, 2016). To synthesize the data collected, I read every interview or text holistically (Vagle, 2018). I kept a journal to record any biases found while reading.

All data points needed to be triangulated to fully synthesize the data presented through the three collection methods. Triangulation of multiple data points produced a complete understanding of the phenomenon under research study and strengthened the credibility of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I used Delve to analyze the three data collection methods and then manually consolidated the individual data themes into a more purposeful collection of themes. As a basis for data source triangulation, I used my research questions as the foundation to determine the validity of the phenomenon under investigation. Open coding was used to compare emerging themes and look for similarities, patterns, and differences.

Trustworthiness

A qualitative research design yields more subjective and interpretive data analysis making trustworthiness an essential aspect of the research method (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established naturalistic criteria for determining trustworthiness. Their model uses four criteria to ensure trustworthiness is present in a qualitative study. The criteria are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness confirms the research’s validity, reliability, and integrity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Trustworthiness was met by ensuring the credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability of the data collected.

Credibility

Credibility ensures that the research findings reflect the reality of the participants' experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Credibility is comparable with the internal validity of the study. It is one of the most critical parts of establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). For this study, I established credibility through triangulation, peer debriefing, and member checking.

Triangulation

In this study, I achieved triangulation of qualitative methods by exploring the experiences of teachers' preparedness for teaching in an inclusion classroom. The methods included individual interviews in which participants were asked to relate their experiences in education, collaboration, and co-teaching (Vagle, 2018); a focus group meeting where participants were asked to relate their experiences as a collective conversation (Ryan et al., 2014); and through LEDs where they recalled and described a specific experience (van Manen, 2016).

Peer Debriefing

Debriefing sessions provided me with feedback on the research, such as questions and observations (Shenton, 2004). The feedback can help refine the research design, ensure the quality of the data, give fresh perspectives, and challenge assumptions (Shenton, 2004). For this study, I had collaborative sessions with the program's dissertation committee chair, members, and peers.

Member Checking

Member checking is essential to ensuring a study's credibility (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Member checks take place during the collection of data and after the data has been collected (Shenton, 2004). I am a special education elementary teacher who allowed

immediate member checking during the interviews. I confirmed participant experiences by asking questions from various perspectives. After the interview and focus group transcriptions, I emailed the transcripts to the participants for feedback and correction to ensure accurate reflections of their experiences. After the LEDs, I provided a copy of what is believed to be the main points of each participant's experience for participants to check for accuracy.

Transferability

Transferability refers to another practitioner's ability to use the study's findings in a different research context (Shenton, 2004). The participants in this study are elementary-level teachers. Fellow researchers can use the thick descriptions to determine if the study would apply to their population. However, the transferability may be problematic as this study focuses on one school district in the southern United States and has a small sample size. This study sought maximum variation in participants' demographics, but transferability cannot be assured.

Dependability

Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptions of the research method and procedures were detailed to allow for replication. My description of sample criteria and selection, coding, and thematic interpretation demonstrated the dependability of the study. An inquiry audit or audit trail (see Appendix H) was used to show dependability in study results. The audit trail consisted of the reflexive journal (see Appendix I) in which I documented my thoughts and reflected on aspects of the study that ensured my personal biases and preferences were in check. The dissertation committee reviewed the dissertation to ensure dependability.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the respondents shape the findings of a study and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure objectivity, I employed three criteria for meeting confirmability (Shenton, 2004). Critical to ensuring confirmability was creating a detailed audit trail. I constructed an audit trail through which the procedures, raw data, analyzed data, and the final report could be transparently tracked if necessary. A second criterion for meeting confirmability was for me to employ triangulation. I utilized triangulation during data collection. Finally, I established confirmability by allowing the study to emerge from the data rather than from predispositions (Shenton, 2004). Bracketing preconceptions, biases, thoughts, and assumptions through reflexive journaling or memoing allowed me to gain insight and explore feelings instead of stifling them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

This study was used to develop an understanding of the phenomenon of teacher preparedness for teaching in an inclusion classroom. Ethical considerations and questions were considered at every step of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Currently, I do not have any authority position over any participant. Before data were collected, IRB approval (see Appendix A), school district approval (see Appendix B), and participant consent (see Appendix C) was obtained. Participants in the study did not include those from the vulnerable population of children and minors. Participants were informed of the nature of the study, and that participation was voluntary and could be discontinued at any time. The study provided confidentiality of the participants by using pseudonyms for the participants' names and the school and school district at which they are employed. Security software and password

protection will be used to safeguard data files. All documents and data will be destroyed three years after completion of the doctoral program.

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Chapter Three detailed the methodology that was used in this hermeneutic phenomenological design. A hermeneutic phenomenological design was used to understand the personal experiences of in-service teachers' preparedness for teaching inclusion. Chapter Three described the setting of elementary-level schools in a small-town school district where I used purposeful sampling to select participants. Data collection consisted of interviews, focus groups, and journaling data, creating data triangulation (Vagle, 2018; van Manen, 2016). Data were analyzed through the organization and coding of responses to develop themes and construct meaning of the phenomenon (Vagle, 2018). Trustworthiness was established by maintaining credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Shenton, 2004). Ethical considerations were considered at each step during the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Chapter Four presents the results of the data analysis of the participants' experiences of preparedness to teach in elementary inclusion classrooms. The data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, a focus group interview, and a lived experience description writing prompt. Chapter Four contains descriptions of the participants and the data, in the form of narrative themes and tables, followed by a thematic alignment of the research questions.

Participants

The participants in this study included elementary-level inclusion teachers from the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Each participant was recruited through purposeful sampling via email. Participants were asked to provide their experiences on preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. Pseudonyms were used to protect the confidentiality of the participants and the locations at which they teach. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that participation was voluntary. Participants signed and submitted a consent form.

Participants were required to either be currently teaching or have previously taught in an inclusion classroom. Thirteen recruits returned a signed informed consent agreeing to participate; however, only 10 completed the data collection sessions. Three participants cited time and work responsibilities as the reason for quitting the study. Participants included nine females and one male. Six participants have master’s degrees and four have bachelor’s degrees. Four participants are certified special educators, three are certified elementary educators, one is dual-certified as

an elementary and special educator, and one is dual-certified as an elementary and gifted educator. The teacher participants along with their demographic information are presented in Table 1.

Olivia

Olivia has been a general education teacher for five years. All five years have been in inclusion classrooms. She has a master's degree and is certified in elementary education. She completed her pre-service training on a traditional pathway that included some courses specific to special education. She believes that teaching inclusion has made her question her teaching abilities more than once but has strengthened them as well. She attributes an instructional coach, who served as a mentor during her first year in service, as the experience that most prepared her for teaching in inclusion: "This experience helped shape my perspective of co-teaching and prepared me for inclusion."

Emma

Emma has been a special education teacher for three years. She started as a special education assistant, moving to the general education position when the teacher left mid-year. In her second year, she was in a self-contained classroom, transitioning behavior modification students back into the general education/inclusion classroom. This year she is an inclusion special education teacher. She has a master's degree and is certified in special education. She completed her pre-service training by way of the alternate certification pathway. Her experience as a general education teacher in an inclusion classroom had the most impact on preparing her to teach in an inclusion classroom: "I was able to see from the perspective of the general education teacher what their roles and responsibilities consist of and figure out ways which would be best to help support a broad range of academic and behavioral needs."

