A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ELEMENTARY GENERAL EDUCATION

TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES TEACHING STUDENTS

WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

by

Patricia Matthews Massengale

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2017
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of elementary general education teachers instructing students diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in a suburban North Georgia inclusion setting. The four research questions that guided this study included (a) How do elementary general education teachers describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms? (b) In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion? (c) How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting? and (d) How do teachers describe the benefits they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting. The theories guiding the study were Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social ecological systems theory and Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory as each of these theories adopt the perspective that individuals are products of their environments, which affect the students with ASD and teachers in the inclusive setting. Data collection included 10 elementary general education teacher participants’ interviews and journals, my researcher journal, and an online focus group. I provided rich, descriptive characterizations of the phenomenon as I conducted the data analysis using coding, peer review, enriched description, and triangulation. Conclusively, the results of this study provided a voice for elementary general education teachers who instructed students with ASD I identified four themes from this study: (a) beliefs, (b) relationships, (c) challenges, and (d) benefits. Recommendations for future research include using diverse schools, increasing the number of participants, and researching the collaboration between general and special education teachers in the inclusion setting.

Keywords: Inclusion, Autism Spectrum Disorder, Special Education, Least Restrictive Environment, Students with Disabilities, General Education
Dedication

I would not have pursued my doctorate without my family. Ray, my sweet husband, has been my shoulders to lean on and my biggest cheerleader getting me to this stage. My children, Elizabeth, Mary-Margaret, Daniel, and Jonathan, supported me and cheered me from afar, and for that, I am grateful. My parents, Bobby and Mary Anne, have always instilled the love of education in me. Daddy, you will always be my favorite principal! Mother, I would have never finished that first degree let alone try this without your encouragement and support.

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List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)
Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)
Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)
Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA)
Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEA)
Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
Institutional Review Board (IRB)
Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
Matthews County School District (MCSD)
No Child Left Behind (NCLB)
Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS)
Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs)
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Imagine being told by an administrator that your elementary general education classroom will serve an inclusive environment for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and that you must teach all elementary general education standards to students with ASD. In addition, you must teach the standards in the same manner as you would for the elementary general education students except you must provide specific accommodations for each of the respective students with ASD. These additions to the classroom environment include a teacher certified in special education, a speech pathologist, and an occupational therapist who implement the specific individualized education plan (IEP) services. At the very least, this scenario is overwhelming especially when the general education teacher has no formal special education training. However, this is a common scenario in public schools today (Marks, Kurth, & Bartz, 2014).

ASD is prevalent in the United States and currently affects one in 68 children (Center for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2016). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) recognized the increased number of students with ASD, which in turn, increased the needs in the general education classroom (Casale-Giannola, 2012). Teaching students with ASD in the public school setting is challenging for the elementary general education teacher. According to the literature, the experiences of elementary general education teachers educating students labeled with disabilities in the inclusive environment were significantly under researched, thus providing the gap in the literature (Berry, Petrin, Gravelle, & Farmer, 2011).
The focus of this phenomenological study was to show how elementary general education teachers experience teaching students with ASD. Researching a deeper meaning and understanding this phenomenon of elementary general education teachers, including students with ASD in their general education classroom, was the purpose of this qualitative study. This chapter consists of the overview, background, and the identification of the gap in the literature. Moreover, this chapter describes the situation to self, the problem statement, the purpose statement, and significance of the study. The following research questions guided this study:

**Research Question One:** How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms?

**Research Question Two:** In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion?

**Research Question Three:** How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

**Research Question Four:** How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

Finally, the definitions and summary will be included in this chapter.

**Background**

Stipulations of the IDEA (2004) require special education students, such as those with ASD, to receive services in general education settings or a Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). The LRE is the general education setting rather than a more restrictive environment where the student may be in a separate school or institution (Carson, 2015). Inclusion is a form of LRE in general education defined as entitling the special needs student to be included, and receive
assistive services within the general education setting (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). As the number of students with ASD increases in the general education classroom, elementary general education teachers must understand the practices of inclusion. Inclusion that is lacking an ideal infrastructure leads teachers to experience a sense of burden to meet the challenging needs of students with ASD (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Teaching students with disabilities with targeted, intensive, and research-based instruction in an inclusive setting is documented and supported through regulatory language in IDEA (Boardman, Brownell, Dingle, Haager, & Leko, 2011).

According to the research of Bethere and Pavitola (2014), special education was considered a segregated sphere for quite some time. Helping students meet goals and find success has been one goal of placing students with special needs in the general education setting. The segregation of students with ASD of long ago is no more as inclusion has closed the door of old practices in the classroom and education in general (Higbee, Katz, & Schultz, 2010). Elementary general education teachers’ experiences teaching students with ASD are important to the planning and achievement within their classrooms (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010).

Consequently, much research has provided information regarding teaching experiences with students with ASD in preschool age programs, but little research exists regarding these experiences in the elementary setting (Di Renzo, Di Castelbianco, Petrillo, Racinaro, & Rea, 2015). Therefore, the gap remains in providing definitive research regarding elementary school general education teachers’ experiences with students diagnosed with ASD (Berry et al., 2011).

**Situation to Self**

In 1993, I welcomed my first student with ASD into my elementary general education classroom. In those days, the practice of least restrictive environment was referred to as mainstreaming. For years, I welcomed countless students to become a part of my general
education setting. From those early encounters with special needs students, I flash forward to being a general education teacher working with a special education teacher in an inclusive setting in the mid-2000s. As an elementary general education teacher, I thrived on sharing my classroom with a special education teacher. I learned a great deal and was able to see the benefits of collaborating with other teachers, exposing students to diverse populations, and watching the success of all learners. Naturally, based on my experiences, when given the opportunity to teach special education, I jumped at the offer.

Currently, I instruct students with ASD daily in the general education setting; as a special education teacher, I co-teach with a general education teacher. Therefore, I have participated in both roles in the inclusive classroom. I have witnessed firsthand the voices of general education teachers as they respond to the inclusion of students with ASD. The research shows that teachers’ views towards students with ASD are generally negative (Humphrey & Hourcade, 2010). My research gave a voice to elementary general education teachers’ lived experiences of the phenomenon of inclusion of students diagnosed with ASD. The philosophical assumptions that guided my research were methodological in nature as I sought to carefully analyze the data to develop a detailed knowledge of the topic in this study (Creswell, 2013). As I framed my research, I used a social constructivist worldview to understand the general education teachers and the world in which they work (Creswell, 2013). The social constructivist worldview holds to the expectation that seeking an understanding of the world in which one lives and works aids an individual make meaning of their experiences (Liu & Lan, 2016).

