

THE PERCEPTIONS OF ELEMENTARY TEACHERS IN AN INCLUSIVE CLASSROOM
ENVIRONMENT RELATED TO THEIR TEACHER PREPARATORY PROGRAMS: A
PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Jevauwn D. Smith

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. The theory guiding this study was Bandura's self-efficacy theory, which describes how an individual will approach a task based on their level of competence and readiness. The central research question was: How do general education teachers describe their level of preparedness for inclusive education based on their teacher preparatory programs? This study used a transcendental phenomenological design to gain insight into the phenomenon from 12 elementary teachers in See County School District. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. The data were collected through individual interviews, two focus groups, and letter writing. Qualitative data analysis procedures were used to triangulate and analyze the data to determine the emerging themes, synthesize the data, and describe the essence of the phenomenon. The findings of this research suggest that elementary general education teachers, through their teacher preparatory programs, need to be equipped with skills and strategies that can be utilized in an inclusive classroom environment. Teachers recognized their role in making inclusive education successful and as such, utilized research-based strategies in their classrooms. The findings also highlight the need for school leaders to gain knowledge in inclusive education practice so they can be more impactful on their campuses in promoting sound academic and social behaviors.

Keywords: inclusive education, general education teacher, self-efficacy, learning disability

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and close friends. They have always strongly believed in my ability to strive for academic excellence and hold me to a higher standard. I, therefore, salute my mother, Phyllis Boucher, my grandmother, Esmine Wright, aunts and uncles, Ruchette Robinson, Kaydian Wilson, Allysa Williams, Hugh-Roy Hanson, Eules Lindsay, my cousins, Apostle Demar C. Crawford, and La'Brece Knox.

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List of Abbreviations

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)

U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Schools should serve the purpose of reaching all students at their developmental and social needs. The teacher plays a critical role in the process of ensuring that learning is maximized for students, and they are able to access the curricula and demonstrate learning in one form or the other. Therefore, it is important that the teacher is equipped with the most effective pedagogical skills to maximize the learning of all students, including those with learning disabilities. Every child has the right to an education that is appropriate for them (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). To this end, inclusive education becomes commonplace in school settings as the general education classroom is identified as the least restrictive environment for students with learning disabilities (IDEA, 2004). It is, therefore, important to understand how general education teachers are prepared for this kind of classroom setting. Consequently, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. This chapter presents the background of inclusive education, the problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, and the definitions.

Background

Several research studies have examined the topic of inclusive education since the publishing of the Salamanca Statement in 1994 (Nilholm, 2020). The general education teacher is expected to provide students with the appropriate modifications and accommodations as outlined in their individualized education program (IEP) (Hurwitz et al., 2021). Based on the

severity of the learning disability, the student is placed in the general education classroom where they will receive instructions alongside their non-disabled peers (Akbarovna, 2022). This would require the general education teacher to adapt his or her approach in the teaching and learning environment to meet the needs of the varied learners (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). For this reason, inclusive education presents several challenges for teachers who are trained as general educators (Love & Horn, 2019; Sharma et al., 2018; Singal, 2019).

Historical Context

It is very important to understand how the education system has evolved over the years and the implications this has had on the policies and procedures that are used to guide practices today. History has shown that children who were born with disabilities in the early years were considered to be a cause of shame and were often placed in institutions (The Anti-Defamation League, 2005). They were ridiculed and seen as a source of entertainment. Data revealed showed that over 1.8 million students were excluded from the education system up to the late 20th century (Duncan, 2015). When mandatory education commenced near the 21st century, schools did not have programs to cater to the needs of students with disabilities (Akbarovna, 2022). By the 1950s, America started to see a change as the Civil Rights Movement started to result in changes (Kirby, 2017). In 1966, an amendment was made to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act to provide federal funds to support the education of students with disabilities who are in public schools (Elementary and Secondary Education Act Amendments of 1965, 1965). However, educating these students in isolated settings started to coexist with the issue of segregation which was a fighting order during that period (Graham et al., 2020).

The fight for equal rights through the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and the historical United States Supreme Court case of *Brown vs. Board of education*, where it was

decided that the promotion of school segregation did not allow all students the same equal opportunities, influenced changes to come (Bateman & Yell, 2019). Although the court case was a matter of racial segregation, it had a significant impact on and helped to give support to advocates who were in the fight for rights for individuals with disabilities. Consequently, legislation would be passed to give rights to individuals with disabilities. In 1973, The Rehabilitation Act made provisions that ensured individuals with disabilities would not be denied benefits from programs that were being funded by the Federal government (Rehabilitation Act, 1973). However, more work was needed to be done to ensure the rights of these individuals. This saw the passing of another legislation in 1975. The Education of All Handicapped Children Act would guarantee free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with disabilities (The Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Even then, educators considered this to be a waste of time (West, 2000).

In 1982, the United States Supreme Court case of Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley saw an outcome where the Education for the Handicapped Act of 1974 be renamed to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Britannica, 2023). As a result of the ruling of the United States Supreme Court, state governments and local school boards were now required to provide FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE), where students identified as needing special education services would receive instruction alongside their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004). It was now a requirement that students who qualify for special education programs be provided with individualized education program (IEP) that cater to their learning needs. This must be decided upon by the school officials and consultation with the child's guardian. Thus, the court defined what is meant by free and appropriate public education.

To continue with the process of improving the lives of students with disabilities, an amendment was made to IDEA in 1997 to ensure meaningful programs were in schools for students with disabilities and parents were more involved in the writing of IEPs for the children. The amendment reiterated and supported the thinking of inclusive education as general and special education teachers must collaborate to decide on the best educational goals for the child. In 2004, the controversial No Child Left Behind Act helped to improve special education programs by requiring statewide assessments and educators who were trained to teach students with special needs. This was reauthorized as the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015.

Social Context

All students are wired differently, but all students can thrive with the right kind of support. The research shows that the role of the teacher in the life of a student plays a significant part in this success (Fang, 2022). This role is even greater for teachers who have students who will need to be enrolled in special education services in order to gain support for academic success (Agran et al., 2019). Agran et al. (2019) explained that the teacher's inability to provide students with the appropriate accommodations and modifications can be detrimental to their success. For this reason, Aldabas (2020) postulated that the general education classroom may not be the best setting for students with learning disabilities. However, other research suggests more benefits for students with learning disabilities when educated in the same setting as their non-disabled peers (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). These students can socialize and avoid discrimination from other students because of their learning challenges that cause them to be in a segregated setting (Ruppar et al., 2016). It is, therefore, critical to examine how general education teachers are being prepared through their teacher preparatory programs to teach in an inclusive classroom.

The challenges of inclusive education have been ongoing for at least the past 35 years

(Sailor & McCart, 2014). This is even so after decades of efforts to make inclusive education a reality. These challenges have resulted in students being placed in segregated classrooms (Brock, 2018). The United States Department of Education (2018) reported that over half of the students who are identified as students needing special education services are spending over 60% of their time in the special education setting. In 2021-22, over 15% of all public school students ranging from age 3-21 received special educational services, with 32% of this group representing students with learning disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). The law requires that the least restrictive environment to be used for placing students (the general education classroom). However, one factor that has hampered school districts from upholding this policy is the preparation and competency of teachers for inclusive education (Agran et al., 2019). According to Chadwell et al. (2019), teachers who were not prepared for inclusive education and lack experience in such settings may have severe challenges functioning effectively and may stunt the growth of both the general education students and those with IEPs. These teachers may not also understand the value of educating these students alongside their non-disabled peers (Agran et al., 2019). To this end, it is important to examine the preparation of general education teachers to function effectively in an inclusive classroom environment.

Theoretical Context

Over the past three decades, inclusive education has become more of a topical conversation in education. This is also evident in research that has been done on different areas that affect service delivery for students in special education programs which teachers' perspective, content knowledge of teachers, and placement for students (Dillon et al., 2021). Consequently, different theoretical frameworks have been used to explore the preparedness of teachers for inclusion. Two of these theories are sensemaking theory and the theory of planned

behavior.

Massouti (2021) applied the sensemaking theory to understand the perspective of teachers about their preparation for inclusive education. Sensemaking theory was postulated by Weick (1995) and examines the social-cultural perspective of organizations and the impact it will have on the meaning individuals will have. The sensemaking theory assisted leaders in making the changes that are necessary in an organization based on the information or data they have to support the need for change (Weick, 1995). In the study by Massouti (2021), the researcher's aim was to have the participants reflecting on their teacher preparation programs toward inclusion and then determine what necessary changes were needed in effectively preparing teachers for inclusive education. Through the application of sensemaking theory, the participants scrutinize processes of knowledge construction (Weber & Glynn, 2006) and look at how their belief systems are shaped by the phenomenon (the teacher training program) (Coburn & Talbert, 2006).

Another theory that provides context to the study is Ajzen and Fishbein's (1977) theory of planned behavior. The theory of planned behavior was used by Alnahdi and Schwab (2021) to examine teachers' self-efficacy for inclusion. The theory of planned behavior is extended from the theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). In the theory of planned behavior, one would examine the individual's intention to carry out a behavior based on the motivation (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1977). Alnahdi and Schwab (2021) connected the theory of planned behavior by making the assumption that the behaviors of teachers in an inclusive setting is planned based on their level of self-efficacy.

This study employed Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory to describe elementary general education teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. Bandura (1977) described this

theory as the belief in oneself to carry out a task which may be influenced by the individual's past experiences. This research will, therefore, add to existing knowledge and further shed light on how teachers are being prepared for inclusive environments.

Problem Statement

The problem is that elementary school teachers are not adequately prepared in teacher preparatory programs to function effectively in an inclusive classroom. During the teacher preparatory programs, the focus of a student being prepared as an elementary school teacher and being prepared as a special education teacher take different formats (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). The skills and knowledge developed by special education student teachers and their experiences during their programs are not the same as those of students studying to become general elementary teachers (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). A recent study conducted by Lopez-Azuaga and Riveiro (2020) revealed that teacher training institutions are not adequately preparing teachers to manage the diversity in the classroom regarding inclusion. Preparing future teachers for inclusive education is very important for a general education teacher. With the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), depending on the needs of the student, the general education classroom is considered the least restrictive environment (LRE) when placing students with special needs. Therefore, the learning space becomes an inclusive classroom where the teacher must provide modifications and accommodations for these identified students and cater to the learning needs of the general education students (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Vancleef, 2019).

General education teachers are required to sit in on meetings where students' individual education programs (IEPs) are discussed. IEPs are developed by knowledgeable special educators who would have used assessment data to determine goals for students (IDEA, 2004). The meeting sets the purpose of setting out a plan that will be used to guide the teacher in

providing academic and functional support to the identified student (Thurlow, 2009). However, Strunk et al. (2022) recently reported that only 17% of general education teachers feel well prepared to serve special education students according to the accommodations and modifications written in their IEPs. It, therefore, becomes critical to understand this phenomenon from the perspective of teachers' lived experiences during their teacher preparatory programs.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. At this stage in the research, inclusive education is generally defined as having all children in the same classroom, which means giving students with disabilities and speakers of minority languages an opportunity for authentic learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2017). The theory guiding this study is the self-efficacy theory, as it describes how an individual will approach a task based on their level of competence (Bandura, 1977).

Significance of the Study

There is a constant effort for students with learning disabilities to be placed in general education classrooms to receive formal instruction alongside their non-disabled peers (Giangreco, 2019). This is in keeping with federal law that requires that students be placed in the least restrictive environment to access the curriculum through accommodations and modifications (IDEA, 2004). In fact, the National Center for Education Statistics [NCES] (2019) reported that over the past three decades, over 80% of the time, students with disabilities have been placed in the general education classroom. However, students with more severe disabilities are placed in special education classrooms (NCES, 2019). Inclusive education allows students

with learning disabilities access to the general education curriculum, improved social and behavioral interactions, improved academic performance, and an increase in their engagement (Agran, 2020). This is further supported by the National Council on Disability (2018) which reported that when students are educated in the general education classroom, their non-disabled peers tend to develop “a reduced fear of human differences” (p. 39). However, if the general education teacher is not able to support students in an inclusive setting, then inclusive education becomes detrimental to the success of students with disabilities (Giangreco, 2019).

Consequently, this research has a theoretical, empirical, and practical significance for general education teachers, special education teachers, instructional coaches, and administrators at the school and district levels. This research serves as part of emerging research on teacher preparation for inclusive education and impacts the role of curriculum specialists who are tasked with designing college courses for general education teachers.

Theoretical

This transcendental phenomenological study utilized Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory to understand the phenomenon being explored. This research can benefit other researchers by advancing Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory. The results of the study allow educational stakeholders to better understand the importance of teachers being prepared for inclusive education and how the lack thereof can have an impact on the teacher’s level of self-efficacy. Research suggests teacher self-efficacy plays a critical role in the successful implementation of a program (Boswell et al., 2020). Consequently, this research helps in expanding Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory and provide a better understanding of the theory as well as how it can be applied to the successful implementation of inclusion. The results further advance the theory by helping other researchers and professionals in education to understand how teachers’ perceptions

of their ability (self-efficacy) to teach in an inclusive classroom can be impacted by their level of preparation for the classroom through their teacher preparatory programs. It also highlights the importance of boosting a teacher's level of belief in his or her competence by effectively preparing them for inclusive education.

Empirical

Researchers have identified the role that teachers play in the successful implementation of inclusive education and the importance of their ability to successfully teach students with varied needs in such classroom settings (Dignath et al., 2022). There are several research studies on inclusive education, the barriers, and the role of the teacher in it being successful, as this topical area has become one of the most significant educational reforms across the globe (Savolainen et al., 2020). Research shows that the teacher's self-efficacy and attitude toward inclusive education are hampered by several factors (Miesera et al., 2019). According to Woodcock and Jones (2020), teacher self-efficacy is often interwoven, and knowing what drives their actions can be used for teacher training and professional development. To this end, if teachers' backgrounds, prior experiences, and training do not provide them with the skills needed for inclusive practice, then this may become a barrier in producing successful learning outcomes for students (Fox et al., 2021). This study, therefore, adds to the body of knowledge on inclusive education and draws attention to the preparation of general education teachers in honing the skills necessary for inclusion.

Practical

This research is deemed relevant and supports current trends in special education as well as policies set out by the federal government in regards to the placement of students with special needs. This study generated data that have a significant impact on the education landscape both

locally and globally. The participants can benefit from forming alliances with other members in the focus groups to share best practices and collaborate. It highlights for district leaders and other school officials the kinds of support that will be needed for general education teachers who are teaching in an inclusive classroom setting. These teachers can gain support through ongoing professional development programs to garner the skills and best practices for teaching students with varied needs. On a wider scale, teacher training programs can use the results from the data to carefully evaluate their teacher preparation programs and ensure pre-service teachers are gaining knowledge and practical experiences during their preparatory programs. This is critical in aiding them hone the skills that are needed for teaching in an inclusive classroom (Lucas & Frazier, 2020).

Research Questions

This research was guided by a central research question and two sub-questions. These helped to focus the study and provided the pathway for gathering the data necessary to describe the lived experiences of general education teachers lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. This study addressed the following research questions:

Central Research Question

How do general education teachers in an inclusive classroom perceive their level of preparedness for inclusive education based on their teacher preparatory programs?

Sub-Question One

How do general education teachers describe the challenges they face while teaching in an inclusive classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How do general education teachers explain how they overcome barriers associated with teaching in an inclusive classroom?

Definitions

The list below provides the terms that are used in this study for a better understanding of its content.

1. *Inclusive education* - Inclusive education means providing all students (disabled and non-disabled) with the same learning experiences in the same classroom for authentic learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2017).
2. *General education teacher* - A general education teacher is an individual who has been trained to teach non-disabled students (“Handbook of Research on Critical Issues in Special Education for School Rehabilitation Practices,” 2021)
3. *Self-efficacy* - Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to successfully complete a task based on one’s experiences (Bandura, 1977).
4. *Learning disability* – Learning disability is defined as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language spoken or written or do mathematical calculations (IDEA, 2004).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the lived experiences of general education teachers for inclusive education through their teacher preparatory programs. The problem is that the law requires placement of students with learning disabilities in general education classrooms which now gives elementary general education teachers the task of providing them with accommodations and modifications. These teachers are

not adequately prepared through their teacher preparatory programs for inclusive classrooms (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). The study utilized Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory to explore the phenomenon and bring context to the participants' stories. Bandura (1977) believed that when an individual is confident in their ability to carry out a task successfully, they are more inclined to pursue such a task. General education teachers can get this level of confidence and competence from training and programs that provide them with the required skills and strategies to reach all learners in an inclusive setting (Fox et al., 2021). It is, therefore, important that pre-service teachers are adequately prepared through content and experiences to effectively teach in an inclusive classroom.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore elementary grade general education teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment while teaching in a public school setting in a southeastern state. This chapter offers a review of the scholarly research related to this topic. The self-efficacy theory is discussed in the first section, followed by a review of recent literature on teachers' perceptions of their ability to teach in inclusive classrooms and teacher training programs. Lastly, the literature surrounding the impact of inclusion for students with learning disabilities in inclusive education will be reviewed. Finally, a gap in the literature is identified regarding the need for more research concerning teachers' lived experiences in their preparation for inclusion during their preparatory programs.

Theoretical Framework

This research has a theoretical framework based on Bandura's (1977) work on self-efficacy theory, grounded in the social cognitive theory. The self-efficacy theory will help in understanding the importance of teachers' belief in their ability to effectively function in an inclusive classroom based on their teacher preparation programs. The self-efficacy theory provides the framework for exploring teacher preparation and their competency in teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Self-Efficacy Theory

Self-efficacy theory was developed through Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Self-efficacy theory describes a person's belief in their level of competence or ability to effectively carry out a task, attain a goal, or surmount an obstacle (Bandura, 1977).

Consequently, there is an impact on an individual's level of motivation, thought processes, feelings, and behavior toward assigned tasks. Self-efficacy can also affect a person's productivity and guide an individual in determining what tasks they are to undertake (Lue et al., 2014). According to Bandura (1977), when people have high self-assurance in their ability to successfully complete a task, they approach it with a more positive outlook and see it as a challenge rather than a daunting task. These individuals are more motivated, tend to be more productive, and typically do not avoid specific tasks given to them.

Research shows three dimensions of teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran & Wookfolk Hoy, 2001). These dimensions impact students' learning outcomes as the teacher's approach to teaching and learning will be impacted by their perception of their ability (Bandura, 1977). The first dimension is self-efficacy for classroom management. This dimension examines a teacher's belief about their ability to establish and maintain order in their classroom. Teachers with a high level of self-efficacy tend to be more enduring and constant even as they face behavioral problems in the classroom (Lazarides & Warner, 2020). Research shows that teacher self-efficacy for classroom management increases as the teacher gains more experience (Freeman et al., 2014). The teacher's belief about their ability to effectively manage a classroom is vital to the learner's success as this will influence their approach (Hagger et al., 2020).

The second dimension of teacher self-efficacy refers to the teacher's belief in his or her ability to use appropriate teaching strategies to bring about positive learning outcomes. A teacher's teaching practices are influenced by their level of self-efficacy (Alibakhshi et al., 2020). Alibakhshi et al. (2020) further stated that this can be accomplished through teaching practice. Consequently, Bandura (1977) postulated that an individual's level of self-efficacy can be heightened by engaging in experiences that allow him/her to gain mastery. In Bandura's

(1977) view, this level of teacher self-efficacy is context-specific and is based on the teacher's belief in his or her ability to reach students based on the appropriateness of their teaching strategies.