Charlotte

Charlotte has been a general education teacher for four years. Three of the four years have been in inclusion classrooms. She has a master's degree and is certified in elementary and gifted education. She completed her pre-service training on a traditional pathway which included a class related to learning disabilities. She and her co-teacher take turns teaching different parts of the lesson, learning how to co-teach through being thrown into the inclusion classroom. Before being "thrown in" she would not have thought she would be able to teach students with varying skills: "I have learned how to adapt lessons to better fit the needs of my students."

Amelia

Amelia has been a general education teacher for 28 years. She has taught in many inclusion classrooms during those years, with the last three years being inclusion. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in elementary education. She completed her pre-service on a traditional pathway. She has not had any training to teach in an inclusion classroom and attributes her experience as what has most prepared her: "Classes on co-teaching and working with special education students should be mandatory in college and required professional development for teachers."

Sophia

Sophia has been a special education teacher in inclusion classrooms for five years. She has a bachelor's degree and is certified in special education. She completed her pre-service training through the alternate certification pathway, with classes in classroom management, data collection, behavior, and lesson planning. When she entered the classroom as an in-service teacher, she was only prepared for the basics. She attributes her experience as what prepared her

most for teaching: “It was more like I just learned on the job and have spent the past five years figuring out what works and what does not work in the inclusion classroom.”

Isabella

Isabella has been a general education teacher for eight years. She has been in an inclusion classroom for six of the eight years. She has a master’s degree and is certified in elementary education. She completed her pre-service training through the alternate certification pathway, with the extent of her inclusion classroom preparation being instruction in differentiation strategies during a master’s course. She struggles with differentiating instruction and believes that the special education students’ state test scores push her to continue to develop her instructional practices. She attributes building relationships with special education teachers, teaching experience, and understanding best practices to use with special education students as what has most prepared her for the inclusion classroom: “As a result of my alternate route path, I did not have educational experience in an actual classroom to prepare me to teach in an inclusion setting. The extent of my preparation came from some instruction on differentiation strategies during my first semester of master’s courses.”

Noah

Noah has been a special education teacher for four years. He has taught in inclusion classrooms all four years. He has a master’s degree and is certified in special education. He completed his pre-service training through the alternate certification pathway. His preparation for inclusion came from his experience in the classroom. His work with difficult students, specifically with behavior and disabilities, has helped him in planning and responding to situations. His experience as a coach and his participation in athletics has prepared him most for

the classroom: “This has given me the experience needed to work with various people collaboratively.

Ava

Ava has been a special education teacher for 12 years. In her first year, she worked as a pre-K special education teacher and traveled to daycares and elementary schools across the county servicing students with disabilities. Since then, she has been in an inclusion classroom. She has a bachelor’s degree and is certified in elementary education and special education. She completed her pre-service training on a traditional pathway. She attributes the number of teachers she has worked with throughout her career as most helpful in her preparation for the inclusion classroom: “I am learning from experienced colleagues who have taught inclusion for strategies and resources to teach in a true collaborative inclusive classroom.”

Luna

Luna has been a special education teacher for 19 years. She has worked at the high school and elementary school levels, in a resource setting as an interventionist, and in an inclusion setting. She has a master’s degree and is certified in special education. She completed her pre-service training on a traditional pathway. She does not mind asking other teachers questions or seeking help to better guide her students. She attributes athletics and her time as a coach as what prepared her most for the inclusion classroom: “Being an athlete helped prepare me for inclusion because you have to be able to work with people and be a team player.”

Mia

Mia has been a general education teacher for 19 years. Her last five years have been exclusively as an inclusion teacher. She has a bachelor’s degree and is certified in elementary education. She completed her pre-service training on a traditional pathway. She has not had any

courses in special education and has gained all of her experience in the classroom. For the last five years, she has had the same co-teacher which has allowed for relationship-building, trust, instructional strategies, and collaboration to be built. She attributes classroom experience and having the same co-teacher long-term as what has best prepared her for inclusion: “We teach the class together and share responsibilities for all students.”

Table 4

Teacher Participants

Teacher Participant	Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Type of Teacher	Certificate Pathway
Olivia	5	Masters	General Education	Traditional
Emma	3	Masters	Special Education	Alternate Route
Charlotte	4	Masters	General Education	Traditional
Amelia	28	Bachelors	General Education	Traditional
Sophia	5	Bachelors	Special Education	Alternate Route
Isabella	8	Masters	General Education	Alternate Route
Noah	4	Masters	Special Education	Alternate Route
Ava	12	Bachelors	Special Education	Traditional
Luna	19	Masters	Special Education	Traditional

Mia	19	Bachelors	General Education	Traditional

Results

Using a hermeneutic phenomenological design, this study interprets the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. This study's data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, a focus group meeting, and a journal prompt in the form of a lived experience description. Using the Delve tool, I carefully analyzed each participant's responses. Participants provided thick, rich descriptions of their experiences that allowed several themes and subthemes to emerge from the data collection. There was a total of four themes and eight subthemes, as well as one outlier, that were derived from the analysis of the data collection. The themes and corresponding subthemes are presented in Table 2.

Table 5

Themes & Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Preparedness for Inclusion Teaching	Lack of Preparedness for Inclusion Teaching
	Felt Prepared to Teach Inclusion
Co-teaching Experiences	Co-teaching Instructional Roles and Responsibilities
	Preparation for Co-teaching
Educational Experiences	Education Courses and Training Preparation
	Professional Development
Collaboration Experiences	Collaborative Relationships
	Preparation for Collaboration

Preparedness for Inclusion Teaching

Preparedness for inclusion teaching was the first theme that developed from data analysis. The theme was derived from participants' experiences related to understanding, exposure, and familiarity with inclusion classrooms as well as their lack of knowledge and experience with inclusion. The codes "better prepared me," "felt prepared," and "lack of experience" were clustered to form the theme of preparedness for inclusion teaching. In total, these codes appeared 157 times in participant interview transcripts, the focus group transcript, and LEDs. Charlotte epitomized the experiences of the participants in her statements, "I have gotten better teaching as each year passes," and "I have learned through being thrown into the inclusion classroom." All 10 participants voiced that classroom experiences most prepared them for inclusion. Isabella stated in her individual interview that she "over time" learned practices that work in the inclusion classroom. All participants articulated the lack of experience the first time they entered the inclusion classroom. Sophia said during the focus group, "When I finally stepped into the classroom as a special education teacher, I was only somewhat prepared."

Lack of Preparedness for Inclusion Teaching

The subtheme of lack of preparedness for inclusion teaching in the participants' lived realities was a leading issue in preparation for inclusion. The subtheme occurred 95 times in the codes of "lack of experience from my classes" and "being thrown into the classroom." According to eight of the participants, the lack of experience was attributed to their pre-service training. Charlotte said during the focus group, "None of the classes specifically pertained to teaching students in an inclusion setting." Isabella noted in her individual interview that due to the alternate route pathway, she did not have "educational experience in an actual classroom to prepare me to teach in an inclusion setting." Although Sophia did take some education classes

during her collegiate pursuits, “none of those classes really prepared me for the inclusion classroom.”

In addition to pre-service training, “being thrown into” the inclusion classroom was cited by six of the participants as the reason for lack of experience. Isabella wrote in her LED, “I was unfamiliar with the standards I needed to teach and had no idea how to implement the provided curriculum in an inclusion setting.” Olivia said in her individual interview that she had no “grasp of what it really meant to teach students with disabilities.” Charlotte shared during the focus group that “no official guidelines on how to prepare for inclusion” were given.