**Problem Statement**

Inclusion enables a child with a diagnosed special need, such as ASD, to be included and receive assistive services within the general education setting (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011).
Statistics have shown that 39% of students diagnosed with ASD were served 80% or more of the time in a general education setting (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). At one time, national curriculum was the path for students to gain knowledge. However, minimizing or altering that curriculum for some students challenges a public service for a population of students with ASD (Berry et al., 2011). Therefore, including students with ASD in the general education setting afforded opportunities for these students to have success and to gain access to a general education curriculum (Witmer & Ferrari, 2014). Researchers found that general education teachers must be knowledgeable about the practice of inclusion for implementation to be successful (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014).

Helping teachers prepare and understand students with ASD occurs through collaboration. Elementary general education teachers and special education teachers jointly and effectively educate all students in the same classroom (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). The problem is that experiences of elementary general education teachers educating students with ASD in the inclusive environment are significantly under researched (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015; Berry et al., 2011). This study attempted to address this gap.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of elementary general education teachers instructing students diagnosed with ASD in inclusive settings in the Matthews County School District (MCSD), a pseudonym for a large suburban school district in northwest Georgia (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). The phenomenon of this study was understanding the deep and rich value of elementary general education teachers’ experiences with ASD students. In the research, the lived experiences of general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the general education environment
was generally defined as inclusion of students with ASD (Carson, 2015). The theories that guided the study were Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) social ecological systems theory and Bandura’s (2000) social learning theory as each of these theories adopted the perspective that individuals are products of their environments, which can impact the students and teachers in an inclusive setting.

**Significance of the Study**

This study provided empirical, theoretical, and practical significances by offering insight into the experiences of general education teachers and their work with students with ASD in the inclusion setting. The empirical implications were evident in understanding the voices of general education teachers as they instructed students with ASD in their general education settings. Empirical implications came from analysis of the interviews and journals of the participants. The direct experiences of general education teachers teaching students with ASD was evident in the data analysis.

First, the research showed that one in 68 children is diagnosed with ASD and served in general education settings (CDC, 2016). Second, this phenomenon has a significant gap in the literature (Able et al., 2015; Berry et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2014). There was little literature regarding the use of co-teaching or inclusion as a common practice in the elementary classroom (Tremblay, 2013). Third, having examined the experiences of these teachers provides current or future teachers with strategies for working in general education settings with students diagnosed with ASD (Tzivinikou, 2015).

Providing an understanding of the placement of students with ASD in the elementary general education classroom also offers implications of practical importance (Sikora, Vora, Coury, & Rosenberg, 2012). Foremost, autism is prevalent in the classrooms of the 21st century.
All teachers must be prepared and able to work with students with ASD (Witmer & Ferrari, 2014; Yildiz, 2015). Furthermore, preparation and ability are important considering the significant increase of students with ASD placed in general education (Casale-Giannola, 2012). Hearing the voices of general educators teaching students with ASD is of paramount importance to general education teachers, special education teachers, and students with ASD as it addresses the gap in the literature. Examining those who experienced this phenomenon provided a foundation for the structural and textural descriptions, which are a part of the phenomenon (Cordes, 2014).

Ongoing challenges come with inclusion practices in the general education setting. One of the challenges considered was gaining a greater understanding of creating inclusion for the students with ASD in the general education setting (Marks et al., 2014). Current research offered little insight into some of the issues that occur with inclusion of students with ASD (Able et al., 2015; Carter et al., 2014). Mostly quantitative in nature, research studies have looked at the field of special education teachers and their experiences in varied settings. A gap is evident in the experiences of general education teachers (Boe, 2013). While many studies have provided insight into the special education teacher’s experiences in the inclusion classroom with students with ASD, few have highlighted the significance of the general education teacher’s experiences (Barr, 2014; Boe, 2013; Cordes, 2014). This study offers a voice to the general educators and gives an opportunity for the challenges and successes of teaching students with ASD to be heard.

Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) social ecological system and Bandura’s (1997) social learning theory provided the theoretical influence and implications of this phenomenon of general education teachers teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting. As general education teachers include students with ASD in their general education classrooms, they form
relationships. Those environmental relationships relate to Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) social ecological system thus provided theoretical significance for this study. School environments have a significant effect on a child’s progress and success in school (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Howie, 2013). Consequently, classroom environment affects the general education teachers and the students with ASD. Furthermore, the systems within the social ecological system affect the growth and encounters of the student with ASD (Howie, 2013; Neal & Neal, 2013).

Equally significant was Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory as it was applied to this phenomenon. Bandura noted that learning occurs within the inclusion classroom as co-teaching offers an optimal method for modeling ways to learn in social environments (Bandura, 1986; Oppong, 2014). Observing the behavior of others in the inclusion classroom was substantial to the students with ASD (DiBenedetto & Bembenutty, 2013). Consequently, observations impacted the behavior of general education teachers in the inclusion classroom just as the students with ASD were impacted (Bandura, 2002; Whitaker, 2011).

Finally, this study proved useful to the Matthews County School District as it gave guidance and direction for practical implications for general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the inclusion classroom. Costley (2013) stipulated the need for ongoing professional development for general education teachers to meet the needs of the learner with ASD. In another study, researchers cited the importance of clearly understanding the need of students with ASD in the general education inclusion setting (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). Similarly, the data collected and reported from my study may significantly influence and impact future implications and practices in the MCSD.
Research Questions

The research was framed with the following research questions as they aligned to the purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study:

**Research Question One:** How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms?

Education’s landscape has changed considerably in the United States over the past four decades (Mackey, 2014). The learning environment impacts academics, behavior, and communication skills of students with ASD (Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013). Learning was impacted by the general education teachers’ experiences in the inclusion classroom with students with ASD as expressed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) social ecological system.

**Research Question Two:** In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion?

Students with ASD receive services in the general education environment; yet general education teachers are not well informed or educated regarding teaching this population (Whitburn, 2013). Bandura (1997) emphasized that one’s behavior stems from one’s environment, therefore the presence of students with ASD can affect the beliefs of the participants (McLeod, 2011).

