

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION OF NORTH CAROLINA'S GENERAL PRE-
KINDERGARTEN TEACHERS' ATTITUDES AND PERCEIVED
SELF-EFFICACY TOWARD INCLUSION

by

Susanne Williamson Carter

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 qualitative phenomenological study was to investigate and describe North Carolina's general Pre-Kindergarten teachers' lived experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion. The theories guiding this research study were Bandura's social learning theory and Ajzen's theory of planned behavior. The social learning theory laid the foundation for the importance of positive attitudes and a high sense of self-efficacy toward inclusion. The theory of planned behavior grounded the idea that teachers' attitudes influence their behaviors and actions. Therefore, negative attitudes can cause teachers to be negative towards including special needs children. Ten general NC Pre-K teachers were selected to participate in this study through purposeful sampling. The study took place in two school districts in North Carolina. Data were collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and document artifacts. The data was analyzed and coded into themes. Four major themes emerged from the data: Pre-K teachers define and describe inclusion, the main influences of teacher attitudes towards inclusion, the main influences of perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion, and barriers to successful inclusion. The results from the data showed that NC Pre-K teachers had positive attitudes towards including children with mild and medium special needs but a negative attitude towards including children with severe special needs. The findings also revealed that support, training, and resources were the main influences of negative attitudes, low perceived self-efficacy, and barriers to successful inclusion. The findings from this study can assist those that govern the NC Pre-K program by addressing factors that influence negative teacher attitudes and low self-efficacy toward inclusion among NC Pre-K teachers.

Keywords: general teachers, early childhood education, Pre-Kindergarten, attitudes, perceived self-efficacy, barriers, inclusion

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, for I have accomplished this journey by His grace and mercy. To my parents, Rev. Rocky Ray Williamson and Velvet C. Williamson, who instilled in me at an early age the importance of salvation, family, community, and education, along with good morals and values. To the memory of my brother William J. Williamson, who was a hard worker and vision seeker. His life was taken shortly after he began fulfilling his vision of owning his own small business. He went home to be with Jesus without achieving all the dreams he hoped for. When I started this journey, he was alive; he supported and encouraged me with the decision to further my education. Halfway through this journey, his life was taken; the memories he left me fueled my drive to finish this journey so that he could look down from heaven and smile.

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List of Abbreviations

Early Childhood Education (ECE)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Least Restrict Environment (LRE)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

North Carolina (NC)

Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K)

Social Learning Theory (SLT)

Special Needs Children (SNC)

Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

This study investigated the lived experiences of North Carolina's (NC) general Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) teachers concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy when including special needs children (SNC) in their regular classes. This introduction chapter provides a background on inclusion and NC Pre-K. Additionally, it discusses the historical, social, and theoretical context regarding general teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusive practices. The problem that this study addresses is revealing the factors that influence the types of attitudes (negative or positive) and perceived self-efficacy (low or high) that general Pre-K teachers have towards including SNC in their classes and the barriers that impede teachers' success at inclusion. This study aimed to investigate and describe the attitudes and self-efficacy that NC Pre-K teachers experience when special needs children are included in their regular classes. This study adds to the literature on teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. It helps narrow the gap in the research on the population of NC Pre-K teachers.

Background

Today, classrooms with only typical learning students are almost extinct within most education systems. Inclusive classes have replaced most general classrooms as most special needs students are now included in classes with their regular learning or non-special needs peers. Schwab et al. (2018) defined inclusive education as "a process of high-quality implementation of aspects that are important for the psycho-emotional and academic development of students with and without special education needs" (p. 32). Education and intervention during children's early years are vital components to improving long-term educational outcomes. According to Bakken et al. (2017), education and intervention implemented during a child's early years have

significant positive benefits, including increased educational outcomes that can be tracked well into adulthood. The push to expand early education and intervention to increase educational outcomes has increased the number of slots allotted for most public-funded Pre-K programs. According to Friedman-Krauss et al. (2023), North Carolina enrolled 23,679 children in its state-funded Pre-K program during the 2021-2022, a 3,742 enrollment increase from the 2020-2021 school year. Of the 23,679 students enrolled in NC Pre-K, 9,082 are considered to have special needs (Friedman-Krauss et al., 2023). The rise in Pre-K allotted slots has increased the number of children with identified and suspected special needs being placed in regular Pre-K classrooms, requiring NC Pre-K teachers to be educators of inclusive classrooms.

Inclusion in America is a by-product of sanctions and laws prohibiting discrimination; its roots are grounded in the equal rights outlined in the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. The aspect of inclusion is becoming more transparent in educational settings; the reason is that more literature now supports and upholds the philosophy of inclusion to include special needs students with regular students (Buchner et al., 2021; see also Ainscow, 2020; Cole et al., 2022; Wehmeyer et al., 2021). The practice of inclusion continues to evolve in the early childhood education sector. Teachers of young children have vital roles as they are critical stakeholders in teaching students who are typical and atypical learners. Although inclusion is not mandated, the philosophy it represents has added pressure from supporters and advocates that it be embraced in our educational settings. Next to parents, teachers play a vital role in shaping children's personalities, learning, development of skills, and educational outcomes. Teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy in their teaching abilities set the tone for student learning. According to Charitaki et al. (2022), teachers with special needs children in their classrooms are the main characters who can implement inclusive policies and shape the educational experiences

of students with special needs. As the gatekeeper of successful inclusion, teachers' attitudes towards including and teaching special needs students are pivotal to the success of an inclusive class (Saloviita, 2020). Teachers with low self-efficacy and negative attitudes toward their teaching abilities decrease their pupils' self-esteem, social interactions, and educational outcomes (Agir, 2019; Marroquin, 2018; Pit-ten Cate et al., 2018). According to Gizem (2020) and Miller et al. (2017), teachers with positive attitudes toward their teaching abilities and their students yield higher student educational outcomes and success.

Historical Context

Inclusive education has been steadily evolving in America for nearly 60 years as the abolishment of school segregation unlocked the door for all students to receive an equal education. The inclusion of children with disabilities in regular classrooms is the result of several landmarked law cases such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act (2004), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002), and its reauthorization Every Student Succeeds Act (2015). The push for early intervention and early education exploded during the onset of the NCLB and has been steadily growing. Recent data from the National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) (2019) reported that one in five young children has a special need that is not officially or formally identified. "When these children receive the right interventions and informal support, many can succeed in general education. Without enough support, however, children with unidentified disabilities may not reach their full potential and risk falling behind" (NCLD, 2019, p. 3). The term disability is interpreted differently among societies, ethnicities, cultures, and various other demographics (The World Health Organization, (WHO) (2012). According to the WHO (2012), the differences among the different interpretations of the term disability are a significant factor as to why "many

children with disabilities may neither be identified nor receive needed services" (p. 8). Most existing literature on teachers' attitudes towards inclusion have been conducted among regular teachers in public schools who taught kindergarten through 12th grade (Lindner et al., 2023; see also Alfaro et al., 2015; Gaines et al., 2017); the same is true concerning teacher attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusions (Mngo & Mngo, 2018).

Regarding teachers' perceptions of inclusion within early childhood settings, research conducted in settings such as Head Start centers and other childcare settings is available (Alexander et al., 2016; Lee et al., 2015; Yu, 2019). However, to date, little to no data exists concerning the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion among general Pre-K teachers within the public-school sector. The increasing enrollment of identified special needs children (SNC) and children with hidden special needs in general Pre-K teachers' regular public Pre-K classrooms is the backdrop for this study.

Social Context

Research has uncovered that teachers' beliefs and attitudes towards inclusion and SNC affect the success of an inclusive class and SNC outcomes (Schmidt & Vrhovnik, 2015). According to Tiwari et al. (2015), teachers are essential people who organize and execute practices to serve students with and without disabilities in the same educational settings. Educators who teach young children, such as Pre-K teachers, are seen as the most influential teachers because they are usually children's first official academic educators. They shape the foundation for students' life-long learning. An article by Hudson (2017) explains that teachers of preschool-aged children play a vital role in constructing young children's success during their first school years. Preschool teachers "provide structure and help children grow in their reading and writing skills, teach science and help children understand themselves" (Hudson, 2017, p. 1).

In state-funded preschool programs like NC Pre-K, typical learning children and children diagnosed with various special needs (such as autism, speech and language deficiencies, and developmental delays) are placed in regular Pre-K classrooms. At the same time, children diagnosed with more severe special needs (such as complete blindness, deafness, muteness, and other severe disabilities) are usually placed in Exceptional Children's (EC) Pre-K classrooms. However, some children placed in regular NC Pre-K classes may have a special need that has not been officially documented or have severe special needs and are placed in the general class per parent request. In a report by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2013), identifying a young child with a potential special need requires an early childhood teacher or professional to have a high degree of competence in identifying early learning and development patterns of typical and atypical children regarding the five domains of learning. It can take an entire academic school year for a Pre-K child with a suspected special need to be identified, referred, and officially documented.

Since a Pre-K teacher is usually a child's first official educator, it is essential to understand their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards including SNC in their regular classroom. As stated by Campbell (2015), "Preschool teachers contribute more to society than most other professions" (p. 1). Preschool teachers prepare students' minds for learning while building character and instilling good values (elements that help build good members of society) (Campbell, 2015). Mixing identified SNC and children with hidden special needs in a regular class with typical learners can affect general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Therefore, this study helps society to understand NC Pre-K teachers' lived experiences teaching SNC regarding their attitudes, perceived self-efficacy, and barriers that impede their success as inclusive teachers and the factors that influence them.

Theoretical Context

Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB) were used to examine the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy that general Pre-K teachers in NC have experienced while having SNC included in their classrooms. Bandura's (1977) SLT served two purposes in this study. First, it grounded the study by examining the participants' (NC Pre-K teachers) attitudes and actions regarding their social interactions, experiences, and observations of SNC in their classes. Likewise, the theory formulated the critical role that NC Pre-K teachers' social interactions (attitudes), experiences (inclusive teaching), and modeling (self-efficacy) played in their success as inclusive teachers, which impacted the outcomes of special needs children in their classes. According to Bandura (1977), the SLT explains that imitation and modeling are essential tools for social learning. The SLT dictates that observational learning occurs when the four fundamental concepts, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, are mediated by observation (Bandura, 1977). The theory also explains that learning through observation, imitation, and modeling is shaped by reinforcement factors. Bandura (1977) concludes that individuals such as teachers have a more substantial influence than a peer, sibling, or parent; "those who have high status, prestige, and power are much more effective in evoking matching behavior in observers than models of low standing" (p. 18).

Another critical component of Bandura's (1977) SLT that formed the foundation of this study was his theory of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the general belief one has in one's self-abilities to achieve various tasks and challenges; it is thought to be the building blocks of people's thought processes, how they feel and act, and how they are motivated; individuals' thoughts, feelings, internal motivation, and actions. In layperson's terms, self-efficacy is an

individual's belief in their ability to accomplish or carry out a particular task. Teaching typical Pre-K-aged and Pre-K-aged children with special needs are challenging jobs for a general Pre-K teacher, requiring them to encompass a high degree of self-efficacy in their ability to carry out their duties successfully. Teacher self-efficacy, according to Barni (2019), is “a teacher’s belief in their ability to effectively handle the tasks, obligations, and challenges related to their professional activity” (p. 1). A teacher’s perception of their ability to execute instruction that is effective for students is the aim of teacher self-efficacy, according to Aldridge and Fraser (2015). A plethora of research exists on teacher self-efficacy and the effect it has on student learning, which shows that teachers who feel competent in their abilities because of their education and professional development have a higher sense of self-efficacy than teachers who do not feel competent in their abilities (Klassen et al., 2011; Yada et al., 2022).

Problem Statement

The problem this study addressed was revealing factors that influenced attitudes (negative or positive) and perceived self-efficacy (low or high) that general Pre-K teachers had towards including SNC in their classes and the barriers that impeded successful inclusion. Upon using several search engines such as Google Scholar, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine (BASE), ResearchGate, Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC), ProQuest, and SAGE Journals, the keywords teachers, Pre-Kindergarten, early childhood, attitudes, beliefs, perceptions, self-efficacy, and inclusion, in the date range of 2000-2023, little to no literature surfaced on NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion. According to the work of Lee et al. (2015), "it is critical to understand teachers' acceptance of inclusion so that effective practices for promoting inclusion are elucidated" (p. 85). A recent study on early childhood teachers’ beliefs and self-efficacy towards inclusion by You et al. (2020) found that

teachers' positive beliefs concerning inclusive education are significantly related to their self-efficacy in teaching. Likewise, researchers Yada et al. (2022) conducted a meta-analysis review examining the literature on the relationship between teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in inclusion. They concluded that teachers' self-efficacy concerning inclusion correlates with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

Today's public Pre-K programs enroll children who are considered "at-risk." According to Zablotsky et al. (2019), at-risk children have a higher probability of having developmental delays. Children with developmental delays are placed under the umbrella of special needs children. The increased probability of enrolling special needs children in regular Pre-K classrooms has increased the demand for general teachers to be inclusive. For general Pre-K teachers to be successful and effective in inclusion, these teachers need to hold positive attitudes and teaching abilities towards inclusive practices. The literature indicates that teachers' attitudes and practices are critical for shaping students' learning environment, motivation, and outcomes (Khan, 2020). Teachers who possess positive attitudes regarding inclusion are more likely to implement inclusive practices in their classrooms that will encourage successful and effective inclusion (Priyadarshini & Thangarajathi, 2016; Vogiatzi et al., 2021; Vogiatzi et al., 2022). Therefore, it was vital to investigate general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. This research could reveal factors that influence teachers' positive and negative attitudes, level of perceived self-efficacy, and barriers to successful inclusive practices regarding teaching SNC with typical learners.

Purpose Statement

This transcendental phenomenological study investigated and understood the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy that general Pre-K teachers in North Carolina's public school settings

had towards inclusion and the barriers that impeded their success as inclusive teachers. In this study, teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were defined as their emotional and behavioral responses toward the inclusion of special needs children enrolled in their classes (Cherry, 2020). The literature showed that teachers who held positive and open attitudes toward creating an inclusive environment for all students placed in their class, regardless of their particular needs, demonstrated higher success in implementing inclusive practices (Avramidis et al., 2000). A study by Yada et al. (2018) concluded that teachers with a strong belief in their ability to implement successful inclusive practices in their classrooms hold more positive attitudes toward inclusion. In this study, teachers perceived self-efficacy was their perception of their knowledge, skills, and ability to implement inclusive practices. The theories guiding this study were Albert Bandura's (1977) SLT and Ajzen's (1991) TPB. Bandura's (1977) SLT, which included the theory of self-efficacy, explained individuals' social interactions and how they perceived their abilities affected their responses, such as their attitudes. Ajzen's (1991) TPB concluded that an individual's actions were a product of their intention, which was shaped by their attitudes towards behaviors, subjective norms, social norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The SLT and TPB were joined to form the theoretical framework for this study; teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy concerning inclusion impact teachers' interactions and practices to teach and include children with special needs, which affected the success of inclusion within regular Pre-K classrooms.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that there is currently little to no research on the population of regular public-school Pre-K teachers in North Carolina regarding their attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. Researching academic journal articles from the last 20 years

using many popular search engines and keywords related to the topic returned little information on the population used in this study. Regular Pre-K teachers in North Carolina teach atypical and typical learning students within the four walls of one classroom. The following section will detail the study's empirical, practical, and theoretical significance.

Empirical Significance

It is vital to fill the literature gap on regular NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. North Carolina's Pre-K program is growing, and more special needs children are placed in regular Pre-K classrooms. It is essential to know what type of attitudes and the level of perceived self-efficacy general NC Pre-K teachers feel they hold because teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy impact their inclusive practices and ability to teach children with special needs successfully. Recent studies by Ozokcu (2019) and Savolainen et al. (2020) concluded that teachers' self-efficacy is a vital predictor of their attitudes toward inclusion. Ozokcu (2019) also noted a significant positive relationship between teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy for inclusive practices. According to Lee et al. (2015), "Successful implementation of effective inclusion very much depends on the attitudes of educationalists, and the critical agent for successful inclusion is undoubtedly the teachers" (p. 85). Most research that has been conducted concludes that preschool teachers have an overall mild acceptance of special needs children; However, the child's type of special need influences the degree or level of acceptance the teacher asserts (Lee et al., 2015).

Practical Significance

The information gained from this study could assist the NC Pre-K program and the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) in understanding Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. Understanding teachers' perceived self-efficacy

concerning inclusive practices and their attitudes towards inclusion could reveal factors that influence negative attitudes and affect teachers' beliefs in their abilities to carry out successful inclusive practices. Addressing factors that cause negative attitudes and negatively affect teachers' self-efficacy towards inclusion can improve how NC Pre-K teachers view and carry out inclusion. A recent review of the literature from 2002 to 2018 on teacher attitudes toward inclusion conducted by Kim Jenson (2018) suggested that "continuous research in this field will advocate for the essential component in implementing successful inclusive practices, the classroom teacher" (p. 24). This study could help to improve the NC Pre-K program and move early education forward in North Carolina. The data gathered from this qualitative research study could be utilized, measured, and compared among Pre-K teachers at the local, state, national, and international levels. It is vital to fill this literature gap because general NC Pre-K teachers constantly receive children with identified and suspected special needs enrolled in their general classes.

Theoretical Significance

Numerous research studies about early childhood teachers' attitudes toward inclusion have been conducted among various early childhood settings such as Head Start, private and public daycare facilities, and private preschool settings across America and other nations (Yu, 2019; Mngo & Mngo, 2018; Alexander et al., 2016). A plethora of literature existed on regular public school teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. However, most literature did not include Pre-K teachers (Ewing et al., 2018). In 2018, Jenson completed a literature synthesis concerning regular teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, including studies from various countries, cultures, religions, and educational backgrounds. A summary by Jenson (2018) concluded that teachers' attitudes towards accepting inclusion are influenced by the following general global factors: age,

gender, grade level taught, training, efficacy in teaching practices, and experience teaching students with disabilities. While similar to other studies on teacher attitudes and abilities towards inclusion, this research will add information regarding the population of general NC Pre-K while updating the research on teachers' attitudes and perceived self-competence towards inclusion. This study will reveal whether this population shares the same common influencing factors regarding attitudes and self-efficacy toward including SNC as indicated in prior studies (Ismailos et al., 2022; Saloviita, 2020; Wray et al., 2022; see also Amr et al., 2016; Cwirynkalo et al., 2017; Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Priyadarshini & Thangarajathi, 2016; Sandhu, 2017; Vaz et al., 2015).

This study could also aid modern research by revealing factors influencing NC Pre-K teachers' inclusive attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion among regular classroom teachers. This study could narrow the early childhood education literature gap on public Pre-Kindergarten teachers' inclusive attitudes and perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion in regular classrooms. The level of self-efficacy that the teachers from this study stated they had could affect their attitudes and abilities to include and effectively teach Pre-K children with special needs in the general classroom.

Research Questions

This qualitative phenomenological study explored and described general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion and the barriers that impeded their success as inclusive teachers. The research questions for this study were derived from examining general Pre-K teachers' lived experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting in North Carolina

public schools. The following central research question (RQ) and three sub-questions (SQs) will guide the investigation of the proposed study:

Central Research Question

How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators?

This question sought to understand the type of attitudes (positive or negative) general Pre-K teachers had when special needs children were placed in their classrooms, how teachers viewed their abilities to teach these students, and the barriers that deterred them from being successful inclusive teachers. Authors Lee et al. (2015) insist that preschool teachers' attitudes toward inclusion be studied because most literature is based on teachers who teach kindergarten through high school. More recently, Jenson (2018) examined the literature on teachers' attitudes concerning inclusion and concluded that ongoing research on this topic is necessary because it can assist with helping teachers be more successful at inclusion. Ajzen's (1991) TPB details attitudes as a critical predictor of behavior. The TPB was a lens by which we examined factors that influenced teacher attitude and affected behavior (Hellmich et al., 2019; see also MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Young et al., 2017). Bandura's (1977) SLT and self-efficacy was the microscope that helped investigate and reveal how teachers perceived their skills concerning teaching SNC in their regular classes.

Sub-Question One

What attitudes do general Pre-K teachers hold towards teaching children with mild, medium, and severe special needs in an inclusive setting within public schools in North Carolina?

Increasing our knowledge base concerning general education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion will help ensure that students with disabilities, general education students, and teachers are successful within inclusive classrooms (Parey, 2019; Yaraya et al., 2018). According to Adewumi and Mosito (2019), positive attitudes from teachers are vital for the success of special needs students when placed in general classrooms. Examining this question revealed general Pre-K teachers' attitudes towards children with special needs. If negative attitudes would have been revealed, this research could be used to prove that the issue needs to be addressed.

Sub-Question Two

What are general Pre-K teachers perceived self-efficacy of inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina?

This question aimed to understand how general Pre-K teachers viewed their beliefs in their capabilities to conduct the correct skills to execute successful inclusive practices when teaching special needs children in a setting with regular children. Studies on early childhood teachers' perceptions of self-efficacy in inclusive practices have been conducted in various nations (You et al., 2019; see also Klassen et al., 2011; Miller et al., 2017). Investigating this question increased the validity of the existing information as more early childhood teachers shared their experiences of perceiving their abilities in teaching SNC. This question also compared the participants of this grade level with literature on similar participants and those who taught higher grade levels.

Sub-Question Three

What do general Pre-K teachers voice as the main barriers (if any) that prohibit them from being highly successful inclusive teachers within Pre-K classes in the public school settings of North Carolina?

This question investigated general Pre-K teachers' lived experiences of teaching SNC in an inclusive setting to reveal challenges that hindered them from carrying out successful inclusion while teaching SNC in a general class. Literature notes that general teachers' voice challenges to inclusion as a result of their training and knowledge of inclusion (Bemiller, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017). A study conducted by Hannas and Bahdanovich Hanssen (2016) concluded that general preschool teachers had a lower inclusion competency than special education preschool teachers because special education teachers engaged in coursework centered around special education, whereas general teachers did not. The literature concluded that a lack of preparedness in inclusion during initial teacher education, a lack of inclusion training, and a lack of inclusive supports and resources were among the top barriers that kept regular teachers from being successful inclusion teachers (Suprivanto, 2019; see also Symeonidou, 2017; Pantic & Florian, 2015; Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014). However, many prior studies on barriers to successful inclusion had been conducted on teachers who taught students in grades higher than Pre-K (Hassanein et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2018; Woodcock & Wolfson, 2019), which gave justification for the need to investigate this question.

Definitions

1. *Inclusive education* was the educational accommodations that integrated non-disabled, disabled, and those with special education needs learning together in classes, schools, and universities (The Alliance for Inclusive Education, 2021).
2. *Pre-Kindergarten* was a structured classroom setting for children around four who would begin kindergarten the following school year (Learn and Grow Academy, 2019).
3. A *general/regular classroom* was a setting within the school where most students were considered typical learners and did not have special needs (students who did not have a

504 Plan or Individualized Education Plan) (Haynal, 2016).

4. *A general/regular teacher* was a teacher who had obtained at least a four-year undergraduate degree in either birth through kindergarten, elementary, middle, or high school education and was certified by their state with a license to teach (Cameron, 2014).
5. *Typical/regular students* were children who developed and mastered social, cognitive, physical, and language skills within their age's normal and predictive range (Brooks, 2020).
6. *Atypical/special needs students* were children who lagged or failed to thrive in developing social, cognitive, physical, or language skills within the standard and predictive developmental range of peers their age (Brooks, 2020).
7. *Attitudes*- An attitude was an individual's emotional and behavioral responses towards people, places, or things (Cherry, 2020).
8. *Least restrictive environment (LRE)* was a term outlined by Statute IB612a5, which dictated that children with special needs had the right to be educated, whether in public or private settings, alongside their regular peers, by the most significant means possible (US Department of Education, 2017).
9. *Self-efficacy* was defined by Bandura (1977) as an individual's belief in their capabilities to meet or obtain needed results.

Summary

Children with identified and hidden special needs are steadily enrolling in public-funded Pre-K programs across North Carolina. These diagnosed and undiagnosed children with special needs are being placed in regular Pre-K classrooms where regular Pre-K teachers are responsible for teaching them. Investigating regular NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy

toward inclusion will be a significant step toward filling the literature gap due to the current absence of data regarding the population of regular Pre-K teachers in North Carolina public Pre-K classrooms. The data collected in this study could bring to the surface factors that positively and negatively influence NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-competence towards inclusion. This study's results could assist early childhood education and NC's Pre-K program in addressing barriers hindering general teachers from successfully implementing inclusion. Addressing teachers' barriers to successful inclusion may improve teachers perceived self-efficacy and change their attitudes to be more favorable toward including SNC in regular classes.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter consists of three main sections. The first section is the theoretical framework. It explains the two theories that guided this study: Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT), including self-efficacy, and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB). The second section discusses the literature related to this study's phenomenon. The related literature will begin with a historical background of inclusion, a brief history of NC Pre-K, and the ideas that constitute a high-quality early learning environment to create a general understanding of the setting for the topic. The related literature will also cover information on teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion while highlighting the main influences of attitudes and self-efficacy. Barriers that teachers identify as impeding them from being successful inclusive teachers will finish up the related literature section. The theoretical framework and related literature form the foundation for this phenomenological study on general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. The chapter will conclude with a summary reiterating the highlights extracted from the literature concerning teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion and the barriers that impede teachers from being successful at inclusion. Additionally, the conclusion will argue why this study on North Carolina's general Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion is necessary to fill the gap in the existing literature.

Theoretical Framework

General Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) teachers in North Carolina are entrusted to teach typical and atypical children within the same four walls. Although most children enrolled in general Pre-K public classrooms are typical learners, the atypical learners change the dynamics

of the regular class into an inclusive one. General Pre-K, teachers of these classrooms, are the main contributors responsible for the implementation of inclusive education; therefore, their positive attitudes toward inclusion are crucial to constructing a successful inclusive educational system (Avramidis & Toulia, 2020; see also Moberg et al., 2019; Schwab, 2018). Inclusion classrooms challenge regular education teachers because students with various educational and developmental aspects, from typical developing learners to atypical learners with severe or profound needs or disabilities, are integrated into the same class (Ramos, 2022). Teaching young children with documented special needs along with typical learners presents a challenge to most general education teachers; Including children with "hidden" special needs into the equation becomes an overwhelming task. Mwangi (2015) states, "Children with hidden disabilities may include those with intellectual disabilities and mental health problems but may also include children with unidentified disabilities such as hearing loss" (p. 4-5). According to Ball and Green (2014), meeting the needs of students with special needs is challenging for general teachers because they require more one-on-one time or modified instruction to learn successfully. Pre-K teachers have unique circumstances regarding teaching young children compared to their colleagues who teach higher grades. Pre-K teachers are usually a child's first academic teachers within a structured environment. This study focused on regular NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion.

To investigate and understand the phenomena of general North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion, I selected the following theories to ground the study: Bandura's (1977) SLT and Ajzen's (1991) TPB. Theories utilized in quantitative research designs are tested and measured (James, n.d.). In quantitative research, theories are stated prior to the study and explicitly stated so they can be tested.

However, theories utilized in qualitative studies are usually tentative because they evolve with the study. According to Saldana and Omasta (2018), theories in qualitative studies serve one of four purposes: "predicts and controls action through an if-then logic, accounts for variation, explains how and why something happens through causation, and provides insights for improving social life" (p. 257). A theory in qualitative studies clarifies research into a statement about "social life that holds transferable applications to other settings, context, populations, and possibly periods" (Saldana & Omasta, 2018, p. 257). This study utilizes a qualitative design, and many scholars have different perspectives on using theoretical frameworks in these designs (Anfara & Mertz, 2015). Collins and Stockton (2018) argue that a theoretical framework utilized in qualitative research serves as a guide.

The theoretical framework for this study utilized Bandura's (1977) SLT because it outlined the impact of social interactions and environments in formulating general Pre-K teachers' attitudes and abilities towards inclusion. In retrospect, the SLT played a vital role in revealing how general Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy were reflected in their social interactions, which could impact outcomes of special needs children in their classes. Ajzen's (1991) TPB outlined how teachers' attitudes influence behavior. The SLT and TPB were used to reveal and describe NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. The selected theories also assisted in understanding the impact that general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy had on special needs children's learning and outcomes in their classrooms.