Felt Prepared to Teach Inclusion

The subtheme felt prepared to teach inclusion was characterized by the participants as “familiarity,” “knowledgeable,” “progress,” and “greatly improved” in the area of inclusion instruction. The subtheme occurred 62 times in the codes of “classroom teaching experience” and “advanced classroom setup.” Five of the participants cited their years in the classroom as the reason for their improvement. Mia said during the focus group, “As I have gotten more inclusion classroom experience over my 19 years, not only has my self-efficacy been greatly improved, but my knowledge and ability to help all students has increased.” Isabella agreed stating, “Over time, I have learned to implement classroom management and differentiated instruction so that all students benefit.”

Part of the experience of preparedness mentioned by three of the participants was in the advanced set-up of the classroom, instructional materials, and pedagogical plans. Olivia wrote that her lived experience of preparedness was “I walked into my classroom already prepared because I left the day before with the new date on the board, the agenda filled out, and my desk clean. My copies for the lesson were ready to go, and the classroom was clean.” Isabella wrote

about her lived experience of preparedness: “I assembled and labeled the lab material the previous day. Response questions had been glued into science notebooks by students earlier in the week, so I simply had to tell students to open the page and begin the lesson.”

Co-Teaching Experiences

The second theme that emerged was co-teaching experiences. This theme developed from participants’ discussions of their co-teaching experiences at their current school as well as previous schools or with different teachers. They voiced accounts of different styles and preparation for co-teaching. The codes “shared responsibilities in the classroom,” “use of co-teaching styles,” and “experiences that prepared me for co-teaching” were clustered to form the theme of co-teaching experiences. In total, these codes appeared 164 times in participant interview transcripts, the focus group transcript, and LEDs. Eight of the participants have experienced “true co-teaching” where both teachers share responsibility for lesson planning and instruction. Sophia said in her individual interview, “I teach in a true inclusion setting. I am in the classroom the entire day. I partner teach with my general education teacher.” Luna shared in her individual interview, “The general education teacher is wonderful and makes me feel like a co-teacher and not an assistant. We teach the class together and share responsibilities for all the students.” Participants discussed their negative co-teaching experiences as well as their positive. Olivia stated during the focus group, “My first two years of teaching did not give me a great outlook on co-teaching with special education teachers. When I was a first-year teacher, I only had one class of inclusion students and a special education teacher who was in my room for less than an hour during the class period.” Sophia said in her individual interview, “My first two years the general education teacher saw me as an assistant and the classroom as hers. Co-teaching did not occur.”

Co-Teaching Instructional Roles and Responsibilities

Co-teaching instructional roles and responsibilities emerged as a subtheme as seven participants mentioned co-teaching styles within their co-teaching experience. The subtheme centers around the instructional models utilized by the teachers in the classroom. The subtheme occurred 92 times in the codes of "use of co-teaching styles" and "shared responsibilities in the classroom." Ava wrote in her LED, "To help myself and co-general education teacher prepare for each lesson, we set up a Google Doc lesson plan the week prior. We comment on the document on what part of the lesson we want to teach to the class. We collaborate on the delivery method of instruction and decide the co-teaching style best for the lesson." Luna also wrote in her LED, "We each teach the part of the lesson we are most comfortable with, then we do group work to make sure all our students are successful." Noah stated in his LED, "My co-teacher and I planned together on developing various centers to be used after the whole group lesson." Mia said in the focus group, "My co-teacher and I utilize the team-teaching model. We have worked together for 5 years and have developed a relationship that allows for this model to work. We trust each other and can finish each other's sentences."

Preparation for Co-Teaching

Another subtheme developed was preparation for co-teaching. This subtheme was voiced by eight of the participants and materialized from their experiences that most prepared them for co-teaching. The subtheme occurred 72 times in the codes of "co-teaching experiences that prepared" and "mentors." Emma stated in her individual interview, "One of the best experiences that prepared me to co-teach happened when I had to take over a general education teaching position. I was able to see from the perspective of the general education teacher what their roles and responsibilities consisted of." She went on to say, "I was able to learn where I can most

effectively spend my time to increase outcomes." Olivia said in her individual interview, "My first year of teaching I had an instructional coach who was more of a mentor. She would visit my class a few times a week and essentially co-teach with me. This experience helped shape my perspective of co-teaching and prepared me." Charlotte shared during the focus group, "All of my knowledge has been made from the experience of teaching in an inclusion class. I have learned more from being thrown into this position than during my education." Ava shared during the focus group, "When I moved to this district, I was given a mentor. She helped me tremendously by suggesting I observe different inclusion classrooms. I was able to see the different co-teaching styles in action."

Educational Experiences

Educational experiences developed as a theme because participants discussed their pre-service training and professional development related to inclusion. All participants are certified teachers; however, they did not experience the same pre-service training due to different pathways or course curriculum requirements at their respective universities. The codes "certification pathway," "lack of courses and training on inclusion teaching," and "professional development" were clustered to form the theme of educational experiences. In total, these codes appeared 125 times in participant interview transcripts, the focus group transcript, and LEDs. Emma shared in her individual interview, "I have a bachelor's in psychology with a minor in child and family studies. I got my alternate teaching license from a different university and finished my Masters in the Art of Teaching with a special education focus." Charlotte stated in her individual interview, "I went to a university for my undergraduate in elementary education. I then went to a different university for my master's degree in secondary education with an emphasis in gifted education." Isabella said in her individual interview, "I graduated from a state

university with a bachelor's in biological science with a concentration in pre-veterinary medicine, then decided to become a teacher. I began the Master of Arts in Teaching which allowed me to complete the requirements for alternate route certification."

Education Courses and Training Preparation

A subtheme developed from education experiences was education courses and training preparation. All participants spoke on the lack of courses and training they received from their pre-service programs related to inclusion classrooms. The subtheme occurred 69 times in the codes of "lack of educational classes" and "lack of field experience." Sophia stated during the focus group, "While I did have a couple of educational classes, none actually prepared me for teaching inclusion." Noah said during the focus group, "Preparation for an inclusion classroom came from teaching in an inclusion classroom. I did not participate in any student teaching, so my preparation came from active participation in the classroom after beginning my career." Mia stated during the focus group, "I did have education classes such as classroom management and the foundations of teaching, but I did not have anything to prepare me for teaching inclusion." Amelia said during the focus group, "I was never trained to co-teach, and was a difficult procedure to learn after being a teacher for years."

Professional Development

Another subtheme that developed from educational experience was professional development. Participants discussed if they participate in professional development to help prepare them for inclusion and if they do, what the professional development entails. The subtheme occurred 56 times in the codes of "have not participated" and "participated in professional development." Five participants admitted they had not participated in any professional development related to inclusion. Charlotte said in her individual interview, "At the

moment, I am not doing anything to prepare to teach in an inclusion classroom." Emma stated in her individual interview, "Since I just finished my master's program, I am not currently doing any continuing education at the moment." Amelia said in her individual interview, "I have not taken any continuing education course to help me, but professional development needs to be required on how to co-teach and deal with diverse abilities." The other five participants stated they had participated in professional development. Noah said in his individual interview, "I have participated in various professional development opportunities geared towards literacy in special education classrooms. I have also begun the national board process and will be attending two professional development courses focused on teaching within an inclusion classroom this semester and summer." Sophia stated in her individual interview, "I get professional development on a consistent basis to continue to prepare me for the inclusion classroom as well as to teach me new techniques or strategies for the classroom."