**Research Question Three:** How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

Realistic beliefs and knowledge regarding students with ASD play an important role for the general education teacher and the special education teacher co-existing in the inclusive environment (Talib & Paulson, 2015). Oppong (2014) explained that recursive relationships
occur between teachers and students within the inclusion classroom. These relationships concur with Bandura’s (1986) social learning theory.

**Research Question Four:** How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

Students with ASD are provided access to general education as outlined in the IEP and as detailed in Free and Appropriate Public Education Act (FAPE; Patti, 2016; Whitaker, 2011). In 1975, the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) proclaimed the right for all students to have FAPE (Whitaker, 2011). Bronfenbrenner (1977) noted the interactions within the social ecological system that directly coincided with the interactions in the inclusion classroom (Tremblay, 2013).

**Definitions**

1. **Inclusion** – Inclusion is the practice of including students with disabilities in the general education setting (Carson, 2015).
2. **General Education Teacher** – Classroom teacher who instructs students within a regular education environment (Yildiz, 2015).
3. **Special Education Teacher** – A teacher who works with students diagnosed with special needs requiring an IEP (Yildiz, 2015).

**Summary**

In Chapter One, I provided a framework for the research in this phenomenological study. Federal laws mandated that students with ASD and other special needs be entitled to services within their least restrictive environment. Some people define the least restrictive environment
as inclusion (Whitburn, 2013). A gap was evident in the literature regarding the experiences of general education teachers teaching students with ASD. Little research was found concerning those experiences as evidenced in the inclusion setting (Berry et al., 2011).
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter includes an explanation of the theoretical framework as it related to the experiences of elementary general education teachers in the inclusion classroom instructing students with ASD (Bandura, 2002; Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Furthermore, this review of literature stipulates the findings of research regarding inclusion practices of general education teachers in the general education inclusion environment. Students with ASD are being served more in the general education environment, and general education teachers are not well-informed or educated about best practices with this population of students (Whitburn, 2013). A clear description of students diagnosed with ASD is provided in this literature review along with a detailed explanation of the history of special education (Sikora et al., 2012; Whitaker, 2011). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders and the IEP provided insight into the process of diagnosis of ASD and the detailed plan for teaching students with ASD (Crowe, 2015; Jitsuki, Shigeru, & Jun, 2016; Yell, Katsiyannis, Losinski, & Marshall, 2016). Finally, a section of the literature review is devoted to describing the inclusion practices and the way these practices affect general education teachers in inclusion classrooms (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner’s Social Ecological System

Bronfenbrenner (1977) described components found within one’s environment as illustrated in Figure 1. The relationships identified in teaching experiences correlate to these components.
Environments surrounding children, including school environments, have significance to phenomenon identified in this study (Bronfenbrenner, 1977). Specifically, the understanding of this placement is proposed here:

Bronfenbrenner places the child, with what he calls ‘developmentally instigative person characteristics’, along with meaning making by the child, right at the center of his model. The needs of the learner, what is in the best interests of the learner, the agency of the learner, including their voice, and the unique making of the learner of their own learning, are all central, and first principles, in rights documents, both international and national. (Howie, 2013, pp. 33-34)

The relationships within environments are crucial, and the systems are of importance. Multiple systems affect human encounters and growth: the microsystems, the mesosystems, the exosystems, and the macrosystems detailed in the Social Ecological System (Bronfenbrenner,
2005). Each of these systems is nested around the individual sections similarly to concentric circles (Neal & Neal, 2013).

The microsystem, at the lowest level of the hierarchy, is a system where the individual has a direct role with direct experiences (Neal & Neal, 2013). The microsystem is the setting where an individual resides, including his family, his school, his neighborhood, and his peers (Christensen, 2016). With regards to the school setting, this level relates to the general education teacher as well as the student with ASD as each has a role in the inclusive environment.

Within the different parts of the microsystems, the mesosystems work together for the welfare of the child and the relationship with the school (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The mesosystem includes social interactions between individuals within a common setting, showing the relationships that occur between all of the various environments (Bronfenbrenner, 1977; Christensen, 2016). This particular system is crucial to the classroom in that students who do not have good parental relationships may have issues with teacher relationships (Christensen, 2016). Concurrently, this system relates to the collaboration of the general education teacher and the special education teacher teaching students with ASD.

Exosystems, nested within mesosystems, influence the focal individual, yet the focal individual does not participate directly. In this setting, the exosystem is the social setting where the individual may not have an active role (Christensen, 2016). In school, the student is part of the system but not a direct participant (Neal & Neal, 2013). Even though the student participates in the inclusion classroom, the direct participants are the collaborating teachers.

Finally, the macrosystem is nested within the exosystem and includes the long-range consequences for the focal individual (Bronfenbrenner, 2005). The macrosystem includes overarching patterns in culture regarding religion, education, and economics, which directly
work together to impact the learning of students with ASD (Howie, 2013). This system covers the social culture where individuals reside (Christensen, 2016).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) defined these systems in the social ecological system as social interactions. Within these systems the person and the context are integral parts of determining a child’s behavior. The person aspect refers to the attributes and the skills that students experience in the classroom environment, and the context explains how that environment influences the child (Poulou, 2014).

**Bandura’s Social Learning Theory**

Bandura’s (1997) social learning theory stipulated that behavior stems from one’s environment through observational learning that can occur in any classroom (McLeod, 2011). Co-teaching is an optimal way of modeling the social environments through which learning occurs (Bandura, 1986). This learning occurs through people inactively performing, or it occurs vicariously through observing behaviors (Bandura, 1977). This learning is a process in which behavioral structure and environmental events transform to guide future actions (Bandura, 1986). People in their environments coincide directly with the behaviors of the environments. Therefore, students with ASD and general education teachers in the general education setting must interact effectively in the inclusion environment. Oppong (2014) shared the relationships: There are recursive relationships as illustrated in Figure 2, among person (agency), environment (structure), and behavior (outcome). These recursive relationships suggest that people create their environments (structures) which, in turn, shape the person; it is also expected that both the person and the structures will influence the behavior (Oppong, 2014, p. 113).
Figure 2. Bandura's social learning theory (Oppong, 2014).