Social Learning Theory

This study examined and revealed general NC Pre-K teachers' lived experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when special needs

children are placed in their classrooms. The SLT attributes humans' learning and social processes to their interactions with other humans' intelligence within their society or culture. Bandura (1977) noted that social constructs formulate people's social capabilities to interact and work with others. Therefore, an individual's social interactions with others in their environment help develop their knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and views of reality. Pre-K teachers' attitude towards inclusion affects their behaviors (inclusive practices), impacting how special needs children learn and progress within their classrooms. Authors Yada et al. (2022) conclude that teachers' self-efficacy and attitudes impact their behavior. Ajzen (2012) and Sharma and Jacobs (2016) state that teachers' behavior refers to their inclusive practices. Therefore, teachers' behaviors can impact the learning experiences of special needs students within a school environment (van Steen & Wilson, 2020).

In Pre-K, teaching and learning are mainly done through social interactions between the teacher and the students. Therefore, teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion can influence how they interact socially with their students and implement and carry out their practices. Bandura (1977) added to prior behavior theories of learning (which proposed that learning resulted from conditioning, reinforcement, and punishment through direct interaction) by proving that learning also occurs by observing others' live, verbal, and symbolic behaviors. The social learning theory asserts that observational learning occurs when the four main factors, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation, are mediated by observation (Bandura, 1977). Therefore, in a Pre-Kindergarten classroom, teachers must know appropriate modeling skills for all students, especially children with special needs.

Within Bandura's (1977) SLT, he discussed the concept of self-efficacy. Bandura (1977) noted that an individual's self-efficacy beliefs were defined by their capabilities to meet specific

demands and challenges to succeed. Teachers are viewed as the main facilitators of learning in the classroom, and students' success is attributed to the teacher's teaching practices. However, studies show that some teachers express feelings of not being equipped or prepared to lead an inclusive class due to factors such as implementing new rigorous standards, inadequate training in teaching students with special needs, and teacher efficacy in working with special needs students (Ewing et al., 2018; Marin, 2014; Vaz et al., 2015). Studies also concluded that teachers indicated feelings of being unprepared to support students with special needs because they lack training, resources, and support (Mitchell, 2019; see also Alexander et al., 2016; Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017; Bryant & Ewing, 2018; Woodcock & Hardy, 2017). According to the literature, equipping teachers with inclusiveness begins with improving their attitudes (Boyle et al., 2020) and self-efficacy (Savolainen et al., 2020). According to Hosford and O'Sullivan (2016), teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and practices are shaped by their level of self-efficacy. The following sections will detail how Bandura's (1977) social learning theory anchors this study by explaining its components of social observation and reinforcements and expounding on the theory's additive of self-efficacy.

Learning through Social Observations and Reinforcements

SLT explains that imitation and modeling are tools for social learning. The theory also explains that learning can occur through observation, imitation, modeling, and behavior reinforcement. Bandura (1977) proposed that individuals learn by observing others' learning and knowledge. General NC Pre-K teachers must have positive attitudes and a high degree of inclusion self-efficacy to foster and carry out effective inclusive practices. When applied to the SLT, the development of cognitive skills and learning for typical and atypical students can be explained since inclusion consists of social interactions among the teacher and students in an

inclusive class. According to Lucas and Frazier (2014), social interactions within a classroom allow for the development of cognitive skills and learning to take place. When teachers model positive attitudes and exhibit the appropriate skills and behaviors for SNC, these students can learn these skills, behaviors, and attitudes by observing them. Therefore, teachers need to have positive attitudes towards inclusion because their attitudes influence their social interactions and teaching practices needed to have a successful inclusive class.

When needed, general Pre-K teachers can improve their attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion by observing others who are educated, trained, and experienced in inclusion and special education. Likewise, special needs children in general Pre-Kindergarten teachers' classes can learn and progress if their teachers are knowledgeable and can model adequate inclusive practices that will benefit them in the regular classrooms. These social observations can be learned by observing, imitating, and modeling other capable individuals (Bandura, 1977). Additionally, Bandura (1977) proved that behavior reinforcement could change an individual's learning. Positive and negative reinforcements assist with keeping, modifying, and disregarding behaviors. Regarding teachers' attitudes towards inclusion, the theory would imply that to increase positive attitudes towards inclusion; teachers would require positive reinforcement to assist them in being more accepting of special needs children. Reinforcements can come in the form of support and training to help teachers increase and retain positive attitudes.

A recent document by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) (2021) notes that the program Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS) suggests schools can employ its strategies to "effectively teach, encourage, and reinforce pro-social behavior" (p.1). These strategies can be beneficial to both teachers and students. The agency further notes that positive reinforcement builds a positive school climate by engaging teachers to meet students' needs through teamwork

and goal setting (TEA, 2021). Positive reinforcement to increase positive attitudes towards children with special needs could be the intrinsic reward that a teacher receives when they see the progress a child with special needs is making in their class. On the other hand, positive reinforcement could be an extrinsic reward. For example, when a school recognizes the progress that special needs students make in a teacher's class, the teacher receives the extrinsic compensation of being recognized.

Bandura's Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is intertwined with Bandura's (1977) SLT. Bandura (1977, 1986) asserts that self-efficacy is an individual's view of their capabilities to motivate and accomplish their desired results. Self-efficacy is documented as a psychosocial, behavioral mechanism; it is defined by the type of experiences, level of mastery, and physiological responses to those experiences (Bandura, 1977). It is the foundation of individuals' thoughts, feelings, internal motivation, and actions. Bandura (1977) concludes that the higher one's sense of self-efficacy, the higher the individual's accomplishments and well-being. Since the formation of Bandura's (1977) social learning theory and self-efficacy, many studies have been conducted that prove teachers' self-efficacy affects their student outcomes. Recent studies aimed at teachers' self-efficacy and inclusion practices indicate that teachers with a high degree of self-efficacy yield higher successes in inclusion practices than teachers with low self-efficacy (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2016; You et al., 2019). According to Mishra and Koehler (2006), teaching is "a highly complex activity that draws on many kinds of knowledge" (p. 1020). Therefore, teachers with a high sense of self-efficacy in their teaching ability encompass the knowledge needed to act. Regular teachers who accommodate special needs children in their class need high self-efficacy to succeed effectively in inclusion.

It is posited by Bandura (1977, 1986) that self-efficacy and how a person perceives trigger the type of coping mechanism the individual utilizes when encountering problems and stress. Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT), which includes the concept of observational learning, reinforcements of behavior and learning, and self-efficacy, supports the framework of the proposed study because it lays the foundation for understanding how general Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion can impact their behaviors and ability to implement appropriate inclusive practices for the special needs children in their classrooms. SLT formulates how important it is for children, especially those with special needs, to have teachers who can adequately interact and model age and developmentally appropriate learning behaviors that they can acquire.

Theory of Planned Behavior

Ajzen's (1991) TPB supported this study's framework because it interpreted NC's general Pre-K teachers' attitudes concerning the inclusion of special needs children in their classrooms. Ajzen's (1991) TPB indicates that a person's attitude influences their behaviors and actions. Therefore, an individual's behavior toward a task is influenced by their attitude, the subjective norm surrounding the behavior's action, and the amount of control the individual thinks they have over the behavior or task. Attitudes are defined by Cherry (2020) as an individual's emotional and behavioral responses towards people, places, or things. According to Ajzen (1991), a person's attitude is a concept in psychology, and the theory of planned behavior illustrates the relationship between behavior and intentions. Hodge and Elliott (2013) explain that behavior intention is the decision-making process that ignites conduct and requires a set of procedures to affect any action plan.

Ajzen's (1991) TPB asserts that to predict a specific behavior (attitudes and self-efficacy), one must examine the behavioral intentions as determined by attitudes (successful inclusion), subjective norms (how others, such as colleagues and school culture view the actions) and perceived behavioral control (knowledge, competencies, efficacy). Previous studies examining teachers' perspectives and attitudes toward inclusion have utilized Ajzen's (1991) TPB as their theoretical framework (Hellmich et al., 2019; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Tiwari et al., 2015). A recent study conducted by Young et al. (2017) credits the TPB as the primary means for assisting the development of Pre-Kindergarten special needs students' cognitive, social, emotional, language, and motor skills, to which Pre-Kindergarten teachers play a vital role. The way teachers feel about including special needs children in their classrooms impacts their behaviors and how they implement and carry out their teaching practices, all of which affect special needs children's success in their classes. Therefore, it is vital to use Ajzen's (1991) TPB as a guide to reveal and understand the factors that influence general NC Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards including SNC in their classrooms. The TPB by Ajzen (1991) helps form the frame of the proposed study because it will be used to understand predicted behaviors of general Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Understanding predicted behaviors would enable us to make necessary adjustments to improve and change teachers' attitudes towards including special needs children in their classrooms.

Attitudes Predict Behaviors

The TPB suggests that individuals' actions or behaviors at any specific time or place are influenced by their intentions, and a person's intentions are shaped by the synergy of attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms, social norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991). The theory is a broad model that outlines possible behaviors resulting from attitudes. A

recent study conducted by Wilson et al. (2016) notes that the TPB assists in examining and understanding the relationship between teachers' cognitions, personalities, and reports of self-behaviors towards the inclusion of special needs children. Wilson et al. (2016) also reported that high predictors of teachers' behaviors toward inclusion are attitude, descriptive norms, self-efficacy, and personality, which are significant in predicting teachers' inclusive intentions. However, a more recent study by Opoku et al. (2021) also utilized the TPB to investigate teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy concerning inclusion. Combined, these researchers found that only attitude and self-efficacy were significant in predicting teachers' inclusive intentions (Opoku et al., 2021).

Planning can Change Attitude and Behavior

Ajzen's (1991) theory proposes that a person's behavior (intention) can be changed when planning to change their attitude and perception of subjective norms, social norms, and behavioral control. A recent study by Supriyanto (2019) concluded that regular teachers who must include young children with special needs or disabilities in their classes still lack positive attitudes toward inclusion. Young et al. (2017) used the TPB to investigate teachers' perceptions toward including special needs students in regular classrooms. The authors reported that although inclusion is advocated internationally, a significant lack of attitudinal change, training, funding, and infrastructure is necessary to make genuine inclusion a reality (Young et al., 2017).

Young et al. (2017) also indicated that teachers had positive attitudes towards inclusion based on their perceived behavioral control influenced by favorable subjective norms instituted by their school. The authors also note that teachers' behavioral control needed to make inclusion work is diminished because their behavioral intentions are not being developed or supported as needed (Young et al., 2017). Early childhood educators, such as NC Pre-K teachers, must have

positive attitudes towards inclusion so that special needs children can reap the benefits of effective inclusion. Utilizing Ajzen's (1991) TPB helped general Pre-K teachers change their negative attitudes. It could help them develop positive behaviors by outlining their current negative attitudes and intentions and making plans to help change them based on the model within the theory.

Related Literature

Teaching young children with special needs in a special education class is daunting for teachers with a special education certification. However, teaching young children with special needs can be even more challenging when placed in a regular classroom with a general education teacher. Young children today have the same rights as their primary and secondary peers to receive an education in the same classroom as their regular learning peers. Pre-Kindergarten's push for inclusiveness places more strain on regular Pre-Kindergarten teachers because they already have a rigorous task of adhering to high-quality and developmentally appropriate practices and standards issued by the local, state, and federal sectors. This related literature section will cover some history of inclusion, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and NC Pre-K to understand the setting and need to conduct the proposed study. The related literature will also explain inclusion within early childhood education and effective inclusive environments and practices. This section will also provide literature concerning teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, significant influences on inclusion acceptance, and early educators' barriers to effective inclusion.

History of Inclusive Education

The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the landmark law that ended public segregation and discrimination (History.com, 2010 & 2021) and initiated a movement that would give children

with disabilities the same rights as their typical learning peers. Inclusive education within early childhood settings results from Public Law 99-457, The Education for all Handicapped Children Act Amendment of 1986. Many educators and advocates for young children refer to it today as the pre-school law.

Before 1986, the Education for All Handicapped Act of 1975 gave students with disabilities rights to free public education; however, children under five were excluded from the same rights as their school-aged peers until the passing of the Pre-K law in 1986. In 1990, the Education for All Handicapped Act underwent a title change. It became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In 2004, IDEA was again amended to its current title, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004). Overall, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (its current title IDEIA) has structured the current laws that guide the educational platforms written for children with disabilities. Currently, no educational law recognizes the term inclusion with a legal definition. Therefore, educational organizations adhere to IDEIA's least restrictive environment (LRE), which indicates that a student with disabilities is entitled to learn in a setting along with their regular peers to the most significant means possible (US Department of Education (DOE), 2017). Even though young children with special needs are entitled to a free and appropriate education in the LRE, there is a continuous debate concerning where and how these students should be served (Ahsan & Sharma, 2018; Gilmore, 2018; Zigmond, 2003).

No Child Left Behind

The presidential administration, led by George W. Bush, initiated the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001 (US DOE, 2004). This law was established to decrease the educational achievement gap among the nation's various subgroups of students. The NCLB Act

increased the accountability of America's public educational system. The increased accountability increased student expectations, forcing educators to improve the learning rigor. The rise in students' expectations and rigor imposed by NCLB flowed down to early education. DellaMattera (2010) states, "Along with schoolteachers, early educators are being held to a higher level of accountability detailed in content-based learning standards" (p. 41). According to Stipek (2006), policymakers believed that implementing academic standards for young children could help them obtain skills they would need during their school years. The No Child Left Behind law has since forced teachers in early childhood settings to implement academics into their curriculums (Stipek, 2006). Teachers of young children have had to adapt curriculums and implement structured daily routines for children from ages six weeks to five years of age. A study by DellaMattera (2010) concluded that the educational policies of NCLB had significant implications for early educators and their teaching practices. The author noted that NCLB policies assume all children develop and learn simultaneously (DellaMattera, 2010).

In 2015, NCLB was replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which also reauthorized the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) (The Understood Team, 2022). According to the comparison chart of NCLB and ESSA by The Understood Team (2022), the ESSA allows states to hold schools more accountable for outcomes. However, the ESSA holds the same assumptions for student outcomes as NCLB. Therefore, the expectations of ESSA place general Pre-Kindergarten teachers in a dilemma. Typical learning young children in general classes need individualized instruction because they require developmentally appropriate practices (NAEYC, 2022) to show success and accountability. Including children with special needs in these general teachers' rooms increases their challenges because special needs children require more than individualization; they also need more support and services to succeed.

North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten

The United States of America currently has 39 states implementing public pre-school programs; however, only eight are universal, and the others are considered targeted programs for at-risk children (The Urban Child Institute, 2021). North Carolina's Pre-Kindergarten program was initially titled "More at Four" but is known today as NC Pre-K. The program started in 2001 as the nation rolled out No Child Left Behind. Former North Carolina Governor Mike Easley convinced the state to provide free public pre-school to upcoming high-risk students. The More at Four program was created to " provide a high-quality educational program for at-risk children in the year before kindergarten entry" (Franklin Porter Graham Child Development Institute, 2019, p. 1). Therefore, most children in the program would be required to be around four, giving rise to the title "More at Four."

A 2019 National Institute for Early Education (NIEER) report on North Carolina's Pre-Kindergarten program shows that only 23% of NC's preschool-age population is enrolling (Barnett & Kasmin, 2018). According to Public Schools First NC (2021), high-quality Pre-Kindergarten decreases the likelihood of delinquency and lowers the achievement gap by increasing social skills and improving cognitive, literacy, and communication skills. The study illustrated how vital it was to understand general North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion, as some high-risk children enrolled in NC Pre-K have diagnosed or undiagnosed special needs.

Inclusion within Early Childhood Classes

Early childhood education began engulfing inclusive practices long before federal and state legislation began to mandate inclusive education. The reason is that young children are often placed in early learning settings before some are identified with special needs. In many

instances, early childhood settings are places where some children's delays or deficiencies related to learning, behavior, social, emotional, and motor skills are detected and identified. In a recent study by Symeonidou (2017), the author states, "*Inclusive education* is a term now found in international, European Union, and national policy documents which claim that equal learning opportunities can be provided in mainstream schools that are prepared to accommodate all students regardless of their characteristics" (p. 401). A class is considered inclusive when children with special needs are placed in a general class with typical learning peers and they are active participants in the class. As inclusion becomes the new norm for education, general education teachers must adapt to including and implementing practices to engage the participation of special needs children in their classrooms, which means adopting positive attitudes and a high sense of self-efficacy towards inclusion.

Placement of Special Needs Students in Schools

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Educational Improvement Act (IDEA) (2000), children with disabilities must be served in the least restricted environment (LRE). Educators, policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders often have different opinions about what constitutes the least restricted environment. IDEA (2000) does not state that students with disabilities or special needs must be included in a regular classroom. Some schools and agencies feel that the least restricted environment is mainstreaming, meaning that special needs children will spend a specific amount of time in a class with typically developing peers and the other time in a class receiving services about their specific needs. However, some educators and stakeholders believe that the least restricted environment is where students with special needs attend a regular class with typically developing peers and receive all their services within that regular class setting. Although mandates outline inclusion, early education settings utilize

inclusion as a philosophy, and the overseeing organization decides where the student with special needs should be placed. The administrator or governing body of stakeholders who run early education programs set the guidelines for the type of inclusive classrooms (full or partial), often driven by their attitudes towards inclusion.

According to Wilcox (2019), full inclusion is when students with special needs are placed in a regular class and receive all their services in that setting. In contrast, partial inclusion is when the student attends the regular class for part of the day and gets special services in another class the other part of the day. The DEC and NAEYC (2009) imply that early childhood programs that follow high standards often adhere to full inclusion. When children with special needs are placed in regular classrooms full-time, they learn beside their typically developing peers. However, these students challenge general education teachers because they require more one-on-one attention and modified teaching strategies to assist their learning (Ball & Green, 2014). Early childhood teachers, such as North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten teachers, need to have attitudes that influence them to accept special needs children and drive them to implement practices that ensure those students will be successful.

Participation of Special Needs Children in General Classes

Inclusion in early education is more than placing special needs children (SNC) in regular class settings. Inclusion is SNC's active engagement with typical and non-typical peers. According to DEC and NAEYC (2009), when children with special needs socially interact, play, and learn alongside typically developing peers and teachers, it is called participation. Early education aims to help young children with social and emotional skills first and academic and motor skills second. Authors Fyssa et al. (2014) noted that active participation of special needs students within the class is "the first and foremost requirement of inclusive education" (p. 224).

Guralnick and Bruder (2016) found that the number one goal of inclusive education is social interaction. More recently, Mamas et al. (2020) concluded that in classroom settings where students with special needs are supported and encouraged to participate, they also gain access to social gains that support their academic skills, emotions, well-being, and sense of belonging. If special needs children are placed in general class settings with typical learning peers and are not encouraged to interact, talk, and play with those peers, then calling that class an inclusive class would be a misconception. To portray successful inclusion in early childhood settings and primary schools, general teachers, such as NC Pre-K teachers, should hold attitudes and self-efficacy that encourage special needs children to participate in their inclusive classes.

Effective Inclusive Environments and Practices for Young Children

Many early learning environments in America have state organizations that govern their early education divisions. The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an organization in most states in America and other international providences utilized as a frame to structure the policies and practices of their early childhood education departments. The NAEYC engulfs high-quality early childhood development and research-based educational practices (DEC & NAEYC, 2009; NAEYC, 2020). The NAEYC also has practices and philosophies for early childhood education, specifically for inclusion, because young children have a right to be educated in the least restricted environment, just like school-aged students (IDEIA, 2000). To fully understand what makes general Pre-Kindergarten teachers successful at implementing inclusion, one must know what constructs an effective inclusive environment and its practices, such as teacher qualifications, support, and resources.

Appropriately Qualified Teachers for Young Children

Studies show that teachers with a bachelor's degree in early childhood education for children ages birth through eight years of age are more effective in teaching young children and implementing higher-quality practices (Bueno et al., 2010; Allen & Kelly, 2015). However, teaching special needs children is different from teaching typical developing children. Authors Borg et al. (2011) note that research from the European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education outlines that a teacher needs appropriate skills, understanding, knowledge, and specific values and attitudes to work in an inclusive class effectively. Young children with special needs and disabilities often need modifications to assist their learning and development of specific skills. Teachers with special needs children in their regular classrooms need to know the modifications and individualizations these students need to progress and succeed. According to Symeonidou (2017), "disabled children will benefit the most if the quality of teacher education for inclusion is improved" (p. 403). A recent study on inclusion in early childhood by Mathwasa and Sibanda (2021) concluded that the higher a teacher's educational level, the higher the levels of quality in their class as they demonstrated more appropriate practices and instructional activities. The study also showed that students in early childhood settings with teachers who obtained a bachelor's degree and special training in early childhood development had better outcomes than peers taught by less-educated teachers (Mathwasa & Sibanda, 2021). Therefore, having highly qualified teachers with a background in early childhood development is necessary in programs like NC Pre-K.

Proper Resources and Supports for Special Needs Children

Young children with disabilities and special needs require modifications to succeed in any setting. However, support and resources are even more critical in regular class settings

because special needs children should feel as successful and normal as their typical learning peers. Supports that special needs children need to participate successfully alongside their classmates are accommodations and modifications (Brillante, 2017). The accommodations that special needs children must have been based on their disability and needs; these accommodations should be provided so that they can remain in a regular setting instead of being secluded and making them feel that they are not a part of the general class setting. Accommodations, resources, and support are imperative for special needs children to meet their highest capabilities. Resources and supports such as digital devices and speech therapy for children with communication delays or disabilities would be part of a high-quality environment that would give these special needs children the chance to thrive in a regular early learning setting.

Teachers' Attitudes toward Inclusion

A teacher is vital for successfully implementing inclusive practices within the classroom. Therefore, the successful outcome of an inclusive class and its influence on special needs children is often determined by the teacher's attitude towards inclusion, whether positive, negative, or mediocre. In a recent meta-analysis of the literature on teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education, Van Steen and Wilson (2020) collected over 64 peer-reviewed studies conducted within the past ten years. The authors revealed that the various works of literature agree that the teacher is a primary key factor in successful learning. This is even more apparent in an inclusive setting because the teacher holds the key to designing and facilitating learning that will benefit an array of learners within one classroom. Van Steen and Wilson (2020) state, "Understanding teacher attitudes toward inclusion is often the starting point in designing effective and efficient interventions to enhance teachers' inclusive behavior" (p. 2).

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) examined 28 studies on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, mainly among general education teachers, conducted in the United States, Australia, and Canada from 1958 to 1995. The authors noted that approximately two-thirds of the teachers from the studies expressed positive attitudes toward the general idea of inclusion. However, Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) found that a smaller percentage expressed a willingness to include special needs children in their classes. Similar results have emerged from subsequent studies on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, indicating that acceptance of inclusion among general educators has not significantly increased. According to de Boer et al. (2011), studies examined from 1999 to 2008 concluded that none of the studies indicated positive teacher attitude response above 70 %.

Supriyanto (2019) utilized a systematic qualitative review of the literature to reveal teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education and pinpoint the factors that shape their perceptions of inclusive education. The author retrieved 27 studies published between the years 2004 and 2014, conducted worldwide on the topic of teacher attitudes toward inclusion. The 27 studies contained a combined total of 5,471 teacher participants. Supriyanto's (2019) review concludes that teacher attitudes towards inclusion vary widely worldwide, with nations such as the United States and Australia expressing overall positive attitudes compared to Korea and Turkey, which indicates negative attitudes.

More recently, Bandyopadhyay and Dhara (2021) examined the most current literature concerning teachers' attitudes toward inclusions. The authors found that most teachers had positive attitudes, while some had negative or neutral attitudes toward inclusion. Bandyopadhyay and Dhara (2021) synthesized the literature and concluded that teachers' attitudes are not positive overall. Current literature on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion vividly parallels Scruggs and Mastropieri's (1996) study, noting no significant changes in teacher attitudes between 1958 and

1995. From the studies collected and reviewed over the last sixty years, the literature concludes that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion have remained the same because no real growth in positive attitudes when including special needs children in regular classes has been extracted. However, the decades of literature on the topic expounds that the following factors influence teacher attitudes towards inclusion: degree, teaching experience, support, inclusion training, the type of disability or need students have, gender, and self-efficacy (Bandyopadhyay & Dhara, 2021; Desombre et al., 2021; Hind et al., 2019; Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Hofman & Kilimo, 2014; Savolainen et al. (2020); Supriyanto, 2019; Vaz et al., 2015).

Teachers' Education Influence their Attitudes toward Inclusion

The attitudes expressed by teachers are vital to building the class learning environment. The literature indicates that teachers with a healthy and positive attitude toward inclusion are more apt to have successful classrooms (Costello & Boyle, 2013; Priyadarshini & Thangarajathi, 2016). Kuyini and Mangope (2011) noted a significant statistical difference in attitude toward inclusion among five groups of teachers based on their educational type (bachelor's in general education, bachelor's in primary education, bachelor's in secondary education, bachelor's in special education, and graduated in regular education). According to Costello and Boyled (2013), educators who held master's and doctorate degrees had more positive attitudes than their colleagues who only held bachelor's degrees.

A recent examination of the literature by Bandyopadhyay and Dhara (2021) concluded that teachers' attitudes are influenced by their education. In early childhood education, it is essential to have a teacher who can implement a high-quality environment. The NAEYC (2009) reports that a highly qualified teacher is critical in a high-quality early childhood environment. In an early childhood educational setting where SNCs are placed in general education classes, the

level and type of degree a teacher has is vital to the progress and success of SNC. Supriyanto (2019) engaged in a study that concluded that a teacher's educational attainment and field of study influence a teacher's attitudes toward inclusion. A teacher with a birth through kindergarten degree has more knowledge of child development and learning of young children than a teacher with a degree in elementary education. Higher education programs are usually tailored to the type of certification and licensure a teacher seeks. A medical doctor specializing in cardiac care cannot advise patients needing bone disease diagnosis. Teachers with a degree in one subject can obtain an add-on certification to teach another area or content. However, the knowledge level differs from obtaining a degree in that subject or content area.

A teacher's knowledge level is critical in implementing high-quality learning in early education, especially when special needs children are in a regular education setting. The literature details that teachers with a special education background possess the highest positive attitudes toward inclusion compared to teachers in other categories (Jobe et al., 1996; Forlin et al., 1996; Hernandez et al., 2016). Aside from special education teachers, studies show that primary education teachers have more positive attitudes toward inclusion than teachers in secondary education (Chiner & Cardona, 2013; McHatton & Parker, 2013). Regarding pre-school teachers, Bandyopadhyay and Dhara (2021) found that these teachers "held more positive attitudes towards inclusive education" (p. 215).

Teachers' Training Influences Their Attitudes toward Inclusion

To identify and address issues, it is vital to investigate NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. Recent literature by van Steen and Wilson (2020) concluded that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion varied overall based on significant factors such as education, experience, training, and forms of student disabilities. A review of the literature by Van

Mieghem et al. (2020) has some similarities to van Steen and Wilson's (2020) study in that the authors found that professional development (training) focused on specific disabilities or special needs was more effective than surface training in inclusive education. Additionally, the authors note that teachers need support and resources to be more accepting of special needs children (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). In a study by Yu (2019), the author declares that the data indicated a significant correlation exists between teachers' attitudes and their perceived self-efficacy of inclusion $r = .46$, $n = 41$, $p < .01$ (Yu, 2019).

Additionally, the data concluded that the more training a teacher noted in special education, the higher they rated their competence toward inclusion (Yu, 2019). The studies indicate that teachers' attitudes and how they view their abilities to implement and teach SNC influence their thoughts and actions toward inclusion. The literature dictates that education, experience, training, and the type of disabled student placed in the class of a general education teacher are significant factors that influence his or her attitude (van Steen & Wilson, 2020; Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Yu, 2019). Investigating the type of training that NC Pre-K teachers have acquired regarding inclusion is a gigantic step toward understanding NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes toward inclusion.

Knowledge and training in working with special needs students can influence positive teacher attitudes (Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015). "When teachers can understand and master the skills of teaching learners with special needs, they would be more committed to changes as their intention and competency improve" (Supriyanto, 2019, p. 32). Teachers often use the quote "practice makes perfect" with students; however, practice makes perfect for the teachers when it comes to including children with special needs in general teachers' classes. As

indicated by the research, an increase in inclusive training shows a significant increase in teachers' attitudes towards inclusion (Van Mieghem, 2020; Yu, 2019).