Thirdly, self-efficacy for student engagement examines the teacher's perception of their capability to develop positive relationships with students, bringing about a high level of motivation and engagement during learning (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen & McMater, 2009). Bandura (1977) believed that teachers with high self-efficacy are risk-takers and can better motivate and build positive relationships with students. This performance in behavior (Bandura, 1997) will affect how teachers motivate and engage students, particularly those who demonstrate a lack of interest in classroom activities (Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001).

According to Bandura (1986), a high level of self-efficacy results in the teacher overcoming obstacles in the domain. In this case, the domain would be their ability to function effectively in an inclusive classroom. According to the research (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Morgan & Wookfolk Hoy, 2001), the teacher's level of self-efficacy will determine the extent to which they participate in an activity. Teachers can gain high self-efficacy by participating in authentic teaching experiences (Bandura, 1977). Ideally, this authentic teaching experience would have been gained through their teacher preparation programs during their teaching practicum (Symesa et al., 2023). Bandura (1977) also suggested observational learning (modeling) to improve self-efficacy. Observational learning through modeling occurs when the observer shows a new behavior that, before being exposed to the modeled behavior, has a non-existent probability of occurrence even when motivation is high (Bandura, 1969, as cited in Schunk, 2019). These are elements that should be considered when designing teacher preparatory programs.

The self-efficacy theory provides the framework to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. Inclusive education requires a set of skills, as these educators cater to varied classroom needs (Mahasneh & Thabet, 2017; Mitsea, et al., 2021). The general education teachers are expected to provide modifications and accommodations according to the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) and also meet the needs of the general education students. For a teacher to be successful in such an environment, they must be confident in their abilities to function effectively in such a classroom environment (Bandura, 1977). Ewin (2014) believed that self-efficacy is connected to past events in a person's life. In this case, the past event relates to the teacher preparation program. It relates to the courses and experiences a pre-service teacher would have received in their preparation for teacher education. Gaining a high level of self-efficacy can positively impact the teacher and enhance the learner's holistic development (Asirit, 2022). The theory will, therefore, be used to understand how teachers view their level of preparedness and self-efficacy to successfully teach in an inclusive classroom based on their teacher preparation programs.

Related Literature

There has been a substantial increase in students who are in special education spending more time with their non-disabled peers (Watson, 2022). Before 1975, this was not a practice in the United States due to the lack of resources (Kirby, 2017). Many believed that these students should be in a self-contained classroom or a separate institution that catered to their specific needs (Stiker, 2019). Public schools did not have special education units; therefore, students who required special education services were not allowed (Kirby, 2017). As inclusion becomes a

widespread practice, it is essential to research teachers' level of preparedness for an inclusive classroom. This section provides a review of the literature on teachers' perception of their ability to teach in inclusive classrooms, including pre-service and in-service teachers, in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, teacher training programs, and the impact of inclusion on students with learning disabilities in inclusive education.

Inclusive Education

With the passing of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) by Congress in 1975, access to education was more guaranteed for children with disabilities (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975). Every child now had the opportunity and the right to free and appropriate public education (FAPE) (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). According to the Rehabilitation Act (1973), Section 504 forbids discrimination against individuals with disabilities in institutions receiving federal funding. One of the main components of IDEA is the Individualized Education Program (IEP). This plan provides modifications and accommodations, and placement for students with learning disabilities. The least restrictive environment (LRE) should always be considered when placing students (IDEA, 2004). Changes were made to special education with the passage of the 1975 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and with amendments made in 1997 and has since evolved with a focus on creating equitable learning opportunities for all students, which removes the focus from disability (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Hope & Hall, 2018).

Inclusive education means having all children in the same classroom, and giving students with disabilities and speakers of minority languages an opportunity for authentic learning outcomes (UNESCO, 2017). Inclusive education allows all students of all backgrounds to be

educated together and benefit from the same learning experiences (UNESCO, 2017). The main goal of inclusive education is to ensure that each child is provided with an education and not deprived of equal opportunities (Haug, 2017; Shaikh et al., 2023). This goal has been used by countries to develop policies and practices that promote equity in the classroom and identify the teacher as playing a critical role in the success of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2022). Students who are identified with learning disabilities are educated alongside their non-disabled peers by the general education teacher. These students receive most, if not all, their instruction, in the general education classroom with some form of support from a special education teacher. Modifications and accommodations are provided based on the student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) (Kansas State Department of Education, 2018).

Teachers' Readiness to Teach in Inclusive Classrooms

To teach in the United States, individuals must complete a teacher education program specific to the area of specialization they intend to work in (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2023). Consequently, a general education teacher would follow a different program completion than a special education teacher. As a result, general education teachers feel they lack the skill set to implement the accommodations and modifications for students with learning disabilities as outlined in their IEPs (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Vancleef, 2019). Literature shows that teachers are better at taking risks and promoting a higher level of standards in their classrooms when they are more efficacious (Alibakhshi et al., 2020). This section will, therefore, examine this belief from two perspectives: pre-service teachers' readiness and in-service teachers' readiness.

Inservice Teachers' Readiness for Inclusion

Examining the perception of general education teachers' readiness to function effectively in an inclusive classroom is essential. It is challenging to support special education students in

being part of the general education classroom activities and to provide modifications that will lead to the correct completion of the task (Zagona et al., 2017). Therefore, inclusion does not bring about success for learners (Mngo & Mngo, 2018). Zagona et al. (2017) reported that teachers in their study shared that they completed coursework or training related to special education but had challenges in responding to the individual needs of the learners in an inclusive classroom. Students with special needs are best served in the special education classroom; the teacher preparation programs did not equip teachers for inclusion (Vancleef, 2019; Zagona et al., 2017).

Inservice teachers' attitudes and perceptions toward inclusive education can be tied back to the kind of disability they have to contend with in the inclusive classroom. Although in-service teachers expressed a positive attitude toward inclusive education, they have noted the need for training appropriate to the individual needs of students with learning disabilities (Pappas et al., 2018). Students with more severe disabilities presented in-service teachers with a more significant challenge in effectively reaching all learners in the class. Therefore, in-service teachers believe the classroom environment can become overwhelming when the teacher is required to provide modifications for students with IEPs while helping them access the general education curriculum and also providing support for their non-disabled peers (Vancleef, 2019). In addition, Sharma and Jacobs (2016) discussed teachers' opinions on their preparedness to face the diversity that exist in the classroom and concluded that the lack of preparedness is due to their initial training. This conclusion supports previous research that showed that in-service teachers do not always express self-efficacy and competence in teaching students with learning difficulties in an inclusive setting (Wray et al., 2022).

In fact, in a study conducted by Trivino-Amigo et al. (2023), teachers from the elementary and secondary school levels were interviewed to determine their readiness for inclusive education based on their teachers' preparatory programs. All teachers expressed that their initial teacher training programs did not prepare them to deal with the diversity that exists in an inclusive classroom. This was more evident from the participants who were at the secondary school level. This finding is congruent with other research that has recommended the need for more focus to be placed on preparing secondary teachers for inclusive education as they tend to lack more skills and strategies to teach in an inclusive classroom (Ruiz et al., 2014; Torres & Fernandez, 2015). In contrast, more recent studies indicated that there is no significant difference between elementary and secondary teachers' perceptions about their preparation to manage an inclusive classroom (Sanchez et al., 2021).

Preservice Teacher's Readiness for Inclusion

Research indicates pre-service teachers' perceptions of their readiness for inclusive education demonstrate apprehension (Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018). Teacher preparatory programs have the task of training pre-service teachers to be ready for classroom practice. However, pre-service teachers are of the notion that their experiences in college during the general education curriculum neglected to expose them to effective strategies for the realities of inclusive classrooms (Gigante & Gilmore, 2018). On the other hand, coursework assignments geared toward inclusive education incorporated within teacher education programs have positively influenced pre-service teachers' attitudes about their ability and level of competence to teach in an inclusive classroom (Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018). To increase the teachers' efficiency in managing an inclusive classroom, it becomes imperative to have teacher training

courses designed as part of the school's curriculum, so pre-service teachers are prepared to cater to diverse classroom needs (Khan et al., 2022).

Contrastingly, pre-service teachers' readiness for inclusion cannot be achieved by simply exposing them to information about learning disabilities but more so through meaningful interactions with students with various disabilities (Gigante & Gilmore, 2018; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Therefore, pre-service teachers must be allowed to plan and implement lessons in natural settings geared toward inclusion (Gigante & Gilmore, 2018). When pre-service teachers lack the confidence that their schooling is not preparing or supporting them to effectively implement strategies in the classroom their level of self-efficacy lowers (Alibakhshi et al., 2020).

Inservice Teachers' Attitude Toward Inclusive Education

In-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education are based on the severity of the disability and the support given to them by special education teachers on their campuses (Ramakrishnan, 2020). Although the Western part of the world tends to have more resources available to teachers to support students with disabilities in the general education classroom, in-service teachers in some countries have expressed a negative attitude toward inclusive education. This is supported by Lacruz-Pérez et al. (2021) who shared that general education teachers have expressed a negative attitude toward inclusive education because of the lack of knowledge they possess about special education and classrooms that are overcrowded. Boyle et al. (2020) also expressed that teachers are not willing to understand inclusive education because they often find their workdays being overloaded with work and constrained by time. With limited time in the school day set aside for planning, teachers find it difficult to plan for students based on the modifications and accommodations that are outlined in their IEPs (Mofield, 2019).

Further, there is a disparity between elementary school teachers' and secondary school teachers' beliefs about inclusive education (Rofiah, 2022). According to Budiyanto et al. (2020), teachers at the elementary school level tend to demonstrate a more positive attitude toward inclusive education than teachers at the secondary level. Czyz (2020) further explained that this negative attitude on the part of teachers at the secondary school level is due in part to heavier syllabi that present a greater amount of work to be completed by their students in a short period. To this end, in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusive education have an impact on how well they work with all students in the classroom environment (Ismailos et al., 2019). The teacher's attitude toward inclusive education is very important to its implementation as teachers who have a more positive approach tend to have learning environments that are more conducive to learning than teachers who have a negative attitude (Boyle et al., 2020). The authors further state that this negative attitude can result in teachers beginning to think that students with learning needs cannot access the curriculum and there is not much time in the school day to provide the necessary accommodations and modifications for students based on their IEPs.

Preservice Teachers' Attitude Toward Inclusive Education

The successful implementation of inclusive education is dependent on several factors. One fact is the general attitude of the teacher toward this education practice. Pre-service teachers' preparatory programs have a strong influence on their attitude toward inclusive education (Hassanein et al., 2021). Preservice teachers are of the notion that study program courses do not offer them the opportunity to be prepared for inclusive education and that the courses taken during their programs serve the purpose of academic completion (Hassanein et al., 2021). Other studies have shown that teachers who have taken courses on diversity and inclusive practices tend to have a more positive attitude toward inclusive education (Alsarawi &

Sukonthaman, 2021). Additionally, preservice teachers who are in an elementary teacher preparatory program have reported having a more positive attitude toward inclusive education in comparison to those who are in a secondary teacher preparatory program (Qandhi & Kurniawati, 2019).

Bandura (1977) highlighted that one's experience will influence their level of self-efficacy and their attitude toward a given task. Likely, the attitudes of pre-service teachers toward inclusive education are influenced by their experiences in environments of diversity and the training experiences they would have garnered from teaching practicum. Preservice teachers who have had experiences completing their teaching practice in an inclusive classroom have a more positive attitude toward inclusive education (Kim, 2016). Teacher training programs that orient students in courses and practical experiences in working with students with special educational needs promote an awareness of special education, educational practices for teaching diverse learners, and a positive attitude toward inclusion (Singh et al., 2020). This argument is further supported by Metsala and Harkins (2019) who postulated that preservice teachers' attitudes are influenced by the year group they are in their preparatory programs, their exposure to information about inclusive education, and their experiences teaching students with special educational needs.

Teacher Training Programs

Teacher training is mandatory for licensure but is based on requirements from individual states. However, when comparing the general education curriculum to the special education curriculum, there is an insignificant focus on special education, including field experiences (Abbeglen & Hessels, 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). To date, several teacher training institutions worldwide have not redesigned their general teacher education programs to address

the growing need for teachers to function effectively in an inclusive classroom (Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Pre-service teachers are often placed in general education classrooms for their teaching practicum, which results in no field experience that can provide some form of inclusive training (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019).

General education teachers who have completed special education degrees postcollege have expressed that based on the training and knowledge they received in the special education degree program, a general education degree is not designed for inclusion (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). These postgraduate teachers felt more equipped to cater to the varied needs of the learners in the inclusive classroom. As such, it is recommended that training institutions make the necessary changes to their general education curriculum (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). On average, teacher training programs have less than 4% of their courses associated with special education (Allday et al., 2013). This lack of training through teacher training programs results in unpreparedness to provide the necessary support a student with learning disabilities would need in an inclusive classroom (Mngo & Mngo, 2018).

Teacher efficacy in their ability to teach in an inclusive classroom can significantly impact students' learning outcomes (Thompson, 2018). In a study by Lucas and Frazier (2020), 110 student-teachers were interviewed after completing their teaching practicum in an inclusive classroom. Lucas and Frazier (2020) reported that most participants revealed improved perceptions of their ability to teach in an inclusive classroom. However, student-teachers only sometimes get the opportunity to do their practicum in inclusive classrooms (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019).

It is essential that pre-service students get the opportunity for hands-on and real-life training and get a better understanding of how they are positioned in terms of their knowledge,

skills, and competencies (Boyd et al., 2019; Clark & Newberry, 2019; Kidd & Murray, 2020). This hands-on and real-life training is important in developing their self-efficacy, as one of the most essential sources of developing self-efficacy is through mastery experiences (Bandura, 1986). Student teachers may gain practical experiences during their training program by engaging in case studies at different host schools, teaching activities, planning lessons, and helping to manage students' disruptions (Symesa et al., 2023). The authors further concurred that the field experiences should allow student teachers to work with and learn from other experienced teachers. The authentic field experiences will provide the kind of learning described by Bandura (1997) as observational learning.

Impact of Inclusion on Teachers

Regardless of how individuals may feel about inclusion, research has shown that educators often feel they lack the skill set and awareness of specific needs to create inclusive classrooms that encourage the successful development of students with behavioral problems (McGregor & Campbell, 2001, as cited in Hind et al., 2019). The 40th Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) revealed that one-half of students with intellectual or multiple disabilities spend less than 60% of their time in the special education classroom instead of the general education classroom (U.S. Department of Education, 2018). The focus should not be on where the students spend their day rather than where they can get the most out of the teaching experiences (Bakken & Obiakor, 2016). The authors further contended that if the argument is about social justice, the focus should be on the classroom environment that will give students with learning disabilities adequate instructions that meet their varied needs.

Behavior in The Inclusive Classroom

Inclusive education has been a challenging adaptation for many teachers. It has brought into the classroom several variables that must all work cohesively to bring about success for all learners (van den Berg & Stolz, 2018). Behavior has been highlighted as one of the significant problems in inclusion being successful (Pappas et al., 2018). Inclusion has crippled learning outcomes for students in the inclusive classroom due to behavioral challenges. These students sometimes act up in class out of frustration when the work presented to them seems challenging and the teacher finds it difficult to provide the needed assistance (van den Berg & Stoltz, 2018). Approximately, 40% of the teacher's time is spent responding to behavioral challenges in the inclusive classroom (Hind et al., 2019). To combat these outcomes for teachers, effective classroom management strategies are needed that are appropriate for students with learning disabilities and display behavioral concerns. To this end, teachers of inclusion are to be provided with opportunities for ongoing and intensive training so that more time can be spent on teaching and learning (Hind et al., 2019).

The teacher's action in the inclusive classroom is of significant importance and there are essential tools to minimize classroom disruptions from students with learning disabilities (Yildiz, 2018). Students ravish approval and reinforcement from their teachers. To this end, to minimize inappropriate behaviors from students, educators are encouraged to approve students' behaviors by reinforcing the appropriate behaviors, praising them after they have displayed the classroom behavior expectations, and letting them know when they are satisfied with the effort toward their classwork (Hind et al., 2019; Pappas et al., 2018). When teachers focus on appropriate behaviors from students with learning disabilities, engage them in academic activities, and highlight their efforts toward their work, behavioral problems are minimized

(Hind et al., 2019). However, it is important that teachers are equipped with effective strategies to manage these kinds of classroom settings, as behavioral problems in the classroom can hamper the success of all students (Mngo & Mngo, 2018).

Academic Outcomes in the Inclusive Classroom

Studies indicate teachers are likely the most significant ingredient in the implementation of inclusion being successful, although few studies have examined how general education teachers are affected by the inclusion of students with learning disabilities (Gilmour, 2018). Students' academic progress depends on the composition of the learning group (Kramer et al., 2021; Thrupp et al., 2002). It is believed that students with learning disabilities will perform better because of the influence of their general education peers (Kramer et al., 2021). However, Kramer et al. (2021) believe that inclusive education can be disadvantageous to students with learning disabilities if teachers are not able to adequately present students with challenging tasks in alignment with the child's instructional level.

Teacher preparation may present a barrier to inclusive education and the teacher's ability to teach students with learning disabilities (Agran et al., 2019). When teachers need to learn how to adapt their teaching methodologies to match the varied profiles of their learners, inclusive education becomes unsuccessful (Ruppar et al., 2016). Teachers can improve their students' academic and socioemotional well-being if they are prepared with the proper tools and skills to support learners and families from diverse backgrounds and experiences, irrespective of their learning disabilities (Jez et al., 2021).

Impact of Inclusion on Learners

Inclusive education has become a widespread educational practice across the world. In the 1970s, public schools in the United States only catered to approximately 20% of students

who were identified with special needs and the services provided to them were in segregated classrooms that did not sufficiently target their needs (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Changes in policy and laws saw an increase of 95% of students being educated in the general education classroom by 2017 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). The statistics showed that the students who were in special education programs spend more than 80% of their day in the general education classroom (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). It is, therefore, important to examine the impact that inclusive education has on both the disabled and non-disabled students.

The Non-Disabled Learner

There have been mixed reviews on the academic impact of inclusion for typically developing students. Some studies have shown that educating students who receive special education services alongside their non-disabled peers does not impede the academic growth of non-disabled students (Kart & Kart, 2021; Szumski et al., 2017). In fact, in general education classes where the teacher had a more positive attitude toward inclusive education, positive academic gains were yielded for students without a disability. Researchers continue to examine the attitude of students without a disability in the inclusive classroom. There is still some amount of vagueness about how non-disabled students in the inclusive classroom feel about their classmates with disabilities in terms of their cognitive readiness and behavioral readiness (Szumski et al., 2020). The attitudes and perceptions of the non-disabled students may be based on their feelings and emotions, their anticipated behavior towards other children based on their development level, and the knowledge they possess about students with disabilities (Shavitt, 2018)

Typically developing students who demonstrate a negative attitude toward students with disabilities in the inclusive classroom can play a key role in making inclusive education unsuccessful (M. Armstrong et al., 2016). The negative attitude is evidenced by their lack of interactions with students with a disability, negative body language, and refusal to make eye contact (Szumski et al., 2020). Non-disabled students have expressed that they do not believe their non-disabled peers should be educated alongside them as it will slow down their class (Dare et al., 2017). However, research has shown that non-disabled students who interact more with other students who have a disability, tend to have a more positive attitude toward these students (Amstrong, 2016). Non-disabled students tend to advocate for their disabled peers and develop friendships with them over time. Bates et al. (2014) found that non-disabled students over time demonstrate a level of tolerance and empathy for others and the success of inclusion is dependent on these factors. This positive attitude and empathy are important for the disabled student. Furthermore, the interaction among peers in the classroom aids the non-disabled peers in developing knowledge of disabilities and the impact it has on their peers (Szumski et al., 2020). In turn, the students have a more positive attitude toward their disabled peers.