Central to Bandura’s (1997) theory of human agency is an individual’s belief of personal efficacy. Bandura’s (1997) three areas of focus were person, environment, and behavior as explained by DiBenedetto and Bembenutty (2013) in the following:

Bandura’s theory suggests that cognition and behavior are functions of human agency and context. This fall within Bandura's triadic model of reciprocality as: personal (i.e., feelings and cognition), behavioral (i.e., learning strategies or test performance), and environmental dimensions (i.e., classrooms or family units). The three dimensions are not unidirectional. Personal dimensions affect one's behavior and one's behavior affects one's personal feelings and thoughts. Learning takes place through social modeling—observing patterns of behavior of another in the environment. (p. 218)

People transform circumstances in an environment to fit their needs within a general education classroom (Creswell, 2013). The transformation of circumstances in an individual’s environment can influence the events that shape one’s life (Bandura, 2000).

Ultimately, the inclusion environment impacts teacher behavior (Bandura, 2002). Behavioral models can be observed in society and in the elementary school classroom (McLeod,
Being capable of bringing about desired outcomes in the classroom is a part of teacher self-efficacy when educating students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Additionally, teacher training suggests that enhancing self-efficacy improves performance (Higgins & Guilliford, 2014). Many self-efficacy theories from Bandura cover two specific areas: outcome expectancy and efficacy expectancy. Outcome expectancy is when effort achieves an outcome, and efficacy expectancy is believing in one’s ability to influence the actual outcome (Higgins & Guilliford, 2014). Figure 3 shows the interaction of the two factors and the process.

![Figure 3. Bandura's Process of Self-Efficacy (Bandura, 1977).](image)

Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) social ecological system and Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory effectively guided this study, situating the findings within a greater context.

**Related Literature**

**Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders**

Professionals, in the first half of the 20th century, worked to understand the field of child development and the abnormalities found in diagnosing childhood psychoses (Holaday, 2012). For many decades ASD existed, and yet, no definitive and universally accepted diagnostic criteria have been provided to medical personnel, educators, and families (Juneja et al., 2014). In 1952, the American Psychiatric Association (APA) created and published the first Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; Jitsuki et al., 2016). This influential
publication had not been updated in nearly 20 years when the fifth edition of the diagnostic manual was published (Schneider, 2013). Diagnosing psychiatric and biological treatments occur using the current DSM-5. The staggering number of children diagnosed with ASD translates to an estimated 730,000 people between the ages of 0-21 (Brady & Dieterich, 2015). The APA’s DSM-5 is currently the number one resource for a psychiatric diagnosis (Crowe, 2015). The diagnostic criteria in the DSM-5 awaken discussions for school personnel in guiding the process of determining the eligibility for students with special needs (Prykanowski, Gage, & Conroy, 2015). Detailed and explicit criteria are significantly enhancing the diagnostic field for families facing the diagnosis of ASD in one of their children (Juneja et al., 2014).

The revisions to the DSM-5 mirror the changes in the conceptualization of autism diagnoses (Mehling & Tassé, 2016). The changing criteria can affect clinical practices in diagnosing ASD (Harstad et al., 2015). Using the DSM-5 criteria resulted in 47% fewer diagnoses of toddlers having ASD, compared to the criteria of the DSM-IV. One of the major revisions of DSM-5 is the coupling of ASD with social communication impairments and restricted and repetitive behaviors (Sipes & Matson, 2014). Consequently, students with ASD and language impairments can be more at risk for social-developmental issues (Bennett et al., 2014).

The DSM-5 provides detailed symptoms of mental disorders. It now specifies criteria used in diagnoses related to the presence or absence of particular symptoms (Jitsuki et al., 2016). The APA published the DSM-5 to assist with the diagnosis of mental disorders. Additionally, the primary purpose of the DSM-5 enabled researchers and clinicians with their diagnoses, communication, and treatment of people with the disorders provided in the publication (Crowe, 2015). Revisions to the DSM-5 placed autistic disorder, Asperger’s disorder, and pervasive
developmental disorder under one category of ASD (Young & Rodi, 2014). A concern of incorporating Asperger’s disorder into the ASD category is the negative attitudes that can relate to Asperger’s when considered a part of ASD. These concerns arise because the ASD category has a stigma associated with it even though Asperger’s disorder presents milder symptoms (Ohan, Ellefson, & Corrigan, 2015). Another significant change is that language development is considered separate from ASD in the new DSM-5, which means that a student with ASD may or may not have a language disorder (Meng-Chuan, Lombardo, Chakrabarti, & Baron-Cohen, 2013).

Another revision involved Rett’s disorder. Rett’s disorder was removed from the DSM-5 as it was classified as genetic syndrome (Crowe, 2015; Young & Rodi, 2014). As illustrated in Figure 4, regardless of the changes from the DSM-IV to the DSM-5, ASD is considered a mental disorder that needs further explanation.

Figure 4. DSM Comparison (Wilson et al., 2013).
Explanation of Autism Spectrum Disorder

Zander and Bölte (2015) described ASD as a mental disorder. Leo Kanner, an American researcher, was considered the first to describe children with autism. He described autism as a distinct and unique psychiatric diagnosis in 1943. Kanner initially called autism a form of schizophrenia. Over 70 years ago, his original findings met significant advances in approaching the diagnosis of autism (Smith, Reichow, & Volkmar, 2015). Kanner claimed that his findings on autism were his contribution, not necessarily a discovery. He preferred to note his findings provided a clearer picture of conventional diagnoses of explaining the behaviors in the child with ASD (Donovan & Zucker, 2016). Typically, autism is a lifelong condition that begins in early childhood and continues into adulthood with pathological outcomes (Romero et al., 2016).