Teachers' Experience Influence their Attitudes toward Inclusion

Initial education guides teachers; however, experience allows teachers to apply what they have learned and increase their knowledge in a deeper context. This is even more apparent in inclusion because inclusive education courses are usually broad, whereas experience teaching SNC is more specific. The more specific a child's disability that a teacher works with, the more their knowledge about that specific need or disability is increased, making it easier to work with another student with that same disability because of being familiar with it. Van Mieghem et al. (2020) completed a meta-analysis that indicated that experience with inclusive education improved teachers' positive perceptions of inclusion. Individuals' efficacy levels regarding particular tasks can increase as they engage in tasks and become more familiar with the task. As a teacher continually interacts and teaches SNC, those experiences can improve their attitudes and feelings about their abilities to accommodate students with disabilities or special needs. When general teachers have SNC with the same type of disability included in their class year after year, their attitudes can improve towards SNC. Their perception of their abilities to include special needs children can become more positive.

A teacher's experience is often associated with higher self-efficacy and capability to teach students. In that notion, many believe teachers who have taught for many years have a greater knowledge and ability to teach. However, a teacher's attitude affects how they teach, just like their pedagogical strategies affect their ability to implement inclusion. In so, teachers' self-efficacy affects their attitude (Yada et al., 2022; Yada et al., 2018). Teachers in all stages of their careers can utilize some simple strategies to increase their self-efficacy and grow more confident

in their ability to implement successful inclusive environments. Teachers can begin by making small changes for special needs students that will not affect the class routine of the other students (Hardin & Hardin, 2002). Therefore, increasing general teachers' self-efficacy can increase their capacity to include special needs children in their classes and increase teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Type of Student Disability/Need's Influence on Teacher Attitude

Regular early education teachers today are considered inclusive teachers. Although various special needs children are placed in regular early childhood classrooms, research suggests that the type of disability or need a student has impacts general education teachers' attitudes toward inclusion (Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2015). For example, literature dictates that teachers were more supportive of accommodating children with sensory or physical disabilities compared to children with behavioral or cognitive disabilities (Winter, 2020; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; de Boer et al., 2011; see also Ellins & Porter, 2005; Hastings & Oakford, 2003; Westwood & Graham, 2008). According to the literature, teachers have more positive attitudes towards children with mild disabilities and needs while holding negative attitudes when including children with severe cognitive needs or behavior issues (Alkahtani, 2022; Kamran et al., 2023. Supriyanto (2019) cites Yeo et al. (2014), "If the child is high functioning, it tends to make inclusion a little easier. If the child is low-functioning or unidentified, it makes things a little more challenging" (p. 32). Therefore, the severity of a child's disability or need whom teachers are required to include within their classroom impacts the attitudes teachers have toward inclusion. According to the literature, the higher the severity of a child's disability or need, the less favorable the teacher's attitude is concerning inclusion (Kamran et al., 2023; see also Ellins & Porter, 2005; Forlin & Chambers, 2011).

Teachers' Perceived Self-Efficacy towards Inclusion

Bandura's theory of social learning outlines self-efficacy and how an individual perceives his or her abilities to carry out tasks. Supriyanto (2019) suggests further research be conducted on teachers' self-efficacy to determine if self-efficacy plays a role in influencing attitudes towards inclusion. General education teachers must encompass adequate self-efficacy in inclusive practices to implement successful and effective inclusive education. Initial education, the school environment, and professional development can shape self-efficacy toward inclusion. In a recent study by Van Mieghem et al. (2020), the authors state, "It is argued that a teacher's sense of professional self-efficacy is aligned with the endorsed attitudes in the wider school environment, which can positively or negatively influence the teachers' ability to deal with the behavior of these students" (p. 667).

Regular early childhood educators are not expected to automatically have a high perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion because this must be developed. Van Mieghem et al. (2020) explain that teachers' self-efficacy is developed through education, training, and experience. According to Bandura (1977), vicarious experiences can also develop self-efficacy. A study by Zundans-Fraser and Lancaster (2012) noted that teachers could increase their positive attitudes through vicarious experiences such as collaborative activities and presentations with other teachers with positive attitudes and knowledge towards inclusion.

Many recent studies conducted on teachers' efficacy toward inclusion utilize Sharma et al.'s (2012) Teacher Efficacy for Inclusive Practices (TEIP) scale (Savolainen et al., 2020). According to its authors, "This scale was designed to measure teachers' self-efficacy to implement inclusive classroom practices" (Sharma et al., 2012, p. 16). As with teacher's attitudes, a teacher's self-efficacy concerning inclusion is affected by multiple variables such as

training and support (Bas, 2022; see also Fives & Buehl, 2009; Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Sokal & Sharma, 2014). Teachers' self-efficacy is a vital predictor of teachers' overall attitudes toward inclusion (Hernandez et al., 2016). This supports previous research by Malien et al. (2012) that notes teachers' self-efficacy in fact predicts teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. More recently, Yada et al. (2022) concluded that teachers' self-efficacy concerning inclusion significantly correlates with teachers' attitudes toward inclusion. Yada et al. (2022) support Sokal and Sharma's (2014) study that found that teachers' confidence level and training in teaching special needs students predicted teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. Concerning general teachers, Hernandez et al. (2016) reported, "higher levels of self-efficacy were associated with more positive attitudes towards inclusion" (p. 89). Recent studies by Savolainen et al. (2020) and Yada et al. (2018) also found that teachers with high self-efficacy in inclusion held more positive attitudes toward inclusion.

Investigating general NC Pre-K teachers perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion can be a gateway to understanding their attitudes toward inclusion. Based on the literature, improving teachers' self-efficacy can improve teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion (Hwang & Evans, 2011; Hernandez et al., 2016; Yada et al., 2022). Teachers' self-efficacy is linked to the amount of work they are willing to exert in carrying out a task (Zee & Koomen, 2016). Teachers with high self-efficacy will place more effort into tasks to help their students succeed, whereas teachers with low self-efficacy will not put forth the effort.

Main Barriers that Impede Teachers from Effective Inclusion

Barriers exist in all avenues and occupations; they are the stopping points that hold people back and keep them from succeeding in their occupations, education, and abilities. General education teachers often dictate the barriers that impede their acceptance and abilities to carry out

successful inclusion in research studies conducted on the topic. The main barriers highlighted in the literature that keep regular teachers from successful inclusion include a lack of preparedness in initial teacher education concerning inclusion, a lack of training (in special education and inclusion), and a lack of support (to implement and carry out inclusion) (Al Jaffal, 2022; Suprivanto, 2019; Pantic & Florian, 2015; see also Peebles & Mendaglio, 2014).

Education within a formal setting and experience in inclusion strategies can help general education teachers increase their knowledge of inclusive practices. However, training is needed to stay abreast with updated practices and critique acquired knowledge.

The more knowledge and training teachers have in inclusion, the more likely they will accept students with special needs into their classrooms. In a study by Silva and Morgado (2004), the researchers concluded that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are influenced by their training and experience. Silva and Morgado (2004) also noted that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion became more positive as they obtained more training in special education. However, according to Zwane and Malale (2018), most training or professional development for regular teachers rarely prepares them to work with special needs children in an inclusive classroom. In simpler terms, most training does not equip regular teachers with the confidence, knowledge, and skills to effectively accommodate and teach students with special needs. The reason is that most professional development that districts require of teachers is not related to inclusion but to state initiatives that drive accountability, such as subject matter and content. Another reason why teachers are not getting adequate training on special needs and inclusion is that "it is expensive, particularly in the context of competing demands on educational budgets, and especially in the contexts of stringency which prevail in developing countries" (Upton, 1991, p. 3).

Inadequate Inclusive Educational Preparedness

Some literature on general education teachers concerning inclusion indicates that many teachers claim that they were not adequately prepared during their initial teacher education courses to carry out inclusion (Al Jaffal, 2022; Mitchell, 2019; Trivino-Amigo et al., 2023; see also Chitiyo et al., 2019; Alkhateeb et al., 2016). A teacher's formal education plays a significant role in the teacher's knowledge and abilities to carry out curriculum and instruction. Initial education also shapes teachers' pedagogical practices and how they implement and work with students. "Research has suggested that the attitudes, knowledge, and skills of student-teachers concerning inclusion may be influenced by courses or units of study that include fieldwork" (Symeonidou, 2017, p. 414). Authors Zagona et al. (2017) noted that obtaining coursework in inclusion reflected having pedagogical skills to carry out inclusion in practice. The study also revealed that general and special education teachers with inclusion coursework or training were more prepared to collaborate with other professionals and families, individualize instruction, make accommodations, and adapt standards for students with significant disabilities. (Zagona et al., 2017). A study in which 232 teachers were surveyed by Chitiyo et al. (2019) concluded that teachers felt they were not adequately prepared to teach students with special needs.

A recent study on teachers' attitudes and barriers regarding inclusion conducted by researchers Paramita et al. (2020) found that most teacher education programs do not adequately address the preparation of general teachers for inclusive education. Today's regular teachers accommodate special needs children more than ever. Therefore, regular teachers must receive adequate educational courses in special education and inclusion (Savolainen et al., 2020).

Obtaining special education and inclusion courses can help teachers feel they have the

knowledge and capabilities to implement and carry out inclusive practices, increasing their self-efficacy and positive attitudes towards inclusion.

Inadequate Inclusive Training

Inclusive training is crucial in increasing positive attitudes towards inclusion. Regular ECE teachers insist that they need or lack proper training to incorporate special needs students into their classrooms effectively (Yu, 2019; see also Civitillo et al., 2016; Vaz et al., 2015; Walton & Rusznyak, 2014). According to Walton and Rusznyak (2014), a challenge that teachers face concerning the successful implementation of inclusive education that will satisfy the learning of special needs students is practical training. More recently, Chitiyo et al. (2019) noted that teachers voiced professional development as a need for building their capacity to teach students with special needs.

Professional development and ongoing training on various student needs and disabilities, as well as inclusive strategies, are much-needed processes because practices and processes to implement successful inclusive education are constantly changing. Jonathan Glazzard conducted a qualitative investigation in 2011 on teacher barriers to inclusion. Glazzard's (2011) study indicated that "many of the participants (teachers) felt strongly that they were inadequately trained to educate children with special educational needs" (p. 60). The literature reports that teachers feel that a lack of training lowers their ability to effectively stay abreast of trends that will increase their capabilities to implement successful inclusive practices (Lee et al., 2015; Yu, 2019; Zwane & Malale, 2018). Gidlund and Bostrom (2017) report that teachers express inadequacy and frustration concerning implementing inclusive practices due to a lack of knowledge and inadequate use of research findings. Training on specific disabilities and special needs can assist regular teachers with their knowledge to increase their inclusive practices.

Inadequate Support and Resources

Previous studies on regular early childhood teachers state that a lack of support and insufficient resources impede their ability to accommodate children with special needs successfully (Alexander et al., 2016; Mgno & Mgno, 2018). According to Fakudze (2012), inadequate support for teachers results from a lack of state funding for inclusive education programs and professional development training needed to empower teachers to transform their attitudes towards inclusive education.

General education teachers need support from co-workers and community partners with a background in special education and disabilities, such as special education teachers and therapists like occupational, physical, and speech and language. Support from these co-workers and community partners can help regular teachers increase their sense of efficacy and positive attitudes toward inclusion. Thus, if general education teachers are given the right support system to assist them with their special needs students, they can improve their inclusive practices.

Summary

North Carolina wants the best for its youngest students, those without special needs, those with identified special needs, and those with hidden special needs. It is reported that 65% of children with disabilities are in regular classrooms for 80% of their day (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology, (DO-IT) 2021). Investigating teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy is imperative to understanding the major factors influencing the acceptance level toward inclusion. Most studies that examined regular teachers' attitudes toward inclusion held the assumption that teachers' acceptance of inclusive policies impacted their commitment to implement them (Avramidis & Toulia, 2020). However, general Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards including children with special needs in regular

classrooms was an important topic to study because it filled the gap in the literature for this grade level. Additionally, this study assisted in moving early education and Pre-K forward in the practice of successful inclusion. Inclusion has taken more than 60 years to get where it is today. Today, children with special needs are placed in general education classrooms to learn and develop beside their typically developing peers.

North Carolina's publicly sponsored Pre-K program promotes inclusiveness by placing special needs children in classrooms with general education teachers and typical learners. Young children with special needs or disabilities only benefit and succeed in inclusive settings when they participate in the classroom (NAEYC, 2022). Placing special needs children in a regular class is not a triumphant picture of inclusion. Special needs children must be actively engaged in an early childhood setting with a high-quality teacher and provide all necessary resources and supports for inclusion to be successful.

This study focused on NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. The key to successful inclusion is, first and foremost, the teacher (van Steen & Wilson, 2020). Teachers' ability to accept and implement effective inclusion is shaped by their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion (Mngo & Mngo, 2018; Yu, 2019;). Factors influencing NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy must be highlighted to ensure that effective inclusive practices occur so SNC can succeed in regular classrooms. The literature resonates that factors that influence teachers' attitudes towards inclusion are education, training, experience, and the type of special need or disability that a student has (van Steen & Wilson, 2020; Yu, 2019; see also Alexander et al.; 2016; Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Knowing the significant influences of teachers' attitudes toward inclusion can help understand how those influences trigger negative or positive actions and practices. Predicting behaviors and what

influences those behaviors is critical to narrowing down issues that negatively affect regular teachers' acceptance of special needs students in their classes so that they can be addressed.

The literature also dictated the main barriers that impeded teachers from implementing successful inclusive practices. Recent studies mention that barriers to inclusion are a lack of initial teacher education courses in inclusion, a lack of training in specific inclusive practices, and a lack of support and resources to assist implementation and practices of inclusion (Mitchell, 2019; Yu, 2019; see also Symeonidou, 2017; Zwane & Malale, 2018). The information gathered on barriers toward successful inclusion assists early childhood education stakeholders with a foundation in which to build solutions to address those barriers. General early childhood teachers who educate children with special needs are like the children they teach; They need resources and support to increase the way they perceive their self-efficacy toward inclusion. Villegas (2021) notes that teachers lack resources, such as "funding shortages for materials, equipment, and technology as well as barriers resulting from overcrowded facilities and inadequate time for planning and collaboration between staff members" (p. 4, 2021). Receiving the right resources and support concerning inclusion can help general education teachers improve their perceived teaching self-efficacy. Increasing teachers perceived self-efficacy can increase their positive attitudes and abilities to have successful inclusive classes.

The study of NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion is unique because to date little research exists on the topic of inclusion with this population of general teachers. The current study assisted with filling the gap in the literature concerning teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion with the population of general NC Pre-K teachers. Additionally, the study added more information concerning factors that positively or negatively affected NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes towards inclusion so that issues could be

addressed to move early education and Pre-K forward in NC and throughout the nations of the world.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This qualitative phenomenological investigation and revealed the lived experiences of NC's general Pre-K teachers concerning their attitudes and self-efficacy towards including special needs children in their class. The following chapter discusses the details of the research methodology, qualitative phenomenology, that I utilized to conduct this study. The first part of the chapter describes the study's qualitative design of the phenomenological approach. It will also entail why I choose to utilize the phenomenological approach, explain the purpose of the study, and state the research questions. The first part of this chapter will also describe the setting and participants, explain the procedures I used to conduct the study, and detail my role as the researcher.

The second section of this chapter explains the data collection process. It lists the semi-structured interview open-ended questions I utilized to reveal the participants' lived experiences concerning the phenomena. It also lists the semi-structured open-ended questions I used to collect data from the focus group. The last section of the chapter describes the forms of data analysis I utilized to derive the findings for the study, and it details all the procedures I utilized to conduct this study. The last section of this chapter also explains the trustworthiness, credibility, and ethical considerations for the study before ending with a summary of the chapter.

Research Design

This research study utilized a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach to organize and conduct the study. Qualitative research design is generally for studies that aim to understand individuals' views and perceptions. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), engaging in a qualitative methodology allows the researcher to collect data by communicating directly

with the participants and observing their behaviors within the environment where the phenomena occur. A qualitative design was most appropriate for this study because it allowed me, the researcher, to interact and gather data from participants in person (live face-to-face through Zoom) and in their natural environment. Quantitative research was not appropriate for this study because it does not require direct interaction with participants, defeating the purpose of examining their lived experiences within the environment where the phenomena happen. Additionally, a qualitative design allowed dialogue, observations of facial gestures, and body language to be gathered, all impacting participants expressing details of their lived experiences.

Qualitative research has five main approaches a researcher can use to conduct research (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994). This study employed the phenomenological approach. Phenomenology is a philosophical approach guiding qualitative research methodology that acquires an understanding of human experiences (Moustakas, 1994). A phenomenological study allows researchers to simplify and describe the lived experiences that a group of individuals has in common concerning phenomena to be understood by people who have not experienced it. A German philosopher, Edmond Husserl, is credited with developing the phenomenological research approach (Moustakas, 1994).

Creswell and Poth (2018) suggest that researchers use the phenomenological approach to learn about lived experiences that an individual or group has encountered regarding a phenomenon.

According to Moustakas (1994) and agreed upon by Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology research is based on vivid textural and structural descriptions and the study's pure essence.

Phenomenological studies can be conducted by using hermeneutics (the researcher interprets the meaning of the participants' experiences) or transcendental (the researcher describes the participants' experiences) (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology was used

because it was the best fit for this study. It focused on examining and describing the phenomena of attitudes and self-efficacy that general NC Pre-K teachers have experienced due to including special needs children in their regular class. The transcendental phenomenology approach best fit this study because it focused on a sensitive topic requiring me, the researcher, to collect data through in-depth interviews of several participants who have lived the experiences to reveal the phenomena' essence. Utilizing the transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me to reveal common themes that were synthesized and reported to describe participants' experiences as they lived them to help readers understand the essence of participants' experiences. Using a qualitative phenomenological design also allowed me to identify reoccurring problems and concerns so that implications could be outlined for future research.

Research Questions

This study investigated and described NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion to describe and understand the factors that influence teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. The following research questions were utilized:

Central Research Question

How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators?

Sub-Question One

What attitudes do general Pre-K teachers hold towards teaching children with mild, medium, and severe special needs in an inclusive setting within public schools in North Carolina?

Sub-Question Two

What are general Pre-K teachers perceived self-efficacy of inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina?

Sub-Question Three

What do general Pre-K teachers voice as the main barriers (if any) that prohibit them from providing best practices and highly successful outcomes to special needs children within inclusive settings in public schools of North Carolina?

Sites and Participants

The current study was conducted in two North Carolina school districts. The participants for the study were required to be NC Pre-K teachers because these teachers are the target population with a gap in the literature concerning their attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. It must be noted that I, the researcher of this study, have a professional affiliation with the sites chosen for this study. Before moving to the community college sector, I, the researcher, held a position as a general NC Pre-K teacher for both school districts during my time as a teacher. Both the sites and participants are critical pieces to this study's topic.

Sites

Permission to conduct the current study in North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Classes was obtained from two school districts in southeastern North Carolina counties. One county has a population of 54,764; the other has a population of 130,625. Both school systems are in the Sandhills region of North Carolina. Both school districts have a student and teaching population that are culturally, ethnically, or racially diverse. The two combined school districts have an estimated 5.5% student population with identified disabilities from ages three through five.

The study occurred in seven different public schools within the school systems that house an NC Pre-K class. I chose these two school systems because they are in counties that are side by

side. Their NC Pre-K programs follow the same curriculum, guidelines for teacher qualifications, academic calendar, and processes for children with special needs. Additionally, both districts are at the forefront of a national court case involving the inclusive education of a former Pre-K student with special needs—the two combined school districts house over 55 NC Pre-K classrooms with approximately 75 NC Pre-K teachers. The schools within these school systems that house NC Pre-K classes fall into the rural or suburban category. One school system employs one coordinator, a North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Coordinator, who oversees its NC Pre-K program, and an administrator who oversees its curriculum and instruction. The other school system employs one NC Pre-K coordinator and two NC Pre-K monitors that helped direct the program, curriculum, instruction, and teachers. The setting played a vital role in the study because it allowed me to observe and conversate with the participants in their natural setting. The locations ensured that I obtained enough participants to carry out this study.

Participants

The participants for this study were general teachers who teach Pre-K in a public school located in the state of North Carolina. This study did not place any requirements on gender, race, or level of education. However, teachers in this study were required to have taught NC Pre-K for at least one or more years and have taught at least one student with special needs or an IEP. A total of 10 participants were selected to meet the minimum requirements for Liberty University's qualitative dissertation.

Researcher Positionality

I was an educator in Early Childhood Education for over twenty years. During those twenty years, I observed the field of Early Childhood Education in North Carolina evolve from being "a babysitting service" with no curriculum to a structured learning environment with a

curriculum aligned to North Carolina's common core standards. Having taught for the NC Pre-K program (both in a Head Start setting and in the public school setting), I experienced the struggles of implementing inclusive practices, especially during my early years as a beginning and inexperienced Pre-K teacher. Therefore, my personal and professional beliefs as a former early childhood educator and advocate for young children were the forces that ignited my inquiry for this study.

Interpretive Framework

The overarching interpretive framework for this study is grounded in social constructivism because my personal, professional, and educational background, in addition to my experiences, evoked me to pursue research that would increase the literature on Early Childhood Education. Lev Vygotsky (1978) defines social constructivism as learning built from knowledge constructed through social interactions of humans, which is shared. Creswell & Poth (2018) state that a researcher's goal in engulfing a social constructivism framework is to understand the world in which they live and work. Adhering to a social constructivist paradigm allowed me, as the researcher, to guide the data collection by utilizing open-ended questions that enabled the study participants to dictate their personal experiences concerning the phenomena. Concerning social constructivism in qualitative studies, Creswell and Poth (2018) state, "The more open-ended the questioning, the better, as the researcher listens carefully to what people say or do in their life setting" (p. 23).

Philosophical Assumptions

A qualitative study was the best fit for this research study because my philosophical assumptions navigated the study's direction. My methodological assumption for this study was to build the study based solely on the participants' stories instead of my perspectives and

experiences. Creswell and Poth (2018) note that a methodological assumption uses inductive logic to study the topic within its context.

Ontological Assumption

My ontological assumption for the study sought to understand the nature of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I aimed to investigate and consider the varied experiences concerning NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. My ontological philosophical assumption taught me to ask clarifying and follow-up questions.

Epistemological Assumption

My epistemological assumptions allowed me to be subjective to the participants' experiences. I acknowledged that I was the researcher seeking to examine, reveal, and describe the true essence of general NC Pre-K teachers' lived experiences regarding their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy due to the inclusion of special needs children in their classrooms. Brundrett et al. (2013) explain that epistemology assumption is knowledge concerning scope, validity, and bases. I used my knowledge and stance as a veteran Pre-K teacher to establish a good rapport with the participants and develop questions to help them feel comfortable sharing their stories.

Axiological Assumption

My axiological assumption allowed me to acknowledge my bias concerning Pre-K teachers and children. As a former teacher who taught NC Pre-K for more than twenty years, I witnessed various attitudes and abilities of other general NC Pre-K teachers towards special needs children placed in their classes. The effects of those teachers' attitudes and skills on their Pre-K students with special needs were evident in the students' outcomes. I believe that all children can learn according to their capabilities. However, as a former NC Pre-K teacher with many special needs

children placed in my class throughout my teaching years, I also understand that having special needs children enrolled in your general class can strain a teacher's ability to implement effective instruction evenly.

Researcher's Role

As a former general NC Pre-K teacher who taught many children with identified special needs that ranged from mild to severe disabilities, my professional and educational experiences cultivated a desire to conduct the current study. Therefore, the philosophical assumption that brought me to this study is ontological. It allowed me to ask, "What is the nature of reality?" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.20) as I examined other NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. As the main instrument for collecting data, I utilized Giorgi's (2009) concept of bracketing, in which I did not forget what I had experienced. Still, I did not let my experiences interfere with the described experiences of the participants of this study so that I could gain a genuine understanding of their lived experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion. The method of bracketing is what Mouskatakis (1994) refers to as epoche; it helps the researcher set aside his or her bias to gain an authentic understanding of the participants' experiences concerning the phenomena. According to Beyer (2020), the theory of Epoche was first termed by Husserl in 1906. I adhered to Husserl's Epoche to bracket my assumptions to ensure I collected information strictly from the participants' textural descriptions.

Utilizing Epoche increased the data triangulation because it placed me in a position where I could set aside my subjective state of mind and be more objective in reporting the true information gathered from the participants. My role was strictly being the inquisitive researcher

as I sat in each teacher's class and inquired about their experience as an NC Pre-K teacher concerning their perceptions and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion.

As a qualitative phenomenological researcher, I received the chance to obtain accurate, in-depth, sensitive information from the participants in my study. I utilized member checking in the data analysis process to ensure that I stayed straight and genuinely articulated the NC Pre-K teachers' lived experiences regarding the studied phenomena. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), member checking increases the study's validity because participants check the data for accuracy. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that member checking is "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 314)

Procedures

This process began with me deriving a study that would add to the literature and a method that would best fit carrying out the study. I chose to investigate NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion using the qualitative and phenomenological research design because they best fit my study. Next, I chose two theories to ground my study, conducted a literature review to support my study, and wrote out the methodology, which formed chapters 1-3 and became my dissertation proposal. I defended my proposal in June of 2022. I submitted my application to the IRB in July of 2022. This study received approval from Liberty University's IRB in October 2022 (See Appendix B for IRB approval). I sent recruitment letters and participant screening surveys during the first week of November 2022. I received replies and surveys within the first two weeks. I emailed ten qualifying participants' consent forms and began setting up individual interviews the first week of December 2022. I completed the first individual interview in the first week of December 2022 and the last in March 2023. I completed the focus group interview in January of 2023. Prior to the individual interviews, the participants

turned in their document artifacts. After I collected all the data, I transcribed the audio data. I then sent the transcripts to the participants for member checking. It took me until May 2023 to transcribe all the data and complete the member checking. When I received the okay from the participants that the transcripts were correct, I began analyzing the data manually and with the software NVivo. I analyzed the data into themes that reoccurred from the codes. I finished analyzing the data in August of 2023, in which I wrote Chapter 4, the Findings, and then I wrote Chapter 5, the Study Results.

Permissions

In June of 2022, I submitted a formal site consent request to two school districts in southeastern North Carolina, requesting permission to conduct my study in their school districts. The title, purpose of the study, participant requirements, and documents to be collected were explained in full detail to the granting school districts. The site consent request form thoroughly explained that the school systems and participants would be kept anonymous and that participation in the study was completely voluntary. Permission was obtained from both school districts in July of 2022 (See Appendix F for site one consent and Appendix G for site two consent). Once I received site consent, I completed and applied with all needed documents and my research proposal to Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) seeking permission to conduct this study (See Appendix A for IRB application). The IRB approved this study in October of 2022 (See Appendix B for IRB approval). After following the recruitment process and screening the potential participants, I obtained permission from each participant by emailing them a stamped consent form issued to me by Liberty's IRB to sign electronically. Ten general NC Pre-K teachers from both school districts returned their consent forms between November 2022 and February 2023 and were permitted to be in this study.

Recruitment Plan

To recruit participants, I emailed a recruitment letter to all the regular NC Pre-K teachers in the two school districts selected for the study (See Appendix C for the participant recruitment letter). The email dictated the study's purpose and gave examples of the proposed interview questions and a qualifications/pre-screen survey. This qualitative study adhered to the selection of a specific sample to ensure the adequate collection of information about the phenomenon concerning the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy of NC Pre-K teachers towards the inclusion of special needs children in their classes. The participants for the study were selected by utilizing the purposeful sampling method. Robinson (2014) stated that purposive sampling intentionally selects participants based on their ability to identify with a particular theme, concept, or phenomenon. According to Given (2008), "Within the broad process of sampling, choosing the actual sample is the second step in a two-step process, which begins with defining the population that is eligible for inclusion in the sample" (p. 797). Approximately 1,000 general education teachers teach Pre-K in North Carolina public schools (UNC School of Government, 2017). However, not all NC Pre-K general teachers would meet the study's criteria if random sampling were used. Therefore, the potential sample pool for this research study was less than 1,000.