While inclusive education provides substantial benefits to students with learning disabilities, it is important to also examine the impact inclusive education has on regular developing students in the learning environment. Non-disabled students in the inclusive classroom benefit from having their disabled peers in the same environment (Roldan et al., 2021). The non-disabled students learn from the cognitive effort that is required of them to explain their thinking to their peers as well as to decipher what those peers are bringing across to them (Roldan et al., 2021). During this process, the general education students are building their verbal and cognitive skills and further cementing their understanding of concepts. Furthermore,

different researchers have delved into the impact of inclusive education on the development of cognitive abilities for non-disabled students and has reported that these students have a better theory of mind when compared to other non-disabled students being educated in a regular general education classroom (Smogorzewska et al., 2020). Other studies have shown a slight decrease in performance for non-disabled learners (Hienonen et al., 2018) while others have shown a neutral effect (Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009).

The Disabled Learner

Growing evidence points to myriad benefits to including students with disabilities in the general education classroom so they can access the general education curriculum alongside their non-disabled peers. One such benefit is the development of friendships for students with special educational needs. (Roldan et al., 2021). While all students are interacting in the inclusive classroom, they get the opportunity to learn about others, the diversity that exists among them, and the abilities of their disabled peers, thereby, forging new relationships (Roldan et al., 2021). Students with special educational needs in the general education classroom tend to perform better in this setting more so at the elementary school level than at the secondary level (De Vroey et al., 2015). Other studies have shown that students with special educational needs in an inclusive classroom perform better on standardized tests and assessment instruments that measure social outcomes in comparison to the same profile of learners who receive their instructions in a segregated classroom (Oh-Young & Filler, 2015).

Inclusive education is not only about providing all students with equal learning opportunities but also ensuring that students with special educational needs are getting opportunities to interact with their peers and be able to function socially on that developmental level. The inclusive classroom allows students with disabilities to develop relevant social skills

that will become applicable as they move into adult life (Kefallinou et al., 2020). Research has shown that when students with special educational needs are educated alongside their non-disabled peers, it promotes greater academic achievement, social growth, and better interactions in life after secondary education (European Agency for Special Needs and Inclusive Education, 2018). Overall, students who are educated in an inclusive setting tend to have better social and academic gains than those who are not (Kefallinou et al., 2020). This conclusion is further evidenced by research carried out to examine the impact of inclusive education versus a self-contained classroom (Gee et al., 2020). The students with special educational needs who were placed in the inclusive classroom had a greater effect size in comparison to their peers in the self-contained classroom. Additionally, the students show a greater level of improvement academically.

Challenges of Inclusion

The demographic of most of our children continues to change and there continues to be calls for fairness and equality. Inclusive education is deemed as one educational practice that promotes equitable education as students with special educational needs can be educated alongside their non-disabled peers (UNESCO, 2017). However, inclusive education is not without its challenges. The way teachers are trained to meet the diversity that exists in the classroom is of paramount importance (Florian & Camedda, 2019). Additionally, societal norms and attitudes is another factor that negatively impacts the successful implementation of inclusive education.

Inadequate Teacher Training

For inclusive education to be successful, teachers must be able to implement effective pedagogical strategies in the classroom and promote values that are common to the learning

environment (Florian, 2012). Unfortunately, general education teachers lack the kind of skill set through training that is needed to teach students with special educational needs (Tristani & Bassett-Gunter, 2019). This calls into question how teachers are prepared for teaching. Teacher education programs emphasize training of students based on their area (early childhood, elementary, special education, and secondary) (Florian & Camedda, 2019). Consequently, this perpetuates the belief that student-teachers need to be prepared to teach their categories of learners rather than an approach that ensures during the preparation process they are adequately prepared to cater to the diverse educational needs that exist in the classroom (Ainscow, 2020). Researchers have argued that if preservice teachers are not trained to teach in inclusive classrooms, then they are not adequately prepared for inclusive educational practices (Ruppar et al., 2016).

While some researchers have argued the need for including courses specific to teaching students with special educational needs, others have argued that the inclusion of these courses does not do much good if student-teachers are not getting the opportunity to put the knowledge they have acquired into practice by completing teaching practice in inclusive classrooms (Dignath, 2022). Therefore, more knowledge about special education students does not necessarily equate to the ability to function effectively in an inclusive environment. The focus over the years has been on promoting inclusive education but there has been a shift to examine the preparation of teachers for this educational practice (Lindner et al., 2020). Traditionally, schools have responded to poor academic performance of learners through the services of interventionists and other educational specialists, however, the call is to equip all educators with the tools for reaching all profiles of learners (Savolainen et al., 2020). For this reason, the United Nations Convention has highlighted that it is not only important to become

knowledgeable about the need for equal educational opportunities for all learners, but also to prepare educators to teach these profiles of learners (UNESCO, 2017).

Lack of Resources

A lack of resources in a school can have a detrimental effect on efforts to implement programs that are intended to be of educational benefit to students. This lack of resources will impact the accommodations that can be made readily available to students (Graham, 2020). The author further contends that a lack of resources can impact the training of teachers which research has shown is critical in the successful implementation of inclusive education. The use of technology in the inclusive classroom promotes diversity and equity in instruction, and assessment and helps to provide accommodations and modifications for students with special educational needs, however, if funding is not available to purchase the necessary resources then this effort becomes futile (Timotheou et al., 2022). Moreover, in recent times, the nation has been experiencing a critical shortage of special education teachers which has undermined the educational advancement of students identified as needing special education services (Mason-Williams et al., 2019).

Societal Norms and Attitudes

Inclusion and special education are intertwined into historical and evolutionary phenomena. Legislators over the years have put policies in place to ensure that students who are identified as needing special education services are receiving them in a free and appropriate manner (IDEA, 2004). IDEA defines what education should look like for learners who are identified as needing special education services and the most appropriate setting for this learning to take place. Experts have argued that inclusive education is an educational practice that promotes social justice and a break away from segregated classrooms (Artiles, 2021). Inclusive

education promotes the idea that students with special needs can be educated alongside their non-disabled peers instead of in schools that are designed specifically for them (Akbarovna, 2022). Inclusive education is not just another educational reform to make the education system look good but a retort to the need that children from diverse groups deserve the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Francisco et al., 2020). Others have argued that where the child receives the needed instruction is not of importance, but the focus should be on providing the necessary services for students to reach their full potential (Kauffman et al., 2016). The placement of students does not have the most significant impact on growth for students but the quality of the instruction they receive (Kauffman et al., 2016).

While special education and inclusion have seen improvements over the years in terms of people's attitudes, there are still some places that frown upon inclusion and share the belief that students with special educational needs should be educated in a self-contained classroom (Francisco et al., 2020). A positive attitude toward inclusive education is one of the key tenets in making it successful (Schwab & Schwab, 2021). Parents have a mixed view about inclusive education because of the risks and benefits (Leyser & Kirk, 2007; Mann et al., 2016; Schwab, 2018). However, the consensus is that inclusive education is of benefit to students with disabilities (Mann et al., 2016). This calls into question what is meant by the least restrictive environment. Different criteria have been used to define the least restrictive environment such as opportunities for the child to engage, capabilities of the child, and the student-teacher ratio (Heron & Skinner, 1981). However, there has been an increase in the number of students being placed in mainstream classrooms to receive their instructions (McLeskey et al., 2010). However, with this being the case, including students with special educational needs in the mainstream

classroom might not be the best place for them to fully benefit due to the quality of the inclusion program (Schumaker et al., 2002).

Making Inclusion Work

With the widespread use of inclusive education as an educational practice to include all students in the mainstream classroom for instructions, it is important to examine strategies that are effective in making inclusive education successful. Inclusive education has been described as an opportunity to defend the learning experiences of students with special educational needs and ensure they are not in segregated classrooms, but with their non-disabled peers (Sagun-Ongtangco et al., 2021). With the correct implementation of inclusive education, there is a greater level of success for students with special educational needs among their peers (Canges et al., 2021). It is, therefore, important to examine the strategies that can be employed to make inclusive education a successful practice.

Evidence-Based Practices

Evidence-based teaching strategies, in the context of special education, are described as specific teaching pedagogical practices that have been shown to have significant learning outcomes for students based on controlled research that has been employed over sometime time (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). The descriptions from the research must show clear learner characteristics, such as age, the type of learning needs, and developmental level, the context and the setting, as well as the behavioral outcomes (Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020). It is believed that using evidence-based teaching strategies in the inclusive classroom is one effective strategy to bring about positive learning outcomes for students (Wilcox, et al., 2021). The educator plays a vital role in making inclusive education a successful practice, consequently, the effectiveness of

the teacher is judged based on the strategies that are used in the classroom to reach all learners at their developmental and instructional levels (Konrad et al., 2019).

Students must receive effective instructions in the classroom that are research-based and supported by empirical data (Reynolds et al., 1982). As a result, teachers are encouraged to modify their instructional practices or methods of intervention based on the needs of the learners (Finkelstein et al., 2021). Proponents of inclusive education, therefore, suggest training of preservice teachers and ongoing training for in-service teachers (Filderman et al., 2019).

Putting Students First – Data-Based Instruction

The practices that are implemented in the classroom should be driven by data at every step of the process. To this end, data-based instruction is suggested as another method for making inclusive education successful as it brings about positive academic outcomes of students with special educational needs (Kim & Choi, 2021). This concept was birth out of data-based program modifications from a study by Deno and Merkin (Deno & Merkin, 1977, as cited in Kim & Choi, 2021).

There are specific procedures to adhere to for data-based instruction to be successful. The teacher must first use research-based instruments to identify the performance level of the learner (Jung et al., 2018). The instrument used to assess the performance level of the student should be reliable and valid (Poch et al., 2020). Based on the data, the teacher then establishes long-term goals for the student. Following this, the teacher utilizes evidence-based intervention strategies and regularly monitors student's progress toward the established goals. As the teacher progress monitors to see the effect the intervention is having on student's learning outcomes, changes are made where deemed necessary. These changes may also include the teaching strategy that is being used. The process is then repeated until academic progress is seen (Poch et al., 2020).

Collaboration

Collaboration plays a key role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. The level of collaboration between parents of students with special educational needs and schools still needs improvement (D. Armstrong et al., 2020). Parents in urban areas were more frequently present at IEP meetings than parents in rural areas (Bouck et al., 2021). However, parents are strongly encouraged to be involved in the decision-making process concerning their children. This involvement first begins when the IEP team begins to evaluate data and make learning goals for students that will determine their accommodations and modifications (Zagona et al., 2018). During this time, parents have the opportunity to provide astute information about their child and help determine the learning needs of the student (Kurth et al., 2020).

The collaboration between the general education teacher and the special education teacher also plays an important role in making inclusive education successful for students with special education teachers; the special educator or discussion partners whose distinct role is to provide support to general education teachers (Sundqvist, 2019). With that aside, there should be a collaboration between the educator who has the knowledge about teaching students with learning disabilities and the teacher who has the knowledge of the subject matter or content (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). In so doing, the educators are ensuring that every student in the classroom is receiving the correct support and attention that will help to promote academic achievement for them. Effective educational needs. The educators are encouraged to brainstorm and determine the best strategies that can be used to promote positive learning outcomes for students with learning needs (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). However, the debate exists on who should be providing educational consultation to general communication between educators can

also improve overall communication and collaboration between parents and schools (Accardo et al., 2020).

Collaboration in making inclusive education successful goes beyond the walls of the institution. The collaboration extends to a partnership among all stakeholders, including agencies that were formed to provide additional support and resources to parents and schools with students with special educational services (Asamoah et al., 2021). These agencies can help parents become aware of their rights and how they can continue partnering with schools to ensure the best services are given to their children and provide additional support and funding to schools (Shaw, 2017).

Administrators and School Officials

The successful implementation of inclusive education as an educational practice to discard segregated classrooms and promote equitable education for learners with special educational needs is not only the responsibility of the general education classroom teachers. Administrators and school officials have a critical role to play in its successful implementation and is deemed as a leadership responsibility (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Experts in educational leadership have taken note of the impact principals have on student achievement (Billingsley et al., 2019). To this end, the conclusion has been drawn that administrators are critical to the success of students with special educational needs (Billingsley et al., 2019). Furthermore, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR, 2017) created norms in alignment with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and are connected to school principals promoting an ethos in their schools that support inclusivity for all. These include but

are not limited to, equity and cultural responsiveness, professional capacity of school personnel, and meaningful engagement with families and communities (CEEDAR, 2017).

School officials are responsible for creating policies and procedures that promote inclusive education. The policies and procedures are related to students' accommodation, diversity and cultural awareness, and promptly responding to discrimination and bullying against students with special educational needs (DeMatthews et al., 2020). An effective leader is fundamental in promoting the kind of culture that caters to the diversity of its learners and ensures that all students are reaching their full potential academically, socially, and emotionally (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

One of the challenges with the successful implementation of inclusive education is the preparation of teachers and support staff to respond to the needs of students with special educational needs through effective teaching strategies (Ainscow, 2020). In this regard, school officials are expected to provide their staff with ongoing training on how to utilize effective data-driven inclusive practices to cater to the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students in the inclusive classroom (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). There should be a focus on creating a classroom free from bullying and discrimination, providing students with accommodations and modifications, and the effective use of technology to maximize learning (CEEDAR, 2017; Griffiths, et al., 2020).

Collaboration among the school, home, and community plays an important role in the successful development of the child (Zagona et al., 2018). To accomplish this, school officials and administrators must provide opportunities for staff to interact with parents and community members through workshops, open houses, and other forms of interactions (Bolman & Deal, 2021). These interactions will help to form a partnership between the school and families and

allow these families to be aware of what is being done at school to support the learning development of their child as well as how they can continue with this level of support when the students are out of school. According to Sianturi et al. (2023), this level of meaningful collaboration has a positive impact on parents' attitudes toward school, promotes a better understanding of the educational needs of their child, and improves test scores.

Using Technology and Other Resources to Support Inclusion

The COVID-19 pandemic that caused a global pandemic in 2020 and resulted in schools moving to online learning has proven the power of technology and the purpose it serves in education. Technology in education influences how teachers teach and has revolutionized curriculum and instruction over the years (Parkay et al., 2014). Technology in education provides students with opportunities to be exposed to learning experiences that are specific and tailored to their learning needs through different educational programs (Asmar et al., 2020). Further, including technology in the inclusive classroom helps to promote equality in education as it can be used by the teacher to level the assessment and instructions for students with learning needs.

When an IEP is written, it contains modifications and accommodations students are to receive to help them assess the general education curriculum. It can be difficult to consistently provide these modifications and accommodations to students in an inclusive classroom where the teacher is responsible for catering to the needs of both the general education students and those with an IEP (Cavendish et al., 2019). However, the use of technology can help to alleviate some of these challenges. For example, a student who has read-aloud as one of his or her accommodations can be given a computer and headphones for the text to be read to them instead of the teacher having to sit with the child while others need assistance (Thurston et al., 2021). The use of technology in the inclusive classroom can be seen as a method to alleviate some of

the issues and make inclusive education a successful practice (Holmes, 2018). Students who have disabilities can access the general education curriculum through the use of technology and other resources such as laptops, cellphones, or braille, where the teacher can use videos, closed captions, large prints, and text-to-speech (Thurston et al., 2021).

Other supporters of using technology in the inclusive classroom to maximize learning for students are of the notion that educational applications provide the general education teacher with the opportunity to individualize instruction and assessment for students, cater to their needs, and meet the requirements established in their IEPs (Jameson et al., 2020). However, the use of technology in the inclusive classroom is cautioned as teachers may lack the ability to effectively utilize the resources, therefore, professional learning and support is highly recommended for teachers (Checovich, 2019). School officials must be providing teachers the opportunity to become aware of the most appropriate and effective ways to use technology to maximize the learning of students with special educational needs in the inclusive setting (Griffiths et al., 2020). To this end, they are encouraged to invest in the development of teachers is creating a staff that is digitally literate and has the skills to create lessons that will promote high levels of academic achievement for students with special educational needs (Shariman et al., 2012).

While researchers support teachers using technology in the inclusive classroom as a strategy to eliminate some of the challenges, others have highlighted the need to ensure that students with special educational needs can effectively utilize the resources (Tohara, 2021). It is important not to perpetuate the use of technology as other students might start to feel that they are excluded from the use of technology or begin to stereotype the students are always using the technology during class time (Juvonen et al., 2019). To combat this, teachers are encouraged to provide a safe space for students to build positive peer relationships.

Summary

The least restrictive environment (LRE) is a guiding principle in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). As a result of this act, more students with special needs are being educated in the general education classroom alongside their non-disabled peers (IDEA, 2004). The literature review provided information regarding the theoretical framework associated with this study, self-efficacy theory, which revealed that teachers' belief in their level of competence or ability to effectively carry out a task, attain a goal, or surmount an obstacle is based on their level of preparedness for the classroom (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Bandura, 1977; Bannister-Tyrrell et al., 2018). This level of self-efficacy has impacted the general education classroom as these teachers are not trained for inclusive education (Crispel & Kaperski, 2019; Jez et al., 2021; Kramer et al., 2021). Additionally, evidence regarding teachers' perceptions of their readiness to teach in inclusive classrooms, in-service teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, teacher training programs, and the impact of inclusion were discussed.

It was also noted that inclusive education is not without its challenges and people have different ideas on where students with educational needs should receive their instructions. However, irrespective of different ideas and views on inclusive education, the implementation of the right strategies can yield significant academic gains for students with special educational needs (Kim & Choi, 2021; Filderman et al., 2019). To accomplish this, all stakeholders must recognize the role they play in helping students reach their full potential irrespective of their challenges (Accardo et al., 2020; Asamoah, 2021).

A gap in the literature exists concerning teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in the inclusive classroom. Given the lack of research on teacher preparation for inclusive education, this research will help narrow the gap

and provide guidance in preparing and training teachers at the college, university, and local school levels to function effectively in such settings.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' lived experiences in teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment while teaching in a public school setting in rural South Carolina. This chapter includes the research design that was employed to understand the phenomenon, research questions, setting and participants, and procedures that were used to carry out the study. Additionally, the methods of data collection and how the data were analyzed are discussed. As a qualitative researcher, I discuss my role in the process, as well as how the research gained trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with ethical considerations.

Research Design

A qualitative study was used to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. Qualitative research was most applicable to the study as it allowed the participants to bring meaning to the phenomenon, which the researcher interpreted and drew conclusions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Qualitative research design allowed for the exploration of the lived experiences of the phenomenon and brought meaning to it, as expressed by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). There is a better understanding of the teachers' lived experiences during their preparatory programs and their beliefs about this experience for inclusive education.

One research design used for qualitative research is phenomenology. Phenomenology was developed by Husserl (1913), a German mathematician, and further developed through the work of Giorgi (1991) and Moustakas (1994a). In a phenomenological study, the researcher seeks to

find and describe the shared meaning that all participants have based on a lived experience, which is described as a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). After collecting data, the researcher looks for what the participants experience and how they experience the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994a).