Collaboration Experiences

Collaboration experiences emerged as a theme that developed from participants' shared lived experiences of their participation in collaboration. Participants discussed their experiences of effective collaboration and what experiences prepared them for collaboration. The codes "communicated frequently," "collaborative meetings with co-teacher and team," and "experiences that prepared" were clustered to form the theme of collaboration experiences. In total, these codes appeared 175 times in participant interview transcripts, the focus group transcript, and LEDs. All participants noted that collaboration is necessary for teaching in an inclusion classroom. Isabella stated in her individual interview, "Collaborative relationships with special education teachers have been crucial in gaining information about IEP accommodations and understanding best practices to use with special education students." Luna said in her

individual interview, “Collaboration is required between myself, all general education teachers on my team, and my special education counterpart.” Four of the participants said they had negative experiences with collaboration during their in-service inclusion teaching. Ava said in her individual interview, “Prior to working at my current school, the only collaboration experience I received was within my special education department.” Sophia stated in her individual interview, “I have co-taught with general education teachers who did not want to give up control. We did not collaborate on anything.”

Collaborative Relationships

Seven of the participants discussed or wrote about their lived experiences related to collaborative meetings and communication within the inclusion environment. The subtheme of collaborative relationships emerged from their explanations of ways they effectively communicate, plan, and determine instructional strategies, models, and lesson activities. The subtheme occurred 95 times in the codes of “communicated frequently” and “met collaboratively with co-teacher and team members.” Noah stated, “I collaborate with both a general education teacher regarding lessons and with the math special education teacher regarding assessments and pull-outs and what works best for specific students.” Olivia said, “By collaborating, we are able to cover each other’s weak spots and complement each other’s teaching styles.” Charlotte said, “Our inclusion team works well to make sure we are accommodating all students and their needs. We get together daily to discuss any issues we see or anything that would benefit the students.” Emma wrote in her LED:

> Our class took their quarter one test one and the scores for all the students were all over the place. I pulled up Mastery Connect and analyzed the data for all three homerooms. As I looked over the data, I realized all three classes had more than half of the students

struggling with similar questions on the test. The majority of the questions students struggled with were all in relation to the poem on the test. I brought this information to the general education teacher and showed her what I was seeing. I told her I had a way to present how to break down a poem so it could be best understood even with figurative language. She shifted some plans around for the next day so I could whole-group review the poem and questions while teaching the strategies to make poems easier to understand for all three classes.

Preparation for Collaboration

Five of the participants discussed experiences that prepared them for collaboration. The subtheme developed from the lived experiences of the participants' explanations of the experience that had the most impact on their communication and ability to work as a team. The subtheme occurred 80 times in the codes of "working with multiple teachers," "extracurricular activities," and "experience with different personality types." Emma said about her time as an inclusion assistant, "I had the opportunity to work with multiple teachers collaboratively. This gave me a broad range of different experiences where I learned effective communication and the importance of teamwork." Ava attributed the number of years she has taught as well as the different districts as the experience that most prepared her, "That provided me with experience in working with a lot of different personality types which helped me be prepared to collaborate with an inclusion team." Noah and Luna gave credit to athletics as the experience that most prepared them. "Being an athlete and working with all kinds of people teaches communication and teamwork," stated Luna. Noah said, "I have been involved in athletics throughout my life including coaching on large staffs. This has given me the experience to work with various people collaboratively."

Outlier Data and Findings

In qualitative research, an outlier is an unexpected theme or finding that represents a variation in the participants being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Although research discusses student outcomes because of teacher self-efficacy and preparedness for teaching, data collection was aimed at exploring the lived experiences of teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. The outlier data emerged as unexpected information from six participants.

Student Outcomes

Student outcomes surfaced as an outlier theme based on participants' discussions of finding ways to engage students within the inclusion classroom and the impacts of teaching in inclusion classrooms. The outlier theme occurred 64 times in the codes of "engaging students," and "student achievements." Charlotte discussed ways she and her co-teacher are collaborating to ensure all inclusion students make progress, "Not only do we collaborate daily, but we also are constantly keeping eyes on all inclusion students to make sure they are progressing to their best ability." Sophia said she works "daily to meet students' educational goals and bridge gaps in learning." She also stated that "because we discuss progress monitoring, IEP data, and IEP goals, our students benefit greatly." Amelia and Emma both shared "It helped to see what effect co-teaching and collaboration can have on student outcomes." Olivia shared her self-efficacy has grown by "seeing an inclusion student's confidence grow" more than any other teaching experience.

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This section focuses on the responses to the research questions that

guided the study. This section begins by including the responses to the central research question regarding teachers' preparation for teaching in inclusion classrooms. The next section addresses the sub-questions regarding educational experience, collaboration experience, and co-teaching experience.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of teachers regarding their preparation for teaching in elementary-level inclusion classrooms? The participants specifically discussed their lived experiences regarding preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms resulting in the theme of preparedness for inclusion teaching and subthemes of lack of preparedness for inclusion teaching and felt prepared to teach inclusion. They discussed the events that elicited their preparedness for inclusion and contributed to their lack of experience. Ava wrote in her LED, "I feel more comfortable and prepared to teach inclusion when I know what is expected and have time to preview the teaching material." Sophia said in her interview, "By co-teaching in a true inclusion setting, my self-efficacy has improved thereby allowing me to be more prepared for teaching." Charlotte wrote in her LED, "After teaching inclusion for five years, I finally feel prepared to teach." Isabella shared, "I did not have any experience working with inclusion, I have learned everything from teaching."

Sub-Question One

What educational experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching? Educational experience was the theme that answered sub-question two. Participants discussed their experiences related to education courses and training preparation and professional development, which resulted in the subthemes. Participants agreed that their pre-service training did not help prepare them for teaching in an inclusion setting. Only half of the participants shared that they

participated consistently in professional development while all stated that professional development was needed to help effectively prepare teachers for inclusion classrooms. Sophia shared, “I didn’t really have many experiences that properly prepared me. It was more like I just learned on the job.” Noah stated, “Preparation for inclusion teaching came from actively teaching not from my pre-service classroom.” Mia shared, “I take online courses to help enrich my teaching ability and understand best practices for inclusion.”

Sub-Question Two

What collaboration experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching? Collaboration experiences developed as a theme with sub-themes of collaborative relationships and preparation for collaboration as an answer to sub-question two. Participants discussed their experiences with relationships, communication, and collaborative approaches along with experiences that helped prepare them for collaboration. Isabella stated, “Relationships with special education teachers have been crucial…the entire inclusion team must communicate frequently to determine routines, behavior supports, and instructional practices that help students succeed.” Emma shared, “Last year, I collaborated with multiple subjects and grade-level teams which allowed me to see many different teaching strategies and classroom management styles.” Ava said, “Teaching in different districts has allowed me the opportunity to collaborate with many different personality types which helped prepare me for the inclusion classroom.