Purposeful criterion sampling was used to narrow the sample pool. Purposeful criterion sampling is noted by Patton (2015) as the predetermined criterion that participants must meet to be selected for a study. A purposeful sample, according to Creswell and Poth (2018), is an "intentional sample, a group of people that can best inform the researcher about the research problem under examination" (p. 118). Purposeful sampling ensured that the study participants had the qualifications and experiences aligned with the examined phenomenon. Therefore, during data collection, each participant had to be a general NC Pre-K teacher in a public school

and have at least one special needs child in their class. Alternatively, the teacher had to hold the position as an NC Pre-K teacher for more than a year and had to have taught at least one special needs child in their class during those years. This study required a minimum sample of ten general NC Pre-K teachers to be selected. According to Polkinghorne (1989), the sample size is small, and a sample set of 5-25 participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied is sufficient. The selection of ten participants fulfilled the minimum requirements of Liberty University's sample set for a qualitative dissertation.

The qualification survey was linked to the recruitment letter emailed to all the NC Pre-K teachers within the two school districts chosen for the study. The qualification survey (see Appendix D for the participant screening survey) consists of the following questions:

1. Are you a general education Pre-K teacher? Yes or No
2. Do you currently have a student in your class with special needs? Yes or No
3. Have you taught NC Pre-K for more than a year? Yes or No.
4. If you answered yes to question 3, how many years have you taught NC Pre-K?
5. If you answered yes to question 3, did you have any special needs children in your general education class during your prior years of teaching NC Pre-K? Yes or No

The qualification survey (See Appendix D for participant screening survey) was piloted by surveying three NC Pre-K teachers in settings not part of this study's sites. The first NC Pre-K teacher who piloted the survey questions worked at a Head Start center that housed NC Pre-K classes. The second was an NC Pre-K teacher in a private daycare, and the third was an NC Pre-K teacher who taught in a public school outside the two chosen districts in this study. I also submitted the qualifications survey to the professor, who reviewed my methodology since they had experience formulating and conducting surveys to ensure the survey met the needs to

choose the sample for this study.

The recruitment email dictated the study's purpose and gave examples of the interview questions and a qualifications/pre-screen survey. The initial email also informed the participants that I, the researcher, would review their submission upon completing the qualifications survey to participate in the study. The email also detailed that the semi-structured interviews conducted would be audio-recorded. The initial email also informed the possible participants that four participants would be selected from among the 10 participants to take part in a separate focus group interview if they met the initial qualifications for the study and their screening survey showed that they had taught five or more years in NC Pre-K and had taught five or more students with special needs or IEP's during their years as an NC Pre-K teacher. The possible participants were also informed that the focus group interview would consist of four people in which five semi-structured questions would be asked and audio recorded.

I informed the possible participants that all their information would be secured in a locked location. I also informed the participants that any identifying information would not be used as their identity would remain anonymous by assigning each participant a code. I stressed in the email that participation was entirely voluntary. I also informed all possible participants that if they volunteered and were selected to participate in the study, they would receive their choice of a fifty-dollar Amazon or Walmart gift card for participation in the individual interviews. The participants were also informed that those who qualified and participated in the focus group interview would receive a second gift card of forty dollars from Amazon or Wal-Mart. The participants were informed that the gift cards would be issued after they completed the member-checking process. I informed the participants that all the information collected would be kept in a secure, locked place and that I would be the only one with the keys to access the information.

In the recruitment email, I outlined the time frame. I informed the participants of the approximate time required for completing the interview, focus group interview, document artifacts, and follow-ups for participants to be part of member checking. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that member checking helps ensure participants' experiences and words are represented in the transcriptions, analysis, and results.

I received around 25 replies from teachers; I looked through all the returned participant survey screenings to screen the interested NC Pre-K teachers to see who qualified to participate in the study. Fifteen participants qualified; however, I only chose ten to email a qualifying participant consent form to sign digitally through e-signature or to download, print, sign the consent form, then scan it or take a photo with a smart device and send it back through email. I emailed the five remaining qualifying participants and indicated they qualified, but I only needed ten participants. I informed them that I would hold on to their participant surveys just in case any of the ten participants I chose did not participate in the study. Once consent forms were received, I emailed each participant and set up interviews via Zoom, as the schools in this study did not allow outside visitors. I also sent the participants a document labeled Personal Course and Training Log (See Appendix H for participant course and training log) for them to complete and email back to me and informed them also to email me three of their lesson plans for the document artifacts as indicated in the recruitment email.

Data Collection Plan

To answer the research questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), qualitative researchers develop their instrument mainly open-ended questions rather than relying on questionnaires or tools that other researchers have constructed. The questions for the interviews allowed the participants to dictate

their responses with details. I also collected document artifacts from each participant. I also conducted a focus group interview with four participants to help reveal and describe general NC Pre-K teachers' lived experiences teaching children with special needs. The following section will explain the specific data collection methods of interviews, document artifacts, and focus groups.

Individual Interviews Data Collection Approach

The interview process engulfed the start of a voice recorder and an introduction of myself as the study's researcher. I then dictated a detailed description of the purpose of the study and asked the participants to introduce themselves. I also informed the participants that their identities would be omitted from the audio, and their transcriptions would entail a code instead of their names. I then began asking the participants the open-ended interview questions and some additional questions to clarify and follow up on information. Asking clarifying and possible follow-up questions and having space for reflective notes are essential for collecting interview data (Sandelowski, 2000). I took reflective notes to assist me with recording the gestures and possible feelings regarding participants' responses during the process.

Semi-structured interviews allowed me to provide the teachers with flexibility and the capacity to derive in-depth and rich information from the teachers. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to reply to the questions using their own words, whereas a quantitative survey would limit their responses (May, 1997). Inquiring teachers about their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion is assumed to be a sensitive topic. Conducting semi-structured interviews was the best approach due to studying topics of sensitivity and complexity (Naz et al., 2022). Moustakas (1994) suggests that qualitative researchers ask their participants two broad questions about their experience of the phenomenon. Creswell and Poth (2018) cite

Moustakas's (1994) two broad questions: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon" (p. 79)? According to Creswell and Poth (2018), other open-ended questions can be asked. However, Moustakas (1994) asserted that questions are essential for gathering data that will allow the researcher to gain textual and structural descriptions of the participants' lived experiences, ultimately leading to a general understanding of the participants' everyday experiences.

The audio recordings were saved to a flash drive and on my computer. The flash drive was secured in a locked filing cabinet, and a password secured the file on my computer to gain access. I am the only person with the key to the filing cabinet and the password to the file on my computer. The transcribed audio recordings, handwritten notes from the individual interviews, focus group interviews, and document artifacts were put away in a locked cabinet to which only I, the researcher, had access. The data from this study will be held in a secure location for three years from the time of competition.

Individual Interview Questions

The following are the open-ended questions that I utilized to collect the proposed study data.

1. Can you please introduce yourself to me?
2. Will you share with me your gender, age, and race?
3. What is your highest level of education and major?
4. How many years of teaching experience do you currently have?
5. How many years do you have teaching NC Pre-K?
6. What does your educational background consist of?
7. What, if any, training do you currently have regarding students with special needs?

8. Approximately how many students have you taught (previously and currently) that had an identified or unidentified special need?
9. What type of special needs students (previously or currently) have been enrolled in your class?
10. What is your definition of inclusion?
11. What main factors do you feel positively affect your attitude towards including children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
12. What main factors do you feel negatively affect your attitude towards including children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
13. What main factors do you feel are barriers to your success in including special needs children in your regular Pre-K class?
14. What main factors do you feel increase your self-efficacy to effectively include children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
15. What main factors do you feel are barriers that impede your self-concept to effectively include children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
16. What are your thoughts about including children with mild special needs in your class?
17. What are your thoughts about including children with medium-level special needs in your class?
18. What are your thoughts about including children with severe special needs in your class?
19. Do you have anything else you would like to share regarding your belief or perceived self-concept for the successful inclusion of special needs students in a regular Pre-K class?

Questions 1-7 were derived to evoke the participants' demographics. Galaterou and

Antoniou (2020) concluded that most investigations on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion generally controlled key demographics such as gender, age, experience, and educational attainment. Supriyanto (2019) also concluded that teachers' attitudes towards inclusion were impacted by education, major, specific training in inclusion, and the type of disability students have.

Questions 8-9 were derived to reveal the types of special needs students included in the general Pre-K teachers' classrooms. Studies by Lee et al. (2015) and Mngo and Mngo (2018) conclude that a correlation exists between preschool teachers' acceptance, experience, and training regarding the types of special needs children have. Lee et al. (2015) report that the kind of disability or special need a child has can influence the attitude (positive or negative) a teacher has toward including that type of SNC in his or her class.

Question 10 generated how the participants interpreted inclusion. Nilholm and Göransson (2017) concluded that the definition of inclusion lacks clarity, and the literature broadly defines it. Krischler et al. (2019) add that the lack of a clear definition of inclusion impacts research findings concerning teachers' attitudes toward inclusion and the effectiveness of their inclusive practices.

Questions 11-15 comprised the broad questions that examined the teachers' experiences regarding the phenomena (attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion) suggested by Moustakas (1994). Additionally, questions 11-15 helped reveal factors influencing teachers' attitudes towards inclusion. "Factors affecting teacher attitudes towards inclusion include support services, adequate resources, administrator support, type of disability, and appropriate training" (Alexander et al., 2016, p. 19). Supriyanto (2019) suggested that further research studies be conducted on teachers' self-efficacy to determine if self-efficacy plays a role in

influencing attitudes toward inclusion.

Questions 16-18 were follow-up questions to elicit precise details of teachers' attitudes toward inclusion based on specific special needs. According to Lee et al. (2015), "It is critical to understand teachers' acceptance of inclusion so that effective practices for promoting inclusion are elucidated" (p. 85). Question 19 allowed the participants to detail information I, the researcher, did not probe.

I utilized open-ended questions consisting of language and dialogue relevant to phenomena easily understood by the participants (Bryman & Bell, 2011). Once Liberty's IRB approved the study, the collection of data began. Upon IRB approval, the questions utilized for the interviews were field studied by several professionals specializing in early childhood inclusion. An NC Pre-K exceptional children's coordinator and division leader for EC Pe-K studied the individual interview questions and focus group questions for accuracy to the phenomena and gave their approval. I piloted the semi-structured questions for the individual and focus group interviews with two NC Pre-K teachers who were not selected to engage in the study. One teacher taught NC Pre-K in a Head Start center, and the other teacher taught NC Pre-K in a public school setting outside of the two districts utilized for this study. Eliciting the professionals' stance on the questions and piloting them with teachers helped to establish that the questions were valid for the study. The teachers who piloted the study provided lots of information that indicated that the questions would provide sufficient information to answer the central research question and sub-questions outlined for this study. The teachers who piloted the interview and focus group questions did not indicate that any changes should be made to the questions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

To analyze the data collected from the individual interviews, I transcribed and checked, memoed ideas that emerged during the interviews, and then read and read to code the data to organize it into themes. I transcribed each audio-recorded interview verbatim into written text using the software NVivo and manually added information that the software could not pick up. Utilizing software assistance allowed me to play the audio-recorded interviews with the participants' spoken words, and the software could transcribe the words into typed text. I reviewed the audio and written text to ensure every word was transcribed. I manually added words that the software did not transcribe to the transcripts. I also reviewed the transcripts and numbered each segment to help with coding. Next, I read and re-read the transcription in its entirety to gain an understanding of the whole phenomenon. Transcribing, reading, and re-reading the transcripts thoroughly helps researchers organize their data and identify significant reoccurring statements (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As I read the transcribed data thoroughly, I used a highlighter and pencil to highlight and make notes in the text's margin. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that highlighting and noting significant reoccurring statements allows the researcher to begin looking for emergent themes from the data, which I did.

Focus Groups Data Collection Approach

This study utilized a focus group, the third form of data collection. A focus group is used in qualitative studies to collect in-depth information from individuals who share a common experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher leads a focus group, and its method is to obtain data from a group of purposely selected individuals (Ochieng et al., 2018). The topic for this study's focus group interview is teachers' attitudes and perceived self-competence towards including SNC in their regular classes. A focus group allows multiple individuals with the same

experiences to share their perceptions and opinions within a group discussion so that their data can be collected at once (Tumen-Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021).

This study's focus group intended to interview four participants who were all general NC Pre-K teachers who have/had SNC included in their regular classes. I used open-ended discussion questions that were audio recorded. The data was collected, stored on a flash drive, and formatted in an MP3 file. I stored the flash drive in a locked file cabinet, and the MP3 file is saved in a folder on my computer that is locked with a password. I am the only person with the key to the filing cabinet and the password to the MP3 file on my computer.

Focus Group Questions

Questions for the focus group interview were developed and piloted in the same fashion as the questions for the individual interviews. I asked the following questions in the focus group:

1. Describe your attitudes towards including SNC in your class.
2. Explain the challenges you perceive in teaching atypical and SNC in your class.
3. What factors make SNC more accepting of you?
4. What factors do you perceive as barriers to your success as an inclusive educator?
5. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to discuss?

The five focus group questions were derived to reveal the attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion that the NC Pre-K teachers perceived themselves as having in common and elicit a group discussion (Moustakas, 1994).

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I transcribed the audio recording from the focus group interview into text using the NVivo qualitative data software assistant. I also manually read the transcripts as I listened to the audio recordings to insert text that NVivo omitted manually. NVivo guarantees only 90%

accurate transcription. As I read the transcripts, I manually transcribed any audio the software omitted to ensure it was transcribed word for word. After transcribing the focus group, I numbered the segments for reference to make it easier. I coded the data into themes by looking for similarities and commonalities among the participants' responses.

Document Artifacts Data Collection Approach

I collected artifacts from the teachers that illustrate their support of inclusive practices. The documents I collected from each participant were a Personal Course and Training Log documenting the courses and training/professional development teachers had obtained for inclusion. I also collected three lesson plans from each participant that align with the children's progress stages (beginning, middle, and end). To ensure confidentiality is maintained, I requested that the teacher use the code name I assigned to them for this study in place of their names on their Course and Training Log and their lesson plans. I also asked that any student identifying information be blacked out before scanning and emailing lesson plans, as students' names usually appear on the lesson plans of NC Pre-K teachers due to the curriculum they use.

Document Artifacts Data Analysis Plan

The documents were all read and re-read several times. I gave a detailed description of all the content in the documents collected. Next, code the documents and look for similarities and patterns found among the documents collected from each Pre-K teacher. Once similarities and patterns were extracted, I generated a table of reoccurrences to assist in developing themes to summarize the findings within the documents. According to Morgan (2022) document analysis data can corroborate with other collected data sources and be used to triangulate findings.

Data Synthesis

The data was analyzed both manually and using NVivo software. The data collected from the participants underwent a structured analysis approach to identify common reoccurring themes among the participants' shared stories to be reduced and described to understand the phenomenon's essential meaning. Moustakas (1994) asserts that transcendental phenomenology allows researchers to bracket out their own experiences and report the true lived experiences of the individuals in the study. According to Smith and Osborn (2015), the data collected and used in qualitative studies should be relevant to the studied content. I began the data analysis by bracketing out my experiences of including children with special needs in my general education classroom when I was a pre-K teacher. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), this helped me, as a researcher, set aside and limit my perceptions of the phenomena so that the study would focus directly on the participants' lived experiences.

Each form of data collection (individual interviews, focus group interviews, and documented artifacts) was transcribed into text as needed. The data was coded, and the codes formed subthemes and themes based on similarities that were derived from the data. Analyzing the collected data into themes allowed me to reduce and translate the information gathered on the phenomena so that others could understand it the way participants experienced it.

Trustworthiness

As the researcher of this study, I established the trustworthiness of the study by following the recommendations outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which suggest various ways to “establish efficacy in the 'truth' of the findings” (p. 218). According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), “trustworthiness” can be established through credibility (efficacy in the “truth” of the findings), transferability (dictating that the findings from the data can be utilized in other contexts), dependability (proving that the study is consistent and could be replicated), and confirmability

(showing that the participants shaped the data and finding of the study). The following sub-sections will further detail credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, as they all are essential for establishing trustworthiness in this qualitative research study.

Credibility

In all research, proving that the results are credible and trustworthy is critical.

Triangulation, as noted by Nobel and Heale (2019), is a method utilized to increase the credibility of the findings from a study and is achieved by combining either theories, methods, or observes within a study to hold down bias that may emerge from utilizing just a single method, theory, or observer. To increase the credibility and trustworthiness of this study, I utilized member checking for the triangulation of data collected and the data results (See Appendix L member checking questions). Member checks are the collaboration between the participants and researcher concerning the transcripts and the results. I sought the participants' input to check and ensure accuracy concerning their spoken words obtained from the interviews.

StatisticSolutions.com (2019) states, "Member checking is a qualitative technique used to establish the tenet of credibility in trustworthiness... as sharing either a summary of the findings or sharing the whole findings with the research participants" (p.1).

Transferability

To ensure that the study entailed transferability, I detailed the procedures and steps of the data collection and analysis. Detailing the procedures and steps taken during the data collection and analysis process will allow other researchers to replicate this study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017) regarding the phenomena of teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion in similar settings.

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) inform us that dependability is the consistency in which the study findings can be repeated. To ensure dependability, a dependability audit was conducted by my dissertation committee, which included a Qualitative Researcher Methodologist. The committee examined my research process and products to ensure that every step was consistent in conceptualizing the study, collecting the data, interpreting the results, and reporting the findings. I also kept an audit trail. The detailed description of the process and audit trail helps establish dependability in this study.

Confirmability

To assert confirmability, I conformed to an audit trail throughout the process. An audit trail allows researchers to detail the process of data collection, data analysis, and interpretation of the data (Statistical Solutions, 2020). I made notes and recorded the interesting topics as I collected data, and then I generated thoughts as I began coding the data. I used tables to show how the codes emerged and how the sub-themes and themes emerged from the data. I explained in the results what the themes mean.

Ethical Considerations

One potential ethical issue that could have resulted from this study was disclosing information that could negatively affect the participants and their schools. To avoid this concern, I followed the recommendations of Creswell and Poth (2018), who recommend using "composite stories so that individuals cannot be identified" (p. 56). I used codes instead of names to secure the identity and confidentiality of all participants and their workplaces. All information obtained for this study will continue to be kept secure on three separate flash drives, and all three flash drives will contain a password for access and be locked in secured locations. I will be the only

person with the key to the secured cabinets and passwords to access the transcripts and artifact documents.

Using “participants” for data collection is a potential ethical issue. To avoid this issue in my study, I offered the participants an incentive for their time by giving them a fifty-dollar gift card from their choice of Walmart or Amazon for their participation in the individual interviews and a forty-dollar gift card from their choice of Walmart or Amazon for those that participant in the focus group interview of this study. Additionally, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), "attend to opportunities for reciprocity" (p.55). Also, to ensure the participants that their identities would remain anonymous, and their words would not be changed, I followed up with the participants and engaged them in member checking.

Summary

The methods chapter represents the research design, data collection, and analysis of this qualitative phenomenological study on NC Pre-K teachers’ attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. I utilized a qualitative design because it allowed me to research with participants to learn about their experiences in their natural setting. The phenomenological approach allowed me to examine and describe the Pre-K teachers’ lived experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. As I conducted this qualitative phenomenological approach, I completed the study at two school systems sites with NC Pre-K programs. These two school systems, located in southeastern NC, had more than enough general NC Pre-K teachers to meet the criteria to be participants in the study. I relied on my experience and background to drive the study and derive interview questions for the individual and focus

group interviews. I adhered to the advice of Creswell and Poth (2018) as I avoided questions that could be leading so that the participants were able to share their lived experiences genuinely.

As noted, the primary data collection instrument was me, the researcher. The primary data collection method was individual and focus group interviews. The individual interview questions consisted of 19 open-ended questions, and the focus group had five open-ended questions. I generated all the questions for this study. However, to support the validity of the questions used in the interviews, all the questions were piloted by two professionals who work in the field of inclusion and exceptional children. The questions were then piloted by NC Pre-K teachers who were not in the study. After the IRB approved the study and data collection began, the interviews were conducted, audio recorded, and transcribed to text. The transcripts were highlighted manually and numbered so that I could begin coding the data into themes. The themes contained the participant quotes to ensure credibility. An audit trail was kept, member checking was completed, and the data collection and analysis were outlined step by step to help ensure the trustworthiness and replication of the study. The methodology I utilized was the most relevant for conducting this study because I wanted to describe and reveal the lived experiences of these NC Pre-K teachers concerning their attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. The results generated by this study could help NC's public instruction department address factors that impede and decrease teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter 4 entails the findings and results of the data analysis. This chapter begins with a description of the participants, followed by the data results, which are presented in various forms such as tables, charts, and themes, all derived from participants' individual interviews, focus group responses, and documents, in addition to detailing how the themes answered the research questions. The chapter ends with a summary.

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews individually and in a focus group and through the collection of document artifacts. The interviews were all transcribed and coded manually and with NVivo software to ensure accuracy. After the interviews were all transcribed, I read them while listening to the audio recordings to make corrections as needed. Next, I coded the data by hand and made notes in the margins of the transcripts. Then, I coded the transcripts in NVivo. I analyzed the data using thematic content analysis, the most common analysis method used in qualitative research. According to Maguire and Delahunt (2017), thematic analysis aims to identify themes, i.e., patterns in the data that are important or interesting, and use these themes to address the research or say something about an issue. Thematic content analysis allows researchers to summarize and interpret the data so that it makes sense to the readers. This chapter entails the findings of the data analysis as it begins with a description of the participants, followed by the data in the form of themes and charts, responses to the research question, and the conclusion of the chapter.

Participants

Participants for this qualitative phenomenological study were chosen through purposeful selection. Purposive sampling allows the researcher to choose the sample based on

characteristics that the participants for the study must possess, allowing the sample selection to be on purpose (Nikolopoulou, 2022). Participants were selected purposefully from two North Carolina districts with public Pre-Kindergarten classes included at their schools. Both districts are neighboring counties that primarily have students with racial backgrounds that are predominately Native American, African American, White, or Hispanic. The socio-economic background of the Pre-K students from both districts ranges from low to middle-income, as NC Pre-K targets students considered “at-risk.” Ten general education teachers were selected for the individual interviews through purposeful sampling. Criteria required for teachers to be considered participants in the study were: must be a NC Pre-K teacher in a public-school setting, must have at least one year of teaching experience in a general NC Pre-K class and must have taught at least one student with special needs.

An e-mail with a recruitment letter was sent to all NC Pre-K teachers in two school districts in Southeastern North Carolina to recruit participants for this study. The recruitment letter had a link inside the letter that allowed the NC Pre-K teachers to click on the link that took them to a participant survey. The participant survey was linked into the recruitment letter e-mail for teachers’ convenience. The participant survey was used to determine the eligibility of the prospective teachers to be participants in the study. Fifteen teachers responded to the recruitment letter that was e-mailed. All fifteen teachers filled out the participant survey. Twelve of teachers that completed the participant survey met the criteria to be participants in the study; however, only ten participants were needed. Ten participants were chosen amongst the qualified. The demographics of the participants can be found in the participant demographics of individual interviews (see Table 1).

Table 1*Participant Demographics of Individual Interviews*

Participants	Age	Race	Total Years of Teaching Experience	Years Teaching NC Pre-K	Highest Degree Earned	Educational Major
PK T1	41	African American	18	10	Bachelor's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T2	40	Native American	18	10	Bachelor's	Sociology with a Birth-Kindergarten Add-on license
PK T3	45	African American	12	5	Bachelor's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T4	50	White	25	16	Master's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T5	33	White	12	2	Master's	Leadership in Early Childhood Education
PK T6	45	Native American	23	18	Master's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T7	34	White	8	4	Bachelor's	Early Childhood Education
PK T8	44	African American	24	1yr. 4 mons.	Bachelor's	Sociology with a Birth-Kindergarten Add-on license
PK T9	35	White	10	10	Bachelor's	Early Childhood Education
PK T10	42	Native American	19	14	Bachelor's Master's	Early Childhood Education/Divinity

PK T1

PK T1 is a 41-year-old African American female with 18 years of teaching experience under her belt. She holds a bachelor's degree in Birth through Kindergarten education. For the last 10 years, she has dedicated herself to teaching in North Carolina's Pre-K programs, where she has passionately contributed to the early learning and development of countless young learners.

Before transitioning to the public schools of North Carolina, she taught Early Start and regular Head Start for 8 years. PK T1 shared that she had taught “roughly at least 10 or more kids” with

special needs, in her regular class during her 10 years as a NC Pre-K teacher. She defines inclusions as “everyone is treated the same, just with slight modifications or accommodations.”

PK T2

PK T2 is a 40-year-old Native American woman with a robust educational background with 18 years of teaching experience. She holds a bachelor’s degree in Sociology, supplemented by a specialized Birth through Kindergarten add-on license, equipping her with a unique perspective on early childhood education. Over the last ten years, PK T2 has been an integral part of North Carolina's Pre-Kindergarten education system, dedicating herself to the nurturing and development of young minds. Her teaching journey in NC Pre-K began at the site 1 district, where she spent eight years shaping the early educational experiences of countless children. For the past two years, PK T2 has brought her expertise and passion to a new setting, teaching NC Pre-K for site 2 of this study. Prior to teaching NC Pre-K, she was a teacher for her church’s Christian daycare for over 8 years. PK T2 said that throughout her tenure as a Pre-K teacher she has taught at least one or more students per year that were identified as special needs. She described an inclusive class as “a class that’s not regular but has regular kids and special needs kids.”

PK T3

PK T3, an African American female, was 45 years-old at the time this study was conducted. Her journey into teaching began from a foundational role, where she served as a teacher assistant for a Head Start Program for 7 years. The hands-on experience gained as an assistant teacher inspired her to further her educational attainment, leading her to obtain a degree in Birth through Kindergarten education. With a total of 12 years of teaching experience under her belt, PK T3 has spent the last five years focused on teaching in North Carolina's Pre-K program. PK T3 said

that since holding her position in NC Pre-K she has included children with “ADHD, ADD, Speech and Language, some with a slight hearing delay, and a few with behavior issues.” When describing a factor that influences her to have a positive attitude towards inclusion she stated, “my love and passion to work with children and help them to get to their next level of education.”

PK T4

PK T4 is a devoted educator with an impressive career spanning over a quarter of a century. At the time of this study, PK T4 was 50-years old. She identified as a white female with 25 years of teaching experience. Her first six months as a teacher, she worked for a child development center where she worked specifically with special needs children. Then she transitioned to public schools as an Exceptional Children’s (EC) teacher for a title 1 Pre-K where she taught for two years before teaching Kindergarten. She taught Kindergarten for 7 years before deciding to transition to a regular NC Pre-K class where she had acquired a notable 16 years. PK T4's academic journey is as remarkable as her professional one. She holds both a Bachelor's and a Master's degree in Birth through Kindergarten education. She shared that she had probably taught over 30 special needs children during the 16 years that she has taught in NC Pre-K. When sharing her idea of including special needs students, PK T4 shared, “include them in normal daily activities as much as you can and as much as they can do.”

PK T5

PK T5 was 33-year-old during the time this study was conducted. She is a white female with 12 years of teaching experience, to which her last two years has been in NC Pre-K. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education and a master's degree in Leadership in Early Childhood Education. Before joining the NC Pre-K team, she taught kindergarten for 8 years and

held a Head Start director position for 2 years. In the few short years that she has held her NC Pre-K position she has taught about five students with identified special needs. Her definition of inclusion consisted of “accepting all students in the classroom, regardless of race, regardless of educational level, and abilities or disabilities.”

PK T6

PK T6 is a Native American female that was 45 years in age during this study. She had 23-years of teaching experience that focused primarily on early childhood education. For the past 18 years, she dedicated herself to teaching NC Pre-K in the public-school setting. Before this, she held a lead teacher position in a Head Start setting as a More at Four (the former name for NC Pre-K) teacher. She holds both a bachelor's and a master's degree in Birth-Kindergarten education. PK T6 shared that during her 18-year tenure as a NC Pre-K teacher she has taught many young children with special needs ranging from mild speech and language delays to children on the autism spectrum. She expressed her thoughts on inclusion, “I believe in inclusion, but I also believe that children should learn in an environment that best meets their overall needs, be it in a regular class or an EC class.”

PK T7

PK T7, a 34-year-old white female at the time of this research, has 8 years of teaching experience. She holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education. She began her teaching career as a Kindergarten teacher. After four years of enriching Kindergarten students' lives, she transitioned to North Carolina's Pre-K program where she has stayed for the past four years. When discussing inclusion PK T7 stated, “I support inclusion. It can have barriers, depending on children's ability. I think it allows special students to be included with peers their age. But if it's a severe need, it can be difficult, because they usually require extra support.”