Phenomenology can be classified as hermeneutic and transcendental. van Manen (1990, 2014) described hermeneutical phenomenology as understanding the lived experiences of the participants and recognizing the unique experiences they bring to the phenomenon. When using a transcendental research design, the researcher focuses more on the descriptions of the phenomenon of the participants (Moustakas, 1994a). The researcher must set aside his or her experiences with the phenomenon (bracketing) and gain a new perspective, as revealed by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For my research, I adopted a transcendental phenomenological design. Transcendental phenomenology allowed me to understand the phenomenon in a new context and interpret the lived experiences of the participants as I set aside my own beliefs and prior assumptions. The phenomenon explored was the training teachers receive during their teacher preparatory programs to function effectively in an inclusive environment. Using a transcendental phenomenological design helped me to understand what the participants deem as truth and a better understanding of their lived experiences using their own words. The transcendental phenomenological design allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon so that meanings, themes, and descriptions could be garnered from the stories the participants tell (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994a). In this research, the researcher also experienced the phenomenon and bracketed those experiences to gain new perspectives as revealed by the data through the participants.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

Central Research Question

How do general education teachers in an inclusive classroom perceive their level of preparedness for inclusive education based on their teacher preparatory programs?

Sub-Question One

How do general education teachers describe the challenges they experience while teaching in an inclusive classroom?

Sub-Question Two

How do general education teachers explain how they overcome barriers associated with teaching in an inclusive classroom?

Setting and Participants

The setting and participants section for this research familiarizes the readers with the location where the research was conducted and how the lived experiences unfolded for each participant. In this section, readers will become familiar with a description of the participants as well as the criteria that was used for including them. This section also clearly outlines for the reader the procedures that were used to gain saturation and gain the participants needed for the study.

Settings

I gathered data for this research by surveying elementary school teachers from grades one to five, at See Elementary School in See County School District. See County was used as the pseudonym to represent the school district. See County School District is a small school district with all Title 1 schools. The school district currently has 1,441 students enrolled in grades PK

and K-12. This number accounts for 617 students at the three elementary schools and a total of 25 teachers, with a 12:1 student-teacher ratio. The teaching staff is comprised of 99.98% Black teachers and 0.13% White teachers. There is one middle school and one high school. Each school has a principal and two assistant principals, except for two of the elementary schools that do not have an assistant principal, and another having one assistant principal. The oversight of the county is done by the school board and the superintendent.

The school district sponsors the H1B visa and accommodates teachers on the J1 work visa through various sponsoring companies. Both work visas are for teachers from international countries who have been authorized by United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) to work in the country. Currently, over 60% of the teachers at the elementary school level are international teachers. All students receive free breakfast and lunch and there is a graduation rate of 89%. The Black population accounts for 91% of the students, 2% Hispanic, and 6% White.. This school district was selected due to its practice of inclusive education, the purposeful sample size of the population, and the identification of participants.

Participants

I used purposive sampling for selecting participants due to the nature of the qualitative research (Patton, 2015). Therefore, the criterion sampling method was included as part of the purposive sampling technique to establish inclusion and exclusion of participants from the study (Polat & Kazak, 2015). This method is often used in qualitative research when this type of sampling technique is used (Yildirim, 2016). For this research, purposive sampling, which includes the criterion sampling method, was used to select teachers who can provide data that is specific to the research questions. This sampling method allowed me to interview teachers who

had at least one year's teaching experience in an inclusive classroom, held a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited university or college, and held a state teaching license.

The participants pool included 25 elementary teachers from the three elementary schools. Creswell and Poth (2018) postulated having enough participants to meet saturation. For this study, I used 12 teachers from one of the elementary schools. All 12 participants were female teachers; 8% White and 92% Black. This included a mixture of six American teachers and seven international teachers. To be included in the study, participants must have: (a) completed a teacher preparatory program and earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited university, (b) held a state teaching license, and (c) completed at least one year of full-time teaching as an inclusive teacher in an elementary grade. A purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants so that the researcher could gain insight into the research questions based on the common lived experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This helped to increase the accuracy of the data, as all participants experienced the phenomenon. Although maximum variation was used to create a general understanding of the phenomenon being studied (Benoot et al., 2016), due to the participant pool, I did not seek maximum variation. The participant pool did not allow me to make selections based on grade level, years of experience, gender, or ethnicity. The study was within a small school district that does not have a lot of variations in terms of the variables that were identified that would be used for the variation of participants.

Recruitment Plan

To gain participants for this study, I utilized purposive sampling which includes criterion sampling to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. The criterion

sampling technique allowed me to include in the study participants that match the aims and objective of the study (Campbell et al., 2020). To this end, I ensured that the participants were able to speak with authority concerning the research questions. Consequently, I used the teachers from one of the elementary schools in my district since this institution has inclusive classrooms. A total of 12 participants were recruited. I explained to them the nature of the research in an effort to garner participation. During this time, I checked on the educational background of the teachers to confirm they held a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited institution and had a state teaching license. These served as the criteria for participation in the research. I then emailed them a formal recruitment email requesting their participation with the formal letter of consent attached. This assured them of the level of confidentiality, and their ability to withdraw from the study at any time. The recruitment email had a Google Form for the participants to confirm their eligibility for the study.

Researcher's Positionality

Human beings experience the world on a daily basis. These experiences have taught us many lessons and caused us to formulate different conclusions. What is true for one person may be obsolete for another because their experiences are different. To this end, we bring to the process of research certain beliefs and assumptions which can, in turn, have an impact on what we decide to study, the questions we will ask, and how we will gather the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is, therefore, important to be aware of these assumptions and highlight them. Consequently, in this section, I detail my interpretative framework for my study, as well as my philosophical assumptions that guided this study to include the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions.

I graduated from teachers' college in 2012 with a diploma in teaching and learning. I later read for my bachelor's degree in primary education and started my career in teaching in 2013. As I entered the classroom, I recognized the myriad of challenges that existed. In 2017, I moved to the United States and was given an inclusive education class to teach. I taught this class for nine weeks and was later transferred to another school where my class setting was the same. It was during this period I came to the realization that I did not have the necessary skills to meet the diverse needs of students in my classroom and meet the demands that were established in the students' IEPs. As I reflected on this, my mind wandered back to the courses I took in college as well as the classroom settings my teaching practicums were done. Therefore, I thought it fit to explore the preparation of general education teachers to function effectively in an inclusive classroom environment.

Interpretive Framework

As we interact with people daily, we develop thoughts and ideas that help us understand and draw conclusions about lived experiences. To this end, I conducted my research through the lens of social constructivism. In social constructivism, the researcher seeks to develop meaning from the views of others through broad open-ended questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I, therefore, engaged my participants through interviews, and letter writing which allowed them to describe the extent to which they believe their teacher preparatory programs prepared them to teach in an inclusive classroom. During this process, the participants described their experiences. This description allowed the participants to develop the meaning of the situation based on the interactions they would have had with other people (Chuang, 2021). The task was then mine to develop the essence or make interpretations of the findings and draw conclusions.

Philosophical Assumptions

The researcher's philosophical assumptions are key components when conducting qualitative research. It is, therefore, important that I address for my readers my philosophical assumptions, as this guided the research process (Guyotte & Wolgemuth, 2022). To this end, I discuss how my ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions have an impact on my research process.

Ontological Assumption

“Ontological assumptions relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 19). It is usually contrasted with epistemology and surrounds what truly and actually is or in essence, the reality. As a constructivist, I believe that reality is created through the research process by gathering and analyzing data. There is no single reality as this is created through the phenomenon. I remained open-minded and allowed the participants to embrace their realities. Therefore, as the interpreter of the data, I put aside my biases and drew conclusions based on the findings evidenced by the actual words of the participants (Moustakas, 1994b). Consequently, the reality was created by the participants in the study, and I reported different viewpoints developed through the findings.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemology deals with what is truth and how this truth can be justified (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Knowledge, therefore, comes from the personal experiences of people. For truth to be revealed, my biases must be removed. Although I am an educator who works in an inclusive classroom, I recognized my irrelevance to the outcomes or the process and allowed the participants to reveal their lived experiences with the phenomenon with no interference. I recognize that knowledge is known through the experiences of people. Interacting with the

participants in their natural settings gave me the opportunity to see what they revealed as truth based on their reality. I am of the belief that reality cannot be measured as experiences are different according to different variables. I, therefore, relied on quotes from the participants and used an unbiased lens to make interpretations and draw conclusions.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption looks at the role of values and notes that this is a part of all researchers. Value is rooted in the very nature of God and revealed unto us (Romans 1:19). I am a Christian educator who is guided by godly principles as established in the Bible. I believe that God is the source of all knowledge and as humans, we only see a fraction of the reality. I also believe that God gives us the ability to understand things as imperfect as we may be as humans. Consequently, I know it is important to honor individual values and perspectives as it is revealed through the data. Being aware and remaining cognizant of my values allowed me to bracket out my experiences and focus on the experiences of the participants to arrive at unbiased conclusions. Although I completed a teacher preparatory program and continue to engage with students in an inclusive classroom, I did not allow this level of experience with the phenomenon to cloud my judgment and make interpretations and in turn, make a biased report of the essence of the experience.

Researcher's Role

In conducting this research, I brought to it my personal experiences. I was an assistant teacher in a special education classroom for two years. Following this, I completed my diploma and bachelor's degree that focused on teaching grades two to nine and at the elementary level, respectively. For the past six years, I have been teaching in inclusive classrooms that serve students with IEPs. To date, I continue to struggle with catering to the varied needs of students in

the classroom and find that the students with IEPs often require much support which often create an imbalance in the amount of time that is given to the general education students. As I reflect on my teacher preparatory programs for both the diploma and bachelor's degrees, I can recall learning about different students who are classified as special education students and the IEP process. However, my courses did not address strategies that can be used to make an inclusive environment a successful one. With these kinds of experiences, I brought into the research process my own thoughts and feelings about teachers' perceptions of their readiness to teach in an inclusive classroom after their teacher training.

Using the social constructivist approach, it was important that I focused on the narratives that the participants produced and not be overshadowed by my experiences with the phenomenon. This was critical because, unlike quantitative research, in qualitative research, the human serves as the instrument that will collect the data, analyze and create a description to represent the essence of the group (Merriam & Tisdell, 2019). To this end, it was my task to collect the data by conducting individual interviews, guiding the focus group meetings, and collecting the information from the letter writing. During the interviews, I ensured not to insert my personal thoughts and feelings that would in turn influence the responses from the participants. As an employee at the same site, I had a professional relationship with the participants. The participants were teachers from my school and there is a possibility that they will all be future coworkers as the elementary schools will be joined to create one. However, I maintained a professional decorum with the participants at all times. I did not have any authority over them, however, two of the participants at the time of the study were my team members at the fifth-grade level.

Personal biases can negatively affect the validity and reliability of the data collected

(Smith & Noble, 2014). To combat this, I used three methods of data collection to ensure triangulation. In this instance, it was my role to collect and analyze the data based on individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. My focus was on how the individual participants viewed their teacher preparatory programs in preparing them for inclusive education. The data analysis procedures were guided by those outlined by Moustakas, 1994b. To this end, my interpretations were shaped by the participants' view of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994b).

Procedures

This section details the procedures that were used to gain approval and collect data to complete this study. This was significant in ensuring that all procedures were in guidance with the proper protocols established to carry out phenomenological research. I obtained permission from the school district and submitted this with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application. While awaiting IRB approval, the potential participants were contacted via email to gain their participation in the study.

Data Collection Plan

When conducting research, it is important to employ methods of data collection that are aligned with the research questions so that the data collected can generate a narrative to answer those questions. Therefore, in conducting this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research, I used three methods of data collection. This was important in validating and bringing authenticity to the researcher's findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Consequently, I used interviews, two focus groups, and letter writing as the three methods of data collection. The use of the three methods of data collection allowed for triangulation of the data and helped to eliminate bias (Bowen, 2009). The methods of data collection were employed in the order they are noted below.

Individual Interviews

To gather data for this qualitative study, interviews were used as the main method of data collection. This allowed me to understand the phenomenon in an in-depth manner from the perspective of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This was in an attempt to build knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015) as the process unfolded, and allow me to draw conclusions based on the responses. These questions were composed based on the sub-questions that are driving the research (McCloskey & Rapp, 2017).

Using Yin's (2018) protocol for using interviews as a method of data collection, my committee members were used as the experts in the field to determine the clarity and appropriateness of the questions for the study. To promote efficiency and accommodation, interviews were conducted one-on-one or virtually for each participant (Yin, 2018) using Google Meet, as is used in the school district. I asked open-ended questions. This allowed the participants to be more responsive in sharing their views and feelings related to the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each interview lasted for approximately 30-75 minutes and was recorded using the Google Meets platform as previous consent was received to perform this action (Polat & Kazak, 2015). Participants were informed of these procedures as part of the recruitment plan.

Table 1

Individual Interviews

1. Please describe your educational background and share how long you have been teaching, including how many of those years are in an inclusive classroom. CRQ
2. Describe your college experience, detailing the types of courses you took and how those prepared you for inclusive education. CRQ

3. Which kind of classroom environment facilitated your student teaching and did you have any field experiences prior to your student teaching? CRQ
4. How, if at all, did your teacher preparatory program prepare you to function effectively in an inclusive classroom? CRQ
5. After graduating college, how confident were you in your ability to teach students with special needs? Explain your answer. CRQ
6. How can teacher training institutions improve their programs to better prepare teachers for inclusion? CRQ
7. What is your understanding of an inclusive classroom and the role you play in making inclusion successful? SQ1
8. What kinds of challenges have you experienced in the past year teaching in an inclusive classroom? SQ1
9. What level of academic support do you receive in teaching in an inclusive classroom? SQ1
10. What level of behavioral and social emotional support do you receive in teaching in an inclusive classroom? SQ1
11. What are some other challenges you have faced while teaching in an inclusive classroom? SQ1
12. How do you collaborate with the special education teachers on your campus to serve the needs of the students in your classroom with IEPs? SQ2
13. What strategies have you employed to minimize the challenges you have faced with teaching in an inclusive classroom? SQ2

14. How can school administrators and school officials support general education teachers in developing the skills needed to teach in an inclusive classroom? SQ2

Each question posed to the participants was based on the research questions and the theoretical framework guiding the study. Question 1 was asked to establish a positive interview space, build rapport with the participant (Bruijns et al., 2019), and gain information related to the central research question.

Questions two to six served the purpose of understanding the preparation of the participants and their self-efficacy for teaching in an inclusive classroom. These questions helped to bring focus to the lived experience of the participants and support the transcendental research design (Moustakas, 1994b). These questions were important in understanding how teachers perceived their preparatory teacher education programs in preparing them to teach in an inclusive classroom. Teacher self-efficacy is important in determining the goals they set and the tasks they will undertake toward the success of their learners (Bandura, 1977).

Questions 7-11 make a connection between the teacher preparatory programs and post-college. It is important to note the challenges general education teachers face while teaching in an inclusive classroom and how this could be related to their teacher preparatory programs. The research shows that general education teachers face many barriers that result in inclusion not being as successful as it should be (Jaffal, 2022). It was, therefore, important to understand these barriers.

Questions 12-13 addressed how to overcome barriers that are associated with teaching in an inclusive classroom as a general education teacher. These questions helped to gather data for research question, sub-question two.

Focus Group

Using the initial findings of the data interview, I used two focus groups to gather further data on the phenomenon. This included all the participants who participated in the individual interviews. However, the group was split into two to allow the participants more opportunities to share their experiences on the phenomenon. The focus groups allowed the teachers to have dialog and interaction about the topic and allowed me to interface with multiple participants at the same time (Bourne & Winstone, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using this method of data collection allowed for the triangulation of the data and the conservation of time post-interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus groups took place in person and were audio recorded in the confines of a private space to allow for confidentiality. The audio was recorded using Google Meets and otter.ai was used to transcribe the meeting.

Table 2

Focus Group

1. How long have you been teaching in an inclusive classroom?
2. Describe your college experience toward getting skills and strategies to teach in an inclusive classroom. CRQ
3. How do you collaborate with special education teachers on your campus to plan for the success of students in your classroom with an IEP? SQ2
4. How well do you understand IEP documents and are able to implement them with fidelity? Explain. CRQ
5. Describe your typical classroom as you try to cater to the learning needs of all students and provide accommodations and modifications for students with IEPs. SQ1

Question one established the credibility of the participants and their experiences interacting with students in an inclusive environment. Questions two and four helped to focus on understanding how the participants perceived their college experiences in preparing them to teach in an inclusive classroom. Questions three, four, and five focused on understanding the experiences of the participants post-college and what they must do in order to be successful educators in an inclusive classroom.

Letter Writing

Letter writing was used as another method of data collection to allow for triangulation of the data and minimize bias (Crossman, 2021). This method of data collection allowed the participants more time to be more reflective on the writing prompt and give more in-depth thoughts that can help with drawing conclusions about the phenomenon. According to researchers, this method of data collection allows participants to take ownership of the data in the absence of the researcher and can form an empowering experience that leads to a more thoughtful analysis of the phenomenon (Grinyer, 2004; Milligan, 2005). To accomplish this, the participants were asked to write a letter to themselves. Each participant was allowed a two-week period to write during their personal time. This task was administered after each focus group. The writing prompt was emailed to them and sent back to me in a prompt manner.

Writing Prompt

For this research, the participants were provided with the following writing prompt and given specific guidelines that were in accordance with the research questions and the focus of the research.

Write a letter to yourself describing the feelings you had the first time you taught in an inclusive classroom. What are some of the challenges you faced as an inclusive teacher?

In your letter, reflect on your college journey related to becoming a teacher. How did your college experience prepare you to deal with the realities of teaching in an inclusive classroom? There is no length requirement and your writing will be kept confidential. Please return your letter to me within 14 days of this email.

This writing prompt gave me information on the participants' level of self-efficacy and the extent to which they believed they were adequately prepared for an inclusive setting.

Data Analysis

This section provides details on the procedures used to analyze the data to arrive at the essence of the story told by the participants. My research employed the procedures described by Moustakas (1994b) for analyzing transcendental phenomenology. Each method of data collection was analyzed accordingly to ensure validity, trustworthiness, and triangulation of the data.

To begin the process of analyzing the data obtained from the data collection tools, I transcribed the interviews verbatimly for each participant using the otter.ai software. I then listened to the audio recordings and followed the transcriptions to ensure there was 100% accuracy. Following this, each participant was given a copy of the transcription (Appendix J) for his or her interview and the focus groups in an effort to maintain the highest level of accuracy. Member checking enhanced accuracy as the participants got the opportunity to go over the transcription to ensure that it matched what was said during the interview (Moustakas, 1994b).

After member checking was completed, I then read each transcription several times to get a sense of the intent of the interviews and focus groups before beginning to separate the ideas into parts (Bazeley, 2013). This step was the beginning stage of analyzing the data collected from the letter writing. Moustakas (1994b) suggested horizontalization as the next step in the process. Consequently, I determined and recorded all relevant information from the data

collected from the individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing that were directly connected to the phenomenon. Repetitive and overlapping details were removed. This was followed by the coding process. During this time, I aggregated the text into patterns and themes that emerged from the data. I highlighted comments, used different colors to identify the codes, and used marginal notes to identify the emerging themes. The software *taugette* was used to aid in this process. The marginal notes were used to organize the information. I then used a table (Appendix K) to represent the codes that emerged from each participant's interview, the focus groups, and their individual letters. These themes and significant statements were used to create textural descriptions for each participant and structural descriptions to describe what the participants experienced and the context or setting that had an impact on the way the participants faced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994b). Finally, I used the textural and structural descriptions (Appendix L) to compose a narrative that reflected the essence of the phenomenon for the group as a whole. van Manen (2014) believed that phenomenological studies should be inseparable from writing, therefore, I presented the essence of the experience in a written form.