Sub-Question Three

What co-teaching experiences prepare teachers for inclusion teaching? The theme that answered sub-question three was co-teaching experiences including co-teaching instructional roles and responsibilities and preparation for co-teaching as the subthemes. Participants related their experiences with different co-teachers, school districts, how many years spent with the

same co-teacher as the reasons for positive and negative preparedness for inclusion teaching. Charlotte stated of her current co-teacher, “It took trial and error to see what worked but this year we are good at co-teaching.” Olivia related a negative experience, “Due mainly to the size of the school I was at and the scheduling, they had one special education teacher for three grade levels. Her time in my class was very limited so we did not co-teach effectively.” Olivia shared, “My first two years of teaching did not give me a great outlook on co-teaching with special education teachers but now that I have experience teaching inclusion and a very capable, involved co-teacher, I have a new appreciation for the inclusion classroom.”

Summary

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Chapter Four provided a list and description of the participants, including their years in service, degree and pathway, and type of teacher. The study’s results were detailed. The four themes that emerged were preparedness for inclusion teaching, co-teaching experiences, educational experiences, and collaboration experiences. The themes were aligned with the research questions. The themes described experiences that prepared participants for inclusion classrooms and led to high student outcomes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This study aimed to explore teachers' experiences of preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms through exploration of their educational, collaborative, and co-teaching experiences. Chapter Five discusses the interpretation of the study's findings, implications for policy and practice, the theoretical and empirical implications, the limitations and delimitations, followed by recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The purpose of the discussion section is to summarize and examine the findings of the study using the themes explored in Chapter Four. This section begins with a summary of thematic findings, the interpretation of those findings, and the implications for policy and practice. The theoretical and empirical implications and limitations and delimitations will follow. Finally, the recommendations for future research will be discussed.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The thematic findings came from the data collected and analyzed from teacher participants in Chapter Four. After analyzing their interviews, LEDs, and the focus group data, five themes were produced. This section summarizes and discusses the four themes and explores their connection to existing literature.

The theme of preparedness for inclusion teaching had two subthemes, lack of preparedness for inclusion teaching and felt prepared to teach inclusion. Multiple participants discussed accounts of their preparedness for teaching in inclusion settings through classroom

experience and their lack of experience at the start of inclusion teaching. They described how their preparedness was developed as they learned what worked for the students and engaged with strong mentors and special education teachers. They also attributed their preparedness to weekly and daily lesson planning and classroom preparation. When participants discussed their lack of experience, they cited being thrown into the environment and lack of training as the top reasons.

The theme of co-teaching experience emerged as participants discussed their lived experiences in inclusion classrooms with the subthemes of co-teaching instructional roles and responsibilities and preparation for co-teaching. Participants all had different experiences with co-teaching due to co-teacher beliefs, school schedules, and inexperience on both teachers' part. They shared how both co-teachers must buy into the practice for co-teaching to be successful. Some participants reflected on their lack of understanding and inability to implement co-teaching due to nonexistent pre-service training and professional development.

Educational experience was another major theme that developed from the findings. Within the theme of educational experience, two subthemes were developed: educational courses and training preparation and professional development. Although participants had different educational backgrounds, they felt their pre-service training did not effectively prepare them for teaching in inclusion classrooms. They attributed their experience in their classroom as what most prepared them. While all believed that professional development was needed to help prepare and better equip in-service teachers for teaching in inclusion settings, only half of the participants admitted to participating in professional development.

The last major theme that emerged from the data analysis was collaboration experience. The two subthemes that developed within this theme were collaborative relationships and preparation for collaboration. The participants reflected on both positive and negative

experiences with collaboration which positively impacted their abilities to communicate, plan, and work with a team. Participants shared experiences in which effective collaboration led to positive student outcomes.

Interpretation of Findings

Data for this study was analyzed after being collected from participants. Data collection consisted of individual interviews, focus groups, and LEDs. Analysis of the data generated four themes. After analyzing these themes, I identified three thematic findings. My interpretations of those findings are (1) Teacher Self-Efficacy May Elicit Student Outcomes, (2) Classroom Experience Takes Time to Develop, and (3) A Need for Effective Training.

Teacher Self-Efficacy Is Perceived to Elicit Positive Student Outcomes

From teachers' perspectives, this study corroborated Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory where teachers' confidence in their abilities to teach impacts their classrooms and student outcomes. When teachers believe they are prepared to teach, they perceive they are more effective in promoting confidence and ability in their students. Participants all voiced experiences in which their self-efficacy increased. As their experience grew, all shared positive student outcomes. For some participants, this process was iterative, and they perceived their self-efficacy to further increase when student outcomes were high.

These findings substantiate the research Brown et al. (2019) conducted which found teachers' beliefs in their capabilities influence student outcomes. Self-efficacy is influenced by personal accomplishments and shared experiences. For teachers, self-efficacy is shaped during their time in pre-service training and in-service teaching. Participants reflected on whether their pre-service training had any impact on their self-efficacy and found that the training left them unsure and unprepared for teaching. However, they shared how their in-service teaching had a

significant impact on their self-efficacy due to learning from experienced teachers, self-reflection, and trial and error.

Classroom Experience Takes Time to Develop

During this study, a major underlying finding that emerged was classroom experience takes time to develop. Because co-teaching and collaboration require the partnering of teachers, experience in inclusion teaching first requires the right experiential conditions to occur. Once general education teachers partner with special education teachers, they need time to develop their relationship and collaborative skills and identify their co-teaching styles and instructional strategies. Research suggests practical experiences should be part of teacher training to allow for experience and demonstration of skills associated with inclusion (Ajuwon et al., 2012; Finkelstein et al., 2021; Ricci et al., 2017). Participants in this study echoed the literature in that they shared experiences related to their preparedness for teaching to their classroom experience. As they taught with co-teachers, they learned what worked and did not work within the classroom and with different students. They developed their instructional strategies and collaboration skills. As they developed trust and respect with their co-teachers, they built a relationship in which they could effectively co-teach.

Co-teaching requires both teachers to understand and implement instruction, assessments, behavior management, and planning. Participants admitted their greatest challenges were first entering the classroom from pre-service training. They cited a lack of understanding of content instructional strategies, learning disabilities, and behavior management as the major reasons for being unprepared. They shared that their time spent in the classroom allowed them to gain experience in these areas.

A Need for Effective Training

A final thematic finding from data collected and analyzed was a need for effective training. Teachers enter the teaching profession through different pathways. The participants in this study entered either by traditional pathway or through the alternate route, but the pre-service programs have different requirements. While Quigney (2010) found that even with differences in the way teachers are certified, there was no difference in the measures of instructional behavior, student performance, and teacher performance, Nougaret et al. (2005) reported traditional pathway teachers measured higher in planning, classroom management, and instruction. Regardless of the pre-service program, participants in this study reported a lack of preparedness from their pre-service programs.

Pre-service programs and field experience are important to teacher certification. By preparing future teachers for work in-service, not only will their self-efficacy increase but attrition rates have the potential to decline. By including courses on learning disabilities, behavior management, and co-teaching to the general education curriculum and content instruction, preparation and planning, and teacher and student performance in the special education curriculum, future teachers will receive the instruction needed to teach in inclusion settings. Also, an updated field experience that allows teachers to experience an inclusion classroom potentially benefits future teachers.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of teacher preparation for inclusion classrooms. The findings from this study can be used by various entities to implement policy and practice changes. The implications may improve the practices of general and special education teachers in inclusion classrooms.

Implications for Policy

The federal government sets guidelines and standards for state and local governments, school districts, teachers, parents, and students through laws and regulations such as IDEA (2004) and ESSA (2015). It is the responsibility of the state government agencies, local school districts, universities, and accreditation agencies to ensure the guidelines are correctly interpreted and implemented. Standards require accountability for student outcomes, highly qualified teachers, and evidence-based practices.