PK T8

PK T8 is a 44-year-old African American woman with a remarkable 24 years of experience in teaching. She has spent the last year and a half teaching in North Carolina's Pre-K program. Before joining NC Pre-K, she dedicated her efforts to teaching 4-year-olds within the Head Start Program, showcasing her passion for early childhood education. Her academic background includes a bachelor's degree in Sociology, complemented by a specialized add-on license in Birth through Kindergarten education. She shared, "I feel that all children have a right to be included but teaching special needs kids with mild disabilities or impairments is a lot easier than those with severe ones."

PK T9

PK T9 is a 35-year-old white female who has dedicated the last decade of her career to teaching in North Carolina's Pre-K classes. Her commitment to early childhood education is not only reflected in her 10 years of experience but also in her academic achievements. She holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education and is furthering her expertise by pursuing a master's degree in School Administration where she hopes to become a principal. When discussing inclusion PK T9 said, "I am all for inclusion and placing special needs students in regular classrooms; If (she paused and pointed) if, it is the best place for them because sometimes a regular ed setting is just not right for certain students."

PK T10

PK T10 is a 42-year-old Native American woman with a rich 19-year history in the teaching profession, showcasing her deep commitment to education. For much of her career, specifically the last 14 years, she has focused on teaching in North Carolina's Pre-K programs, where she has played a pivotal role in nurturing young minds during their formative years. Her journey in

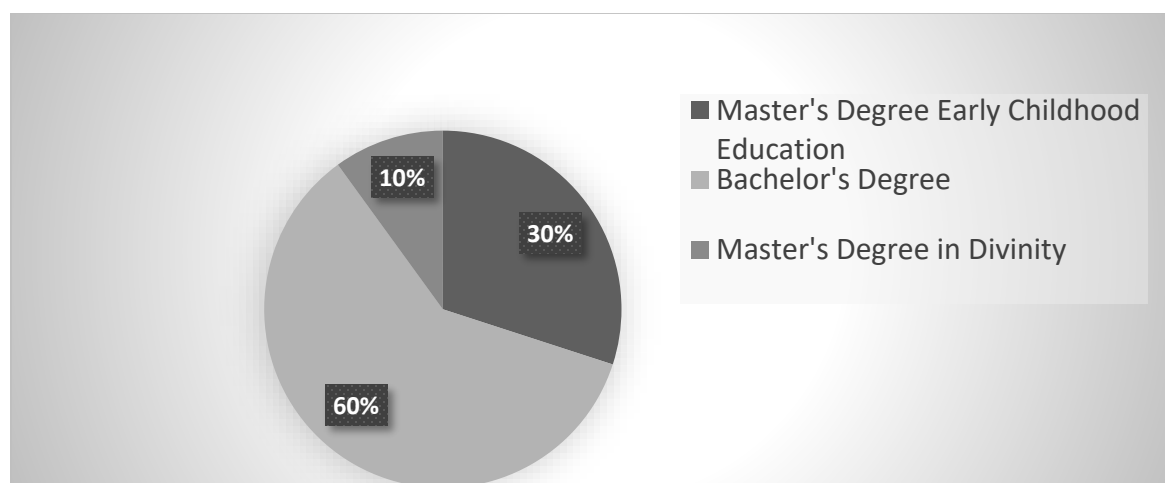
education began with a dedication to supporting special needs children in a developmental setting, a role she held for a few years before transitioning to work with a Head Start program. She left Head Start to assumed a position as an NC Pre-K teacher in a NC public school setting. PK T10's educational background is as diverse as her teaching experience. She holds a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education, which laid the foundation for her career in teaching young children. In addition to her educational qualifications in teaching, she also pursued and obtained a master's degree in Divinity. When defining inclusion, PK T10 said, "it's like having high flyers and low flyers in the same class."

Participants' Educational Demographics

The participants in this study all had North Carolina teaching licenses for Birth through Kindergarten education. However, the teachers in this study had different levels of degree obtainment in the field of Early Childhood Education, with 30% obtaining a master's degree and the other 70% obtaining a bachelor's degree (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Highest Degree Obtained

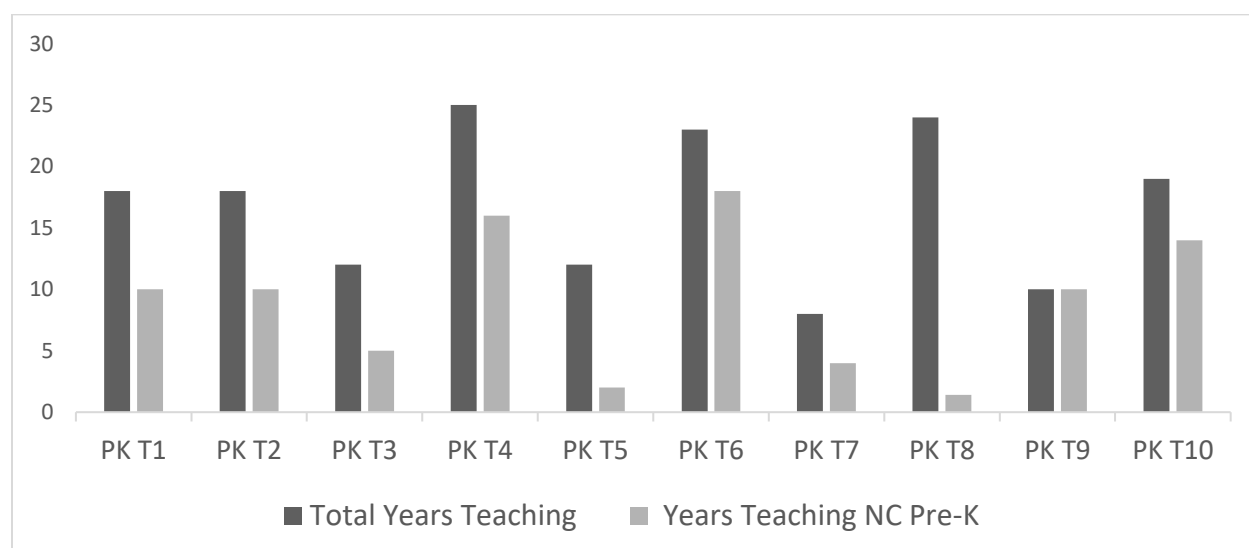


Teachers' Teaching Experience

Participants for this study had to have at least one or more years of teaching experience within a general Pre-Kindergarten class housed in a North Carolina public school. In this study, the participants' years of experience in the teaching profession and years of teaching experience in NC Pre-K vary (see Figure 2).

Figure 2

Teaching Experience



Focus Group Participants

Participants for the focus group interview were selected through purposeful sampling. The required criteria to be selected to participate in the focus group interview included: Teachers must have met all requirements to be a participant in the individual interview, additionally the teacher must have taught NC Pre-K for five or more years and must have taught at least five or more special needs students in NC Pre-K (see Table 2).

Table 2

Focus Group Participant Demographics

Participants	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Teaching NC Pre-K	Estimated Number of Special Needs Children taught	Highest Degree Earned	Educational Major
PK T2	18	10	10 -20	Bachelor's	Sociology with a Birth-Kindergarten Add-on license
PK T4	25	16	Probably around 50	Master's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T6	23	18	30-40	Master's	Birth-Kindergarten Education
PK T10	19	14	About 28 or more	Bachelor's/ Master's	Birth-Kindergarten/ Divinity

Document Artifacts

College courses, professional development, and training in special education, special needs, and disabilities all impact teacher knowledge and ability to general lessons and activities for children with special needs. General teachers in the NC Pre-K program must have a bachelor's degree or licensure in early childhood education. Early childhood education teacher preparation programs vary by college and university; therefore, the special education courses required for degree completion differ among educational institutions. Additionally, professional development and training in special needs and disabilities differs among districts and schools. For this study, I analyzed the course and training log and the lesson plans collected from the NC Pre-K teachers who participated in the study. The document artifacts revealed reoccurring code words across the participants' course and training log (Table 3) and lesson plans (Table 4).

Table 3

Participant Personal Course and Training Log: Appearance of Code Words

Codes	Appearance Across Participants
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	PK T1	PK T2	PK T3	PK T4	PK T5	PK T6	PK T7	PK T8	PK T9	PK T10
Special education college courses	3	3								2-3
MTSS training	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1
CP&I Training	0	1				1				
Autism Training				1		1				
LETRS	1	1		1		1	1	1		
Al's Pals	1	1		1				1		
Other Training	1		1		1				1	

Note. The numbers correspond to the number of courses or training each participant has indicated for each code.

Table 4

Participant Lesson Plans: Appearance of Code Words

Codes	Appearance Across Participants' lesson plans									
	PK T1	PK T2	PK T3	PK T4	PK T5	PK T6	PK T7	PK T8	PK T9	PK T10
Differentiated	X	X		X		X		X	X	X
Individualization			X	X	X		X			X
High / Low Level						X				
IEP	X			X		X			X	

Note. The Xs indicate that the code appears in the participant's lesson plan at least one time.

Results

This phenomenological study aimed to investigate and understand the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy of general Pre-K teachers in North Carolina's public school settings towards inclusion. Examining these teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion reveals factors that influence the attitudes (negative or positive) and perceived self-

efficacy (low or high) that general Pre-K teachers have toward including SNC in their classes and the barriers that impede successful inclusion. A qualitative study was chosen as the design for this research study because of the scarcity of literature on Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy regarding teaching students with special needs. The research was conducted from an interpretative perspective as the researcher brought her own experiences to the dialogue with the interview participants. A central question and three sub-questions were utilized to govern this study.

CRC. How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of NC, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators?

SQ1. What attitudes do general Pre-K teachers hold towards teaching children with mild, medium, and severe special needs in an inclusive setting within public schools in NC?

SQ2. What are general Pre-K teachers perceived self-efficacy of inclusion when teaching special needs children in NC public schools?

SQ3. What do general Pre-K teachers voice as the main barriers (if any) that prohibit them from providing best practices and highly successful outcomes to special needs children?

Data was collected through individual interviews, which took between 45- 60 minutes to conduct via online Zoom sessions, a focus group interview, which took approximately one hour and a half to conduct via online Zoom session, and document artifacts of 3 lesson plans and a personal course and training log per participant, which took around 15 minutes to collect from each participant. The qualitative data collected from the interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim. They were read and re-read to ensure the transcribed text matched the audio recording. Then, the individual and focus group interview transcripts were presented to the

appropriate participants for member checking. Next, the collected documents were read, re-read, and analyzed by looking for word frequencies that allowed me to generate codes and incidences of similarities across the data. Next, all three forms of collected qualitative data went through the last phases of thematic analysis. I subjectively derived codes and generated sub-themes and themes manually and then with NVivo software (See Appendix K for codes and themes table). I used open coding because I preferred to derive my codes from the collected data. From the data analysis emerged, four primary themes: Pre-K teachers define and describe inclusion, main influences of teacher attitudes towards inclusion, main influences of perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion, and barriers to successful inclusion (See Table 5).

Table 5

Themes

Theme Number	Theme Description
1	Pre-K Teachers Define and Describe Inclusion
2	Main Influences of Teacher Attitudes Towards Inclusion
3	Main Influences of Perceived Self-Efficacy Regarding Inclusion
4	Barriers to Successful Inclusion

Theme 1: Pre-K Teachers Define and Describe Inclusion

Theme 1 revealed the participants' definitions and descriptions of inclusion based on their experiences teaching SNC in the general classroom. North Carolina's general Pre-K classrooms are considered inclusive environments as special needs children are enrolled in the same class as their peers without special needs. The data shows that all the participants in this study said that inclusion was a form of placing SNC in the same classroom with peers who do not have special needs. PKT6, with 18 years teaching NC Pre-K and 23 years total teaching in Early Childhood, shared, "Inclusion is when special needs children or children with disabilities

are placed in a regular classroom with regular learners, and they all are taught and learn together.” PKT10, who has 19 years of teaching experience in Early Childhood, of which 14 have been in NC Pre-K, said, “Inclusion is where you have both typical and atypical developing children inside of a classroom, and they are kind of learning with each other based on their development.” PKT4, who has taught NC Pre-K for 16 years and has been a teacher for 25 years, said that inclusion is when SNCs are placed in a regular class and given normal day activities like regular kids, as much as possible. PKT8, who has completed one full year of teaching NC Pre-K, shared that her definition of inclusion was allowing children with special needs to be in a classroom with regular kids and “letting them interact with children that are on the level where they are supposed to be.” With 18 years of teaching experience, ten being in NC Pre-K, PKT2 said that inclusion means “not being able to function as everybody else and instead of having to be in a building by themselves they are included in a class with regular kids.”

Several participants mentioned that inclusion is educating and treating special needs children the same as regular students. PKT1 states, “Inclusion to me is that everyone is treated the same, just with slight modifications or accommodations.” PKT1 added that she believes SNC gets to experience everything the typical children experience. PKT9 explains that inclusion is “all students included in a classroom, regardless of their extra needs or their specific needs, and being able to get the same information presented to them in a way that they will understand, and they will be able to grow and learn.” PKT5 said that “inclusion is accepting all students in a regular class regardless of race, educational level, abilities, or disabilities.” She also said that every student should be able to enter a classroom and be offered an equal education. PKT7 states, “My definition of inclusion would be including everyone no matter what they know,

whatever their disability is; including them and treating them fairly in the classroom and giving them that equal opportunity that everyone else gets.”

While explaining her definition of inclusion, PKT3 notes that inclusion replaces mainstreaming. In this act, students with special needs are placed in separate classes but pulled into regular classes only for specific periods. As stated by PKT3, when schools used mainstreaming, “they (students with special needs) were pulled in and out for services, or they were served in an Exception Children (EC) class; now they are placed in a regular classroom to get services.” The participants described the types of children enrolled in their classes during their years as general NC Pre-K teachers.

Types of Special Needs Children Included in Pre-K General Classrooms

North Carolina’s Pre-Kindergarten program encompasses an inclusive philosophy. Therefore, children with various identified and unidentified special needs are often placed in general Pre-K classrooms. This study revealed various types of special needs children that are placed in the classrooms of general NC Pre-K teachers. The types of special needs reported by the participants ranged from very mild needs, such as simple speech or language delays, to severe needs, such as those that require the assistance of a personal care aide. However, the main types of SNC that were shared amongst the participants’ experiences were speech and language needs, autism spectrum, fine and gross motor delays, and behavior concerns. Fewer common types of SNC mentioned by participants include Spinal Bifida, Down Syndrome, heart condition, hearing deficiency, visual impairments, and developmental delays.

Speech and Language Needs. Children with speech and language needs topped the chart as all the NC Pre-K teachers that participated in this study reported having students with speech and language needs enrolled in their general classrooms. When asked what types of children with

special needs have been enrolled in their class PKT4 stated “Definitely speech and language, some speech, some just language.” PKT6 explained, “Quite often we get a lot of kids with speech and language deficiencies. Some of the children (with speech or language issues) come to Pre-K and they may already have an IEP.” PKT2 expressed that she had several students over the years in her class that had speech impairments. PKT6 explained speech and language types as “Enrolled speech and language can mean children who are expressively delayed and who have issues expressing language.” PKT6 also reported that SNC with speech concerns may have issues with processing spoken language which she refers as “receptive language delays” and difficulties with pronouncing words, that she addresses as “they have articulation issues.”

Children on the Autism Spectrum. This study showed that the second most mentioned type of SNC placed in general Pre-K teachers’ classes were children on the autism spectrum. Seven of the ten participants informed me that they have had a child with autism placed in their class. PKT1, who has taught NC Pre-K for 10 years, explains “Here lately I’ve been getting a lot of kids that are autistic. You know in the previous years it was like, just speech, but now it's more kids that I'm receiving are autistic.” PKT6 shared that she had several kids come through her room on the autism spectrum and some were very high functioning while some were very low functioning. Participants PKT2, PKT4, and PKT9 simply stated that children with “autism” were among several types of SNC that had been enrolled in their class since teaching NC Pre-K. PKT5 and PKT10 each shared that some of the autistic students placed in their classes were unidentified when they first enrolled but left their classes and identified as being on the Autism spectrum. PKT5 said, “I’ve had at least one student that was unidentified. But during the school year, he did get screenings and testing and he was autistic.” PKT10 stated,

“Some children I had with autism were identified, sometimes it was unidentified because the parents did not want them identified (their special need) or there was a learning delay. So, I mean, you could tell, there were some of those like reoccurring behaviors that we see (concerning autism behaviors) like some of the rocking behaviors or even some of the tactile behaviors where they didn't like certain materials being rubbed up against them, and they would cry.”

Fine and Gross Motor Delays. Several general NC Pre-K teachers that participated in this study reported students with gross and fine motor impairments, such as students with leg braces, in wheelchairs, who can't feed themselves, who need assistance going to the bathroom, and who require occupational or physical therapy have been included in their regular classes. PKT8 stated, “I've had some (SNC) with feeding tubes and I had one with braces on his legs.” PKT2 also reported that she had a student in her class that had leg braces. PKT1 described her experience with a SNC included in her class with motor delays:

“I had a kid, I don't know what they call the disability, but it was something dealing with their motor skills, you know. And he used a wheelchair in my classroom, like a roller. I had another child, and the need was something dealing with his fine motor, you know, he wasn't as strong as kids typically his age. So, he needed help with getting around and help with going to the potty and help with feeding himself.”

Additionally, PKT10 shared her experience as she gave a vivid description of a SNC with motor skill impairments included in her class. She said that one child in her class was, “profound to the point, you know, that it was in diapers, but he still was able to walk, and we would have to, like, help him feed himself.”

Behavior Concerns. Half of the participants reported that they had taught students in NC Pre-K that were diagnosed with special needs pertaining to behaviors issues such as attention-deficit disorder (ADD), attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), behavior and emotional disorder (BED), and oppositional defiance disorder (ODD). PKT7 said that she had taught a lot of Pre-K children with ADHD. PKT2 explained, “Last year I had a little a little girl that had ADHD and autism. She was probably like my one child that probably had like multiple diagnoses.” PKT3 mentions that some of her special needs children have been identified with “ADHD, ADD, Speech and Language, some with like a slight hearing delay, and a few with other behavior issues too or special need.”

Lesson Common Types of Special Needs. Other types of special needs children that participants in the study said had been included in their general classes were Spinal Bifida, Down Syndrome, heart condition, hearing deficiency, visual impairments, and developmentally delayed. PKT9 shared that she had taught a child with Down syndrome. PKT 10 stated, “I've come to handle a wide range of interesting cases. I've actually had children who were in diapers, who weren't potty trained, who did have spina bifida, too, as well. I've had some that were visually impaired, too.” PKT7 said that she had a student with a rear heart condition that affected the child's brain and the way they learned which required the child to have an IEP.

Theme 2: Main Influences of Teacher Attitudes Towards Inclusion

General teachers in Pre-K classes throughout NC are tasked with having to include SNC in their classes. Teaching typical learning young children is already a challenge, but adding SNC children changes the general class environment to an inclusive one. Some factors can influence teachers to have a positive attitude towards including SNC while other factors can influence negative attitudes when including SNC. Theme 2 reveals NC Pre-K teachers' experiences when

including SNC with mild, medium, and severe needs. Additionally, the theme uncovers some of the main factors that general NC Pre-K teachers state influence their positive and negative attitudes toward including SNC in their classes. Most participants expressed that they support inclusion or that they did not have any problem, including most children with special needs in their class. PKT4 stated, “I don't have an issue with including children with special needs. I think they should be included as long as you have the right supports to help make sure that you can meet their needs in the classroom.” PKT6 stated that she supports inclusion in the classroom. She further explained, “The problem is not including any type of child with a disability, it’s not having the support, the time, and the materials that make it hard to include these children or make it hard on a teachers’ attitude towards including these children, that’s just my opinion” (PKT6).

Including Children with Mild, Medium, and Severe Special Needs

When asked to share their attitude towards including children specifically with mild, medium, and severe special needs, all the participants in the study reported that in their experience they did not have any problems including children with mild or medium special needs. Yet the data reveals that participants’ attitudes are not as positive towards including severe special needs students in their general classroom.

Including Mild Special Needs Children. The participants reported that they had no problem including students with mild special needs because these students had simple needs that required little to no extra support or additional accommodations or resources within the general classroom. PKT1 expressed that including children with mild special needs was not really any different than including typical students. “It's not really any different than having a typical kid, because it’s just mild. Like I said, a few accommodations and modifications, I can, you know,

include those kids in my everyday routine,” stated PKT1. When asked how they felt about including children with mild special needs, PKT2, PKT3, and PKT6 all had the same reply as they quickly responded including these students was not a problem. PKT5 stated “They should be included” as PKT9 said she was “all for it.” PKT9 explained that including children with mild special needs is “easier than children with severe needs.”

Including Medium Special Needs Children. When sharing their experiences on including children with medium-level special needs, nine of the ten participants gave replies that suggested they were fine with including these SNC in their class; although they would require some help, support, modifications, or extra resources compared to peers with mild needs. PKT5 and PKT7 both shared similar replies as they stated they were okay with teaching SNC with medium special needs as long as they don’t need a lot of support or take away from the rest of the students in the class. PKT7 stated, “I feel like if they're (SNC) able to come in and not need a lot of support, I feel like they should be included in the classroom as well.” PKT8 added that including medium-needs children can be more difficult than including a mild SNC. She stated “You know, you have to go in a little deeper than you would with a mild child. It will be just a little bit more difficult, but not much, you know because you can still research and find something for that child as well.” One participant stated that including SNC with a medium-level special needs was tricky. According to PKT4,

That's a tricky question, one because I think it depends on the severity of the need. We only have one year to help and to play catch up to get them (SNC) where they need to be. If we can't catch them up, then we're sending them to kindergarten behind. Then every year they are behind I just feel like they're falling more and more behind.

Including Severe Special Needs Children. When asked to share their experiences and thoughts on including children with severe special needs, a couple of the participants explained they were okay with including these types of students if they had the proper support in place. PKT2 shared that including SNC with severe needs “goes back to the resources and just being able to have that support system.” PKT2 further explained that including students with severe needs requires extra people in the classrooms to help with situations. According to PKT3

I really don't have a problem including students with severe special needs if we have adequate support and we have the right numbers of teachers or helpers in the classroom to help these children because you know, you don't want to discriminate no child from learning or being in your classroom.

However, most of the participants reported mixed feelings when including students with severe special needs. The participants revealed that although they feel that SNC with severe needs should be included in the general class, including them makes things way more challenging. PKT8 reported that including severe special needs children is okay if everyone is on one accord. PKT8 further explained her stance with including students with severe needs, “the school system, the parent, the school, and the teacher, should be in sync for that child, but it is still going to be a test.” PKT4, the participant with the most experience teaching Pre-K in study, voiced that she had mixed thoughts when it comes to including SNC with severe needs. PKT4 gave a detailed explanation on including severe SNC:

I'm kind of mixed on that (including SNC with severe needs) because do I feel like they should be included? Absolutely 100%, but are they receiving the best possible service in my classroom? Like, is that really the best setting for them? I don't know, it depends on the child. Do they need to be in a center where speech, OT, and PT are available full

time? It depends on what their need is. So, I don't know that's a tough one. I had a couple (SNC) who over the years I'm like, uhm, gosh, they would be much better off at the Children's Center (a placement center that serves severe special needs) where there are more adults in the classroom, where they can be given more time and attention, and they have on site support and resources.

PKT7 replied that she was in total support of including children with severe special needs however she indicated that the type and the severity of the special need influences her attitude towards inclusion. PKT7 states, "I worry it would be a disruption to the class depending on what kind of problems they (children with severe needs) have." She goes on to explain, "I Think it helps children to be included with other children their age, so they can learn, especially socially. However, if it's a severe behavior or disability; That's kind of difficult" notes PKT7. PKT10 replied that she was okay with including SNC with severe needs if she had the "extra hands" to help with the child. She also stated that including severe SNC was "stressful" and having these students was like "having two students" that requires more help in the classroom. PKT10 states "it is very stressful, especially if don't have a team and you just have one child (with severe special needs) it's like having two." To explain her reason behind including such students PKT10 details her experience:

A few years ago, I had a student who was severe and was in diapers and they had a one-on-one worker. But, when that person didn't come, it was an extra added level of stress for me and the assistant, because one of us was really engrossed in trying to help this child move throughout the classroom, and the other teacher was kind of like, you know, fill in the gap. It was very stressful without the right help and support in the classroom.

Main Influences of Positive Attitudes

Participants of this study all shared various factors that they felt contributed to their positive attitude toward inclusion. PKT1 said that her love and compassion toward teaching was a factor that contributed to her positive attitude. Having resources was a factor shared by PKT9 as she states, “having resources, having things provided either at the school level or the district level to be able to best help my students grow and learn.” While PKT4 and PKT8 shared that seeing SNC’s “growth” and “their results at the end of the year” helps them have a positive attitude. PKT4 contributes her “prior experience working with SNC” as a factor that gives her a positive attitude towards inclusion. However, support from parents, support from the school and district, and adequate training were the main influences that reoccurred among the participant’s responses in the individual and focus group interviews.

Support from Parents. All the participants in the study stated that having support influences them to have a positive attitude towards including SNC in their general classroom. However, some of the types of support that the sample reported were different. PKT1, PKT2, PKT5, PKT6, PKT9, and PKT10 all voiced that having support from the parents of SNC helps them have a positive attitude toward including students with special needs in their class. PKT1 reported that when parents are involved that is what helps tailor her positive attitude. PKT2 adds that support from the families of SNC in the form of communication helps her have a positive attitude towards including them. “To me having open communication with parents so that you can understand what really goes on at home. Being able to just communicate back and forth is a must, so you wouldn’t be like why?” stated PKT2. According to PKT5 “getting the support of the family and making sure I communicate well with the family” influences her positive attitude towards SNC. PKT6 explains why support from parents influences her to have a positive

attitude, “You got to have parents’ support, if you don't have parents’ support then that kind of deters you as a teacher from wanting to include certain SNC children in your class. “

Support from the School and District. The other type of reoccurring support that the participants credit with helping them have a positive attitude towards inclusion is school and district-level support. School-level support is considered support from various people that hold positions at the school level such as administration (principal, assistant principal), social worker, guidance counselor, teachers, assistant teachers, and personal care assistants. District-level support is considered support from those that hold positions at the district level such as the exceptional children’s education director, exceptional children’s coordinator, exceptional children itinerary teacher, and professionals that are contracted by the district such as the various therapist (speech pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, behavioral therapist, etc...). PKT2 vividly explains, “Support means everybody, principals, social worker, guidance counselor, Pre-K supervisors, physical therapists, speech, everybody needed if that child needs that service okay.” PKT9 gives a list of items that help her have a positive attitude toward inclusion which includes having support. “First of all, my personal desire and passion to teach all children. Second, support from my building administration and my co-workers. Third, support from the EC office, district leaders, and parents, that's a big one,” explains PKT9. Participants PKT7 and PKT10 specifically mention that having support from the administration assists them with forming a positive attitude towards including SNC in their classes. PKT7 explains that having extra help in the class and support for her administration directs her to have a positive attitude when including SNC. PKT10 states, “I think it's the positive attitudes and support of the parents and administration that can influence me to have a positive attitude.”

Adequate Training and Resources. Having adequate training and resources are two other main factors that reoccurred among some of the participants' statements as they shared their experiences and explained what influenced them to have positive attitudes when SNC were included in their class. PKT7 replied that "having additional training to fully understand the needs, you know, of that child" is a factor that influences her to have a positive attitude. While PKT10 reported that having the right materials and needed training makes her have a positive attitude towards inclusion. She added, "I also think that having specific training, to help a child who has certain disabilities or who's struggling in certain areas" (PKT10).

Main Influences of Negative Attitudes

The codes that resonated from the NC Pre-K teachers' that participated in the individual interviews and the more in-depth focus group interview showed that the participants all shared similar factors that contributed to giving them a negative attitude towards including SNC in their class. The reoccurring factors that the participants voiced as causing them to have negative attitudes towards SNC were lack of support, lack of resources, inadequate training, and including certain types of SNC. The following gives details of the main reoccurring concepts, derived from among the NC Pre-K teachers who participated in this study, that influence negative attitudes towards including SNC in general Pre-K classes in NC.