In the early 1960s, including autism under the category of schizophrenia brought about the first studies experimenting with autism, yet autism was considered a language and cognitive disorder (Verhoeff, 2013). Those original findings have changed significantly over the years. Deficits in social interaction and communication, and the presence of repetitive behaviors, activities, and interests currently constitutes a diagnosis of autism (Lilley, 2015). Consequently, autism includes a wide variability in terms of behavior, such as severity and combination, and to cognition with its wide range of assets, deficits, and biological mechanisms (Meng-Chuan et al., 2013). Moreover, the children with the ASD diagnosis can have a full command of grammar, or their speech patterns can be pedantic and repetitive (Tsai & Ghaziuddin, 2014). Often these speech and communicative issues can be seen in facial expressions of the person with ASD. The facial expressions of students with ASD offer considerable social information (Walsh, Creighton, & Rutherford, 2016).
Even though therapists, clinicians, and doctors are well-versed in diagnosing and identifying ASD, there is far more to learn in the public arena regarding ASD, especially with more and more students on the spectrum in schools (Kelley, Cardon, & Algeo-Nichols, 2015). Hoffman (2014) defined mental disorders as manifested behavior. Not only is a mental disorder described as a manifestation of behavior, but it is also, “a syndrome characterized by clinically significant disturbance in an individual’s cognition, emotion regulation, or behavior that reflects a dysfunction in the psychological, biological, or developmental processes underlying mental functioning” (APA, 2013, p. 20). Autism Spectrum Disorder adversely affects the communication and socialization of children before age three, often evolving at the onset of 15 months of age (Ryan, Hughes, Katsiyannis, McDaniel, & Sprinkle, 2011). Typically, there are five subtypes of the disorder prevalent in current research as shown in Figure 5. Autism spectrum disorder, Asperger’s syndrome, childhood disintegrative disorder, Rett syndrome, and pervasive development disorder are the five commonly associated under the ASD umbrella (Ryan et al., 2011).

**5 Different ASD Disorders**

- Autism Disorder (classic autism).
- Asperger’s Disorder (Asperger Syndrome).
- Pervasive Developmental Disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS).
- Rett’s Disorder (Rett Syndrome).
- Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD).

*Figure 5. Types of ASD (Ryan et al., 2011).*

However, the fourth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) includes four domains as the sub-criteria for diagnosing ASD. The four domains are
autism, Asperger syndrome, pervasive developmental disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder. In the latest fifth edition, these domains situate under one ASD umbrella (Lee, Thomas, & Lee, 2015).

Rett syndrome typically affects 1 of 10,000 live female births. Usually, normal development was perceived within the first six months. The onset of speech impairments, loss of speech, abnormal gait, deceleration of head growth, and breathing problems follow the normal phase of development change along with repetitive hand movements (Lyst & Bird, 2015). Another specific area under the ASD umbrella is Asperger’s disorder. Children born with Asperger’s disorder typically begin speaking at the same time as children without the disorder. Children with Asperger’s may experience abnormal and pedantic speech, difficulty with pronouns, and repetitive phrases (Tsai, 2013). Social interaction is another impairment found in children with Asperger’s disorder as conversation topic changes are difficult for typical individuals with Asperger’s disorder (Lee et al., 2015). Additionally, the social issues can come across as defiance at times, especially in the classroom.

Numerous challenges face the student with ASD. These challenges can be present in varying manners of severity with one or more comorbidities which can include developmental disorders, medical issues and genetic conditions (Paynter, 2015). As a lifelong disability, students with ASD can have distinctive patterns of behavior with communication and social deficits, unusual behavior patterns, and issues with behavior and thinking (Carter et al., 2014). Santos and Almeida (2017) noted, “Children with ASD exhibit a range of specificities in terms of their cognitive and communicative skills that need to be appropriately addressed” (p. 1306).
Parents of students with ASD live through many daily stressors that the typical parent of a child without disabilities cannot even imagine. Parents with children who have disabilities other than ASD face needs that can be far more complex (Reynolds, 2016). Frasier-Robinson (2015) stated that beginning in the early 1990s there was an escalation of numbers of students diagnosed with ASD. Today ASD is considered the fastest growing developmental disability in the United States. Considered a neurodevelopmental disorder, ASD can impair communication, socialization, and repetitive behaviors (Sikora et al., 2012).

Communication and social interaction requires social and emotional reciprocity with nonverbal communicative behaviors, which can be difficult for students with ASD (Ware Balch & Ray, 2015). The communicative issues are evident with students with ASD, yet many challenges arise with solving language-based word problems requiring critical thinking skills (Santos & Almeida, 2017).

Also, some behaviors exhibited by students with ASD are problematic, ranging from oppositional, aggressive behaviors to repetitive behaviors, anxiety, and depression (Sikora et al., 2012). Genetic factors can influence many of these behaviors and the social issues found in students with ASD (Frazier et al., 2014). Terry (2015) explains that once considered to be a rare condition, autism is now recognized as a collection of disorders, increasing in incidence regardless of the way it is defined. The difficulties that come with the disorder are present in multiple contexts and can have a substantial impact on the academics (Clark, Magil-Evans, & Koning, 2015). Therefore, ASD continues to be a concern with many questions and few answers as researchers study genetics, environmental issues, neurobiological factors, and many other avenues of this disorder with little etiological conclusions (Terry, 2015).
History of Special Education of Students with ASD

In the days before the prevalence of ASD, parents became quite overwhelmed, experiencing feelings of guilt and blaming themselves. Often families split apart because of the responsibility of taking care of their child with ASD (Holaday, 2012). Prior to the turn of the 18th century, people with disabilities faced unmitigated circumstances that included exploitation, expulsion, and exclusion from society (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). At the dawn of the nineteenth century, growth occurred in societal attitudes, training and teaching, and appropriate legislation to protect those with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). As time passed, the insurmountable challenges facing families caring for children with ASD, included the lack of access to appropriate health care services and support. However, the diagnosis of ASD can provide implications of considerable help in obtaining clinical services (Beighley et al., 2013).

Stakeholders and policy makers must understand the significance of this problem and work collaboratively with families and services to improve resources (Shrivastava, Krishnan, & Shrivastava, 2016). Furthermore, over the past 100 years, the education of students with special needs has changed immensely (Robbins, 2014). Special education began to grow in the early 19th century. Economic, medical, and scientific advancements prompted more interest in the disabled populations. This interest incited more training, teaching, and legislation to protect children with disabilities (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Other changes have occurred in genetics. Many developments have occurred in brain imagining as well as genetic technology. These developments have created a greater understanding of the genetics behind autism, its early onset, and some strategies for coping (Thompson, 2013).

Previously, students with ASD and other disabilities did not have access to education and were routinely kept at home with limited sub-standard schooling as they were considered a
minority without equal status in society (Antony, 2012). The EAHCA of 1975) proclaimed the right to FAPE for students, including those with special needs (Whitaker, 2011). EAHCA (1975), No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001), and IDEA (2004) hold schools accountable for the learning of all students (Whitaker, 2011). The law mandates placement of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment.