Trustworthiness

As a qualitative researcher, it is imperative to establish trustworthiness. To achieve this, Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four essential characteristics of qualitative research. These are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. These are seen as the equivalents of modern-day qualitative research that a naturalistic researcher would employ (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This section, therefore, explores how using the ideas of Lincoln and Guba helped to increase the authenticity and rigor of this research.

Credibility

Credibility in qualitative research seeks to measure the extent to which the findings of the

study are accurate. Lincoln and Guba (1985) described it as the degree to which the findings of the study describe with accuracy the reality the participants expressed about the phenomenon. To accomplish this, I collected data from multiple sources to promote triangulation and also member-checking.

Triangulation

The way the reader perceives the information that is written to describe the phenomenon as it is interpreted by the researcher is very important in building credibility. In qualitative research, there is not an established instrument that has proven to be valid and reliable in collecting data. Therefore, the collection and interpretation of the data is solely based on the researcher's interpretation of the data. Triangulation is, therefore, very important in building credibility. In qualitative research, triangulation is seen as a method of using multiple sources of data collection to gather information based on the guiding research questions (Carter et al., 2014).

To achieve triangulation, I used three different methods of data collection to gather data and compose the final description of the phenomenon. This approach created credibility and made the written description more authentic and believable for the readers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Nassaji, 2020). The methods of data collection were individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. The data were gathered in the order noted in an effort to explore the lived experiences and actions as an inclusive relationship (Moustakas, 1994b).

Member Checking

Member checking was used as another method to achieve credibility of the data. Through the use of individual interviews and focus group meetings, participants shared information about their lived experiences guided by the researcher's questions. During these times, the sessions

were audio recorded and later transcribed to reflect the exact words that were said during the sessions. Each participant was given a copy of their individual interviews to check for accuracy and ensure the transcription was a reflection of their experiences shared during the interview. Those in the focus groups were also given a copy of the transcript to carry out the same task. Lincoln and Guba (1985) believed this approach could serve as a means of member checking. Consequently, all data collected from the interviews represented an accurate account of what the participants shared. Participants were asked to review the representation of the findings to confirm the extent to which they described their lived experiences.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the ability of the research's findings to be applicable to other settings (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To achieve this, the researcher used thick descriptions of the experiences of the participants to present those themes and interpretations that emerged from the data collected. To show that the research may be relevant in other settings, I included in the study a profile of the participants that shows the different colleges and universities where they gained their teacher training. Showing that the participants are from different institutions of learning will demonstrate that the experiences they had during their teacher preparatory programs in relation to inclusive education were not a result of attending the same school.

Dependability

Dependability refers to the ability for the research to be replicated and produce consistent and reliable results (Doucet et al., 2019). To this end, this study was carried out using research-based strategies that are guided by the literature. Therefore, this research was guided by the procedures that are established by researchers when carrying out phenomenological research

(Moustakas, 1994b). The steps and procedures were closely aligned when collecting and analyzing the data. Also, the methods of data collection were clear and easy to follow.

Furthermore, before the study was carried out, I depended on the experts of my committee and used all feedback to improve my procedures and the quality of questions to be asked during the interviews.

Confirmability

Confirmability is establishing objectivity to show that the findings are based on the respondents and not overshadowed by the researcher's bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used three techniques to ensure confirmability: (a) confirmability audits (b) audit trail; (c) triangulation; and (d) reflexivity. As noted above, each participant was given a copy of the transcript from their individual and focus group interviews to confirm the information noted. I created an audit trail that allowed transparency. Individuals can trace the audit (Appendices I & L) through each step of the research process; from the procedures to the descriptions. Next, I employed different methods of data collection to promote triangulation as was discussed above. Finally, reflexivity, where I examined my own experiences, assumptions, and beliefs and how this aided me in attending to the voices of the participants (Appendix M)

Ethical Considerations

Before this research was conducted, there were preambles that must be adhered to in order to gain consent and ensure the research is in alignment with legal requirements for conducting research. All ethical considerations were guided by Adhabi and Anozie (2017) to reduce the risk of anticipated harm, protect the interview information, inform the interviewees about the nature of the research, and minimize the risk of exploitation.

Permissions

A permission request letter was sent to the superintendent for the research to be conducted using the teachers (Appendix A). The request described the nature of the study, the benefits, risks, and confidentiality of the sites and participants using pseudonyms, as well as other important information that would be needed to guide the decision. Following this, I secured approval from Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix B) before the study started. This board is guided by policies that require evidence that the research to be conducted will be guided by ethical principles (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I adhered to the research protocol by including in the application the purpose of the research, relevant background information and reason for the research, a description of the population, the design and methodology, precautions to be taken, and privacy and confidentiality. I also included as part of the documentation the permission request letter to the superintendent to carry out the study, the site approval (Appendix C), a recruitment email (Appendix D), which also included the informed consent form (Appendix E).

Following IRB's approval, I contacted the potential participants by email (Appendix D), inviting their participation in the study. The email was similar to the one sent to the superintendent. I included a link in the recruitment letter that led to a Google form where the first section was the informed consent, then the second section gathered demographic information and possible times and days in which they can participate in the interview. Also, consent forms were reviewed and signed before the interviews began and I reassured each participant of the level of confidentiality that would be adhered to during and after the process. There were no potential benefits from their participation. There were no issues that arose during the data collection period.

Other Participant Protections

To maintain a high level of privacy before, during, and after the research process, I ensured that readers were not able to identify the site, the superintendent, nor the participants. Firstly, the title for this research used a broad geographic location to avoid tracing the paper to the exact site. Also, I used pseudonyms for the school district and the specific site location, and the participants' names. Additionally, all forms that are included in the Appendix of my research have the names of individuals and addresses blocked out. The potential participants were made aware of their voluntary nature and ability to withdraw from the study at any time as well as how the data collected would be protected. This eliminated the fear participants may have about their principals becoming aware of their responses during the interviews. They were also made aware of the need to participate in all three forms of data collection.

All audio files were uploaded to my Google Drive and participants were made aware that my dissertation committee may request access to the recordings. After member checking, the files were shredded. All data in Google Drive are password protected and require a two-way authentication to access. All data relating to my research will be destroyed after seven years of completing the research

Summary

This chapter encapsulated details pertaining to the research design, research questions, setting and participants, researcher's positionality, procedures that include the data collection and analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological research was to explore the lived experiences of teachers in their teacher preparatory programs and their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. After all IRB and site approvals were given, the researcher served as the human instrument with

the task of collecting, analyzing, and synthesizing the data collected through individual interviews, focus groups, and a letter-writing task. Confidentiality of the participants was maintained and all procedures aligned to phenomenological research were followed to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. I analyzed the data collected from the three methods of data collection tools: individual interviews, focus groups, and letter writing. Chapter Four provides a detailed description of the participants in the study. Common themes and descriptions were generated from the participants' descriptions of the phenomenon and are aligned to the research questions. The chapter concludes by discussing how the developing themes answer the central and sub-questions that guided the research.

Participants

The study included 12 elementary school teachers who teach in inclusive classrooms in a public school in a rural southeastern state. Purposive sampling technique was used for selecting the participants to ensure the research questions could have been answered by individuals who experienced the phenomenon. The participants met the criteria of participation in the study which were to be: licensed elementary school teachers who have completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited institution and have completed at least one year of full-time teaching in an inclusive classroom. Each participant was able to successfully participate in the individual interviews, the focus groups, and complete the writing prompt. Some of the individual interviews were done via Google Meets to accommodate the participants. Both focus groups were done in person. In completion of the writing prompt, the participants' responses were based on my writing prompt which required them to write freely with no word limits. The

information provided by the participants was then analyzed to formulate codes which were then used to create themes (see Table 4).

This section contains a description of each participant through tables and narratives to familiarize the readers with each individual. This information was obtained by having the participants complete a Google Form with specific questions about their teaching history, what motivated them to be in the profession, as well as their accomplishments. This was completed before the time of their interviews. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were used. Table 3 provides a summary of the participants' background followed by a description.

Table 3

Demographic Information

Participants	Number of Years Taught	Highest Degree Earned	Numbers of Years in Inclusive Classroom	Grades Taught	Ethnicity	Nationality
Kaydian	24	Masters in Educational Leadership	6	5 th and 6 th	Black	Jamaican
Jessica	18	Master's	2	4 th	Black	Jamaican
Ann-Marie	8	Master's	4	3 rd – 5 th	Black	Jamaican
Hamlette	12	Bachelor's	6	1 st – 4 th	Black	Jamaican
Annastasia	22	Bachelor's plus 18 Education Specialist	22	5k – 1 st	Caucasian	American
Sadeeka	11	Education Specialist	11	3 rd – 5 th	Black	American
Tricia	34	Master's	33	Kindergarten and 1 st	Black	American
Ariel	27	Master's plus 30	8	4 th and 5 th	Black	Jamaican
Sanya	23	Master's	20	3 rd – 8 th	Black	American
Catherine	40	Master's plus 30	30	1 st – 3 rd	Black	American
Diana	20	Master's	8	1 st , 3 rd – 6 th	Black	Jamaican
Shernette	24	Master's	6	1 st – 5 th	Black	Jamaican

Kaydian

Kaydian received her initial training in elementary education in 2007 after working as a pre-trained teacher for seven years. She explained that her motivation for remaining a teacher comes from her passion for teaching and learning and her love for children. She recently completed a master's in educational leadership and currently teaches a fifth-grade inclusive class. Before this, she taught sixth grade for 16 years. During this time, she served as the math teacher for four years and the other years as a self-contained classroom teacher where she taught all the main subjects (mathematics, science, language arts, and social studies). Over the past six years, she has been teaching in an inclusive classroom environment. Kaydian has been teaching for 24 years and desires to make a positive inspiring impact on children. She takes pleasure in seeing her students improve. She boasts about her students' remarkable progress and results on state mandated examinations.

Jessica

Jessica is a decorated teacher who was named the 2014 Teacher of the Year in her home country and holds the status of Master Teacher status since 2015. This status allowed her the opportunity to supervise the curriculum development at one of her former places of employment. During this time, Jessica had the opportunity to observe different grade levels utilizing different practices in an inclusive education classroom. She has been teaching for 18 years and is currently completing her second year of teaching in an inclusive classroom. Jessica's educational background includes a bachelor's of arts degree with an emphasis in reading and a master's of science degree in curriculum, assessment, and instruction. She declared that her reason for becoming a teacher is due to her desire to engage in lifelong learning that empowers her to become an agent of change.

Ann-Marie

Ann-Marie's "desire to make a positive difference in the lives of students and help them reach their full potential" is one of the reasons she decided to become a teacher and has remained in the profession. She is a certified elementary school teacher who has been teaching for eight years. She has taught grades three to five and describes the accomplishment in her career to be remarkable student progress and additional management skills. Her highest level of qualification is a master's degree. During her career, Ann-Marie has taught in an inclusive classroom for four years where she has created "dynamic lesson plans [that are] aligned to state standards." She is a great communicator and passionate educator who seeks to utilize research-based solutions to create effective learning environments for students.

Hamlette

In her organization, Hamlette is the Global Teacher of the Year (2023) and has received numerous awards for having her students attain 100% pass in grade four literacy examinations. She holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education and has recently started her master's degree in psychology. Hamlette has been teaching for the past 12 years and has served students with IEPs since 2018. She has taught grades one-four and was motivated to become a teacher because of her love for learning and imparting knowledge.

Annastasia

Annastasia shared, "I was told that I couldn't get money to go to school for anything else except teaching." She expressed that she is still in the profession because she likes it. Annastasia has been teaching for 22 years and has experiences in 5k-first-grade classrooms. She enjoys seeing her former students as adults and hearing them share the "wonderful things they have

done.” She earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education and has plus 18 credits. She has always taught in an inclusive classroom.

Sadeeka

Sadeeka was fortunate to have “amazing” teachers when she was a student. She believes that this had a positive impact on her life and propelled her toward the teaching profession so that she too could have the same effect on students. She became a teacher 11 years ago after earning her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. She later completed a master’s degree in classroom leadership and also earned an education specialist degree in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. She has spent all her career educating students with learning disabilities alongside their non-disabled peers. These engagements were in grades three, four, and five. Sadeeka loves to see the academic growth of her students and help them reach their personal goals.

Tricia

Tricia has a bachelor's of science degree in elementary education and earned a master’s degree in learning disabilities toward the end of her career. She believes the degree helped her to better meet the needs of special education students. She has spent the last 33 of 34 years teaching students who require special education services and were placed in the general education classroom. She has taught kindergarten and first grade. Tricia continues to serve students because of her love for children and the opportunity to make a difference in their lives. She was selected multiple times as the Teacher of the Year for her school and was selected once as the District Teacher of the Year.

Ariel

Ariel has been in the field of education for over 27 years. Eight of these years have been in an inclusive classroom setting. She decided to enter the profession because of her love for children and the fact that she had to start school late due to illness. Ariel has taught students in the fourth and fifth grades. She served as an assistant principal for nine years and was named Teacher of the Year in her school organization. She is currently pursuing a doctor of philosophy degree in leadership.

Sanya

Sanya has teaching experiences over a wide grade span, having taught from the fourth-grade level to the eighth-grade level. She started teaching in 2001 and has spent 20 years serving in an inclusive classroom setting. She has served her school as Teacher of the Year and is currently a Master Teacher. Sanya holds a master's of education degree. She stated that her high school math teacher and the teacher cadet program allowed her to teach a math class during her senior year of high school and she fell in love with teaching. "I am still in the profession because I love helping student[s] achieve at their highest."

Catherine

For the past 40 years, Catherine has been teaching students at the first, second, and third grade levels. She spent 30 years teaching in an inclusive classroom. She retired from the classroom but was requested by the superintendent to return due to the need for strong knowledgeable teachers at the institution. Catherine explained, "I accepted the call because I have a passion for teaching and love working with children. The reason that I am still in the teaching profession [is] because I love teaching and teaching children to enjoy learning." She has two master's degrees and a master's plus 30. During her career, Catherine has motivated her

former students to enter the teaching profession and feels proud that some were influenced enough to do so. “They usually reach out to let me know that I was one of the reasons they decided to become a teacher. Catherine is pleased with her ability to have longevity in her teaching career and is grateful to still have the ability to teach children and prepare them for the future.

Diana

Diana has been teaching for 20 years. Over the past eight years, she has been teaching in an inclusive classroom. These experiences have been at the third and fifth grade levels. However, during her career, she has taught grades one, three, four, five, and six. She holds a master’s of education degree with intention of starting her doctoral degree in the summer of 2024. Her desire to help students learn and share with them some of the knowledge she has acquired over the years are some of the reasons she entered and remained in the teaching profession. She highlighted the remarkable progress of her students and the leadership roles she has held at various levels as the highlights of her career. She currently leads her team grade and serves the school in different capacities related to literacy development.

Shernette

Shernette believes in preparing the “whole child.” She believes that education should go beyond getting students to regurgitate facts as the teacher should touch all areas of their lives so they are “equipped with skills to function effectively in a global world”. She has been teaching for 24 years and has experience working with students from first grade to fifth grade. Shernette earned a master’s degree in education and has experience teaching in the United States and overseas. She has led her grade as team leader and sees this as an accomplishment in her career. Shernette has spent the last six years in an inclusive classroom in third and second grade.

Results

The study captured the perceptions of elementary generalists in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. The data were collected from individual interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt. These different methods of data collection provided triangulation of the data and increased the validity and credibility of the findings. To analyze the data, Moustakas's (1994b) transcendental phenomenology was used to derive the emerging themes. Having synthesized the data four themes emerged: 1) Perceived Level of Preparedness. 2) Level of Support. 3) Challenges with Inclusion. 4) Overcoming the Barriers. Table 4 provides a summary of the themes, subthemes, and example codes.

Table 4

Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
Perceived Level of Preparedness	The Effectiveness of Courses Teaching Practicum	end of teaching program, courses, teaching practice, college experiences, not effective,
Level of Support	Academic Behavioral School Officials	academic support, behavioral support, collaboration,
Challenges with Inclusion	Teacher Self-efficacy Collaboration Implementing IEPs	understanding IEPs, college experiences, accommodations, modifications, confidence
Overcoming barriers	What Teachers Do What Training Institutions Can Do	strategies, overcoming barriers, training, professional development, school officials, teachers' colleges, peer tutoring, technology

Perceived Level of Preparedness

How teachers perceive their level of preparedness to enter the classroom is very critical and can be attributed to the engagement and activities during their teacher preparatory programs as explained in Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Feeling overwhelmed and ill-equipped to respond to the diverse needs in the classroom were common themes in this study as the participants described their perceived level of preparedness for teaching in an inclusive classroom. This perception did not vary as the 12 participants across all data collection tools revealed that they did not feel prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom based on their teacher preparatory programs. Although Sadeeka boasted about the teacher training institution she attended and the theoretical and hands-on experiences she received toward inclusive practices, she still expressed a low level of confidence in catering to the needs of students with special educational needs within an inclusive classroom setting. Similarly, during her interview, Anastasia stated in her interview, "My college experience was great. However, I do think it fully prepared me to be a teacher." These were common findings throughout the data as the participants referenced the courses they took during college, their internship, and the overall effectiveness of their teacher preparatory programs.

The Effectiveness of Courses

Participants were explicit when denouncing the notion that the courses in a teacher education program would prepare the learners to function effectively in the related areas post-college. They further expressed that the courses they took during their teacher preparatory programs were geared toward their preparation as elementary generalists. Ariel, during her interview, highlighted some of the courses she took in college such as mathematics methodology, general science, child development, and educational psychology. She concluded,

“These courses did not prepare me for inclusive education.” Similarly, Kaydian shared while in her focus group:

During my college years, I was enrolled in courses such as Math Methodology, Science for Primary Grades, Social Studies, Language Arts Methodology, Emergent Teacher, among others. These courses were not related to teaching students with disabilities nor were there any mention of it throughout. Apart from the course Exception Education there was not much given in gaining skills and strategies to deal with the challenges in the inclusive classroom. You were taught the different features accompanying the disability and how to identify them but not how to teach them.

An effective teacher-education program should provide its learners with the skills and knowledge for the classroom (Darling-Hammond, 2016). As Ann-Marie reflected in her letter, she revealed that she took courses related to inclusive classrooms but “wasn’t thinking” she “would need more training to deal with students” who have special needs. This sentiment was also shared by Hamette in her letter. She completed the course Exceptional Children in the Classroom. She believes this course aided her in identifying different learning disabilities but there were no practical experiences to implement the theory. Relatedly, Jessica was exposed to content that allowed her to learn about the laws in special education, learning disabilities, such as dyslexia, and how to get students into the IEP process. She concluded, “not really like how to teach them but more like being able to identify them in the classroom.” Contrastingly, Sanya highlighted in her letter that her college program did not have classes that prepared her to teach in an inclusive classroom. This was also shared in her response during her interview as she explained that her courses “didn’t teach me how to teach them [students with special educational needs].