Lack of Support. Nine of the ten participants said that a lack of support caused them to have a negative attitude when SNC were placed in their class. PKT6 stated "I would say one thing that negatively affects my attitude is not having support or not having the right amount of help that I need to be able to effectively teach these children." PKT6 also shared that it is important to have the support of the parents: "if you don't have parents' support then that kind of deters you as a teacher from wanting to include certain children with disabilities in your

room.”PKT1, PKT2, PKT4, PKT7, PKT8, PKT9, and PKT10 all shared similar responses as they too said that not having support from the school level (administration, other teachers, and assistants) district level (Pre-K EC office) or parents cause them to have a negative attitude towards including SNC in their class. PKT7 stated, “I have a concern with including some students with special needs if I feel like I'm not being heard or listened to, from support services like the EC department or administration and I get a lack of support from the parent?” PKT5 replied that “I feel like a lack of support from our administration and maybe other people that are within the county” cause her to have a negative attitude. PKT5 explains why not having support causes her to have a negative attitude: “Because where we're at (the school district) we do often have students that do have a disability and they're not getting the services they need so they're not growing.” PKT9 states that she has experienced a negative attitude this year towards inclusion because of support. According to PKT9, “This just happened to me, a lack of support; To me it is the biggest thing, not having support from parents, the EC office, my building administrators. That's the biggest to me. That's the only thing that causes me to have a problem with including SNC in my class.” The participants shared that a lack of support from parents, the school and district make teaching and including SNC more stressful and challenging.

Inadequate Resources. In addition to a lack of support, PKT2, PKT3, PKT6, and PKT8 report that not having adequate resources or materials causes them to have negative attitudes toward inclusion. PKT8 explains, “you need extra help in the classroom, and all the materials and equipment that you need to include them (SNC), because if you don't have it (the materials and resources), it makes it hard on you as a teacher.” PKT2 stated that “not having the accessories to help them grow or be an equal part of the class” is something that triggers her to have a negative attitude towards inclusion. PKT2 explains her reason by saying, “when their need is a

wheelchair, they need to be able to get through the doors. However, all the doors might not be wide enough for kids with wheelchairs.”

Insufficient Training. The participants known as PKT1, PKT7, and PKT10 all replied that insufficient training causes them to have negative attitudes towards teaching SNC in their general class. PKT1 shared that she was “not the professional when it comes to certain needs and disabilities and not having the right training to help particular students with special needs makes teaching them harder.” PKT7 had a similar statement as PKT1 as she explains that she has a negative attitude towards including SNC at times because of, “not having the right knowledge to be able to reach and teach them.” According to PKT10 “I think training is another aspect that gives me a negative attitude, or should I say a lack of specific training for special needs students. We have some good training, but it’s just kind of like a Band-Aid.”

Depends on the Type of Special Need. Three of the participants disclosed that including some children with certain types of special needs influences them to have a negative attitude toward inclusion. PKT1 communicated that including SNC that have severe needs or disabilities that make them aggressive requires teachers to give more time, which will also require more help in the class. This is PKT1’s explanation of how including SNC with severe needs causes negative attitudes towards inclusion: “When you have an Autistic student or student that has aggressiveness with their disability other kids could get harmed; That is what you have to consider if some SNC with those behaviors are in your class.” PKT4 expressed that some children with special needs that require lots of support and help may be better served in a setting designed just for children with special needs. PKT4 further explains “Including children with severe disabilities gives me a negative attitude sometimes. It depends on the child’s needs.” According to PKT4 a child with a severe special need is not always best served in the general

classroom due to the needs associated with their disability. PKT6 justifies why including some types of SNC such as those with “cerebral palsy, confined to a wheelchair, have low-functioning autism, or are non-verbal” causes teachers to have a negative attitude towards inclusion:

Including those children with severe types of special needs will require lots of support. They need a one-on-one worker. To me those are severe disabilities and generally, I know in our county, most children with severe disabilities usually are placed in an EC Pre-K class because those classes are more equipped to handle those types of children. They have more hands and more support in their rooms to help these children whereas in a general Pre-K classroom, you're not going to get that that extra help or those extra hands like the personal care assistance. Regular Pre-K teachers already have enough to do, including children with special needs that requires double the hands and time only makes the job more stressful and it is not always fair to the child with severe special needs or the other children in the class.

Theme 3: Main Influences of Perceived Self-Efficacy Regarding Inclusion

The data from the study brought to light some of the main things that general NC Pre-K teachers express as influencing their levels of self-efficacy regarding teaching students with special needs in their general class. One participant stated that she felt confident with including SNC. PKT6 dictated, “I would say that my perceived self-efficacy is pretty good when it comes to special needs children. I feel pretty confident with including most special needs kids in my class.” However, when inquired about their perceived self-efficacy towards teaching SNC most of the participants simply gave statements that indicated the things that influence them towards having a low or high perception of self-efficacy.

Influences of Low Self-efficacy

Seven of the ten participants indicate some common influences that they have experienced which have triggered them to have a low level of self-efficacy in their ability to teach SNC. The influences of these perceptions of low-level self-efficacy in teaching SNC are a lack of support, insufficient resources, and inadequate training. The experiences of participants PKT1, PKT2, PKT4, PKT5, PKT6, PKT9 and PKT10 are detailed below.

Lack of Support. Half of the participants in the study reported that a lack of support is a factor that lowers their level of self-efficacy in teaching SNC. PKT1 states “When I don't get the support I need in the classroom, it kind of decreases my ability or my confidence with teaching students with special needs.” According to PKT6, not having the right support to help her when SNC are included in her class lowers her confidence to effectively teach SNC. “If you feel like you are not getting all the things that you need as a regular teacher to help these students, then that kind of lowers your confidence in being able to teach these children” said PKT6. Another participant, PKT10, gave a recent account on how a lack of support lowered her self-efficacy in inclusion. PKT10 said:

In our district, they don't stick to a chain of command. So, you don't know who to go to if this child has this problem (special need). We don't really know who to contact to get the ball rolling, so at least they (the SNC) can be screened or tested for referrals. Like I had little Johnny, and I wrote up the paperwork. The parents agreed, and you got them to sign off on the process, but then you don't hear from the district. I talked to my supervisor, and I was like, hey what do we do next? I still haven't quite figured it out. Then they (talking about the district) did not even invite me to my own student's IEP meeting. I'm like, how do you have an IEP meeting without consulting with the teacher?

So, things like this, the lack of communication and support lowers my teaching self-efficacy for inclusion.

Participants PKT2, PKT4, PKT5 and PKT9 all gave similar responses as they simply stated that “not having support” was something that lowered their self-efficacy regarding teaching SNC. During the focus group interview, PKT10 expanded on the lack of support regarding self-efficacy by saying “if we don't have the proper support or tools necessary to include those students with special needs, we don't feel like we're successful or that we cannot give the children what they need to be successful.”

Insufficient Resources. Half of the participants in the study shared that not having the resources and materials needed to include SNC in their general class lowers their confidence in their ability to include SNC in their general class. According to PT1, “If I don't get the support and resources, I need I feel like I'm not really benefiting the child, you know, help them with their goals and such.” PKT2, PKT8, and PKT10 all briefly said that “not having the resources or materials” impeded the way they viewed their abilities to teach and help SNC be successful in their class. PKT6 expound on why resources or materials can lower teachers' self-efficacy when teaching SNC as she stated, “Not having the right materials or resources and supports are like I said, are things that affect a teacher's thoughts on how we think we can teach students with disabilities or special needs.”

Inadequate Training. Two participants, PKT5 and PKT6 both shared that a lack of training lowers the way they perceive their abilities to teach students with special needs in their general class. PKT5 explains why a lack of training influences low self-efficacy by stating, “I feel more training would help because if I have more tools that I can use from training, I feel like I could help these students with special needs grow by meeting their needs in the classroom.”

PKT6 gives an account of how inadequate training influences her low self-efficacy teaching SNC:

To me not having the right type of training can lower my ability to include some special need students because I might need specific training to help some of my students with special needs. Sometimes I get kids that I don't know how to correctly teach, so this is when I feel I need to take some proper training instead I go online and kind of self-advocate for myself to help these kids. Sometimes we as general education teachers, especially in Pre-K, we must take things upon ourselves, to do research, to teach ourselves how to teach these kids especially when you don't have the right background or the training.

Influences of High Self-efficacy

The data from this study revealed that all the participants indicated factors that influence them to have a high level of perceived self-efficacy towards teaching SNC. The study showed that the Pre-K teacher participants reported that proper support, sufficient resources, adequate training, and experience with the types of SNC placed in their class, are some of the main influences that gravitate them to have a higher level of self-efficacy in teaching SNC.

Proper Support. Three participants in this study, PKT2, PKT3, and PKT5 vocalized in their individual interviews that having “support” in their class increases their level of self-efficacy. PKT2 stated she feels more apt to teach certain SNC when she can “ask or get support from colleagues that are familiar in areas that I’m not.” PKT2 added that support from the parents of SNC gives her a higher level of self-efficacy as she explained, “When parents of my students with special needs are supportive and we can be a team I feel more that I have a higher capacity to teach their child with special needs.” PKT3 replied, “Having that support team so I

am able to do more with the special children or just having the adequate staff inside the classroom” increases her level of self-efficacy to include SNC. According to the experience of PKT5, “Having any type of outside support is great for helping me to be more confident teaching SNC.”

Sufficient Resources. Having the right resources or materials available in the class was a factor two participants mentioned as influencing them to have a higher level of self-efficacy towards inclusion. PKT5 said she has a higher level of self-efficacy when “I have the resources I need, you know, like having the adaptive equipment or anything like that, we need in the classroom.” PKT5 also added that “when we are given more resources or resources pinpointed to specific disabilities or delays, then I feel like we are better equipped to have special needs students in our class.” PKT1 just simply replied that “Receiving resources and things like materials that we need” helped her have a higher level of self-efficacy concerning inclusion. know.

Adequate Training. Four participants in the study shared adequate training as a main contributor to higher self-efficacy in teaching SNC. PKT7 stated that just having the “proper training” increases her self-efficacy to teach SNC. PKT1 expressed that “having realistic training that we can use in the classroom” increases her self-efficacy as an inclusive teacher.” I feel like I need training that will teach me about different disabilities, you know, and the what if’s because every child is not the same, even though they may have the same disability” explains PKT1. PKT3 said that taking classes helps increase her self-efficacy as she explains: “Preparing myself and taking more classes to be more aware of special needs children, so I can continue to teach them properly.” PKT9 had this say about what influences her higher level of self-efficacy:

I always feel like we (teachers) need to be growing and learning. Like, if we're not trying to better ourselves, we're not going to be able to help our students. So that's why I like to get training and find reading material. That's also why I've gone back to school to better myself.

Experience Teaching Type of Special Needs Child. Among the influences that NC Pre-K teachers contributed to giving them a high level of perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion, experience teaching the type of SNC included in a teacher's class was reoccurring among two of the participants. PKT2 said "I think my hands-on training over the last 20 years has really taught me a lot. I'm more at ease teaching those students with needs and disabilities I've taught before." PKT6 explains that her self-efficacy is higher when she is familiar with the needs of the students being included in her class. "I'm more comfortable when I'm including children with special needs in my class that I'm familiar with. I'm more confident of being able to teach those kids because I have prior experience working with their types of special needs" replied PKT6.

Theme 4: Barriers to Successful Inclusion

Theme 4 declares the main barriers that the participants report hinders them from being successful inclusive teachers. North Carolina general Pre-K teachers usually hold state licenses that certify them as highly qualified to teach young children ages birth through kindergarten. The data gathered for the document artifacts analysis showed that all the participants modified their lesson plans or activities for SNC. However, adding some modifications to activities or lessons is not enough in itself to carry out successful inclusion. The main goal of inclusion is to provide learning in a class for both typical learners and SNC that is equal, but this is a challenge to most general teachers. The participants for this study reveal the following factors as barriers that keep

them from being more successful as inclusive teachers: lack of support, lack of proper training, class size and time, and the creative curriculum.

Lack of Support

All the participants in this study reported that a lack of support is a barrier that hinders them from effectively and successfully being inclusive teachers. The supports that the participants referred to as barriers are parents, school-level personnel, and district-level personnel. PKT1 quickly said “I’m going to be honest. I think the biggest thing for me is not getting support.” PKT2 said that the barriers that impede her from being more successful as an inclusive teacher is “not having support from home, not getting or not having the right supports from those over the EC department, administration, and all the other people needed to help me help the SNC in my class.” PKT3 replied “not having adequate support and help within the classroom to help assist with SNC” is a barrier. PKT3 also added that inclusive classrooms need support from people that know about “EC children and how to handle certain behaviors.” PKT2 and PKT 4 specified that not having support from parents is a barrier. “I think you got to have good home support too,” replied PKT4. According to PKT4 when parents do not help support or reinforce at home what is being taught to their SNC at school, it makes it harder for the teacher to be successful.

PKT4 and PKT6 explained that in their district for the last four years, the general teacher has been the one implementing the one-on-one time mandated in the IEPs of Pre-K students with special needs in cognitive, academic, or social-emotional. PKT4 and PKT6 also shared that they are the ones that must document and track the IEP goals which in the past was the job of an itinerant teacher from the exceptional children’s office at the district. As noted by PKT4 and PKT6, not having the support in the class of the itinerant EC teacher decreases the amount of one-on-one time that SNC children receive because only the general teacher is implementing the

IEP instead of both the general teacher and the itinerant EC teacher. PKT8 said, “We need support, you know, that's the main thing, support from the parents, support from the school, just support from everybody working together.” PKT8 details that support is the main thing needed to be a successful inclusive teacher, “If you got the support you need, then you can do anything you need to do for that child.” PKT9 and PKT10 simply shared that “support in the classroom is a barrier” that challenges their success as inclusive teachers.

Lack of Proper Training

Four participants in this confer training as a barrier that holds them back from being successful inclusive teachers. PKT1 replied that training is a barrier and explains why it is needed; “We need training that’s realistic with what we are seeing in our classrooms. We need updated information and courses trainings (pertaining to inclusion) because it helps us to apply it to what’s going on with the kids in our classroom.” PKT7 explains that a lack of support is a barrier just like it’s an influence of low self-efficacy. “You know, it’s the same as I said with my self-efficacy, not having the proper training and not having that support is a barrier too,” states PKT7. PKT8 explains that in their district they have received training, but it’s outdated. PKT8 explains:

A lot of the training that we had on Special needs students was years ago, and now inclusion is different. We see different things that we don't even really know a lot about. So being a public school district, they should have updated training to keep the teachers informed on different disabilities or special needs of students.

When giving an account of her experience with barriers to inclusion PKT9 simply shared that training was a barrier in addition to a lack of support.

Class Size and Time

Class size and time are barriers that reoccurred among a few of the participants replies in individual and focus group interviews. PKT4 shared, “I think time is the biggest barrier. I would say. We just don't have time.” PKT4 further explained that the scheduled time in their Pre-K class is not very flexible because of the curriculum. “We have a set schedule outlined by the Creative Curriculum, and you have to follow that schedule” states PKT4. PKT4 also shared that being inclusive is a challenge due to the large class size of 18 students. She explained that EC Pre-K classes are capped off at 12 students with one teacher, two assistants, and personal care assistants when needed. “So, in EC you have more adults and less children and in regular Pre-K they're expecting us to work magic with more children and less adults” states PKT4. PKT2, PKT6, and PK10 agreed that class size was a barrier. PKT2 and PKT10 shared that their district enrolls 15 students into their Pre-K class but to them that is still too many students. PKT5 explained:

Because we do have 18 students in a classroom this can be an obstacle too because you might have two or three students that come in and might have a delay or disability, and you still have 15 regular students you still must help all of them grow.

According to PKT6 sometimes it's a challenge when 18 students are placed in a class and at least one or more of those students have an IEP which requires the general teacher to implement the requirements for the IEP. “If one of them has an IEP that you must implement, it becomes a challenge because of time. I don't really have extra time to give an extra 30 minutes of services two times a week to some SNC” explains PKT6. Participant PKT6 said that the barrier of time makes her feel like she is doing a disservice to both the typical and SNC in her class.

Creative Curriculum

The data showed that five NC Pre-K teachers that participated in the study revealed that the curriculum used by NC Pre-K is a barrier that hampers general NC Pre-K teachers from being successful as inclusive teachers. PKT1 stated, “The current curriculum needs some supplemental resources,” because it does not include lessons for students with special needs. PKT1 further explains that the “Creative Curriculum only modifies the lessons by age.” Participant, PKT4, replied, “I’m not a fan of creative curriculum is very scripted.” According to PKT4 the curriculum is not flexible and deviating or changing the lessons is not allowed. Teachers can add their own activities into their day however the way the curriculum’s schedule is set makes it very challenging. “It leaves very little time to focus on a child who needs either one on one or small group instruction” explains PKT4. PKT5 states that the Creative Curriculum is a barrier because “there really is no adaptations for special needs children.” PKT6 said, “The Creative Curriculum is very strict.” According to PKT6 their district discourages any deviation from the curriculum but encourages teachers to add to the curriculum when needed. “Our county wants us to implement it (Creative Curriculum) with fidelity, you know sticking to the script, and that makes it hard when it comes to teaching children with disabilities because you can't modify the lessons included in the curriculum,” details PKT6. Participant, PKT9, also described the Creative Curriculum as a barrier because “it does not give alternative lessons to include some of our students with special needs.”

Outlier Data and Findings

Most codes and themes in this study were easily connected to the research questions in the study. However, one theme that was revealed stood alone. Outlier data is collected information that does not conform or fit in with other data in a study. According to Oluwasola (2017), outliers are deviants and non-conformists because they do not give the same type of data

as the average. In this study the theme: Identifying Potential Special Needs Students, was derived from the data.

Identifying Potential Special Needs Students

The study revealed that identifying children with potential special needs is a long process.

According to the participant's experiences, when children with potential special needs are placed in general Pre-K teachers' classes it can take almost the entire school year to get these students identified. Therefore, these children are not categorized as children with special needs although they present red flags that point to them being special needs. PKT4 shared, "just to get a child referred for speech, it pretty much takes the whole school year because you have steps to follow, and some steps can take up to 90 days each." PKT2 shared a similar explanation as she stated, "if the child needs the services, they should get them. That's the way I look at it. It should not be a year-long process, but that's what it ends up being." The participants shared that in the meantime potential special needs students may not be receiving the right support they need to learn.

PKT2 and PKT10 shared that in their school district, there was no direct contact or appointed person over the referral process for assisting Pre-K students with getting identified and receiving services for special needs. According to PKT10, "There's no chain of command, no one to contact for follow-up. It's not succinct." PKT10 also explained that in her district the regular teacher is not invited to be part of the IEP team to help plan for special needs children but the teachers in the other district reported they were required to be on the IEP team as the regular teacher.

Research Question Responses

The research questions used to guide this study focused on investigating Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion. The sub questions explored the types of attitudes and levels of perceived self-efficacy Pre-K teachers have when SNC are included in their classes and the barriers that impede their success as inclusive teachers. The following section details the answers to the research questions derived from the analyzed data collected for the study (See Table 6).

Table 6

Research Questions Answered by Themes

Themes	Research Questions
Theme 1: Pre-K Teachers Define and Describe Inclusion	C
Theme 2: Main Influences of Teacher Attitudes Towards Inclusion	C, 1
Theme 3: Main Influences of Perceived Self-Efficacy Regarding Inclusion	C, 2
Theme 4: Barriers to Successful Inclusion	C, 3

Central Research Question

How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of NC, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators?

Teachers' attitudes are crucial in shaping inclusive environments within regular educational settings. An inclusive environment in this study is the general classroom learning environment where students with special needs are included and need to feel welcomed, respected, and supported to participate and learn alongside their typical learning peers. Teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy can significantly impact the effectiveness and success of inclusion

efforts. The central question focuses on teachers' overall attitudes, perceived self-efficacy, and barriers towards inclusion. All the participants of this study emphasized that inclusion means including SNC in the general classroom and giving them equal learning experiences as their typical learning peers. The Nc Pre-K teachers expressed positive attitudes towards including SNC with mild and moderate needs in the general classroom. However, some participants believe that the inclusion of children with severe special needs poses a more significant challenge and feel that these children would be better served in the exceptional children's class. PKT4 shared, "I've always had the attitude that all children can learn." However, she also emphasized that her classroom was not always the best placement for some special needs children and may be better served in a traditional exceptional children's classroom.

The participants of this study felt comfortable with including and teaching some students with special needs. However, the participants explained that they were more confident or had a higher perceived self-efficacy when they had the proper support, sufficient resources, adequate training, and familiarity with the types of SNC. For example, PKT6 explained that she felt that she had a high sense of self-efficacy towards inclusion when she had SNC with needs that she was familiar with. The participants also explained their experiences with a lack of support, proper training, large class size and time, students with severe needs, and the creative curriculum as barriers to their success as inclusive teachers.

Sub-Question One

What attitudes do general Pre-K teachers hold towards teaching children with mild, medium, and severe special needs in an inclusive setting within public schools in NC?

Teachers set the atmosphere of the classroom culture. Their attitudes towards students' differences, such as abilities and capabilities, influence how students interact with each other as

well as how they learn. When asked to share their attitude toward including children specifically with mild, medium, and severe special needs in their regular classroom, all the participants in the study expressed positive attitudes towards including students with mild and medium special. However, the data reveals that general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes towards including children with severe special needs are less favorable than those with mild and medium special needs. According to some of the participants, children with severe special needs are usually two or more years behind in their learning abilities than their regular learning peers. PKT4 explained that students with severe special needs are like including a child that is half the age of typical learning peers included in a general class. The participants expressed that some children with severe special needs would be better served in a better-equipped setting to assist these students.

Sub-Question Two

What are general Pre-K teachers' perceived self-efficacy of inclusion when teaching special needs children in NC public schools?

This study showed that most NC Pre-K teachers expressed low perceived self-efficacy, when SNC were included in their class. The participants expressed a lack of support, insufficient resources, and inadequate training were factors that impeded their ability and confidence to successfully teach some students with special needs, especially those with severe needs or the ones that have needs they are not familiar with. One participant explained that her confidence level starts to drop when children with special need are added.

“When I don't get the support [from EC, the parents, principals,] it kind of decreases my ability or my confidence” stated PKT1. Similarly, PKT6 shared that “not having the right materials, resources, and not having the support, affects a teacher all the way around. Those

things affect your attitude, your success as a teacher, and your confidence to include children with special needs.”

Although the teachers in this study express low perceived self-efficacy when including SNC; the data gathered from the participants’ lesson plans showed that the participants knew how to differentiate or provide individualized instruction to students with special needs. Research by Woodcock et al. (2022) shows that teachers with a high self-efficacy towards inclusion can implement effective differentiation strategies. Participants in the study suggested that high levels of perceived self-efficacy were constructed by proper support, sufficient resources, adequate training, and being familiar with the types of SNC included in their classes.

Sub-Question Three

What do general Pre-K teachers voice as the main barriers (if any) that prohibit them from providing best practices and highly successful outcomes to special needs children?

Successful inclusion requires hard work on the part of the teacher, especially when they are regular or general teachers. However, identifying barriers that impede them from being successful as inclusive teachers is the ultimate step to dismantling the barriers and increasing inclusion success for teachers. Participants in this study shared that the barriers that hold them back from being successful inclusive teachers are a lack of support, proper training, class size and time, and the creative curriculum.

The participants believed that a lack of support from parents, school-level personnel, and district-level personnel hinders their efforts to include SNC in their general classroom.

According to PKT2, not having support from parents, school administration, and the Pre-K Exceptional Children’s Office is a barrier that keeps her from being successful as an inclusive teacher. “Out of all the barriers, a lack of support is the main one that holds me back from being

one hundred percent successful with inclusion.” PK2 also shared that she felt that a lack of proper training hindered her success at inclusion as she shared more of her experience during the focus group interview.

The participants discussed the barriers of having a large class size and insufficient time to effectively give and carry out all the duties needed to be successful inclusive teachers. The participants stressed that their class sizes (18 in District One and 15 in District 2) are large, and having one or more SNC in a class of those sizes is challenging because young children require more one-on-one time than older children. Factor in one or two SNCs into these classes, and the amount of time that teachers need to divide between typical and atypical learners increases. For Example, PKT5 explained:

When there’s only two teachers and 18 students, it’s hard to meet all their learning and needs daily when you must do so much in the classroom. So, I feel like the caseload, as far as the number of students, is very high for NC Pre-K, and I feel like it could be lowered so we can meet more of their needs in the classroom.

Summary

Chapter 4 briefly describes the participants and their demographics in tables, followed by the data results, and then details how themes answered the research questions. The careful and thoroughly examined data collected from the participants resulted in four emergent themes: Pre-K teachers define and describe inclusion, main influences of teacher attitudes toward inclusion, main influences of perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion, and barriers to successful inclusion. Based on the gathered data, the participants in this study feel that students with SNC should be included in the general classroom. The participants report positive attitudes toward students with mild and medium-level needs while expressing more negative attitudes toward

students with severe needs. The participants stated that their attitudes are more positive when they receive support from parents, the school, and the district and receive relevant training and resources for special needs. On the downside, participants shared that a lack of support, resources, inadequate training, and including certain types of SNC influence them to have negative attitudes towards inclusion. Participants outlined that their perceived self-efficacy is lowered by a lack of support, insufficient resources, inadequate training, and students with severe special needs. Participants expressed higher self-efficacy when provided with proper support, sufficient resources, and adequate training. They are familiar with the types of SNC in their class. Further, the participants discussed lack of support, proper training, large class size and time, and the creative curriculum as barriers to their success as inclusive teachers. Overall, the themes in the study provide a rich and nuanced investigation and understanding of participants' experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy when children with special needs were included in their general class.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study was to investigate and describe the lived experiences of general Pre-K teachers concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion within NC public school settings. This study examined NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards including SNC through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and document artifacts. Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological approach was utilized for the data analysis as themes were derived from codes that resonated from the information gathered. Literature evidence from both empirical research and theoretical frameworks corroborate the findings of this study. Chapter five clarifies the study's findings by providing detailed explanations of the significant interpretations. This chapter's discussion section is constructed of five subsections including (a) Interpretation of Findings; (b) Implications for Policy and Practice; (c) Theoretical and Empirical Implications; (d) Limitations and Delimitations; and (e) Recommendations for Future Research. Lastly, chapter five is concluded with a summary.

Discussion

This transcendental phenomenological study's purpose was to investigate and describe the lived experiences of general Pre-K teachers concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. The aim of this study was to reveal factors that influence the types of attitudes (negative or positive) and perceived self-efficacy (low or high) that general Pre-K teachers have towards including SNC in their classes and the barriers that impede successful inclusion. This study was conducted to fill the literature gap on teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion regarding general Pre-Kindergarten teachers in North Carolina public

school settings. In inclusive education, teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion are some of the most highly researched topics. Many studies focus on examining factors that impact the formation of teacher attitudes toward inclusion for teachers that teach grades K-12 (Lindner et al., 2023; see also Alfaro et al., 2015; Gaines et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2015) as well as the barriers toward inclusion of K-12 teachers (Hassanein et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2018; Woodcock & Wolfson, 2019). This study focused on uncovering factors that influence Pre-Kindergarten teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion and the barriers that hinder their success.

The central question that guided this study was as follows: How do general re-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators? This question aimed to ascertain NC Pre-K teachers' overall attitude and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion and the challenges that hinder them from being inclusive. The findings from this study add more layers to the existing literature by increasing the depth of knowledge regarding general teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion. The findings of this study are similar to those of the research presented in the literature review from Chapter 2. This section will interpret the study's findings as derived from the themes, theoretical framework, and literature to describe the participants' lived experiences of their attitudes, perceived self-efficacy, and barriers concerning inclusion.

Summary of Thematic Findings

This qualitative phenomenological study was grounded by Albert Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) and Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior (TPB). Combined, the two theories laid the theoretical framework for this study because teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion impact their behaviors on how they include and teach SNC in

regular Pre-K classrooms, ultimately impacting the outcome of SNC. This study was conducted to answer the following central and sub-questions: Central Question) How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators? The sub-questions were all regarding teaching SNC in an inclusive setting within NC's public schools. Sub-question 1) What attitudes do general Pre-K teachers hold towards teaching children with mild, medium, and severe special needs? Sub-question 2) What are general Pre-K teachers' perceived self-efficacy of inclusion? Sub-question 3) What do general Pre-K teachers voice as the main barriers (if any) that prohibit them from providing best practices and highly successful outcomes to special needs children?