This research found two potential policy changes that could benefit current in-service teachers as well as future teachers. These changes include updates to the current pre-service training curriculum and implementation of required professional development courses in inclusion. Participants voiced a lack of educational experience in preparation for inclusion. By updating current university standards and curriculum to include courses in special education, learning disabilities, behavior management, and collaboration, including co-teaching and evidence-based practices, pre-service teachers have a better prospect of leaving their preparation program ready to enter an inclusion classroom. Extant literature supports this finding by suggesting teachers understand the characteristics of disabilities, have a foundational understanding of the special education process, can differentiate instruction, provide accommodations and modifications, manage behaviors, and understand collaboration (Allday et al., 2013; Finkelstein et al. 2021). Currently, teachers are required to have a certain number of hours related to their job or skill by the time of their five-year license renewal. Requiring a certain number of continuing education hours to be professional development courses related to inclusion (e.g., co-teaching, collaboration, evidence-based practices), in-service teachers have a chance to develop skills and reflect on current teaching practices related to inclusion classrooms.

By implementing this requirement, not only are we preparing teachers for work in inclusion classrooms but also developing skills and practices related to collaboration and instructional practices that are helpful in a general education classroom. While some districts provide professional development courses for free or at a discounted rate, teachers take these courses outside of contract hours, pay for them out of pocket, or must provide for their substitute out of pocket. Compensation for professional development should be required from all districts.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study revealed three implications for practice. The first implication relates to field experiences provided by universities. All participants attributed in-service classroom experience as what most prepared them to teach in inclusion therefore providing meaningful inclusion field experience may benefit future teachers. Most pre-service programs require a semester of student teaching; however, teachers are not required to be exposed to inclusion settings. Teachers in alternate route programs complete their year of internship as in-service teachers placing them directly in the classroom with no prior teaching experience. By allowing access to inclusion classrooms while pre-service teachers are in preparation programs, exposes them to the setting thereby giving opportunities for questions and the development of skills. Access can be through observations, student-teacher placement, or through practicum hours.

Another implication is for districts and administrators to provide professional development for the inclusion teams that include co-teaching methods, collaboration strategies, instructional strategies, behavior management, and learning disabilities. The professional development provided could increase teacher preparedness and self-efficacy as teachers could become more confident in their abilities to work in inclusion settings. Providing access to college

courses, state-led professional development courses, and promoting out-of-state professional development conferences or webinars could encourage teachers to engage in professional development. Districts and schools could set aside funding earmarked for professional development that would allow teachers to take a college course or participate in conferences.

Requiring teachers to have a mentor for at least three years could also benefit in-service teachers. Participants shared that their teaching abilities and preparedness increased as their experience in the classroom increased. When administrators throw first-year teachers into inclusion classrooms the potential for them to fail is increased. By allowing them to gain experience with support, guidance, and encouragement, they learn skills needed to manage different academic levels, collaboration skills, and classroom management skills.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section discusses the empirical and theoretical implications of the study. Participants' lived experiences supported the extant literature mentioned in the literature review. Their experiences showed that in-service experience promotes a perceived preparedness for inclusion. Their lived experiences further supported self-efficacy theory in that as they perceived increases in self-efficacy, their perceived abilities to teach and levels of preparedness increased.

Empirical Implications

This study described the lived experiences of teacher preparedness to teach in inclusion classrooms by exploring their experiences with co-teaching, collaboration, and instructional practices. Previous research focused on pre-service teacher perceptions regarding inclusion (Ahsan et al., 2013; Allday et al., 2013; Brownell et al., 2005; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Gavish, 2017; Kim & Pratt, 2021; Ricci et al., 2017; Scarparolo & Subban,

2021). Participants in this study corroborated the previous research by sharing experiences of unpreparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms.

School reform created a deficit of teachers due to the increase in schools implementing inclusion environments and demands for increased accountability for students with disabilities to increase academic performance (Mastropieri et al., 2017). While not all schools comply with inclusive education, Esposito et al. (2018) identified the emphasis for increasing inclusive education has been on the setting, not on the quality of instruction or its impact on academic achievement. The deficit created by school reform had led to the creation of emergency or provisional licensures, in which teachers were not fully credentialed or highly qualified (Mastropieri et al., 2017). Participants in this study reflect this as two-fifths, almost half, of the participants are through an alternate certification program.

Previous research revealed implementation of inclusion instruction, strategies, and teaching styles is a necessary part of teaching in inclusion classrooms regardless of training, education, and confidence (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Chu et al., 2020; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). While teachers support inclusion, they reported inadequate training left them unprepared to teach in the environment (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Chu et al., 2020; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Participants reflected upon experiences that helped prepare them for inclusion teaching. The experiences included the ability to preview content and curriculum, pace lessons, collaborate on lesson planning, and prepare before class instructional time.

This study makes an important contribution to extant literature on teacher training. The literature identified areas of pre-service programs needed to ensure successful elementary inclusion environments. These areas are an understanding of the characteristics of disabilities and a basic understanding of the special education process, the ability to differentiate instruction,

provide accommodations and modifications, manage classroom behavior, and collaborate (Allday et al., 2013; Finkelstein et al., 2021). However, the research examined teacher candidates' sense of preparedness for teaching, they reported that teacher candidates felt inadequacy in understanding and ability to differentiate lessons, provide classroom management, accommodate, and modify instruction, and assess students (Cornelius & Nagro, 2014; Livers et al., 2021). The candidates cited large classrooms, ineffective mentors, lack of classroom time and experience, and not enough whole-group instruction (Livers et al., 2021). Participants in this study articulated the same findings as the previous research. They expressed inadequate training from their pre-service training programs in the form of courses provided as well as field experiences. This led to ineffectual planning, collaboration, instruction, and low confidence levels. They voiced increased abilities in inclusion teaching as they taught in the classroom. As student outcomes were positive, their confidence increased in their teaching abilities. The implications for improved teacher training and field experiences show great benefit for teacher preparation.

Co-teaching is a difficult concept to comply with and implement (King-Sears & Jenkins, 2020). Previous literature showed that pre-service teachers seldom receive field experience in co-teaching skills in teacher preparation programs (Kim & Pratt, 2021). Teacher preparation programs for general education teachers focus on pedagogy and content knowledge, whereas special education programs focus on disabilities, special education law and documentation, behavior management, and collaboration (Kim & Pratt, 2021; Livers et al., 2021). The co-teaching models require the general and special education teachers to work collaboratively, providing instruction, accommodations, and assessments for all students in the inclusion classroom (Kim & Pratt, 2021). When the teacher preparation programs have yet to train the

teachers to perform in the classroom adequately, the teachers are at a disadvantage. Special education teachers must have a favorable view of inclusion to be effective (Stites et al., 2018; Zagona et al., 2017). Participants expressed the difficulties associated with implementing co-teaching as well as their experiences in successful co-teaching implementation. Participants found that as they taught and collaborated with efficient co-teachers, they improved their abilities to implement co-teaching strategies. Participants spoke of relationships as being an important determinant in successful co-teaching.