Teaching Practicum

Teaching practicums allow student-teachers the opportunity to gain hands-on experiences as they translate theory into practice as to be qualified does not necessarily mean you are trained to teach (Bengtsson et al., 2020). Student-teachers get to work alongside a more experienced in-service educator to hone the skills they will need to function effectively on their own in a classroom setting (Jita & Munje, 2021). This experience is essential in bridging the gap between theory and practice to develop preservice teachers (Jita & Munje, 2021). When examining the data, only one of the participants had the opportunity to complete their teaching practicum in inclusive classrooms. Annastasia shared during her interview that she was in a second-grade inclusive classroom that facilitated the students with a behavioral plan for her teaching practice. The other 11 participants were placed in general education classrooms. Seven of these participants explained that they completed teaching practice on two separate occasions during their teacher preparatory programs and were facilitated in general education classrooms.

Practice in a particular area or skill can allow an individual to get better at it (Ericsson, 2016). This was the case for Catherine who shared that her field experience was successful and helped prepare her for her first year in the classroom. However, this was not a consensus among all the participants. Jessica shared during her interview:

I did teaching practicum twice during my tenure in college and it was in a general education classroom. As a matter of fact, the principal made sure that we were placed in the classroom that had the fast students so that we would perform better and not struggle when our assessors came to see us.

The data from the research shows that the participants believe this kind of experience would not have given a student-teacher the opportunity to interact with, plan for, and gain

experiences teaching students with special educational needs and managing an inclusive classroom. Tricia in her letter noted that during her practicum, the classroom teacher only allowed her to do the whole group lesson and then worked in smaller groups with the higher-performing students. She did not get the opportunity to work with the lower-performing students for small group instructions.

When reflecting on her college experiences, Kaydian wrote in her letter, “What in the world are you doing? This question resounded in my head daily through my practicum. College programs did not prepare me for what I was now encountering.” This is evidenced that a general education classroom will not provide student teachers with the necessary skills needed to perform at their best in an inclusive classroom environment. Shernette revealed during her focus group interview that her school streamed students based on abilities. Practicing teachers were not allowed to teach sixth graders as this was an examination grade. They were also not allowed to teach the “high-flyers” but instead were given the “medium group so that “we can be successful on our teaching practice.”

End of Preparatory Program

The participants addressed the level of satisfaction they attained after completing their teacher preparatory program. Only Ann-Marie believed that her teacher preparatory program “did their part of getting” her ready to function effectively in an inclusive classroom. All the other participants concurred that their teacher preparatory programs did not prepare them to teach students with special educational needs alongside their non-disabled peers. Hamlette quipped,

I didn't feel prepared enough as I was not able to readily cater to their [special education students] needs and understand how to teach them outside of the whole group, as they

were not able to follow the same directions as other students.

Although Sadeeka spoke highly of her teacher training program, during her interview she concluded that when she first entered the teaching profession she was not confident in teaching exceptional students, although she had learned many strategies. She continued, “As a first-year teacher it seemed different because there were more aspects to include and learn.” When Hamlette was asked the question during her interview, “How, if at all, did your teacher preparatory program prepare you to function effectively in an inclusive classroom?” she quickly responded, “Not very effective.” This was echoed by Jessica during her focus group who expressed her appreciation for learning methodologies but hastily added that the hands-on experience was missing. Catherine continued the conversation during the focus group and shared that she decided to complete a second master’s degree in special education so that she would better understand how to respond to students with special educational needs in her classroom as her initial teacher training program did not afford her that opportunity.

Level of Support

A critical component of education is supporting teachers (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Teachers are committed to their students and believe that with the right level of support they can reach their students to bring about positive learning outcomes (Scallon et al., 2021). This support must come in various forms to cater to the whole child. Teachers need support with academics, behavior, and developing their pedagogical skills (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Education is always evolving and it is important to stay current if we are to intentionally and effectively meet the needs of students. The participants alluded to the need for them to be supported academically, behaviourally, and by school officials.

Academic Support

Academic support for elementary generalists in an inclusive classroom is important for their professional growth and development through ongoing coaching and collaborative continuous professional development (Ventista & Brown, 2023). There was a mixed reaction when asked about the level of academic support teachers in the inclusive classroom receive. Ariel deemed it to be a “good question” during her interview. She further expressed, “The only academic support I have received for teaching in an inclusive classroom is a set of primer and A-J reading materials that a teacher gave me.” As Catherine reflected in her letter, she wrote about her years of learning how to teach students with special needs as she did not have anyone to give her the necessary directions. She had to teach herself how to create a classroom where all students can thrive. Jessica, during her interview, described the level of academic support as “a sour point” and spoke strongly about the level of academic support she receives:

Now this is a sour point. The general education teachers write the IEPs and after that it's like you are really expecting me to do all of this? She is not the only student in my room and some of these things I do not know what you are talking about. I was not trained in special education.

Sanya also made mention of the IEP meetings in her response. She expressed that she is asked to be a part of the meetings but there were no conversations between herself and the special education teacher to discuss strategies that can be used in the classroom to help the student. She further explained, “I have no academic support. I am given a list of the accommodations but they are not explained to me.” Teachers who have the academic support can incorporate this in their teaching and get better results from their students (Paulsrud & Nilholm,

2020) . However, Tricia does not get this kind of support on her campus. She noted in her interview that she receives very little academic support.

Academic support for generalists in an inclusive classroom environment requires a level of collaboration between the general education teacher and the special education team to plan for individualized instructions (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). Anastasia shared that they have CLTs (Collaborative Learning Time) each week, which is fairly new. During this time, they learn how to differentiate lessons and tasks to meet the needs of all of the learners. They are advised to keep activities and instructions short, clear, and engaging. The special education teacher encouraged her team to tailor the tasks according to the student's goal and provide additional time to complete tasks as needed. Sadeeka also shared that she gets support from her attendance at CLTs and through professional development where she is provided with tools and insights of how to utilize data to address learning gaps and learning modalities to maximize the success of students. Both Hamlette and Diana in their individual interviews concurred that their students with IEPs are pulled for services and they usually tell her the topics they are currently working on.

Behavioral Support

Behavioral support was an area of concern for all the participants in the study as they agreed that the level of behavioral support is a cause for concern in the inclusive classroom. Sadeeka quipped, "This is still a work in progress that should be looked further into schoolwide." To this end, Anastasia expressed, "Sometimes it feels like none, others [other times] it feels like it is just [not] enough. It just depends on the student and what is going on. Diana shared that the school has a behavioral interventionist who is, at times, not available to assist. Hamlette's response to the level of behavioral support was, "very little." Meanwhile, Jessica brought more

clarity to the question during her interview:

You are really hitting the sour questions. Apparently, no one has the time to do your job and their job at the same time. They are expecting you to handle your business. I remember one year I got a new kid and in her IEP it says something about social emotional and the special education teacher said she was not trained for that. Now if she was not trained for that as the special education teacher what then would I do? So it is these little things that just make the whole process really such a challenge.

The participants noted how behavioral issues in the classroom have a negative impact on teaching and learning. Hamlette pointed out this notion in her letter and shared how students would be allowed to continuously interrupt learning. Diana also reflected in her letter on the behavioral challenges in her room and the lack of support. Meanwhile, Shernette stated that she has given up and has resorted to researching how to better “deal with these areas as these are crucial as we instruct.” Similarly, Ariel has to “handle” behavioral issues herself. She gives treats, stuffed toys, or extended time on the Chromebooks to keep them calm.

School Officials

All participants agreed that school administrators have a role to play in teachers performing at their best in an inclusive classroom. Ann-Marie asserted, “Administrators can assist and empower their teachers when those in leadership positions realize that teachers need encouragement and support and understand that the one-size-fits-all approach doesn’t always work.” Ariel stated, “The general education teacher is in need of significant support.” She further explained:

School administrators and officials can support general education teachers in developing skills needed to teach in an inclusive classroom by providing opportunities to attend

professional development workshops, implementing coaching and mentoring programs, facilitating collaborative planning, and providing access to resources and materials.

Diana echoed this sentiment in her interview and highlighted that general education teachers are not trained to cater to the needs of students in an inclusive classroom. To this end, Kaydian shared in her interview that training must be provided by administrators for teachers who do not know how to facilitate an inclusive classroom.

Communication, support, and collaboration were key themes that emerged when asked, “How can school administrators and school officials support general education teachers in developing skills needed to teach in an inclusive classroom?” This collaboration can come in the form of a partnership with universities where “teachers can get discount prices to complete short courses in special education.” Catherine believes administrators should communicate and collaborate with teachers who have students with special needs in their classrooms. Tricia asserted, “School administrators can make sure that their teachers feel supported, [and] valued by their school by providing professional development, offer meaningful feedback from evaluations, and fostering a positive school culture.” Anastasia stated that “Policies and procedures must be followed to respond to behavioral issues in the classroom and CLTs should be used to introduce teachers to effective research-based strategies.” Additionally, Ann-Marie shared that administrators must take the time to increase their knowledge about inclusive practices so they are better able to respond to the needs of teachers on campus.

Challenges with Inclusion

Inclusive education carries several benefits for disabled and non-disabled students. However, there are challenges with inclusion (Roldan et al., 2021; Smogorzewska et al., 2020). General education teachers must have a level of belief in their ability to manage this type of

classroom environment (Wray et al., 2022). The success of inclusive education requires collaboration among teachers, parents, and administrators. General education teachers must be able to implement with fidelity that which is written in the student's IEP. Ann-Marie's response to the challenges with inclusion summarized the findings for the participants as time constraints, inadequate resources, bias, and inadequate guidance.

Teacher-Self Efficacy

Self-efficacy is the belief in one's self to carry out a task which is influenced by an individual's experiences (Bandura, 1977). In an inclusive classroom environment, the general education teacher must have a high level of self-efficacy in his or her ability to create a classroom space where the needs of all students can be met (Tschannen-Moran & Wookfolk Hoy, 2001). Most of the teachers shared that their initial level of belief in their ability to teach in an inclusive classroom was low. Ann-Marie in her interview shared that she was not confident in teaching students with learning disabilities and this was even more so when having to interact with students with multiple needs. Catherine referenced in her letter how nervous she was when required to teach students with special educational needs because she was not trained for it. She framed it, "This was hard going into a regular classroom and did not have as much experience and knowledge with teaching the special needs students."

As the participants reflected on their perceptions of their readiness for inclusive education related to their teacher preparatory programs, they examined their level of self-efficacy to function effectively in an inclusive classroom setting Ariel expressed:

I have no confidence in my ability to teach students with special needs. As I said before, during my college years, I was not required to take any courses on teaching students with special needs. These classes were only for those who specialized in teaching students

with disabilities. Apart from what I have researched, I have no knowledge about dyslexia, autism, or how to help students with ADHD. Therefore, giving me students with disabilities to teach in an inclusive classroom is a disservice to those children.

Cynthia shared, “After graduating from college, I felt more confident teaching in a classroom setting that had no students with no IEPs.” She acknowledged that all students have different learning styles and abilities, but she was not confident in teaching students with learning disabilities and felt ill-prepared. Tricia said she was not confident in teaching students with learning needs and was not exposed to skills and strategies that could help her. Contrastingly, Sadeeka noted that although her teacher preparatory program included courses and practical experience with students with special needs, these experiences were not enough to build her confidence in teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Collaboration

When asked about the level of collaboration during focus groups and interviews, most of the participants noted that overall, this was an area of concern. Diana shared during her focus group that “collaboration this year has been minimal.” Her arguments were supported by Kaydian who noted that there was an inconsistency with collaboration. “She [the special education teacher] would ask what we are working on [...] Other than that it is tedious” Jessica shared in her focus group that collaboration is not intentional as it is not built into the school day. She only gets the chance to share observations about the special education student in preparation for an IEP meeting. Anastasia echoed her sentiments and added that these impromptu meetings would happen in the hallway by chance. Ariel surfaced back and recounted a negative encounter with the special education teacher assigned to her grade when she tried to collaborate on lesson planning. She suggested sharing lesson plans, but this was dismissed by the special educator.

Sanya has shared that conversations between her and the special education teacher are usually initiated by her.

While the majority of the participants shared that collaboration is an area of concern, others shared how minimal collaboration is between general education teachers and special education teachers. Cynthia shared that she does not get to collaborate with the special education teacher on a regular basis to discuss the needs of students with an IEP. However, they would meet to discuss the students in preparation for IEP meetings. Ann-Marie shared during her interview that the special educator attends their grade level CLTs where they get to share best practices that can be used to teach diverse learners. This is like Tricia's experience who meets with the special education teacher informally to discuss what she is working on in her classroom so that the special education teacher can reinforce this in her room. However, she is not introduced to skills and strategies to use on her own with the students.

Implementing IEPs

The Individual Education Program (IEP) is a legal document that is developed by the team of educators to support the special education student's needs based on outcomes from a series of tests administered (IDEA, 2004). All the participants demonstrated an understanding of what an IEP is. Ariel, during her interview, noted that when she went to college in 1995 she was not taught anything about IEPs nor did she have an understanding of what was meant by accommodations and modifications. However, during her focus group, she revealed that as a result of her engagements while teaching in the United States, she started to learn about the IEP process and its contents. Ann-Marie also shared in her letter that she was not exposed to the "preparing, interpreting, and implementation of an IEP" but later became aware of this. Tricia shared, during her focus group, "I know that it is a legal document that addresses specific needs

and the level the child is performing with a disability.”

All of the participants expressed the challenges they have faced when required to implement IEPs as elementary generalists. Hamelette recounted in her letter:

I was not quite sure how to interpret this document. However, I browsed through the document and found the student’s goals and recommendations for the classroom teacher. Little did I know that those recommended practices would not be easily carried out on a daily basis.

Jessica shared during her focus group her concerns with implementing an IEP. She closed her comment with the question, “How do you create rigor for these students who are performing below grade level and are to access the grade level content?” Her response was supported by Sanya who stated, “The issue is not the understanding, but being able to implement with fidelity in the classroom with 16 other students.” During her interview, Sadeeka shared that her students with IEPs have a harder time staying focused and she thinks they are at times overwhelmed when they are not able to do the work and she had to “juggle teaching slower students and more advanced students.” This is similar to Annastasia’s experience who shared during her interview that the students find it hard to keep up and so they continue to struggle. A lack of resources and the time it takes the student to complete a single assignment was highlighted by Diana as a challenge she has with implementing IEPs. Shernette stated in her focus group, “The students with special [needs] most times require one-on-one. I do meet them on a one-on-one basis but not regularly and when we do it’s for a short time.”

Overcoming the Barriers

The participants alluded to the fact that overcoming the barriers in an inclusive classroom can be a daunting task when the general education teacher has the tedious task of catering to the

varied needs of learners. They have the task of providing modifications, accommodations, and specific learning activities that are at students' instructional levels and will provide the best learning outcomes. The participants shared that as teachers, they have committed themselves to reaching all learners in the classroom. They have also provided suggestions teacher training institutions in regards to the preparation of teacher candidates.

What Teachers Do

Although the participants in the study reported that their teacher preparatory programs did not prepare them to teach in an inclusive classroom environment, they have taken the responsibility of utilizing strategies to reach their students. Diana in her interview shared, "I utilize a variety of differentiated teaching methods to support students with disabilities and diverse learning styles. Those students without a plan [an IEP], I use diverse learning materials to help them become successful." Kaydian also shared that she has taken courses in special education to become more knowledgeable, conducted research, and uses peer tutoring. In her letter, Ann-Marie wrote, "I had to pay close attention to how students are grouped, their social skills, and incorporate the use of multi-modal learning aids and assistive technology to enhance teaching and learning.

In overcoming the barriers, the participants are aware of the use of technology in supporting students. This was commonly shared during the focus groups. Ariel, during her focus group, shared that it is difficult to provide read-aloud accommodations for the students; therefore, she allows her students to use the text-to-speech feature on the computer. "He can play back any particular section as often as he wants until he understands it." Annastasia then followed up and stated, "I am glad that I learned about this [text-to-speech] feature because it was getting difficult having to read every single thing for them." Hamlette also mentioned the

use of technology to support her learners through the use of educational programs and games.

The participants employed different strategies to overcome the challenges an inclusive classroom environment presents. In Ann-Marie's words, "I plan instructions that are student-centered and facilitate active listening and participation. I keep the lessons short to maintain students' focus." Tricia emphasized the need to set high expectations, provide differentiated instructions, use different ways of teaching, and encourage students to use their voices. Sadeeka not only teaches academics but "life skills" that she hopes they will remember throughout their lives. She pointed out in her interview, "[...] we teach the whole child in hopes of instilling values that will benefit students in the duration of their lives." Diana shared similar thoughts in her letter and wrote, "I have to realize the reality for some students and prepare them for a different reality where they can have skills to function at their best in society."

What Training Institutions Can Do

Research indicates teachers' beliefs about special education are related to their teacher preparatory programs (Dignath et al., 2022). All participants agreed that there is a need for teacher training institutions to revamp their teacher preparatory programs. Ariel said, "The special needs students would have a better chance of succeeding in those classrooms, and the teacher would have a better attitude toward teaching students with special needs." Catherine pointed out that, "teacher training institutions should improve their program by focusing on specific learning strategies and training teachers how to fully be equipped to read and understand the IEP." Hamlette suggested that more field experiences in inclusive classroom settings and observations in special education classrooms during teacher training could help. Shernette believes that teacher training institutions should "make inclusive classroom training a priority in teachers' college."

References were made by the participants about the courses and the IEP process. In her letter, Ann-Marie wrote, “I wish I was taught how to read an IEP or how to adapt teaching practices to be more responsive to the unique needs of diverse groups.” In her reflective letter, Sanya concluded that her fear could have been eliminated if her teacher preparatory program had included “classes on how to teach in an inclusive classroom.” Diana pointed out during her interview that IEPs are federally-mandated documents, therefore, learning about it and teaching these students should be mandatory in teachers’ colleges. Annastasia believes that the focus should be on how to implement the modifications based on the grade-level content and not the goals as the students in the general education classroom are interacting with grade-level content.

Research Question Responses

This study focused on the general education teachers’ perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. These perceptions were shared through individual interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt. The study addressed a central research question and two sub-questions. The raw data from the data collection tools provided the perceptions of teachers’ level of readiness to teach in an inclusive classroom related to their teacher education programs. This section, therefore, provides the answers to each research question using themes developed in the previous section and includes in vivo quotes.

Central Research Question

How do general education teachers in an inclusive classroom perceive their level of preparedness for inclusive education based on their teacher preparatory programs? The participants’ perspective is that their teacher preparatory programs underprepared them, through the lack of special education courses and field experiences in inclusive classrooms, to function

effectively in an inclusive classroom environment where they are required to provide accommodations and modifications to students with IEPs and cater to the varied needs of learners in that kind of classroom environment. This was reflected by Ariel who stated, “When I did my teacher preparatory program, [...] I was unprepared to function effectively in an inclusive classroom. I was never exposed to an IEP [...] or what is meant by accommodation. These courses did not prepare me for inclusive education.”

Sub-Question One

How do general education teachers describe the challenges they experience while teaching in an inclusive classroom? Generally, the participants describe the challenges they experience while teaching in an inclusive classroom to be a lack of support in response to student's academic and behavioral needs, a lack of resources, a lack of collaboration, difficulty implementing IEPs, and challenges catering to the diverse needs of learners in the classroom. Sanya said, “I don't get a chance to collaborate with the special education teacher. I have no academic support. I receive no behavioral or social emotion support [while] teaching in an inclusive classroom. Accommodations and modifications are very difficult, especially with content area [...] and you have to meet with your other groups.”