The qualitative data collected through individual interviews, a focus group interview, and document artifacts underwent a thorough thematic analysis manually and with NVivo qualitative analysis software. Through open coding, this study extracted four main themes with subthemes, allowing the researcher to answer the research questions for the study. This section of the discussion will summarize the four themes and outlier.

Theme one, Pre-K teachers define and describe inclusion, had one subtheme, the types of special needs children included in general NC Pre-K classrooms. Findings from theme one and its subtheme answer the CRQ and SQ1. A data synthesis of theme one revealed that general Pre-K teachers in southeastern NC public schools shared a common definition and description of inclusion. Theme one's subtheme also highlighted the common types of SNC that NC Pre-K teachers expressed as included in their general classrooms.

Theme two, main influences of teacher attitudes towards inclusion and its subthemes revealed mutual major factors shared among the participants that influence their positive and negative attitudes towards inclusion. All the participants shared their experiences and thoughts with including special needs students with mild to severe level of needs in their general classes. Additionally, the two subthemes from theme two revealed that the NC Pre-K teachers in this study all expressed similar key factors that influence them to have positive and negative attitudes towards inclusion. The findings from theme two assist in answering the CRQ and SQ1.

Theme three, main influences of perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion and its two subthemes uncover common factors that Pre-K teachers express as influencing their low and high sense of perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion. Theme three's findings answer the CRQ and SQ2.

The findings that theme four, barriers to successful inclusion, brought to light were the barriers to successful inclusion as the participants expressed a lack of support, proper training, class size and time, and the creative curriculum as the key obstacles impeding their full success as inclusive teachers. The findings in theme four answer the CRQ and SQ3.

One outlier was found among the data. A few of the teachers shared that the referral process to have children they suspected had special needs identified, was a long process. The teachers that shared this expressed how it increases their negative attitude towards inclusion.

Interpretation of Findings

The NC Pre-K teachers who participated in this study shared rich and comprehensive experiences regarding attitudes, self-efficacy, and barriers to including special needs children in general classrooms. The participants' contributions provided valuable insight and perspectives on inclusion, which can assist with improving teacher attitudes towards including and teaching

students with special needs. The themes that evolved from the data were: Pre-K teachers define and describe inclusion, main influences of teacher attitudes towards inclusion, main influences of perceived self-efficacy regarding inclusion, and barriers to successful inclusion.

The following section, interpretation of findings, clarifies the significant findings found among the themes as supported by the theoretical frameworks of Bandura's (1977) SLT and Ajzen's (1991) TPB, and the empirical literature from chapter 2 of this study. Additionally, the interpretations will discuss how some of the study's findings align with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2 while a few of the findings do not.

Shared Meaning of Inclusion

A synthesis of the data revealed that general Pre-K teachers in southeastern NC public schools had a common shared meaning when defining inclusion. Collectively, the NC Pre-K teachers in this study all shared similar concepts, that inclusion was a form of placing SNC in the same classroom with regular learning peers. PKT6 stated that inclusion was "when special needs children or children with disabilities are placed in a regular classroom with regular learners, and they all are taught and learn together." This finding aligns with the definition of full inclusion expressed by Wilcox (2019), which states the practice of placing special needs students in a regular class in which they also receive all their services in that setting. Overall, the participants expressed that they believed in the idea of inclusion.

More Positive Attitudes Towards Mild and Medium SNC Verses Severe SNC

The NC Pre-K teachers in this study shared similar experiences with the inclusion of various types and levels of SNC placed in their general Pre-K classes. This indicates that North Carolina Pre-K classes are becoming more inclusively diverse as the severity of SNC placed in Pre-K classes range from mild to severe. According to their experiences, SNC can range from a

student with a simple speech and language delay to a child with high-functioning autism. Additionally, the study found that it is easier for teachers to include SNC with mild to medium needs because these students only require them to make slight adjustments or accommodations which is quite the opposite of severe SNC. The study revealed that children with severe needs require more than general teachers can give in a regular setting. According to the participants, children with severe special needs require more time, support, resources, and materials, and including them makes their job harder. This finding aligns with research conducted by Zabeli and Gjelij (2020), which emphasized that meeting the needs of special needs children in a general class is problematic for general teachers.

According to the Pre-K teachers' responses, they are "all for" including children with mild and medium-level disabilities in their classes. However, the teachers were expressed fewer positive attitudes towards including children with severe special needs. This finding shows that Pre-K teachers in NC have positive attitudes toward the inclusion of children with mild to medium-level special needs but negative attitudes towards including students with severe needs. This finding is parallel to literature written by Avramidis and Toulia (2020) and DeBoer et al. (2011), which found that general teachers' emotions or attitudes vary regarding inclusion and their emotions or attitudes affected by the severity of the disability. This finding also complies with the research of Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), who, after examining 28 studies on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, concluded that two-thirds of the teachers from the studies had positive attitudes while a small percentage still failed to show a strong attitude towards including children with severe needs. Additionally, this finding mirrors the research conducted by Bandyopadhyay and Dhara (2021), who found that early childhood educators hold more positive attitudes towards inclusive education than teachers of higher-grade levels.

The Right Tools Can Change (Increase) Teachers' Attitudes and Self-Efficacy

All the participants in this study had common beliefs that their attitudes towards inclusion would be more positive and their self-efficacy would be higher if they had support, adequate training, and resources and materials to help SNC. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1977) SLT and Ajzen's (1991) TPB as making plans can help change a person's attitude and which can impact a change in their behavior; in this case their perceived self-efficacy. All the NC Pre-K teachers in this study shared similar factors of positive and negative influences on their attitudes towards inclusion. According to their experiences SNC required extra hands and help from everybody, such as principals, social workers, guidance counselors, Pre-K supervisors, physical therapists, speech therapists, and anyone else needed. These findings are congruent with studies conducted by Van Mieghem et al. (2020) and van Steen and Wilson (2020), who found that training on specific special needs was more effective than broad training in inclusive education. The findings also align with Van Mieghem et al. (2020) research, which concluded that teachers need support and resources to be more accepting of special needs children.

Additionally, the study found that a lack of support, lack of resources, inadequate training, and including severe SNC are primary contributors to Nc Pre-K teachers' negative attitudes of including SNC in their regular classrooms. The participants clearly expressed that a lack of support from parents, the school, and the district, in addition to not having the proper training for inclusion and a lack of resources and materials, makes teaching and including SNC more stressful, which causes them to have a negative attitude towards inclusion. The participants experiences concerning their negative attitudes towards inclusion due to a lack of support validates the study's findings with the literature; Hind et al. (2019), concluded that teachers' negative attitudes towards inclusion was result from not feeling supported. Likewise, in a study

conducted by Desombre et al. (2021), the authors found that when teachers do not receive support, they have fewer positive attitudes towards inclusion compared to more positive attitudes when support is provided.

Another interesting finding was all the NC Pre-K teachers in this study expressed low self-efficacy to include and teach most children with special needs. However, their levels of self-efficacy towards inclusion are influenced by the support they receive, resources, training, and experience. The findings show that NC Pre-K teachers disclose low levels of self-efficacy in teaching SNC when they lack support, insufficient resources, and inadequate training. The participants experiences indicate that not having the right support or the proper things needed to include SNC in their classes lowers their confidence in teaching SNC effectively. These findings align with studies by Alexander et al. (2016) and Mgno and Mgno (2018), as they found that general early childhood teachers conveyed a lack of support and insufficient resources as factors that impede their full ability to accommodate children with special needs successfully. Additionally, this finding also concurs with the research of Lee et al. (2015), Yu (2019), and Zwane & Malale (2018), as these authors indicated that a lack of training significantly diminishes teachers' ability to keep up with the latest trends and effectively implement successful inclusive practices.

On the flip side, the study reveals that NC teachers' perceived self-efficacy increases when they receive the support, resources, and training. It is essential to note that the study also uncover that NC Pe-K teachers felt they had a higher sense of self-efficacy when they had experience teaching the type of SNC included in their class. This finding aligns with research conducted by Bain and Hasio (2011), which indicated that teacher experience and authentic

learning experiences were crucial factors for general teachers to increase their confidence and skills to teach special needs students in their classrooms.

In addition, the study highlighted that having support and resources that are tailored to specific disabilities or delays, helps to equip general Pre-K teachers more, which increases their ability to teach and include SNC. This finding correlates with that of Noreen et al. 2019 as these authors found that teachers who received professional development or training concerning special needs were noted to be more favorable toward an inclusive classroom. Teaching students with familiar types of special needs heightens teachers' self-efficacy because they already have a general understanding of how to teach these students. This finding is consistent with the literature of Van Mieghem et al. (2020), who completed a meta-analysis that concluded that having experience with inclusive education improved teachers' positive perception of engaging in inclusion.

Barriers

A synthesis of the data found that general NC Pre-K teachers shared similar barriers that impeded their ability to be 100 percent successful at inclusion. The barriers shared by the Pre-K teachers were a lack of support, inadequate training, large class sizes, time constraints, and the creative curriculum. These findings align with research studies conducted by Al Jaffal (2022), Mitchell (2019), Suprivanto (2019), Symeonidou (2017), Pantic and Florian (2015), and Peebles and Mendaglio (2014), who found that the main barriers that hinder general teachers from being successful at inclusion are a lack of training in special education and a lack of support.

The study revealed that Pre-K teachers emphasized large class sizes and time constraints as barriers that keep them from being successful inclusive teachers. According to participants experiences, large class sizes take away from providing many of the extra needs required to

include SNC. This finding is congruent with that of Ferriday and Cantali (2020), as their study on teachers and inclusion found that large class sizes and time constraints were a few barriers that lowered teacher confidence to include special needs students in their classes. The finding is also similar to Avramidis and Norwich (2002) and Demir (2009), who concluded that teacher-student ratio along with their capabilities and skills are critical factors to success in inclusive environments.

The study also found that the Creative Curriculum is a barrier that impedes Pre-K teachers' from fully being successful as inclusive teachers. According to the experiences of the participants in the study, the Creative Curriculum by Teaching Strategies, which is required by the NC Pre-K program, is not geared to accommodate children with special needs. The study revealed that the curriculum is scripted, not very flexible or easy to modify for SNC. This finding aligns with Panganiban et al. (2022), who concluded that the Creative curriculum is set high developmentally for typically developing children, and it lacks strategies that target specific areas of social communication that are difficult for those with autism as with other special needs. Teachers in Pre-K need to be able to modify their lessons to be developmentally appropriate for all their students especially those with special needs.

Implications for Policy and Practice

The impact of research findings on policy and practice decisions must be emphasized more. Policymakers and practitioners must receive recommendations for policy and practice based on empirical evidence concerning general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, and barriers regarding inclusion. Adhering to the recommendations based on the findings from this study can allow for more informed decision-making based on the data presented, which can lead to the implementation of more effective policies and practices that will ultimately benefit society. The

data revealed that NC Pre-K teachers express positive attitudes toward including students with mild and medium-level disabilities in general classrooms. However, the teachers had negative attitudes towards including students with severe special needs in general classrooms. The findings show that NC Pre-K teachers are confident in their abilities to teach and include SNC in their general class but feel that their self-efficacy would be higher with more support, training, and resources. The barriers that hindered the participants' success as inclusive teachers were lack of support, proper training, large class sizes, insufficient time, and the creative curriculum. Factors such as more support, training, and resources were all overlapping factors that teachers voiced as influencing their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion.

The NC Pre-K teachers also expressed the same factors (support and training) as barriers to their success as inclusive teachers. To help teachers develop more positive attitudes, increase self-efficacy, and tear down barriers concerning inclusion, changes to policy and practice are needed. The following subsections, titled Implications for Policy and Implications for Practice, are directed to various stakeholders in the field of early childhood education including but not limited to the state of North Carolina's General Assembly, Universities and Community College systems, Department of Public Instruction, Division of Child Development and Early Education, Superintendents, Pre-K curriculum specialist, Pre-K District Directors, Coordinators, Exception Children program specialists, School Administrators, Teachers, Assistants, and paraprofessionals and professional therapist that work with students that have special needs in any North Carolina public Pre-K program.

Implications for Policy

The audience that this section is specifically meant to target is the state of North Carolina's General Assembly, Department of Public Instruction, and Division of Child

Development and Early Education. Four policy implications will be discussed in this section: Policy revision to define inclusion, allocation of budget to lower class size, allocation of funds to provide classroom support, and allocation of budget funding for inclusive training.

Policy revision to define inclusion. The findings from this study showed that general NC Pre-K teachers shared similar definitions of inclusion. According to the participants, inclusion means including SNC in a class with peers with no special needs, so they are offered the same learning opportunities as their typical learning peers. This study showed that although teachers believe in inclusion, they have positive attitudes towards SNCs with mild and medium-level needs but not SNCs with severe needs. Since teachers' overall attitude impacts the atmosphere and outcomes of all students, especially SNC placed in their class, policies that define what "inclusion" means concerning general classroom placement should be addressed. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) does not clearly define inclusive education or the severity level at which an SNC must be considered in a general class. The NC DPI does, however, define the Least Restrictive Environment as required by the IDEA Act (2004). According to NC DPI NC 1500-2.23

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) means that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities shall be educated with children who are not disabled. Special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature of the disability is such that education in the regular classes using supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (2021, pg. 15).

The current NCDPI (2021) policy concerning inclusive education notes the types of special needs that evoke children from ages 2-22 as labeled with a special need or disability; however,

the policy does not specify the severity of the need, which is also essential when deciding placement. Revisioning the current policy by defining inclusion to be more specific, along with the severity of the special needs required for students to qualify for placement in a regular/inclusive class, can help increase teachers' positive attitudes toward inclusion. This recommendation aligns with literature that concludes some teachers believe that special needs students with severe needs are the most challenging to include (Jury et al., 2021; de Boer et al., 2011), which increases their negative attitudes towards including students with severe special needs (Benoit, 2016). Additionally, it parallels with literature that concludes that teachers' attitudes toward including students with severe special needs are affected by the extent to which teachers must modify instructional practices to accommodate the students (Center & Ward, 1987).

Allocate budget to lower class size. The findings in this study found that large class sizes, not enough support, and inadequate training are barriers that impede general teachers' success as inclusive teachers. According to Williams-Brown and Hodkinson (2021), a lack of experience, training, and funds are barriers that hinder successful inclusion. Additionally, a lack of support and inadequate training are also factors that influence negative teacher attitudes and lower teacher self-efficacy toward inclusion (Steen & Wilson, 2020; Van Mieghem et al., 2020; Yu, 2019; see also Akalin et al., 2014; Priyadarshini & Thangarajathi, 2016; Sandhu, 2017; Vaz et al., 2015). Lowering the class size means that teachers can spend more one-on-one time helping SNC as it lowers the stress of planning and instructional practices to teach typical and atypical students in a general class. Allocating funds to lower class sizes can not only help break this barrier to teachers' success at inclusion but also ignite teachers' positive attitudes and help increase their perceived self-efficacy towards including SNC in general Pre-K classes in North

Carolina. This recommendation mirrors the policy recommendation written by the National Education Policy Center, which states it is essential for policymakers to consider the effectiveness of implementing a policy that reduces class size compared to allocating funds to other potential areas. Although reducing class sizes may come at a cost, it could ultimately be the more cost-effective policy overall (Schanzenbach, 2014).

Allocate funds to provide classroom support. This study revealed that NC Pre-K teachers need more support in the form of more hands in the classroom. The Pre-K teachers in this study stated that they needed more help in the class in the form of assistants or practical care aides. Providing more support in the form of extra personnel costs money, and schools are allocated monies based on student enrollment, not on the needs of the students. This study indicates that engaging in one-on-one and small-group instruction is essential in NC Pre-K. However, the enrollment of certain types and severity of SNC makes this a difficult task for just a teacher and one assistant. The teachers expressed that having more helpers in the classroom would help them succeed more at inclusion and increase their positive attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. Appropriating funds to give teachers more support aligns with the finding of Hosford and O'Sullivan (2016), who concluded that teachers felt better prepared to implement inclusive practices when they had a supportive environment. This policy recommendation also aligns with a review of the literature by Jenson (2018), which states that teachers' attitudes are positively influenced when they receive support within their class from administrators at the school, assistant teachers, or other staff members.

Revise the current curriculum. According to the findings in this study, the current curriculum used by the NC Pre-K program, called Teaching Strategies Creative Curriculum, is a barrier to inclusion for Pre-K teachers. The teachers in this study revealed that the curriculum is

not inclusive and does not allow them the flexibility to meet the various learning needs of students with special needs. According to Villegas (2021), a rigid curriculum that does not allow for trial and error uses alternative teaching practices or does not consider students' different learning styles is a barrier to inclusive education. The findings of this study showed that teachers are not allowed to change the scripted lessons or activities to make the curriculum more appropriate for some special needs students. As a result, teachers have a lower- sense of self-efficacy when implementing the Creative Curriculum for some of their special needs students. According to research by Nahmias et al. (2014), the Creative Curriculum does not target the challenging areas that children with specific special needs struggle with. Another study by Jenkins et al. (2019) found no significant differences between the Creative Curriculum and locally developed curricula concerning improving academic skills or promoting social, emotional, or noncognitive skills. Therefore, investing in either supplementing or changing the current curriculum is recommended. It can alleviate Pre-K teachers' barriers to teaching SNC and increase their positive attitude and perception of self-efficacy to teach SNC.

Implications for Practice

Removing barriers, increasing positive attitudes, and building a high sense of self-efficacy toward inclusion are essential for general teachers to be successful in inclusive education. This section is directed mainly to district and school leaders. The finding in this study revealed that negative attitudes, low sense of self-efficacy, and barriers regarding inclusion among general Pre-K teachers result from a lack of support, training, and resources and materials. Addressing these issues is critical to cultivating teachers with positive attitudes and a high sense of teaching self-efficacy that will construct successful classrooms and inclusive environments where all students, regardless of their abilities, can learn and thrive. The following

are implications for practice that were derived from the findings of this study: Support from school administrators and professional development on inclusive training.

District and school leader support. The findings from this study showed that NC Pre-K teachers do not get the support they need from their district and school leaders to be entirely successful at inclusion. District leaders from the early childhood exceptional children's department and school leaders (principal and assistant principal) must be more present in NC Pre-K classrooms to help teachers feel more supported. District and school leaders significantly impact teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion. Through their leadership skills, district and school leaders can support teachers and allocate resources, materials, and training about inclusion that will assist teachers in being successful and building an inclusive school culture. When school leaders prioritize inclusion and provide the necessary support and resources, teachers are more inclined to develop positive attitudes and higher self-efficacy toward inclusion. This recommendation is parallel to the literature, as research indicates that supporting teachers can assist their development of positive attitudes towards inclusion, which in turn can have positive outcomes for inclusive classrooms (Desombre et al., 2021; see also Amr et al., 2016; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Monsen et al., 2013; Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Woodcock & Woolfson, 2019).

Provide professional development on inclusive training. The state allocates money to local education agencies (LEAs) to train teachers. It is recommended that LEAs in NC that house Pre-K classes provide teacher training for special needs, and inclusion is strongly recommended to remove this factor as a barrier. The teachers in this study believed that having more training would increase their positive attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion as more training tailored towards the types of SNC would assist them with helping and teaching the SNC included

in their general classes. The Pre-K teachers in this study voiced that having more training geared towards inclusion would help tear down this barrier and increase their success as inclusive teachers. Providing training that teachers need to be successful at inclusion can increase teachers' positive attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards including and teaching SNC. This recommendation is supported by research conducted in 2020 by Somma and Bennett, which concluded that teachers who received training about inclusion in the form of professional development felt more confident as inclusive educators. Teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy regarding inclusion have more positive attitudes toward inclusion, which leads to higher outcomes from the SNC they teach (MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Savolainen et al., 2020; Yada & Savolainen, 2018).

Theoretical Implications

The two theories grounded this study. The first theory was Bandura's (1977) social learning theory (SLT) because it highlighted the impact of social interactions and environments in formulating teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward teaching SNC. Bandura's (1977) SLT (with the focus on his theory of self-efficacy) played an epic role in revealing general Pre-K teachers' attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion as they reflected on their experiences of social interactions with the special needs children in their classes. Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior anchored the study's theoretical framework by allowing the researcher to investigate and reveal how teachers' attitudes towards inclusion influence their behavior (how they feel about teaching SNC and how they perceive their ability to teach SNC). Teachers' attitudes, whether negative or positive, play a significant role in the success of all students in an inclusive class. According to (Ginja and Chen, 2021), teachers' attitudes affect special needs students' learning environment and potential outcomes. General NC Pre-K teachers

are viewed as inclusive teachers. Although they have fairly positive attitudes towards inclusion, the participants in this study indicated a need for more training to increase their self-efficacy in inclusion. This aligns with the literature of Steen and Wilson (2020) and Yu and Park (2020) that even though most Kindergartens through twelfth-grade teachers have students with special needs in their general classes, many teachers feel their training is inadequate concerning inclusion. The way these Pre-K teachers perceive that they need training to perform necessary tasks to include and teach SNC is evidence of Bandura's SLT and self-efficacy. Training in which teachers can "observe" experienced teachers or professionals "model, interact, and engage in social actions" that are appropriate teaching practices for SNC aligns with Bandura's (1977) SLT. Making plans to take action (get training and petition for support and resources) to change their behavior (attitude and self-efficacy) so that they can be more positive and successful inclusive teachers aligns with Ajzen's (1991) theory of planned behavior.

Empirical Implications

The literature details that to equip teachers with a sense of successful inclusiveness, their attitudes, and self-efficacy towards inclusion must be improved (Saloviita, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020; see also Anglim et al., 2018; Avramidis et al., 2019; Chao et al., 2017; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Previous studies from the last few decades conclude that teacher attitudes toward inclusion are affected by factors such as degree, teaching experience, support, inclusion training, the type of disability or needs students to have, teachers' gender, and self-efficacy (Bandyopadhyay & Dhara, 2021; Desombre et al., 2021; Hind et al., 2019; see also Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996; Savolainen et al., 2020; Steen & Wilson, 2020; Supriyanto, 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2020). According to Hosford and O'Sullivan (2016), teachers' attitudes, behaviors, and practices are shaped by their level of self-efficacy. The lived experiences revealed

by the NC Pre-K teachers in the study showed that insufficient support and a need for more inclusive training and resources were the main influences of their negative attitudes and low perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion. The results of the current study are consistent with prior quantitative research conducted by Kamran (2023), which concluded that negative teacher attitudes regarding the inclusion of special needs students were inadequate training to support special needs students and resources, inappropriate curriculum, non-supportive parents, and uncooperative school administration.

A plethora of research regarding teachers' self-efficacy concerning including children with mild disabilities showed a significant correlation to teachers' negative attitudes toward including students with special needs (Karman et al., 2022; Avramidis et al., 2019; Vaz et al., 2015). The current study does not correspond to the previous research as the results indicated this group of Pre-K teachers had positive attitudes towards the inclusion of children with mild and medium-level special needs with negative attitudes towards children with severe disabilities. However, the results of the current study are somewhat in line with research conducted by San Martin et al. (2021), which noted that low teacher self-efficacy was reported among teachers who accommodated special needs students with behavioral and physically aggressive needs. The current study found that teachers reported low self-efficacy when severe special needs students were included in their classes.

The current study showed that NC Pre-K teachers support the idea of inclusion; however, it was found that inadequate support and training, large class size and time, and the Creative curriculum are barriers that hinder Pre-K teachers' success in inclusion. This study aligns with Woodcock and Woolfson (2019), who concluded that to address the main barriers to successful inclusion, there needs to be more support from school and board-level leadership.

Limitations

As with any research, it is essential to acknowledge and consider the study's limitations. Several limitations should be considered in this qualitative research design for future practice and research. According to Horga et al. (2014), limitations are weaknesses or pitfalls of a study that researchers identify and disclose to the audience of the study. Although there are potential weaknesses in a study, it must be noted that limitations are out of the researcher's control because they are influenced by everything humans do. Four primary limitations were identified and are discussed in the following subsections: 1) Sample method and size, 2) Gender, 3) Data collection, 4) Time constraints, 5) Participants' response biases, and 6) Technology issues.

Sample method and size. This study utilized purposeful sampling instead of random sampling, limiting its results only to be suggestive and rejecting its ability to be generalized to the entire population of NC Pre-K teachers. Secondly, the sample size in the study was not large enough to generalize the findings to all Pre-Kindergarten teachers. Given the small sample size of only ten general NC Pre-K public school teachers, the findings in the study on NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion do not accurately reflect all Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy in the State of North Carolina.

Gender. The participants in this study all identified as female, limiting this study to be generalized to only those identifying as female. When data was collected for this study, no NC Pre-K teacher within the two districts where this study took place identified their gender as male.

Time constraints. Data collection and analysis of this study were conducted over three months, which evoked a time constraint limitation. Due to the short time allotted to collect and complete an analysis of the data, there was not enough time to conduct follow-up interviews. This could have allowed the participants to elaborate more on their experiences and increase the

clarity of their responses. I, the researcher, did, however, allow for member checking, which allowed participants to check their responses, given during their interviews, for accuracy.

Participants' response biases. Another limitation of this study was the responses given by the participants (the NC Pre-K teachers). Some of the participants are former co-workers of the researcher, as they taught in the same district but at different schools. Therefore, some of the participants in the study could have replied to the derived open-ended questions in a way they thought would be pleasing to the researcher instead of being truthful. Therefore, the Pre-K teachers in this study may not have shared honest experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion during the individual or focus group interviews, thus skewing the data. The researcher constructed a comfortable rapport and used open-ended questions during the semi-structured individual and focus group interviews to elicit as much honest information as possible.

Technology issues. Due to COVID restrictions prohibiting non-school employees from entering schools in the two school districts where this study took place, Zoom, an online video conferencing platform, was used to conduct the semi-structured interviews in the participants' classes. Utilizing Zoom added limitations to the study due to technology issues with Zoom, internet connection, and device issues. Utilizing technology led to some points during the Zoom interviews in which the audio quality was poor, and it was not easy to hear participants' responses. Using technology also limited the researcher's ability to capture all non-verbal cues, affecting the researcher's ability to analyze participant behavior accurately.

Delimitations

According to Ellis and Levy (2010), Delimitations in research are the boundaries and limits set by the researcher. It is imperative to establish boundaries and delimit the scope of a research

study to render it manageable and relevant. This approach helps ensure that the research produces valuable results that can be utilized in practical situations. The following delimitations were presented in this study: research methodology, participant criteria,

Research methodology. The study employed a qualitative methodology that restricted the sample size and geographic area. This methodology aimed to obtain detailed and descriptive data to shed light on teachers' experiences concerning their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward teaching SNC in their general class. Furthermore, the qualitative design facilitated a better understanding of general NC Pre-K teachers' beliefs about self-efficacy and their confidence in working with special needs students. While a quantitative methodology was considered, it was rejected because the researcher wanted to collect data about participants' lived experiences, which could only be achieved by utilizing a qualitative design.

Participant criteria. The participant criteria were also a delimiting factor, as general Pre-K teachers were the population being investigated in a public school setting. To be in this study, all participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) general education teacher at a public school in North Carolina (b) have a minimum of 1 year of teaching experience in an NC Pre-K class in which at least one student with special needs was included in their class. To be a participant in the focus group interview, the participants had to meet the following criteria: (a) meet the criteria to be a regular participant in this study, (b) have at least five or more years of experience teaching in a general NC Pre-K class (c) had taught at least four or more special needs students or IEPs in a general NC Pre-K class. Potential participants for the individual interviews were excluded if they: (a) were not an NC Pre-K teacher housed in a public school, (b) did not have a minimum of 1 year of experience teaching in a general NC Pre-K class, (c) had not taught at least one student with special needs in an NC Pre-K class. Potential teachers for the

focus group study were excluded if they: (a) did not have a minimum of 5 years of experience teaching in an NC Pre-K class, (b) had not taught at least four or more students with special needs during their years as NC Pre-K general teachers. Delimitating these factors was needed to ensure that the researcher would gather shared experiences on the population (general NC Pre-K teachers) being investigated regarding their attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion to reveal factors that influence their attitudes and self-efficacy and the barriers that hinder their successful inclusion.