According to IDEA (2004) mandates, over 20 years of research and experience show students with disabilities such as ASD receive a better education with access to general education curriculum (Whitaker, 2011). Meeting those mandates for general education opportunities are accomplished in a variety of ways (Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). One of the most significant ways is the public school system as outlined here by Ruble et al. (2011):

For almost 40 years, U.S. public schools have been and continue to be the only publicly funded provider mandated by federal law to ensure that every child with a disability has access to a free and appropriate public education regardless of family income, insurance status, and geographic location. (p. 74)

Consequently, the need for education programs to address the student with ASD is of paramount importance (Boswell, Zablotsky, & Smith, 2014). Learning disabilities were first conceptualized in the early 1900s and often associated with emotional problems stemming from ASD (Nelson & Harwood, 2011). Some of those emotional problems stem from elevated levels of anxiety when trying to process new information, which can, in turn, affect academic performance (Nelson & Harwood, 2011).

In addition to providing appropriate programs and plans for the student with ASD, preparing for future needs is necessary. Because of the increase of diagnoses of students with ASD, the numerous cases are becoming a public health issue. Students with ASD using mental
health care, special education, and other public health care offerings will eventually stagger the resources (Louwerse et al., 2015).

**Individualized Education Program**

Once eligibility for special education services is determined, usually through psychological testing, the special education teacher and other team members can begin the process of developing a plan for the student with ASD. The eligibility of ASD based on the psychological evaluation can certainly be a key step to receiving services in that plan. The eligibility of ASD can help a child access special education services. However, before these services can be accessed, a team must determine if the impairment impedes the educational learning and functioning of the student (Johnson, 2015).

An IEP serves as the foundation for providing services for a specific disability such as that of a child with ASD (Patti, 2016). Students with a diagnosed educational or functional need benefit from an IEP. These IEPs align with the general curriculum and standards of each grade level (Yell et al., 2016). Meeting the academic and emotional needs of students with ASD are outlined in the IEP through goals and accommodations. Typically, there are four types of accommodations detailed in a student’s IEP: presentation of instruction, the type of responses expected, the timing or scheduling of instruction, and the setting (Harrison, Bunford, Evans, & Owens, 2013). When writing the IEP it is imperative to consider three things: incorporating educational strategies supported by solid research, incorporating strategies successfully proven with similar students, and incorporating strategies prepared in advance of the meeting (Rubin, 2017). IDEA (2004) mandated that a team of individuals who have personal knowledge and who work with the student should develop this plan. A key element to any IEP meeting is the participation of parents who can provide relevant information and consent (Rubin, 2017).
Parents want to participate in the IEP process as they seek people who offer to help their children in the learning process (Reynolds, 2016). Parents actively involving themselves in the IEP process is strongly recommended and emphasized in the IDEA (2004). This expectation is that if parents are active in the process of making decisions regarding their child’s special education services and placement, the underlying assumptions will ultimately benefit the child (Lo, 2012). When schools encourage parents to take a role in identifying key parts of the IEP process, specific components are valued in the decision-making process for the goals, accommodations, and setting for the student with ASD (Schuttler, 2012). The IEP establishes a clear plan for these mandates. This team can include teachers, parents, school professionals, and the actual student (Patti, 2016). Then, according to Patti (2016), a special education teacher takes the lead role in the following manner:

Often the special education teacher is commonly responsible for gathering information from team members and developing portions of the IEP (e.g., present level statements, suggested annual goals, recommended modifications/accommodations) in draft form to bring to the committee meeting. Then, at the meeting, the team uses the draft as a conversation starter and flushes out each section into a formal document. When writing an IEP, several steps are often followed. Gathering input, telling the story of the child, sharing data, and providing resources as the writer makes the plan flow. (p. 152)

Parents working with the IEP team interact and influence a variety of the decisions affecting the needs of their child with ASD (Schuttler, 2012). Navigating the IEP process should involve parents, particularly when decisions regarding the education of their child with a disability can present challenges that become complex for schools (Losinski, Katslyannis, White, & Wiseman, 2016).
Next, a meeting is held to discuss the IEP and to determine if the school is meeting the needs of the student with ASD. The IEP meeting can bring overwhelming challenges and benefits to the entire team as they plan what is best for the student. IEPs bring a mixture of emotions such as anticipation, creativity, and celebration, yet the worry and frustration can be present as well (Fialka & Fialka-Feldman, 2017). The IEP process includes procedural safeguards that entitle parents to receive prior written notice of any meetings, especially those that may include proposals for change regarding their child identified with a disability (Losinski et al., 2016).

Developing an IEP provides an important opportunity to draw on the expertise of participants with interest in developing a definitive plan that will support the outcomes of the child’s learning (Hedeen, Peter, Moses, & Engiles, 2013). As an important aspect of the special education, the IEP provides annual goals and services for the student in the educational program (Musvoka & Diane Clark, 2017). Navigating the IEP process and the special education system can be a daunting task for parents (Organization for Autism Research, 2012). However, participating in the process is important for parents, teachers, and all stakeholders. Students with ASD have a right to participate and benefit from the planning of the IEP (Prunty, 2011). Fialka and Fialka-Feldman (2017) wrote, “One way educators can strengthen the partnership is to deepen their understanding of families’ perspectives and their awareness of one important issue: choice” (p. 2). The IEP sets the stage for all services for students with ASD. Typically, children with ASD have two options for receiving that IEP support. Serving children with ASD can come from early intervention programs or the local public schools (Ruble et al., 2011). Moreover, students with ASD can often have two exceptionalities. The challenge facing many schools is providing the appropriate setting for students with ASD who possess another exceptionality.
Some students identified with ASD are served with an IEP and receive gifted services in the same elementary school (Yager, 2016). However, the IEP sets the stage for accomplishing this task of serving two exceptionaldities.

Upon establishing the IEP for the student with ASD, progress monitoring must occur. The special education teachers working with a student must follow the progress of the student. Using data collection, behaviors and learning objectives are monitored (Sugita, 2016). Yell et al. (2016) explained that IDEA (2004) requires monitoring of student progress on a regular basis regarding the student’s IEP goals. This monitoring of progress must occur frequently and systematically and reported to parents. If teachers have evidence of student progress, the less likely challenges will occur in IEP meetings, due-process hearings, and even in court. Personnel from school districts will have proof of the educational benefits of the school’s programs (Yellet et al., 2016). Best practice recommendations as well as legal mandates for students with ASD emphasized collecting observational data which can bridge the gap of research to practice in special education (Harkins, 2013).