Sub-Question Two

How do general education teachers explain how they overcome the barriers associated with teaching in an inclusive classroom? To overcome the challenges associated with teaching in an inclusive classroom environment, the participants use several strategies. These include differentiated instruction, the use of technology, and the creation of a positive learning environment. Shernette stated, “Text-to-speech on the computer is used to help with the reading of texts.” Ann-Marie shared, “I strive to provide students with a sense of belonging and offer an

open and welcoming environment. Implementing activities in my instructional plan that would facilitate active listening and encourage participation is also a strategy I utilize.”

Summary

This chapter described the perceptions of the participants' level of preparedness for inclusive education based on their teacher preparatory programs and how this translated to their everyday life of teaching in this kind of classroom setting. The data were collected through individual interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt. After the analysis of the data, four themes emerged and were used as a guide to answer the research questions. The first theme, Perceived Level of Preparedness, focused on the effectiveness of college courses, teaching practicum, and end of preparatory program. The second theme, Level of Support, focused on academic and behavioral support and support from school officials. The third theme, Challenges with Inclusion, addressed teacher self-efficacy, collaboration, and implementing IEPs. The theme of Overcoming the Barriers examined the roles of teachers and training institutions. The participants felt ill-prepared to cater to the diverse needs of students in the inclusive classroom. This is a result of the lack of proper training during their teacher preparatory programs through content knowledge and practical experiences.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state. This study was guided by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory which describes a person's belief in their level of competence or ability to effectively carry out a task. This chapter presents for its readers a general discussion related to the topic followed by a summary of the thematic findings. The summary also details the interpretations of the findings, implications for policy and practice, and the theoretical and methodological implications. The chapter closes with the limitations and delimitations of the study and recommendations for future research, followed by a summary.

Discussion

The findings of this transcendental phenomenological study included the experiences of 12 teacher participants who described their perceptions of teaching in an elementary school related to their teacher preparatory programs. These data were gathered through the use of individual interviews, focus groups, and a writing prompt and were guided by Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory. Codes were used to develop the themes. Consequently, in this section, I discuss the findings of the study related to the themes and sub-themes through the lens of the self-efficacy theory. In this chapter, I also discuss the interpretation of findings and implications for policy and practice. Theoretical and empirical implications, limitations and delimitations, and recommendations for future research are also included.

The participants in the study varied in terms of their years of teaching and the number of

years they have been teaching in inclusive classrooms. The number of years as educators was from a minimum of 8 years to 40 years. The number of years the participants have been in inclusive classrooms ranged from 2 years to 30 years. The teachers had a wide array of teaching experiences throughout the grades from first to eighth grade. This profile of participants aided in giving a clear picture of their perceived level of preparedness for inclusive education related to their teacher preparatory programs. The participants expressed a low level of confidence when they were required to teach in an inclusive classroom because they did not feel prepared through their teacher preparatory program. Bandura (1977), in his self-efficacy theory, reveals that when an individual has a high level of self-confidence in their ability to carry out a task, they do so with more positivity and motivation. An individual can gain high self-efficacy by engaging in experiences that build their skills and knowledge (Bandura, 1977). The research findings show a failed attempt in this regard as the participants all agreed, that even though some might have had a positive college experience, they left ill-prepared to function effectively in an inclusive classroom environment. This kind of outcome can negatively impact the teacher in the classroom and result in task avoidance (Lue et al., 2014).

The findings of the study align with the literature as the teachers highlighted some areas that make inclusive education a challenge. One of these areas is collaboration. Teachers in the study understood the importance of collaboration in the successful implementation of inclusive education. Participants mentioned attempts to collaborate on lesson planning and hope to be exposed to research-based strategies that can be implemented in the classroom instead of a list of accommodations and modifications. Collaboration is encouraged among educators and generalists in an inclusive classroom to determine the best strategies to be used with students (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). However, the research findings show inconsistency in this regard.

School leaders have a role to play in recognizing a need in this area by organizing school days where special educators and teachers get an opportunity to intentionally have conversations about students (DeMatthews et al., 2020).

Summary of Thematic Findings

The data gathered for this research were analyzed in order to develop rich and thick descriptions of the essence of the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994b). The process of developing the themes began after each interview, continued after the focus group interviews, and after receiving the participants' letters. After careful analysis and synthesis of the data, four themes emerged that were able to answer the three research questions. These themes are: (a) Perceived Level of Preparedness, (b) Level of Support, (c) Challenges with Inclusion, and (d) Overcoming the Barriers.

Perceived Level of Preparedness highlights three sub-themes: the effectiveness of courses, teaching practicum, and end of preparatory program. This theme related to how the participants felt their teacher preparatory programs engaged them in theory and practice to effectively prepare them for inclusive education. The theme Level of Support related to the extent inclusive classroom teachers received help academically and behaviorally from both special education teachers and school officials. Challenges with Inclusive examined the teachers' self-efficacy, opportunities for collaboration, and the effective implementation of IEPs. Lastly, the theme Overcoming the Barriers addressed the strategies used by teachers and what they believe teacher training institutions should do to better prepare teacher candidates for inclusive education practices.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The Rehabilitation Act (1973) promotes inclusive education as a practice to denounce

segregated classrooms and affords students with disabilities to be educated alongside their nondisabled peers based on the severity of their needs. Consequently, teacher candidates and in-service teachers have a significant role to play in the success of students in these kinds of classroom environments that will require a special set of pedagogical skills. In-service teachers will require additional support to develop their pedagogical skills to cater to the varied needs of learners in their classrooms. Teacher candidates must be prepared for inclusive practices through effective teacher training.

Implications for Policy

The findings from the study have implications at the state level. The South Carolina Elementary Education Program Approval Standards addressed five different standards for the preparation of an elementary school teacher. When looking at the academic standards, consideration is not given to special education but to the core subjects, such as mathematics, language arts, science, and social studies. The standard related to instructions alludes to the need for teacher candidates to be aware of and be able to address the diverse needs of students. However, there needs to be an intentional inclusion of a standard or sub-standard to clearly indicate the need for a focus on special education during teacher preparatory programs. Currently, for a teacher to receive his or her initial teaching license, they are required to take the Praxis examinations. Again, these examinations are the core elementary school subjects. Policymakers may want to include an examination that examines the readiness of teacher candidates to teach in inclusive classrooms. However, they must first put policies in place to ensure that teacher training institutions are preparing teacher candidates through intentional special education courses.

The findings of the study have implications at the school and district levels. The general

education teachers, special educators, administrators, and district leaders can benefit from the implications of this study. The findings of the study reveal that teachers need to be equipped with skills and strategies that can be utilized in an inclusive classroom environment. The participants revealed that their teacher preparatory programs did not effectively prepare them for this kind of classroom setting. However, the teachers at See Elementary School are teaching in inclusive classrooms without the necessary skills and strategies to reach the varied levels of learners. This can be detrimental, stunt the growth of the students, and cause teacher burnout. Therefore, there is a need for teachers to be given support through carefully coordinated efforts to build their capacities.

The participants highlighted training and opportunities for collaboration between the general education teachers and special education teachers. In this regard, the findings have implications for school leaders at the local and state level. Locally, the superintendent should carry out a survey of teachers to attain their level of self-efficacy and ability to function effectively in an inclusive classroom environment. The feedback should be used to plan professional development for teachers. This training should include coaches and administrators tasked with following up with the successful implementation on their campuses. At the school level, principals can make accommodations in the schedule that provide opportunities for planning and collaboration between the general education teachers and the special education teachers. Special educators would, therefore, play a more vital role in supporting the general education teachers by building their abilities to reach students academically, socially, and behaviorally. This level of collaboration would include discussing modifications and accommodations in students' IEPs, as this was highlighted as an area of concern by the participants.

The findings also have implications for teacher training institutions. The teachers all agreed that their teacher preparatory programs did not prepare them to function effectively in inclusive classrooms. This is a call for teacher training institutions to revamp their teacher preparatory programs to increase authentic experiences for teacher candidates. Teachers can gain high self-efficacy by participating in authentic teaching experiences (Bandura (1997), as the participants revealed they were not confident enough to teach in inclusive classrooms after graduating from college. Therefore, teacher candidates are to be taught best practices for supporting students with exceptional needs. Also, they are to be engaged in real-world meaningful tasks through internships where they get to connect theory and practice. These experiences will help them to develop a deeper understanding of teaching in an inclusive classroom. Because the federal government requires that the general education classroom be considered the least restrictive environment when placing students for special educational services, they should put policies in place that mandate teacher training institutions to place greater emphasis on inclusive practices.

Implications for Practice

The participants in the study noted the need for professional development to aid them in better understanding how to manage an inclusive classroom and meet the needs of students, especially in accessing the general education curriculum. These engagements may prove to be beneficial to the general education teacher. Practically, school officials may want to explore the use of technology as a means of meeting the educational needs of the students as some of the participants have noted the limited usage through the text-to-speech feature on the computer. Also, assigning special educators to grade levels to serve as mentors may help to alleviate some of the concerns of teachers. Therefore, there should be clear procedures established for

collaboration between generalists and special educators. Additionally, schools that have coaches may provide support to teachers as they receive training to do so.

The participants referenced Collaborative Learning Time (CLT) as a practice at their institutions. This may be an opportune time for generalists, special educators, administrators, and coaches to intentionally dive into ways teachers can make inclusive education an effective practice. One way to accomplish this is through continuous training on differentiated instruction. Some of the participants mentioned that they differentiated the instruction for the students. However, there is a need for intentional coaching where teachers are exposed to research-based approaches to modify and customize their teaching to reach the diverse needs of learners in the classroom. This should also include, differentiated assessment and different ways to assess learning as this can prove to be beneficial and cater to multiple intelligences.

An effective strategy that has been utilized in teaching and learning to intentionally plan and execute lessons with high levels of instruction is the Universal Design for Learning (ULD) (McTighe & Curtis, 2019). In this regard, teachers begin with understanding who their learners are. Teachers then plan learning activities that are engaging and students get opportunities to interact. The teacher presents the content to the students in more than one format, again, catering to the different types of learners. The teacher gives students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in different ways.

During the research, the participants did not reference Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). Consequently, administrators may want to use this framework to help teachers provide academic and behavioral support for their teachers. This framework helps teachers monitor the actions of students through the implementation of research-based strategies and the collection of data, which is then used to determine the next steps for the students.

Empirical and Theoretical Implications

This section examines the empirical and theoretical implications of the study and compares and contrasts the emerged themes with the literature review and theoretical framework that were used for this study. The emerging themes are perceived level of preparedness, level of support, challenges with inclusion, and overcoming the barriers.

Empirical Implications

This research examined the perceptions of elementary teachers in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. Current research has explored the readiness of general education teachers to teach in an inclusive classroom and the impact of inclusive education on teachers and students (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019; Gigante & Gilmore, 2018; Trivino-Amigo et al., 2023; Wray et al., 2022). The findings of this study concur with the current literature on this topic as several of the participants concluded that their teacher preparatory programs ill-prepared them for an inclusive classroom environment.

Perceived Level of Preparedness. The literature shows that teachers believe they are not equipped to effectively cater to the diverse challenges presented in an inclusive classroom (Alibakhshi et al., 2020; Vancleef, 2019). The data collected from this study further extends the literature. The literature further explains that teachers expressed that their initial teacher preparatory programs did not prepare them for inclusive education. This concurs with the findings of the study. Catherine noted in her interview that “[...] the courses really didn’t prepare you for an inclusive classroom. I decided to get a second master’s degree in learning disabilities several years after I started teaching. [...] it better prepared me to teach students with special needs.” The literature explains that a general education teacher preparatory program focuses on preparing teacher candidates to teach in general education classrooms so the focus of courses is

different in comparison to a special education degree program (Abegglen & Hessels, 2018; Van Mieghen et al., 2019). Catherine's thoughts support the notion that generalists who have gone on to complete a degree in special education have compared the experience with their initial teacher certification and concluded that their initial teacher education program would not have given them the skills and knowledge they have now attained (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). These findings were further cemented through this research as the participants highlighted the courses they took in college and the impact they had on their level of preparedness for inclusive education. "I took the following courses: Chemistry, Religion, The Young Child [...]. I was at a loss of how to effectively teach students with learning disabilities in a regular education class especially since I wasn't trained to do so."

Level of Support. The literature examined the impact of inclusive education on teachers and students in terms of their academics and behavior and the need for them to have training and support (Hind et al., 2019; Jez et al., 2021; Kramer et al., 2021). However, the findings of the study extend the literature to examine the level of support teachers receive in an inclusive classroom. Sanya reported, "I have no academic support. The teacher [special educator] only meets for an IEP meeting.". The literature has highlighted the positive impact inclusive education can have on the academic performance of students who receive special education services (Gee et al., 2020; Kefallinou et al., 2020). Students who are in inclusive classrooms tend to perform better than those in segregated classrooms and are more socially advanced (Gee et al., 2020; Roldan et al., 2021). However, the findings show that general education teachers are not receiving the support to assist these students.

The literature shows that behavior in the inclusive classroom has been highlighted as one of the significant problems with inclusive education (Pappas et al., 2018). Teachers are known to

spend a significant amount of time responding to incidents (Hind et al., 2019). However, the findings from the study show that teachers are not receiving significant help in this regard. The data show that teachers have difficulty gaining help with behaviors from special educators and administrators. Teachers are stretched in this regard and are expected to “handle” these behavioral issues in their classrooms. These findings have also highlighted the need for further research that examines how administrators are trained to support the academic needs of teachers.

Challenges with Inclusion. An extensive amount of literature has examined the challenges of inclusive education. General education teachers are not taught in their teacher preparatory programs to hone the skills that are needed to teach in inclusive classrooms (Ainscow, 2020; Savolainen et al., 2020). The findings from the study show that teachers need to be equipped in their teacher preparatory programs to reach all profiles of learners and be taught how to effectively manage the variables in an inclusive classroom. The participants expressed the need for courses that are geared toward special education and more hands-on experiences in inclusive classrooms during their internships. Similarly, the literature states that teacher training programs should prepare general education teachers to teach students with special needs and allow them to translate this skill to other learners (Savolainen et al., 2020).

Collaboration is key to the successful implementation of inclusive education. The literature explored collaboration within the school as well as with outside stakeholders such as parents and other services. However, the study examined collaboration from within the school system. The study shows that collaboration is an area of concern for general education teachers. General education teachers are not getting the opportunity to collaborate with the special education teachers to discuss and plan for the academic needs of students. The literature shows that both general education teachers and special educators are to be working together

intentionally to plan for students' success (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020). Instead, the data show there is inadequate communication between the general education teachers and the special educators. Time plays an important factor during the school day as the schedules do not allow for the teachers to meet during the school day. Generalists and special educators must collaborate so that the special educators can share best practices (Paulsrud & Nilholm, 2020).

Overcoming the Barriers. The literature examines the use of evidence-based strategies to overcome the barriers to inclusion (Konrad et al., 2019; Mitchell & Sutherland, 2020; Wilcox et al., 2021). The strategies that are implemented in the classroom are to be supported by empirical data (Reynolds et al., 1982). This is supported by the research findings where the participants have effectively used evidence-based strategies to help alleviate some of the challenges they face in an inclusive classroom. Participants have used differentiated instruction as a teaching method to reach the diverse learning needs in the classroom. Teachers have also diversified the materials as a way of modifying assignments for students with IEPs. Current studies show that it is good educational practice for teachers to modify their instructional practices or methods of intervention based on the needs of the learners (Finkelstein et al. 2021). The findings reveal other strategies used by the participants are preferential seating, reinforcement and praise, small group instructions, game-based learning, and peer tutoring.

The findings from the study provide empirical evidence for the use of technology in inclusive classrooms to achieve academic excellence. The participants reported that it is difficult to implement the modifications and accommodations that are written in the students' IEPs. However, technology has been used to assist students, especially with their read-aloud accommodations. "I have them use the text-to-speech feature so they can complete the assignment at their own pace because if I sit and read to them they might not ask me to read it

again for them” (Jessica, Focus Group, April 22, 2024). This is supported by Thurston et al. (2021) who noted that the read-aloud feature on the computer is more effective than the teacher reading aloud to students. One teacher reported the technology being used in her classroom to connect students to educational programs. This finding was lacking in the research as most of the participants highlighted during the focus group the use of the text-to-speech feature. However, research shows that educational applications can provide generalists with the opportunity to individualize assessments and instructions for students (Jameson et al., 2020).

This study provides empirical evidence for the need for teacher training programs to reexamine their teacher preparatory programs. The data reveals that the participants required more hands-on experiences teaching students with multiple needs prior to entering the classroom. This supports the literature that teaching practicums are usually facilitated in general education classrooms that do not have students with IEPs (Crispel & Kasperski, 2019). Teacher preparatory programs do not focus on generalists gaining skills in special education (Abbeglen & Hessels, 2019; Van Mieghem et al., 2018). Similarly, the findings show that the participants were exposed to courses that did not focus on gaining skills and strategies to use in inclusive classrooms but being aware of different disabilities. The literature further highlighted that teacher training programs have less than 4% of their courses associated with special education (Allday et al., 2013). The findings also show that teacher candidates are to be intentionally taught about the IEP and how to implement same. Also, the literature shows that teachers may stunt the growth of students with IEPs if they are not able to successfully implement it (Chadwell et al., 2019).

Theoretical Implications

Bandura’s (1977) self-efficacy theory was used as the theoretical framework for this

study as it examines the belief of an individual in their ability to carry out a task based on their experiences. This study examined the perceptions of elementary teachers to teach in an inclusive classroom related to their teacher preparatory programs. High self-efficacy will result in an individual approaching a task with more willingness (Bandura, 1977). As the teachers gain more experience, their level of self-efficacy increases. The research findings, therefore advance Bandura's (1977) theory as the participants noted that they had no confidence to teach in an inclusive classroom after completing their teacher preparatory programs. They reported a lack of hands-on experiences and authentic teaching experiences in inclusive classrooms. Teachers can gain confidence in themselves as their teacher preparatory programs expose them to experiences that will foster their ability to teach diverse learners in the same classroom environment (Symesa et al., 2023). Given the high level of reported outcomes of participants completing their teacher preparatory programs with a lack of confidence to teach in inclusive classroom settings, this study has further advanced Bandura's (1977) self-efficacy theory.

Limitations and Delimitations

This transcendental study included both limitations and delimitations. In this section I discuss the variables that affected the study that were beyond my control. The delimitations section examines the decisions I took as the researcher in an effort to focus the inquiry and gather the necessary data for the research.

Limitations

The first limitation of the study was the profile of the participants. The twelve participants graduated from college at least eight years ago. Consequently, the experiences of the participants are not reflective of recent college graduates. One of the educators has been teaching for over 40 years. Additionally, teaching in a small school district did not afford me the

opportunity to select the participants from a wider pool of teachers. Another limitation of the study is the sample size of the research. The study included 12 participants and as such the data cannot be used to make generalizations about the effectiveness of teacher preparatory programs in preparing teacher candidates for inclusive education. Nine-two percent of the participants were black, therefore, this is an underrepresentation in terms of ethnicity. The study included only females so there were no data from the perspective of a male. One of the participants has always taught fourth grade, as such, the experiences are grade-specific. Overall, the study included participants who have had experiences across the elementary grades. For one of the focus groups, one of the participants was very vocal and may have influenced the responses from the other participants as their responses were similar.