Previous research points to the importance of collaboration. Not only has the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) listed it as a high-leverage practice, but IDEA (2004) also requires that special education teachers collaborate with general education teachers, related service providers, paraprofessionals, IEP team members, and parents (McLeskey et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al., 2015). In addition, the CEC identified collaboration as the practice of jointly working with professionals to increase the success of students with disabilities, organizing and conducting meetings with professionals and families, and working with families to support student learning (Anastasiou & Hajisoteriou, 2022; McLeskey et al., 2019; Pellegrino et al., 2015). While these factors promote effectiveness, they need to be consistently implemented. Stites et al. (2018) found that general education teachers often reported feeling unprepared to support students with various special needs. While the assumption is that special education teachers will service and support the students, this is only sometimes the case (Stites et al., 2018). Research shows that general and special education teachers rarely engage in joint planning for curricular modifications (Stites et al., 2018). Participants in this study voiced positive experiences with collaboration. They identified successful experiences of collaboration in lesson planning, developing student routines, implementation of behavioral supports, and instructional practices.

While these experiences diverged from extant literature, participants did corroborate previous literature in reflections of preparedness for collaboration. Participants reported influences such as sports activities, previous careers, or trial and error as the experiences that most prepared them for collaboration.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework for the study was Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory. The theory suggests people are contributors to their life circumstances. He pointed out we are proactive and self-reflecting individuals acting intentionally on our beliefs (Bandura, 2001). Self-efficacy plays an important part in what we do and how well we do it. As Bandura suggested the four sources of self-efficacy as mastery experiences, affective states, vicarious experiences, and social persuasion, teachers experience these four sources through student outcomes, stress levels and mood, observations, and constructive feedback (Brown et al., 2021; Goddard et al., 2004). The implications for self-efficacy are beneficial to both teachers and students. The findings of this study supported teacher self-efficacy as they contribute to their work circumstances.

Participants articulated positive student outcomes increased their self-efficacy, which supports Bandura's source of mastery experience. They noted that as their belief in their abilities increased so did student outcomes and vice versa. Noah stated that his self-efficacy has improved through navigating challenging situations with students and seeing the students succeed in their goals.

Participants shared experiences of self-reflection and took proactive measures regarding their lack of preparedness to teach in inclusion classrooms, which supports Bandura's source of affective states. Half of the participants said they had taken professional development courses to increase their effectiveness and abilities within the inclusion classroom. Olivia reflected on times

in which she has questioned her ability to teach in an inclusion setting; however, after self-reflection on her skills and abilities, she was able to strengthen her self-efficacy by changing her focus.

Participants discussed their vicarious experiences through their years of experience in in-service teaching. All the participants shared lived experiences of the need for field experience or spoke positively about mentor experiences. The ability to ask questions, observe skills, and observe other teaching styles helped prepare and shape their self-efficacy. Ava shared that her experiences at different schools as well as the number of years she has taught helped shape her self-efficacy. She could observe and learn from many different administrators and teachers in the field.

Participants solidified social persuasion as a source of self-efficacy, as well. All participants voiced the need for constructive feedback through collaborative teaching, observations from administration, and field experience in pre-service training. Mia said her self-efficacy has improved through the constructive feedback she receives from administrator drop-ins and observations.

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations are the parameters of the study method which describe potential weaknesses found in the research. These parameters were not in the researcher's control. The delimitations are the parameters of the study which set the boundaries and uniqueness. These parameters are set by the researcher based on decisions on what to include or exclude from the study.

Limitations

Qualitative research studies have unique limitations. These limitations are specific to the

design seeking the experiences and perceptions of participants. Not only is the design time a time-consuming process, but data collection also involves personal interaction which can deviate from the main topic of study. Replication of qualitative research is difficult because of the subjectivity of the researcher's primary role in analyzing and interpreting data. Limitations of the study consist of transferability, attrition, quality of responses, and number of participant responses. Transferability is a weakness due to the study limits of elementary-level public schools within a small town on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Furthermore, the study was limited to teachers who have taught or are currently teaching in inclusion classrooms. The number of participant responses and attrition rate were weaknesses of the study. I originally received 13 responses from recruits agreeing to participate in this study; however, only 10 completed the data collection sessions. From a recruiting pool of 70 teachers, 13 responded agreeing to participate with three of the participants eventually withdrawing. The three cited time, work responsibility, and amount of work involved in the study as reasons for not participating or withdrawing. Finally, the quality of responses, specifically on the LEDs, was a weakness due to the allowance of personal experience descriptions being subjective.

Delimitations

Delimitations of the study include research design, the number of participants, the geographical location as well as the teaching grade level of participants, and the classroom setting of participants. I purposefully selected a hermeneutic phenomenological study as I am an inclusion special education teacher exploring the lived experiences of other inclusion teachers. Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest using a small sample size for phenomenological studies; therefore, I limited the number of participants to between 10-15 with a final sample size of 10. To collect data in person, I limited the geographical location to a local school district.

Concerning these purposeful decisions, extant research revealed a need to explore the lived experiences of teacher preparedness for inclusion on the elementary level which resulted in the limitation of participants to the elementary level.

Recommendations for Future Research

Extant research provided information on the preparedness of pre-service teachers to teach in inclusion classrooms. Few studies explore the lived experiences of in-service elementary general and special education teachers' perceptions regarding preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms. The purpose of this study was to explore the preparedness of in-service teachers to teach in inclusion classrooms.

The proposed recommendations are provided to advance future research concerning this study. The limitations of this study present several areas upon which to build. This study only recruited within a public school district that utilizes a co-teaching environment inclusion setting. Further expansion of this study may include recruiting participants from private schools as well as schools in which participants have multiple inclusion classrooms making co-teaching in the inclusion setting difficult. Expansion may include the exploration of secondary-level in-service teachers, as this study only focused on elementary-level in-service teachers.

Another recommendation would be to change the data collection methods to include observations instead of LEDs. This change may give more insight and a better participation rate with less attrition. The researcher would be able to enter the inclusion classroom and observe the participants' lived experiences. Observations eliminate the need for participants to write out their lived experiences.

Another recommendation could be to conduct a quantitative study to analyze what practices work best to prepare teachers for inclusion classrooms. A survey could be used to

determine pre-service courses, professional development, field experience, and mentoring benefits as well as how likely participants would engage in the practices. A different qualitative method could be used to research this study. The use of a case study could analyze one in-service teacher's experience of preparedness for teaching in an inclusion classroom. This could provide rich details about self-efficacy regarding preparedness. A longitudinal study could be conducted, following a pre-service student into service over a period of time. This would allow for the exploration of how experience is garnered and how to best prepare in-service teachers.

Conclusion

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. This study was designed to gather the lived experiences of elementary-level teachers' preparedness for inclusion classroom teaching and give meaning to their perceptions. My personal experience as an inclusion special education teacher was the motivation for this study and led me to frame the study with Bandura's (2006) social cognitive theory. The theory places a focus on self-efficacy in that we use our beliefs to decide how well we can conduct a task or a goal. Self-efficacy was foundational to the central research question and sub-questions established for this study.

Ten participants completed data collection protocols that consisted of interviews, a focus group, and LEDs. Data analysis revealed four themes and after further analysis, three thematic findings developed. Thematic findings were used to develop policy and practical implications, empirical and theoretical implications, and implications for further research.

This study revealed teacher self-efficacy is perceived to elicit positive student outcomes and that an adequately prepared teacher may produce high student outcomes. This study also

suggests classroom experience takes time to develop. Finally, this study revealed a need for effective training which includes actual classroom experience. Pre-service teachers need courses in effective instruction as well as field experience to find success within inclusion settings.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 28, 2023

Julie Brown
Amy Schechter

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-147 A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Inclusion Classrooms

Dear Julie Brown, Amy Schechter,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review. This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants' research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

Category 2. (iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects, and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by S46.1 1 1 (a)(7).