**Inclusion for Students with ASD**

Inclusion can be defined as a philosophy of acceptance where all students are treated with respect in the general education classroom (Kaur, Noman, & Awang-Hashim, 2016). In the past, little documentation was evident regarding students with ASD enrolled in general education inclusion classrooms (McKeating, 2013). However, due to the prevalence of ASD in society over the last decade, drastic increases in students with ASD are in schools (Toran et al., 2016). Students with ASD inundate public schools (Carnahan & Williamson, 2016). Formerly, schools provided education services outside of the regular classroom. Inclusion services were limited to students with physical disabilities and the inclusion setting was provided with equipment and
appropriate infrastructure (Kaur, Noman, & Awang-Hashim, 2016). In the mid-1990s, restructuring took place, and inclusion with co-teaching was deemed to be the most used service model for students with ASD (Tremblay, 2013). Decades of research show that inclusion can be beneficial for students with ASD and students without disabilities (Chun & Biying, 2015). Restructuring continued with IDEA (2004) mandating that schools must provide classroom conditions under which children with identified disabilities can receive the same instruction as those not identified with disabilities. Consequently, the IEP drives the support and accommodations for the students, yet the research shows there is more to the process. Students with ASD cannot simply be accommodated, included, provided supports, or given assistive devices. Students with ASD need teachers to teach them well with the accommodations and IEP goals followed (Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). Including the student with ASD in the general education setting is a global issue. Many countries all over the world have joined in the initiative of preparing laws and guidelines that provide ideologies, policies, and implementations for the inclusion of school-aged students with disabilities in the general education classroom (Chun & Biying, 2015).

Including special education and related services aligned with the IEP is what FAPE regards as the least restrictive environment and provided at no cost to parents (Wrightslaw, 2012). The classroom conditions are referred to as inclusion to meet the needs of a wide range of disabilities (Carson, 2015). Placing students with ASD in the general education setting is an essential way to meet those needs as outlined in the research. In general education classrooms and international communities, inclusion is a buzzword. This practice is found all over the world and allows students with and without ASD to be educated, to play and to develop without segregation in the school setting (Antony, 2012). Inclusion can occur with or without additional
support from a special education teacher during core instruction (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McMully, 2012). Table 1 provides examples and descriptions of inclusion models as identified by Jackson, Willis, Giles, Lastrapes, and Mooney (2017).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inclusion Model</th>
<th>Brief Description</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Team Teaching</td>
<td>Two teachers deliver whole-group instruction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One teach, one observe</td>
<td>One teacher delivers whole group lesson while other teacher observes and collects data</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One teach, one assist</td>
<td>One teacher delivers whole group lesson while other teacher works with individual students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alternative teaching</td>
<td>One teacher delivers whole group lesson while the other teacher works with small group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Station teaching</td>
<td>Using several stations, one teacher works with a small group while the other teacher works with a small group and other students work independently</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parallel teaching</td>
<td>Both teachers deliver the same content to two separate groups</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Education for all should be a common cause in the practice of inclusion. This common cause ensures students with ASD can work together with general education peers rather than segregated in parallel environments (Parsons, 2013). Special education drives considerable models of inclusive education with little involvement in the general education setting (Sailor & McCart, 2014). However, in many cases, students with ASD can function in the general education classroom. Facilitating the inclusion of students with ASD in the mainstream of general education requires teacher training, collaboration of stakeholders, social support services, and other pertinent programs (Majoko, 2016). A special education teacher can serve students with a variety of disabilities in the general education setting. These disabilities can include high
and low functioning skills requiring the teacher to strategically plan for successful implementation of instruction to meet such diverse needs, learning styles, and achievement levels (Flores, Schweck, & Hinton, 2016). Students with ASD require equity, participation, and belonging in the inclusive environment (Goodall, 2015). Higher functioning students with ASD receive instruction in the general education classroom as they work to master grade level curriculum (Finnegan & Mazin, 2016). Mainstream inclusion’s efficacy is obviously not a “one size fits all” model for educating children with ASD (Marshall & Goodall, 2015).

Providing diverse instructional settings can be defined as inclusion (Gehrke, Cocchiarella, Harris, & Puckett, 2014). Inclusion entails an environment where students with special learning needs are educated in the general education setting full time (Gehrke et al., 2014). Research shows that students with ASD included with their typical peers in general education settings experienced higher social skills and had more friends than students in more restrictive settings (Lauderdale-Littin et al., 2013). According to the research, achievement improves in the inclusive setting as students with ASD can benefit from the inclusion classroom. Ample evidence indicates that students with ASD in inclusive classrooms achieve at higher levels when the teachers accommodate the particular needs (Johnson & Busby, 2015, p. 101).

NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) have caused an increase of students with ASD to be included in the general education setting to receive the same curriculum as those without identified special needs (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). These legislative mandates add to the responsibilities of the general education teacher participating in the inclusion classroom requiring them to become accountable for the performance of students with ASD (Casale-Giannola, 2012).
Despite weaknesses in executive functioning, social skills, and language, students with ASD often have normal intellectual strengths. These weaknesses and strengths can make it challenging for learning and forming relationships in the general education setting (Talib & Paulson, 2015). Nevertheless, the research shows the benefits of inclusion are many and can result in higher expectations of teachers (Ryndak, Ward, Alper, Montgomery, & Storch, 2010). Inclusion practices have increased because of the benefits to students with ASD as they are able to make more progress academically and socially compared to students receiving education in specialized schools (Dessemontet, Bless, & Morin, 2012). Students in the inclusion setting feel like they are a part of the school as they feel accepted for who they are even though they are different (Wilson, Ellerbee, & Christian, 2011).