Delimitations

Several purposive decisions were taken to narrow the focus and scope of this research. , Purposive sampling techniques were used to establish inclusion and exclusion of participants. Participants had to be licensed elementary school teachers who completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited institution and completed at least one year of full-time teaching in an inclusive classroom. These delimitations were necessary to ensure participants could provide data specific to the research questions. Another delimitation was the decision to use transcendental phenomenology as the research design. This decision was based on my epistemological assumption that knowledge comes from the personal experiences of others. Although I have been teaching in inclusive classrooms since 2017, I must remove my personal biases and focus on the narratives of the participants to write the essence of their lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994b).

Recommendations for Future Research

In light of the study's findings, limitations, and delimitations placed on this study, the following recommendations and directions for future research are being made.

Firstly, the sample size for this research included only 12 participants who graduated from college at least eight years ago. It is, therefore, my recommendation to conduct research that includes participants who graduated from a teacher preparatory program no more than five years ago and have at least one year of teaching experience in an inclusive classroom setting. This kind of data will help to provide information that is recent and support recent literature on the role of teacher preparatory programs for inclusive education. In addition to this recommendation, the method of recruitment could also change so as not to limit the participation to a specific geographical location. As a result, the data can be used to make more generalizations.

The data reveals that participants crave the support of their administrators in making inclusive education successful. It is, therefore, important to examine how administrators are prepared in their principal programs to support the needs of teachers. The literature shows that administrators play a critical role in the successful implementation of inclusive education. However, if they are not cognizant of skills and strategies to support teachers they will not be able to provide effective support. There are administrators who do not possess the skills and knowledge to influence the learning environment because they were not in those kinds of classroom settings. A former elementary teacher in an administrative position might be able to have more influence academically. Therefore, it becomes critical to examine how school administrators are prepared in their principal programs to address the academic needs of their schools.

The study reveals a need for collaboration between general education teachers and special education teachers. I am, therefore, recommending a case study to examine the impact of collaboration between these two categories of educators. In this case study, cognitive coaching would be used as the strategy where the special educators would be assigned to general education teachers and provide them with strategies and techniques to function effectively in the classroom. They would also collaborate on planning for students. Over the period, the researcher would do observations to collect and determine its impact.

Lastly, I recommend that teacher preparatory programs create a replica of the interview questions to be administered to their teacher graduates at least one year after their initial employment. This will help the colleges and universities evaluate the effectiveness of their teacher preparatory programs now that their graduates have been out in the field of work. It is the norm to evaluate courses but this approach will examine the overall program through the lens of inclusive education.

Conclusion

Inclusive education provides students with disabilities and speakers of minority languages the same opportunities as their peers for authentic learning in the same classroom (UNESCO, 2017). In this regard, children are exposed to equal opportunities (Shaikh et al., 2023). The research shows that general education teachers have a critical role to play in the successful implementation of inclusive education (Khan et al., 2022). General education teachers are prepared to teach in classrooms that do not have disabled students (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Therefore, the purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. Individual interviews, two focus

groups, and a writing prompt were used to gather data from the study. The study included 12 participants who met the criteria for inclusion in the study. The data was analyzed using the procedures postulated by Moustakas (1994b) for transcendental phenomenology and four themes emerged. The findings of the study revealed that teachers need to be equipped with skills and strategies that can be utilized in an inclusive classroom environment. Teacher preparatory programs did not prepare them to effectively function in an inclusive classroom environment. However, teachers have taken initiatives and are using research-based strategies to cater to the diverse needs of learners in their classrooms. Teacher training institutions must, therefore, redefine their teacher preparatory programs to equip teacher candidates for inclusive practices. Lastly, school administrators and school officials have a role to play in promoting healthy inclusive cultures that will promote academic performance.

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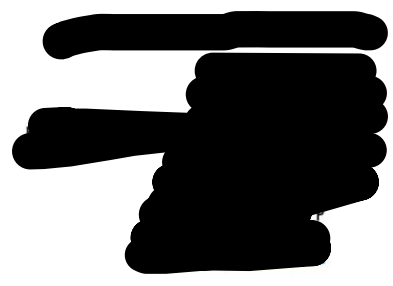
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Appendix A

Permission Letter



January 26, 2024
[Redacted]
Jevauwn D. Smith
Doctoral Candidate
251 Rast Street
Sumter, SC-29150

Dear Mr. Smith:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled The Perceptions of Teachers in An Inclusive Classroom Environment Related to Their Teacher Preparatory Program: A Phenomenological Study, I have decided to grant you permission to contact our staff and invite them to participate in your study.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

I grant permission for Jevauwn D. Smith to contact elementary general education teachers with at least one year's teaching experience in an inclusive classroom to invite them to participate in his research study.

[Retain the below option if desired.]

I am requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]



Sir



Appendix B

Institutional Review Board Approval



April 15, 2024

Jevauwn Smith
Constance Pearson

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY23-24-1459 The Perceptions of Elementary Teachers in An Inclusive Classroom Environment Related to Their Teacher Preparatory Program: A Phenomenological Study

Dear Jevauwn Smith, Constance Pearson,

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application per 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 described in your IRB 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).

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

This exemption only applies to your current research application, and any modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

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

Appendix C

Site Request Email

January 23, 2024

XXXXXXXXXX

Superintendent

See County School District

XXX Street

XXXX

Dear Mr. XXXX,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The title of my research project is *The Perceptions of Elementary Teachers in An Inclusive Classroom Environment Related to Their Teacher Preparatory Programs: A Phenomenological Study*. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study will be to describe elementary general education teachers' perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in the school district, consequently, allowing me to contact members of the staff to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule an interview, participate in a focus group, and complete a writing prompt. The data will be used to describe their perceptions of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please respond by email to XXX@XXX.k12.sc.us. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Jevauwn D. Smith
Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D

Recruitment Email

Dear Educators,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Philosophy degree. The purpose of my research is to describe elementary general education teachers' perception of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs, and I am writing to invite you to join my study.

Participants must be licensed elementary school teachers who have completed a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited institution and have completed at least one year of full-time teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Participants will be asked to:

- Participate in one-on-one interviews where I will ask you 14 questions related to your level of preparedness for inclusive education based on your teacher preparatory program. The interview will be in person or virtual and will last for approximately 30-45 minutes.
- Participate in an in-person focus group with the researcher and the other participants. The focus group will allow you and the other participants to have dialog and interaction about the topic and will allow the researcher to interface with multiple participants at the same time. This will last for approximately 45 minutes.
- Review the transcripts from the audio recordings of the one-on-one interviews and focus group to confirm accuracy.
- Writing Prompt: You will be asked to write a letter to yourself based on the researcher's prompt. This should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked to email your response to the researcher within two weeks of receiving the task.
- Participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected.

To participate, please contact me at 910-XXX-XXXX or XXXX to schedule an interview.

Please, use this link to complete the demographic information:

<https://forms.gle/st9AR3FTbHN6RmKWA>

A consent document is attached to this email for your review and a hard copy will be given to you to sign at the time of the interview if you meet the study criteria and decide to participate. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. You will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card by email after you have completed the study.

Sincerely,

Jevauwn D. Smith
Doctoral Candidate

910-XXX-XXXX/XXXX@liberty.edu

Appendix E

Informed Consent

Title of the Project: The Perceptions of Elementary Teachers in An Inclusive Classroom Environment Related to Their Teacher Preparatory Program: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Jevauwn D. Smith, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must have completed a teacher preparatory program and earned a bachelor's degree in elementary education from an accredited institution, hold a state teaching license, and have completed at least one year of full-time teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe elementary general education teachers' perception of teaching in an inclusive classroom environment related to their teacher preparatory programs while teaching in a public school setting in a rural southeastern state.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. **One-on-One Interview:** I will ask you 14 questions related to your level of preparedness for inclusive education based on your teacher preparatory program. The interview will be approximately 30-45 minutes and be audio recorded using the recording button on the Google platform. You will be asked to look over the transcript of your interview for accuracy.
2. **Focus Group:** You will be asked to participate in a focus group with the researcher and the other participants. The focus group will allow you and the other participants to have dialog and interaction about the topic and will allow me to interface with multiple participants at the same time. This will last for approximately 45 minutes to an hour.
3. **Writing Prompt:** You will be asked to write a letter to yourself based on my prompt. This should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete. You will be asked to email your response to me within two weeks of receiving the task.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

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

Benefits to society include a better understanding of the preparation of general education teachers for inclusive practices. The data can be used to help universities structure their teacher education programs. The data can also be used by local school districts to plan and implement on-going professional development workshops for general education teachers who are teaching in an inclusive setting.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

There is a risk that the data could be lost or stolen which would result in a breach of confidentiality.

How will personal information be protected?

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

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- All data in Google Drive will be password protected and require a two-way authentication to access. Data will be destroyed after seven years.
- Recordings will be stored on a password-locked computer and uploaded to the researcher's Google Drive where a two-way authentication will be required to access. Data will be destroyed after seven years. The transcripts will be shredded after the participants verify the details. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. You will receive a \$10 Starbucks gift card by email after you have completed the study.

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.

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Jevauwn D. Smith. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact me at XXX-XXX-XXXX or XXXX@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Constance Pearson, at XXXX@liberty.edu. .

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

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

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

Your Consent

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

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

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

Printed Subject Name

Signature & Date

Appendix F

Questions for Individual Interviews

1. Please describe your educational background and share how long you have been teaching, including how many of those years are in an inclusive classroom.
2. Describe your college experience, detailing the types of courses you took and how those prepared you for inclusive education.
3. Which kind of classroom environment facilitated your student teaching and did you have any field experiences prior to your student teaching?
4. How, if at all, did your teacher preparatory program prepare you to function effectively in an inclusive classroom?
5. After graduating college, how confident were you in your ability to teach students with special needs? Explain your answer.
6. How can teacher training institutions improve their programs to better prepare teachers for inclusion?
7. What is your understanding of an inclusive classroom and the role you play in making inclusion successful?
8. What kinds of challenges have you experienced in the past year teaching in an inclusive classroom?
9. What level of academic support do you receive in teaching in an inclusive classroom?
10. What level of behavioral and social emotional support do you receive in teaching in an inclusive classroom?
11. What are some other challenges you have faced while teaching in an inclusive classroom?

12. How do you collaborate with the special education teachers on your campus to serve the needs of the students in your classroom with IEPs?
13. What strategies have you employed to minimize the challenges you have faced with teaching in an inclusive classroom?
14. How can school administrators and school officials support general education teachers in developing the skills needed to teach in an inclusive classroom?

Appendix G

Questions for Focus Groups

1. How long have you been teaching in an inclusive classroom?
2. Describe your college experience toward getting skills and strategies to teach in an inclusive classroom.
3. How do you collaborate with special education teachers on your campus to plan for the success of students in your classroom with an IEP?
4. How well do you understand IEP documents and are able to implement them with fidelity? Explain.
5. Describe your typical classroom as you try to cater to the learning needs of all students and provide accommodations and modifications for students with IEPs.

Appendix H

Writing Prompt

Directions – You will read the prompt provided below. Once you have finished responding to the prompt, you will email me your response. Please return your email to me within 14 days of this email.

Prompt – Write a letter to yourself describing the feelings you had the first time you taught in an inclusive classroom. What are some of the challenges you faced as an inclusive teacher? In your letter, reflect on your college journey related to becoming a teacher. How did your college experience prepare you to deal with the realities of teaching in an inclusive classroom? There is no length requirement and your writing will be kept confidential.

Appendix I

Name	Data Collection	Date	Format
Ariel	Interview	April 15, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 25	
Jessica	Interview	April 16, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 26	
Sanya	Interview	April 19, 2024	Google Meets
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 27	
Hamlette	Interview	April 17, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 26	
Catherine	Interview	April 19, 2024	Google Meets
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 26	
Annastasia	Interview	April 19, 2024	Google Meets
	Focus Group	April 22, 2024	
	Letter	April 28	
	Focus Group 2		
Kaydian	Interview	April 15, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 25	
Ann-Marie	Interview	April 15, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 29	
Diana	Interview	April 17, 2024	In-Person
	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 28	
Sadeeka	Interview	April 19, 2024	Google Meets

	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 29	
Shernette	Interview	April 16, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 27	
Tricia	Interview	April 18, 2024	In-person
	Focus Group	April 24, 2024	
	Letter	April 29	

Appendix J

Sample Interview

Please describe your educational background and share how long you have been teaching, including how many of those years are in an inclusive classroom.

Ariel: I have a Teaching Diploma in Primary Education, a Bachelor of Arts in Education, a Master's Degree in Educational Psychology, and a PhD Candidate. I have been teaching for 28 years, serving as a Vice Principal for nine years, and teaching in an inclusive classroom for 19 years.

Describe your college experience, detailing the types of courses you took and how those prepared you for inclusive education.

Ariel: My college experience taught me how to be an effective and efficient general education teacher. As such, I provide students with the essential foundation for lifelong learning. Some of the courses I took in college were Mathematics Methodology, Mathematics Content, Music Education, Physical Education, Arts, General Science, English, Child Development, Religion, and Education Psychology. These courses did not prepare me for inclusive education.

Which kind of classroom environment facilitated your student teaching and did you have any field experiences prior to your student teaching?

Ariel: My student teaching experience was facilitated in a general education classroom. Prior to my student teaching, I had one year of experience teaching as a pre-trained general education teacher.

How, if at all, did your teacher preparatory program prepare you to function effectively in an inclusive classroom?

Ariel: When I did my teacher preparatory program in 1995, I was unprepared to function effectively in an inclusive classroom. I was never exposed to what an IEP is or what is meant by accommodation for students with special needs. Furthermore, I was not taught how to prepare an environment conducive to their learning.

After graduating college, how confident were you in your ability to teach students with special needs? Explain your answer.

Ariel: I have no confidence in my ability to teach students with special needs. As I said before, during my college years, I was not required to take any courses on teaching students with special needs. These classes were only for those who specialized in teaching students with disabilities. Apart from what I have researched, I have no knowledge about dyslexia, autism, or how to help students with ADHD. Therefore, giving me students with disabilities to teach in an inclusive classroom is a disservice to those children. Teachers like me who went to college years ago need help such as training, coaching, or professional development workshops on serving students with special needs so that we can really be effective in an inclusive classroom.

Appendix K

Sample Code Table

Codes	Cluster	Theme
end of teaching program, courses, teaching practice, college experiences, not effective	The Effectiveness of Courses Teaching Practicum	Perceived Level of Preparedness
academic support, behavioral support, collaboration,	Academic Behavioral School Officials	Levels of Support
understanding IEPs, college experiences,	Teacher Self-efficacy Collaboration Implementing IEPs	Challenges with Inclusion
Strategies, overcoming barriers, training, professional development, school officials, teacher's colleges, peer tutoring, technology	What Teachers Do What Training Institutions Can Do	Overcoming the Barriers

Appendix L

Sample of Textual Descriptions

Theme	Textual Descriptions
Perceived Level of Preparedness	<p>My college experience was great. However, I do not think that it fully prepared me to be a teacher. I took one class on reading but it was not how to teach reading. I remember reading children's handwriting and trying to decipher it. I took psychology classes on human growth and development</p> <p>Overall, I would still say that I was not prepared to be in a classroom by myself when I first started teaching. I was lost. We did not have any courses on classroom management, only what we learned from practicum classes and being in classrooms. None of my classes prepared me for teaching students with IEPs or learning disabilities since I was an early childhood major and not a special education major.</p> <p>I would say my program did their part of getting me ready to function effectively in an inclusive classroom but I had to put it in to practice. To some it up I would say that some things were on the job training and some skills I had to relearn.</p>
Levels of Support	<p>I have no academic support. The teacher only meets for an IEP meeting. We never discuss strategies that I might can use in the classroom to help my students. I am given a list of accommodations but they are not explained to me.</p> <p>Now this is a sour point. The general education teachers write the IEPs and after that its like you are really expecting me to do all of this? She is not the only student in my room and some of these things I do not know what you are talking about. I was not trained in special education.</p> <p>I have not received any behavioral or social-emotional support in the inclusive classroom except to help one of the students stay awake during testing. I have to handle any behavioral issues myself. I give them treats, stuffed toys, or extended time on the Chromebooks to keep them calm.</p>
Challenges with Inclusion	<p>The biggest challenges are not getting the support needed with teaching full inclusive classrooms and the identification process taking so long. Students that have already been identified are pretty easy to work with and provide for. It's the</p>

	<p>ones who have not been identified that I struggle with because I do not know what the problem is.</p> <p>Time Constraints, Inadequate Resources, Bias, Inadequate Guidance</p>
Overcoming the Barriers	<p>We would often partner up in professional development and grade meetings to plan standard-aligned lessons that would meet the needs of the students. We share ideas and strategies that would work for the diverse learners and ensure our activities are rigorous to meet the students where they as well as discuss our data to drive instructional planning ensuring that each student's journey is enriched and supported. We plan differentiated lessons that would ensure all students are included.</p> <p>One of the best ways for an administrator to support staff members is to increase their own knowledge about inclusive instruction practices, and understand those staff members' roles and responsibilities. Also, school administrators can assist special education teachers by creating an inclusive and supportive school environment for students with disabilities. By initiating culturally responsive learning strategies, establishing goals and adjusting classroom materials to meet the needs of individual students, special education teachers can assist administrators in reaching their goal of supporting their special education staff.</p>

Appendix M

Sample Journal

April 15, 2024: Today, I had my first interview with Ariel and I started to reflect on my time teaching in the classroom back in 2013. Ariel responded very strongly during the interview and so it brought up those old feelings I had when I started teaching in the United States. I remember my teaching practice was with a group of 6th-grade students who were performing at or above grade level. I did not have much challenge teaching them. I was not exposed to students who had special educational needs during these practicum experiences. However, when I moved to the United States in 2017, this was not the case. This was my first time teaching in an inclusive classroom. I remember how confusing it seemed as I had to go to IEP meetings and then having to modify assignments for students. The hardest part was creating a balance in the classroom and reaching everyone. As I listened to her during her interview, I started to wonder what teaching has been like for teachers in her case who did not have the experience and entered the profession a long time ago. Luckily for me, I had two years working as an assistant teacher in a special education classroom prior to college and was able to somewhat draw on these experiences. She made mention of the courses she took and I remember my professor teaching us a special education course during my degree. She admitted it was her first time teaching the course and she needed my help since I had the experience working in special education.

April 24, 2024: I am not surprised that so many teachers are having the same issue working in an inclusive classroom. One participant brought up a very important element that I will mention during my write-up of Chapters 4 and 5. I know that administrators serve a role in supervising all areas of the school but I have never thought about the ability of administrators to actually help

teachers function effectively in inclusive classroom environments. Now, I am wondering about their principal programs and the areas of focus that need to be included so they can help teachers in these kinds of environments. I had this experience when I moved to another rural school in the U.S. Here, the principal was a former music teacher, the first assistant principal was a former middle school social studies teacher, and the second assistant principal was a former middle school mathematics teacher. The dynamics were different among these administrators. The assistant principal who taught mathematics was more supportive than the others and demonstrated a better understanding. She also had a son who received special education services. At my current school, the principal is a former elementary school teacher and literacy coach, whereas the assistant principal taught middle school social studies. Sometimes when I am given advice, I know it is coming from a good place but it sounds good in theory but not applicable. How then are these administrators truly able to guide teachers? At this stage of the research, it seems as if the participants are calling for more actions from the administration in terms of behavioral and academic support.