For a PDF of your exemption letter, click on your study number in the My Studies card on your Cayuse dashboard. Next, click the Submissions bar beside the Study Details bar on the Study Details page. Finally, click Initial under Submission Type and choose the Letters tab toward the bottom of the Submission Details page. Your information sheet and final versions of your study documents can also be found on the same page under the Attachments tab.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification

of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix B

Site Approval

July 27, 2023

Julie Brown
Doctoral Candidate Liberty
University
[redacted]

Dear Julie Brown:

After a careful review of your research proposal entitled A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Inclusion Classrooms, I/We have decided to grant you permission to access our faculty email lists/contact our faculty and invite them to participate in your study as well as conduct your study at [redacted]

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

X I/We will provide our faculty email list to Julie Brown and Julie Brown may use the list to contact our faculty to invite them to participate in her research study.

X I/We grant permission for Julie Brown to conduct her study at [redacted]

☐ I/We will not provide potential participant information to Julie Brown, but we agree to send/provide her study information to elementary inclusion teachers on her behalf.

☐ I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

[redacted]

Superintendent
[redacted]

Appendix C

Consent

Title of the Project: A Hermeneutic Phenomenological Study of the Lived Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Inclusion Classrooms
Principal Investigator: Julie E. Brown, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a certified general or special education teacher, have or currently are teaching in an elementary-level inclusion setting, are willing to share your experiences, and are willing to successfully participate and complete participant expectations. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. At this stage in the research, teacher preparedness will be defined as the awareness and understanding of having the necessary training, skills, and resources for teaching in a classroom with special and general education students.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview that will take no more than 1 hour.
2. Participate in an emailed review of the transcribed interview that will take no more than 15 minutes.
3. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded focus group that will take no more than 1 hour.
4. Participate in an emailed review of the transcribed focus group that will take no more than 15 minutes.
5. Participate in an emailed lived experience description writing prompt that will take no more than 1 hour.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include adding to the existing body of knowledge on the aspects of in-service elementary teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms, impacting course development for general and special education preparation programs, and impacting professional development for certified general and special education teachers.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

I am a mandatory reporter. During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect, elder abuse, or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of her doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or [redacted]. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Julie E. Brown. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted] or [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Amy Schechter at [redacted].

Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu.

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Dear Teachers,

I am emailing you to invite you to be part of my research project about inclusion teaching preparedness. The purpose of the research is to understand the lived experiences of elementary teachers' preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms on the Mississippi Gulf Coast. At this stage in the research, teacher preparedness will be defined as the awareness and understanding of having the necessary training, skills, and resources for teaching in a classroom with special and general education students. If you participate in my project, you will participate in an individual interview, a focus group, and complete a writing prompt. It will take you around 3 and a half hours to participate in the research. The research is for the completion of my dissertation with Liberty University. To determine if you qualify for the study, you need to complete the attached participant survey form. If you qualify, I will follow up with you within two weeks of receipt of your participant survey form.

Benefits to society include adding to the existing body of knowledge on the aspects of in-service elementary teacher preparedness for teaching in inclusion classrooms, impacting course development for general and special education preparation programs, and impacting professional development for certified general and special education teachers.

Participation is voluntary, but I hope you will choose to be part of this project!

For more information, contact Julie E. Brown, [redacted] or [redacted].

To participate, complete the participant survey form.

Thanks,

Julie E. Brown

Appendix E

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about your experience teaching in an inclusion classroom. CQ
2. Based on Bandura, teacher self-efficacy has been defined as a teacher's belief in their capabilities to bring the desired student outcomes. What experiences teaching inclusion have shaped your self-efficacy? CQ
3. Please tell me about your educational experience. SQ1
4. What educational experiences prepared you to teach in an inclusion classroom? SQ1
5. What continuing education practices are you doing to prepare you to teach in an inclusion classroom? SQ1
6. Please tell me about your collaboration experience in an inclusive environment. SQ2
7. What experiences prepared you to collaborate with the inclusion team? SQ2
8. What experiences prepared you to co-teach in the inclusion classroom? SQ3

Appendix F

Focus Group Questions

1. Describe a time that you and your co-teacher were prepared to teach in an inclusion classroom environment. CQ
2. Give me a word or short phrase that describes your experience in teaching in an inclusion classroom. CQ
3. What positively impacts your experience in teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms? CQ
4. What negatively impacts your experience in teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms? CQ

Appendix G

Lived Experience Descriptions

The purpose of this writing is for you to describe a specific time you recall an inclusion class for which you felt prepared. You are not asked to interpret how you think teachers should be prepared or to characterize your teaching. Instead, the goal is to think about the specific moment. This moment can be an everyday experience. It does not have to be an innovative experience. Once you have chosen a specific moment to describe, consider the following as you write (adapted from Vagle, 2018).

1. Think about the event chronologically.
2. Describe what you saw, what was said, what you heard, how you felt, and what you thought.
3. Describe the experience as you lived through it.
4. Please assign each person a pseudonym if you use names in your description.

With these suggestions in mind, please write a description in response to the following writing prompt.

Write a description of a specific time you recall an inclusion class for which you felt prepared.

Appendix H

Audit Trail

Date	Task Completed
6/18/2023	Proposal Approved
7/11/2023	Defense Accepted
7//27/2023	Site Permission Received
7/28/2023	IRB Submitted
9/05/2023	IRB Revisions Submitted
9/20/2023	IRB Revisions Submitted
9/28/2023	IRB Approved
10/17/2023	Participant Recruitment Began
11/13/2023	Data Collection Began/set up individual interviews and sent out LEDs
12/13/2023	Data Collection Concluded with focus group
12/22/2023	Member Checking Concluded

Appendix I

Reflexive Journal

Date	Entry
October – December 2022	Being enrolled in EDUC980, my role is to develop my proposal. I chose to complete a phenomenological study of teacher preparedness for inclusion classrooms due to my experience as a special education teacher. I recognize that in choosing this study, there is a potential for bias due to my experiences.
January – June 2023	During EDUC987/988, I worked on completing my proposal. I was able to get it approved and ready for defense. I had brain surgery in January for a tumor removal and began radiation treatments in June which slowed down my progress.
July 2023	EDUC988 brought the successful defense of my proposal. I received site approval and began IRB process.
September 2023	IRB revisions were made, and approval letter was attained.
October 2023	I began recruitment at the elementary schools. Recruitment was slow. It took a month to get 13 responses. I had several potential participants call me to ask about the details of the study before they responded. I was disappointed it took so long to get my participants nailed down.
November 2023	Began data collection. Scheduling was difficult to navigate. Participants wanted to do it during their planning time, which was inconvenient for me. When three participants dropped out, I was very disappointed. I had to be careful during interviews not to lead especially when participants went off-topic or didn't understand the question. I had to remember that the questions were subjective. I was also disappointed with some of the LED responses. Again, I know it is subjective, but I wanted more and got less.
December 2023	During data analysis, I had to make sure I was coding objectively. I had to look at the whole instead of individual statements. I used Delve to help with coding and theme development. The program helped me see patterns and similar statements.
January 2024	I have been working on Chapters Four and Five. I am tired and ready for this to be off my task list.