Geographical location. The study was conducted on general Pre-K teachers in two school districts within North Carolina. This geographic delimitation was derived to ensure me, the researcher, access and convenience to the study population sample. The population targeted in this study was limited to general Pre-K teachers in NC public schools only. North Carolina's Pre-K program was chosen to fill the gap in inclusive research on teachers' attitudes and efficacy regarding the NC Pre-K general teacher population.

Recommendations for Future Research

Based upon the findings, limitations, and delimitations that surfaced from the current study, I, the researcher, have articulated recommendations for further research. First, the scope of the study should be reconfigured. The purpose of the study and the population (NC Pre-K teachers) should not be altered, but the other areas need to be revised. The sample size was limited to ten participants due to time constraints. The study should be extended to include more NC Pre-K teachers, including males. This study only had female participants. It would be interesting to find out if male Pre-K teachers have different attitudes or self-efficacy towards inclusion than female NC Pre-K teachers. The time invested in the study must be elongated to generate more precise data such as follow-up interviews, classroom observations, and participant

journals. Completing follow-up interviews would allow participants to clarify and extend information—more time to conduct observations or have teachers complete journals. The collection and varying types of data collected help to increase the triangulation of the study by increasing its strength of validity and reliability. The geographic location should be expanded. The current study was delaminated to two counties in North Carolina. Both districts and the schools that set the study were in rural areas. It would be interesting to investigate the attitudes and perceived self-efficacy of NC Pre-K teachers who teach in suburban areas to find out if the areas (rural or suburban) differ since local taxes fund districts. It is also recommended to do a quantitative study on the research topic of this study to find out Pre-K teachers' overall attitudes and perceived self-efficacy. Extending the geographic location will also allow the literature to conclude if barriers are parallel across all NC Pre-K teachers or if they are affected based on factors such as rural or suburban areas. Finding out if NC Pre-K teachers in big metropolitan districts have the same barriers as Pre-K teachers in small rural districts can impact how the state allocates monies to NC Pre-K programs among the different LEAs.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate general NC Pre-K's attitudes and self-efficacy toward inclusion and barriers that impede their success as inclusive teachers. The purpose of this study was to reveal factors that influence NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes (negative and positive) and self-efficacy (high and low) toward including SNC and barriers that hinder them from being successful at inclusion. Revealing the factors that negatively influence general NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes, lower their self-efficacy, and hinder their success at inclusion extends the literature and decreases the gap in inclusion. Literature conducted on inclusion prior to this study found that teachers' attitudes, self-efficacy, and barriers to successful inclusion exist mainly

among the population of teachers from grades Kindergarten to twelfth grade (Lindner et al., 2023; see also Alfaro et al., 2015; Gaines et al., 2017; Hassanein et al., 2020; Miles et al., 2018; Mngo & Mngo, 2018; Woodcock & Wolfson, 2019). Prior literature also indicated that teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion were influenced by variables such as education, training, resources, support, prior experience, and types of students included (Charitaki et al., 2022; Van Mieghem et al., 2020; van Steen & Wilson, 2020; see also Amr et al., 2016; Cwirynkalo et al., 2017; Nketsia et al., 2016; Odongo & Davidson, 2016; Priyadarshini & Thangarajathi, 2016; Sandhu, 2017; Somma & Bennett, 2020; Vaz et al., 2015).

The findings of this study align with the previous literature as it revealed that NC Pre-K teachers' negative attitudes, self-efficacy, and barriers to inclusion are influenced by overlapping variables such as support, training, and resources. The Pre-K teachers in this study perceive that receiving adequate professional development in inclusive practices that focus on the types of students included in Pre-K will give them positive attitudes toward inclusion and foster a higher sense of self-efficacy to teach SNC. The Pre-K teachers also believe that solving the barriers of a lack of support, need for more training, lower class size, more time, and flexibility with the curriculum will help them be successful at including and teaching students with various types and levels of special needs in their general class. Allotting money to lower class size is a step the state of North Carolina can take to remove this barrier voiced by teachers to increase their success at inclusion, which can lead to inclusive success among the Pre-K classes in the NC Pre-K program in public schools. Local educational agencies can increase NC Pre-K teachers' positive attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion by providing professional development on their needs for inclusive practices and more help and support in their general classes. As the NC Pre-K program grows and the push for more inclusive classrooms is

mandated, more children with identified and potentially unidentified special needs are being enrolled in NC Pre-K classes. The general teachers of NC Pre-K provide these SNCs with the same education as their typical peers. Therefore, increasing NC Pre-K teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy and removing barriers that they voiced concerning inclusion is critical to moving early education and the NC Pre-K program in North Carolina forward.

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Appendix A

IRB Application

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	Exempt - Limited IRB
Member	Susanne Williamson	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Susanne Williamson	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	[REDACTED]
Member	Grania Holman	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	[REDACTED]
					Date: 10-10-2023

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-1248

Title: A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina's General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy Toward Inclusion
 Creation Date: 6-29-2022 End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Susanne Williamson

Review Board: Research Ethics

Office Sponsor:

Study History Initial Submission

IRB Overview

Application for the Use of Human Research Participants

Before proceeding to the IRB application, please review and acknowledge the below information:

Administrative Withdrawal Notice

This section describes the IRB's administrative withdrawal policy. Please review this section carefully.

Your study may be administratively withdrawn if any of the following conditions are met:

- Inactive greater than 60 days and less than 10% of the app has been completed
- Duplicate submissions
- Upon request of the PI (or faculty sponsor for student submissions)
- Inactive for 90 days or more (does not apply to conditional approvals, the IRB will contact PI prior to withdrawal)

*required

- ✓ I have read and understand the above information.

Study Submission & Certification

This section describes how to submit and certify your application. Please review this section carefully. Failure to understand this process may cause delays.

Submission

- Once you click complete submission, all study personnel will need to certify the submission before it is sent to the IRB for review.
- Instructions for submitting and certifying an application are available in the IRB's Cayuse How-to's document.

Certification

- Your study has not been successfully submitted to the IRB office until it has been certified by all study personnel.
 - If you do not receive a "submission received by the IRB office" email, your study has not been received.
 - Please check your junk folder before contacting the IRB.
-

required

- ✓ I have read and understand the above information.

Moving through the Cayuse Stages

In Cayuse, your IRB submission will move through different stages. We have provided a quick overview of each stage below.

In Draft

The In Draft stage means that the study is with the study team (you). In this stage, the study team can make edits to the application.

- When the IRB returns a submission to the study team, the submission will move back to the In-Draft stage to allow for editing.

Awaiting Authorization

- Each time a study is submitted, it will move from In-Draft to Awaiting Authorization.
 - During this stage, the submission must be certified by all study personnel listed on the application (PI, Co-PI, Faculty Sponsor). This ensures that every member of the study team is satisfied with the edits.
 - Please note, the IRB has not received your submission until all study personnel have clicked "certify" on the submission details page.
-

Pre-Review

- When your application is submitted and certified by all study personnel, your study will move into the Pre-Review stage.
- Pre-Review means the IRB has received your submission. The majority of the IRB review occurs during the Pre-Review stage.
- Once received, an IRB analyst will conduct a cursory review of your application to ensure we have all the information and documents necessary to complete a preliminary review. This cursory review usually occurs within 3 business days of receipt.
- If additional information or documents are needed to facilitate our review, your submission will be returned to you to request these changes. Your study will be assigned to an analyst once it is ready for review. Preliminary and any subsequent reviews may take 15–20 business days to complete depending on the IRB's current workload.

Under Review

- Studies will only move into the “Under Review” stage when the analyst has completed his or her review and the study is ready for IRB approval.

*required

✓ I have read and understand the above information.

Finding Help

The IRB has several resources available to assist you with the application process. Please review the below information or contact our office if you need assistance.

Help Button Text (?)

- Some questions within the application may have help text available.
- Please click on the question mark to the right of these questions to find additional guidance.

Need Help? Visit our website, www.liberty.edu/irb, to find:

Cayuse How-To's

FAQs

Supporting document templates

Contact Us:

irb@liberty.edu

434-592-5530

Office Hours: M-F; 8:00AM-4:30PM

*required

✓ I have read and understand the above information.

*required

Acknowledgement

Please acknowledge that you have reviewed and understand the above information. You can refer back to this information at any time.

I acknowledge that I have read and understand the above information. Take me to IRB application.

*required

What type of project are you seeking approval for?

Please make the appropriate selection below.

Research

- Research is any undertaking in which a faculty member, staff member, or student collects information on living humans as part of a planned, designed activity with the intent of contributing relevant information to a body of knowledge within a discipline.

Archival or Secondary Data Use Research ONLY

- Archival data is information previously collected for a purpose other than the proposed research. Examples include student grades and patient medical records.
- Secondary data is data that was previously collected for the purpose of research. For example, a researcher may choose to utilize survey data that was collected as part of an earlier study.

Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) Scholarly Project

- This option is specific to Doctor of Nursing practice (DNP) students' evidence-based practice scholarly projects.

Doctor of Ministry (DMin) Project

This option is specific to Doctor of Ministry (DMin) student projects.

*required

Please indicate the primary purpose of this project:

Why is this project being proposed?

Doctoral Research

*Note: Students must enter themselves as PI and their faculty sponsor under Faculty Sponsor.

*required

Have you passed your dissertation proposal defense?

Doctoral candidates may not submit their project for IRB review until they have successfully passed their proposal defense.

Yes

No

N/A

Master's Research

Undergraduate Research

Faculty or Staff Research

Class Project
Other

Study Personnel

Please fill in all associated personnel below.

Please note: All study personnel must complete CITI training prior to receiving IRB approval. The IRB will accept either of the following CITI courses: "Social & Behavioral Researchers" or "Biomedical & Health Science Researchers."

[IRB Training Information CITI Training Website](#)

*required

Primary Contact

The individual who will receive and respond to communication from the IRB should be listed as the primary contact. For student projects, the primary contact will be the student researcher(s). For faculty projects, the primary contact may be the researcher or a student(s), administrative assistant, etc. assisting the faculty member. The same individual may be listed as the primary contact and the principal investigator.

Name: Susanne Williamson

Organization: Graduate Education

Address: 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA 24515-0000 Phone:

Email: [REDACTED]

*required

Principal Investigator (PI)

The principal investigator (PI) is the individual who will conduct the research or serve as the lead researcher on a project involving more than one investigator. For theses or dissertations, the student should be listed as PI.

Name: Susanne Williamson

Organization: Graduate Education

Address: 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA 24515-0000 Phone:

Email: [REDACTED] Co-Investigator(s)

Co-investigators are researchers who serve alongside the principal investigator and share in the data collection and analysis tasks.

*required

Faculty Sponsor

Projects with students serving as the PI must list a faculty sponsor, typically a dissertation or thesis chairperson/mentor.

Name: Grania Holman

Organization: Graduate Education

Address: 1971 University Blvd, Lynchburg, VA 24515-0000

Email: [REDACTED]

*required

Will the research team include any non-affiliated, non-LU co-investigators?

For example, faculty from other institutions without Liberty University login credentials. Note: These individuals will not be able to access the IRB application in Cayuse, however, the information provided below allows the LU IRB to verify the training and credentials of all associated study personnel. Yes

No

Conflicts of Interest

This section will obtain information about potential conflicts of interest.

*required

Do you or any study personnel hold a position of influence or academic/professional authority over the participants?

For example, are you the participants supervisor, pastor, therapist, teacher, principal, or district/school administrator? Yes

No

*required

Do you or any study personnel have a financial conflict of interest?

For example, do you or an immediate family member receive income or other payments, own investments in, or have a relationship with a non-profit organization that could benefit from this research? Yes

No

Funding Information

This section will request additional information about any funding sources.

*required

Is your project funded?

Yes

No

Study Dates

Please provide your estimated study dates.

*required

Start Date

07-11-2022

*required

End Date

05-09-2022

Use of Liberty University Participants

Please make the appropriate selection below:

*required

I do not plan to use LU students, staff, and/or faculty as participants.

- Note: Use of LU students, faculty, or staff also includes the use of any existing data.
- I plan to use a single LU department or group.
- You will need to submit proof of permission from the department chair, coach, or dean to use LU personnel from a single department.
- I plan to use multiple LU departments or groups.
- If you are including faculty, students, or staff from multiple departments or groups (i.e., all sophomores or LU Online) and you have received documentation of permission, please attach it to your application. Otherwise, the IRB will seek administrative approval on your behalf.

*required

Purpose

Please provide additional details about the purpose of this project.

Write an original, brief, non-technical description of the purpose of your project.

Include in your description your research hypothesis/question, a narrative that explains the major constructs of your study, and how the data will advance your research hypothesis or question. This section should be easy to read for someone not familiar with your academic discipline.

The purpose of my proposed study is to reveal the lived experiences of general North Carolina (NC) Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) teachers concerning their attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion. My overarching research question is: How do general Pre-K teachers describe their attitudes and perceived self-efficacy toward inclusion when teaching special needs children in an inclusive setting within the public schools of North Carolina, and what challenges impede them from being effective inclusive educators? The major constructs of my proposed research are teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy. Teachers play a vital role in the education of young children. The type of attitudes and level of self-efficacy teachers hold impacts their overall behaviors from social interaction to teaching practices. Young children's main avenue of learning is through social interaction and observation. Young children with special needs usually require more one-on-one social interaction and learning opportunities. My proposed study can reveal the types of attitudes and perceptions of self-efficacy towards inclusion that general Pre-K teachers experience when they have special needs children in their class. The data can potentially identify some main factors, shared by general Pre-K teachers, that generate negative attitudes and low self-efficacy towards inclusion. Currently little data is

available on the topic of teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy towards inclusion for the population of NC Pre-K teachers. The data collected from my proposed study can narrow the gap in the literature and assist with moving early education and the NC Pre-K program forward because revealing factors that cause negative attitudes and low self-efficacy toward inclusion can be addressed to assist teachers with being more positive towards inclusion.

Investigational Methods

Please indicate whether your project involves any of the following:

*required

Does this project involve the use of an investigational new drug (IND) or an approved drug for an unapproved Use?

Yes

No

*required

Does this project involve the use of an investigational medical device (IDE) or an approved medical device for an unapproved Use?

Yes

No

Appendix B

IRB Approval of Study

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

October 19, 2022

Susanne Williamson
Grania Holman

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-1248 A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina's General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy Toward Inclusion

Dear Susanne Williamson, Grania Holman,

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 §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form(s) and final versions of your study documents can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. Your stamped consent form(s) should be copied and used to gain the consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information electronically, the contents of the attached consent document(s) should be made available without alteration.

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, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research Research
Ethics Office

Appendix C

Participant Recruitment letter

Dear North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Teacher:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree. The purpose of my research is to reveal attitudes, perceived self-efficacy, and barriers that Pre-K teachers experience when special needs children are included in their general classes. I am sending this e-mail to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older. All participants for the study must be a general education teacher that have taught in a North Carolina (NC) Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) class for at least one or more years in a public-school and have taught at least one special needs child or child with an Individualized Education Plan. All Participants, if willing, will be asked to engage in a 40-60 minute online (zoom) individual interview that will be audio recorded. Participants for the focus group must have at least 5 years' experience teaching NC Pre-K and must be taught at least 4 or more students with special needs or an IEP. Focus group participants, if willing, will be asked to engage in a group interview which will consists of 4 members that will last approximately 30-60 minutes and will be audio recorded. All participants will be asked to gather and submit by e-mail attachment the following de-identified document artifacts (three lesson plans, copy of certificates or personal log of college courses and professional development earned related to training in inclusion of children with special needs or disabilities) which will take approximately 5-10 minutes and engage in a 10–15-minute session of interview transcript review to ensure researcher has accurately translated your responses. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but participant identities will not be disclosed.

To participate, please complete the survey by clicking on this link: [Participant Survey Screen](#) after reading this e-mail. The survey will automatically be returned to my e-mail [REDACTED] and automatically placed in a secure file in my google drive.

A consent document will be e-mailed once I receive your screening survey and ensure that you meet the criteria to be part of the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to digitally sign the consent document and e-mail it to me prior to your individual interview.

Participants will receive a \$50 gift card to their choice of Walmart or Amazon for participating in the individual interview and a \$40 gift card to their choice of Walmart or Amazon for being a participant in the focus group interview. Gift cards will be distributed by participant choice of United States mail (real card) or e-mail (digital gift card) after interview transcripts have been reviewed has been completed.

Sincerely,
Susanne Williamson Carter
Graduate Student of Liberty University

Appendix D

Participant Screening Survey

Participant Screening Survey

Greeting once again and thank you for showing interest in being a participant for my study titled “A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina’s General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers’ Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy Toward Inclusion.” This survey serves as a tool to screen potential participants for the study. Please answer all the survey questions and submit.

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress. Learn more

* Indicates required question

Email*

Your email

1. Are you a general education Pre-K teacher?

Yes

No

2. Do you currently have a student in your class with special needs or an IEP?

Yes

No

3. Have you taught NC Pre-K for more than a year?

Yes

No

4. If you answered yes to question 3, please indicate the number of years you have taught NC Pre-K?

Your answer

5. If you answered yes to question 3, did you have any special needs or IEP children in your general education class during your prior years of teaching NC Pre-K?

Yes

No

6. If you have taught NC Pre-K for more than five years give an estimation of how many students you have taught in NC Pre-K that had special needs or an IEP. Please type the number below.

Your answer

How would you like to receive your qualification results by Text, Phone call, or E-mail? (Please indicate on the short answer line by indicating your chosen method as well as the cell phone number or e-mail address you want to be contacted through).

Your answer

Submit

Appendix E

Participant Consent

Title of the Project: A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina's General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy toward Inclusion

Principal Investigator: Susanne Williamson Carter

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be over 18, a general Pre-Kindergarten teacher in a North Carolina public school. You must have taught Pre-K in NC for at least one full year. You must have taught at least one or more students with special needs or an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) in your NC Pre-K class. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

General Pre-K teachers that meet all the criteria for the study and have taught NC Pre-K for more than 5 years and have taught more than 4 students with special needs or an IEP during their time as a NC Pre-K teacher will be selected to participate a focus group interview. The focus group will consist of 4 general Pre-K teachers that have taught NC Pre-K five or more years during which they have taught four or more students with special needs or an IEP during their years as a general NC Pre-K teacher.

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 examine the lived experiences of North Carolina general Pre-Kindergarten teachers concerning their attitudes and self-efficacy towards special needs students that are included in their regular classes. The study aims to reveal factors that negatively affect teacher attitudes and self-efficiency as well as extract voiced barriers that impede successful inclusion.

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 things:

1. All participants need to engage in an initial 40–60-minute online interview via Zoom. The interview will consist of open questions, and it will be audio recorded.
2. Provide copies of artifacts via email (with names and schools blacked out) such as 3 lesson plans, copy of certificates or personal log of college courses earned related to training in inclusion of children with special needs or disabilities.
3. Focus Group Participants (General NC Pre-K teachers that have taught NC Pre-K for five or more years and have taught more than four students with special needs or IEP's during their years as a Pre-K teacher) will engage in a 30–60-minute focus group interview with three other NC Pre-K teachers via Zoom in which you will answer open ended questions and your responses will be audio recorded.

4. Engage in interview transcripts review for approximately 10-15 minutes to ensure researcher has accurately written about participant's experience.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

Benefits to society for taking part in the study consists of increasing Pre-K teachers' positive attitudes towards inclusion which will assist in moving early childhood education and the NC Pre-K program forward while increasing the outcomes of special needs children in NC Pre-K general classrooms.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

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 codes. During the time of the interviews only the participants and the researcher will be present in the class on Zoom to maintain confidentiality.
- Research records (audio recordings, hand notes, transcribed notes, document artifacts, and flash drive with recorded data) will be stored securely in a locked file for three years. After the three-year annual date of the completed study all records will be erased and destroyed. The researcher will be the only person with access to the research records as well as any passwords to digital data stored on flash drive.
- Data collected from you will be stored on a computer that is locked with a password that only I (the researcher) will have access to. Data collected from you may be used in future presentations. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all paperwork will be shredded and disposed of in a black garbage bag.
- One limit of confidentiality pertaining to this study is the focus group interview. While the researcher will highly discourage the sharing of any information discussed in the focus group interview, there remains a likelihood that members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the focus group.

How will you be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. An incentive in the form of a \$50 dollar gift card from your choice of Walmart or Amazon will be issued for giving up your free time to participate in this study. You can choose to have a real gift card mailed to your home address (United States mailing address) or a digital gift card sent to your e-mail. Participants that are chosen to be part of the four Pre-K teachers of the focus group will receive an additional

\$40 gift card from your choice of Walmart or Amazon for giving up your free time to participate in the study. You can choose to have a real gift card mailed to your home address (United States mailing address) or a digital gift card sent to your e-mail.

All gift cards will be given after participants have completed their interview transcripts review which will be 60 days or less after all the individual and focus group interviews have been conducted. Email and home addresses will be requested for compensation purposes, but they will remain confidential.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. 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 or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data (if applicable), will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data, if applicable, 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 Susanne Williamson Carter. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her by email at [REDACTED] or by text or phone at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Grania Holman, 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 Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at 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 researcher 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 me as part of my participation in this study.

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F

District 1 Site Consent



Human Resources

, North Carolina

June 10, 2022

Asst. Superintendent of Human Resources
County Schools

Dear Susanne Williamson Carter:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled *A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina's General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers' Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy toward Inclusion*, We have decided to grant you permission to contact our NC Pre-K faculty and invite them to participate in your study and conduct your study at [REDACTED] Schools and utilize Pre-K lesson plans, and NC Pre-K staff training documentation in the area of inclusion or special needs for your research study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

We grant permission for Susanne Williamson Carter to contact NC Pre-K teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

We will not provide potential participant information to Susanne Williamson Carter but we agree to [send/provide] her study information to NC Pre-K teachers on her behalf.

The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.

Sincerely,

Asst. Superintendent of Human Resources
County Schools

Appendix G

District 2 Site Consent

Public Schools [Redacted]

North Carolina

July 14, 2022

Susanne Williamson Carter
[Redacted]

Dear Susanne Williamson Carter,

After careful review Of your research proposal entitled A Phenomenological Investigation of North Carolina 's General Pre-Kindergarten Teachers ' Attitudes and Perceived Self-Efficacy toward Inclusion, we have decided to grant you permission to contact our Pre-K faculty and invite them to participate in your study and conduct your study at the Public Schools of [Redacted] and utilize Pre-K lesson plans and Pre-K staff training documentation in the area of inclusion or special needs for your research study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

[We] grant permission for Susanne Williamson Carter to contact Pre-K teachers to invite them to participate in her research study.

[We] will not provide potential participant information to Susanne Williamson Carter but we agree to [send/provide] her study information to NC Pre-K teachers on her behalf.

[The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

[The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

Sincerely,

[Redacted Signature]

Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources
[Redacted Title]

Appendix I

Individual Interview Questions

1. Can you please introduce yourself to me?
2. Will you share with me your gender, age, and race?
3. What is your highest level of education and major?
4. How many years of teaching experience do you currently have?
5. How many years do you have teaching NC Pre-K?
6. What does your educational background consist of?
7. What, if any, training do you currently have regarding students with special needs?
8. Approximately how many students have you taught (previously and currently) that had an identified or unidentified special need?
9. What type of special needs students (previously or currently) have been enrolled in your class?
10. What is your definition of inclusion?
11. What main factors do you feel positively affect your attitude towards including children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
12. What main factors do you feel negatively affect your attitude towards including children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
13. What main factors do you feel are barriers to your success in including special needs children in your regular Pre-K class?
14. What main factors do you feel increase your self-efficacy to effectively include children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
15. What main factors do you feel are barriers that impede your self-concept to effectively include children with special needs in your regular Pre-K class?
16. What are your thoughts about including children with mild special needs in your class?
17. What are your thoughts about including children with medium-level special needs in your class?
18. What are your thoughts about including children with severe special needs in your class?
19. Do you have anything else you would like to share regarding your belief or perceived self-concept for the successful inclusion of special needs students in a regular Pre-K class?

Appendix J

Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Describe your attitudes towards including SNC in your class.
2. Explain the challenges you perceive in teaching both atypical and SNC in your class.
3. What factors make including SNC more accepting to you?
4. What factors do you perceive as barriers to your success as an inclusive educator?
5. Is there anything that I did not ask that you would like to discuss?

Appendix K
Codes and Themes

Codes	Frequency of Codes	Sub-Themes	Themes
Includes all children	4	Types of Special Needs Children Included in Pre-K General Classrooms	Pre-K Teachers Define and Describe Inclusion
Typical and Atypical in the same class	3		
Learn in the same class	5		
Don't want to discriminate	1		
Same education	2		
Helpful	1		
Equal Education	7		
Every SNC is different	5		
Behavior/ Emotionally Disturbed Included	1		
Down Syndrome Included	1		
Students with OT and PT included	2		
Speech and Language issues included	10		
Spinal bifida included	2		
Visually impaired included	1		
Students with ODD included	1		
Unidentified Students included	5		
Wheelchair included	1		
Students with Autism included	7		
Students with Leg Braces included	1		
Heart Condition included	1		
Hearing impaired included	1		
Development Delays included	2		
Students with ADHD included	3		

Students with Behavior
issues included (BED
and ODD). 2

*Type of Need: Mild,
Medium, and Severe:
influence on Teacher
Attitudes*
Mild Disabilities

Main Influences of Teacher
Attitudes Towards
Inclusion

Don't mind/ no
problem/okay
including 7

Not really different
than regular kids 1

Slight Changes needed 5

Easy to include 1

Some vision 1

impairment

Mild/minor speech 9

Spina bifida 1

Wheelchair but can do
for self 1

Multiple diagnosis 2

Simple OT /PT motor
impairment 2

Hearing impairment 1

Mild cognitive delay 1

Dyslexia 1

High functioning 2

Autism

Okay with/don't mind
including med. level 8

Requires more
adjustments 2

Depends on the need
and severity 2

Double-help 5

Requires more one-on-
one than mild 3

Inclusion easier with
support 1

Easier to include when
trained 1

Sensory issues 1

Severe speech 6

Autism Spectrum 6

Medium Disabilities

Don't really mind including severe SNC	3	Severe Disabilities	
Including them is hard	3		
Regular class may not be place	2		
Require lots of support	3		
Need the most help	2		
More than 2 years behind	1		
Low functioning Autism	6		
Feed tube and Wheelchair	1		
Has a catheter	1		
Severe Behavior and Emotional issues	3		
Needs a Personal Care Aide	4		
Nonverbal	2		
Nonmobile	2		
Severe Down Syndrome	1		
PA: Support in Classroom	8		<i>Main Influences of Positive Attitudes</i>
PA: Parent Support	10		
PA: Administrative Support	5		
PA: Support from EC Department	5		
PA: Support from Therapists	6		
PA: Support from all stakeholders	2		
PA: Having the right training/PD	5		
PA: Having Resources/Materials	4	<i>Main Influences of Negative Attitudes</i>	
NA: No support	10		
NA: No parent support/communication	5		
NA: No support from the Administration	9		
NA: No support from the district	3		
NA: Lack of training	3		

NA: Lack of Resources/materials	4		
NA: Type of SNC included	3		
LSE: Lack/need more Training	4	<i>Influences of Low Self-efficacy</i>	Main Influences of Perceived Self-Efficacy Regarding Inclusion
LSE: Lack/no support	7		
LSE: Lack/no resources	7		
HSE: More resources	4	<i>Influences of High Self-efficacy</i>	Barriers to Successful Inclusion
HSE: More support	4		
HSE: Right training	7		
HSE: Experience teaching/working with SNC	6		
B: Lack of Support	7		
B: Lack of Support Admin.	2		
B: Lack of support EC office	4		
B: Lack of Support from professionals	4		
B: Time	5		
B: Lack of Training	8		
B: Class size	2		
Barrier: Creative Curriculum	13		
B: Resources	4		

Appendix L

Member Checking Questions

1. Do you agree that the transcript detailing your lived experiences regarding your attitude and perceived self-efficacy towards inclusion accurately articulates your words?
2. Does the statements in the data analysis accurately describe your attitudes and perceived self-efficacy towards including special needs children in your class and the barriers that you voice as impeding your success as inclusive teachers?
3. Are there any misinterpreted statements that you feel I need to change or revise?
4. Are there any other statements or information that you feel needs to be added that would further explain your attitudes, self-efficacy, and barriers you face when including special needs children in your class?