The social aspect is key to the experiences of the students with ASD. Students with language impairments and ASD are particularly at high risk for difficulties with social development compared to their peers (Bennett et al., 2014). Social cognition can be a challenge for school success, even for students with ASD who have average and above average cognitive skills (Able et al., 2015). Therefore, another positive aspect of inclusion is that students with ASD are able to have more social interaction with their peers in the general education setting (de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2012). In recent years, the roles of special and general educators have evolved towards a more significant collaboration in the inclusive classroom to assist with social interaction (Tremblay, 2013). Social benefits are helpful to a large population of students with ASD. Socialization as a focus among students with and without disabilities offers a sense of belonging and leadership that can evolve in the social settings within the inclusive classroom for both the general education students and the students with ASD (Kauffman & Badar, 2014). The
research showed that students with ASD need the interactions with typically-developed peers found in general education classrooms (McCurdy & Cole, 2014).

General and special education teachers collaborating and sharing their expertise can be beneficial in the inclusive classroom (Harris, 2014). Even though not all students with ASD receive services in inclusion, general education teachers are expected to instruct students with broader ranges of behavioral and developmental variances (Heward, 2013). Therefore, the critical aspect of inclusion is what is happening in the classroom, not where it is occurring (Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012). DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2013) stated, “The literature on inclusion reform demonstrates that programs vary in terms of overarching goals, degree of inclusivity, and degree of implementation at the school level” (p. 4).

Public school general and special education teachers can implement successful inclusion; however, extensive training, coaching, and program fidelity is required (Stahmer et al., 2015).

Successful implementation of inclusion must include positive attitudes of all stakeholders, professional knowledge, and confidence in the program (Hernandez, 2013). When using inclusion for students with ASD, skillful and experienced teachers are needed as teacher judgment is critical for achieving successful inclusion (Kauffman & Badar, 2014). Substantial sets of skills are needed from the general and special education teachers as they work in the inclusion classroom (Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). Classroom management and preparing lessons is important for teaching students with ASD alongside their general education peers and can often be problematic for the general education teacher (Ledford & Wehby, 2015).

Some of the successful components of inclusion are prompting and visual scheduling. Prompting strategies for students with ASD can be used to elicit responses in the academic or social setting. In the classroom, using a peer for prompting is helpful to the student with ASD.
The conditions for prompting might include organization assistance, scheduling, or transition assistance. Additionally, the prompting strategies may be helpful in other settings, such as the playground, gym, cafeteria, home, and all educational settings (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012). The other component of visual scheduling is a formative tool for inclusion. Visual schedules increase on-task and on-schedule responses for students with ASD. Visual schedules increase the predictability for the student with ASD. Communicating visually for transitions between classes and activities, upcoming events, and increasing overall student independence is the outcome of visual scheduling (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012).

While social interaction is important, academic goals need to prevail. Helping special education students is not just a matter of having them participate in the general education classroom. Learning to read, solving word problems, interacting with peers, and discussing valuable concepts are desired outcomes of the inclusion setting (Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). The teachers’ attitudes tie directly into the inclusion process as well. The research shows that some teachers have diverse perceptions regarding the implementation and success of inclusive education (Monsen, Ewing, & Kwoka, 2014). Having realistic beliefs and knowledge about ASD is important for the general education and the special education teachers in the inclusive setting (Talib & Paulson, 2015).

**General Education Teacher Preparation**

Millions of students receive special education services daily in the United States, with services provided in the inclusion setting (Schulze, 2016). Research is lacking regarding the education programs that define the collaboration of teachers working in common environments with students with ASD (Güleç-Aslan, 2013). Since the early 1800s, public education has served the United States’ students (Lee, 2013). Special education has sometimes embraced easy
alternatives rather than facing the more difficult tasks of effective teaching (Lloyd & Lloyd, 2015). Schools are being inundated with students on the spectrum and need more funding and more experience to know how to service these students (Kelley et al., 2015). Considering the increase of students with ASD and the trend towards inclusion of students with disabilities, general educators must have appropriate training for inclusion settings (Parsons, Miller, & Deris, 2016). Inclusion is over 30 years old in the United States and special education teachers must enter the field with optimal skills to serve students with ASD in inclusive settings (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2013).

Consequently, accommodating the needs of students with ASD in the inclusion classroom requires knowledge of the teachers as well as appropriate training for pre-service teachers (Talib & Paulson, 2015). The public service of education requires trained teachers. Pre-service programs play a significant role in preparing effective teachers to acquire knowledge of inclusion practices and to transfer the knowledge to their future classrooms (Gehrke et al., 2014). Being prepared pedagogically to respond to the diverse needs of students in the inclusive environment is a necessary part of training for pre-service teachers (Walton & Rusznyak, 2014).

Research reports that the majority of teachers graduate from universities with little preparation in evidence-based practices related to teaching students with ASD (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010). Having the necessary skills and knowledge are imperative for special education and general education teachers with regards to the large population of students with ASD (Toran et al., 2016). Consequently, understanding and remaining current with today’s research in specific special education areas is crucial for teachers (Walton & Rusznyak, 2014; Yell et al., 2016). Educator training programs are needed to enhance the competency and the quality of preparing for the diverse classrooms of today (Güleç-Aslan, 2013).
Consequently, many general education teachers often feel inadequate to meet the needs of certain students diagnosed with ASD in their general education classrooms (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). Research has shown that teachers often lack the knowledge and training to implement inclusion programs effectively (Hamblin, 2013). Much of the research about working with students with ASD introduces teaching methods based on the decisions of researchers with little or no input from educators. Therefore, the literature determines what educators need and how they should prepare for their teaching methods (Güleç-Aslan, 2013). Having college and university faculty who can rely on their own experiences with students with ASD can be helpful for the preservice teacher training (Austin & Peña, 2017).

Training teachers in college and university programs requires extensive effort and time to teach pedagogical practices. These pedagogical practices must include curriculum and instruction for students identified with special needs, particularly students with ASD (Mamlin, 2012). Training programs for inclusion can be effective if general education and special education teachers work closely to examine structures and contents of teacher education programs (Beacham & Rouse, 2012). While many colleges and universities successfully train in pedagogical practices, they are not helping to transition those practices into the special education curriculum (Markelz, Ridden, & Scheeler, 2017). Equally important, the teacher pre-service programs should give guidance for a variety of specialty areas such as special education due to these programs being held accountable for their training methods (Mamlin, 2012). It is imperative that schools staff classrooms with effective teachers who are readily knowledgeable to meet the needs of diverse learners, such as those with ASD (Gehrke et al., 2014). General education and special education teachers share a lens to view each learner as a valued and needed part of their successful education (Grima-Farrell, Bain, & McDonagh, 2011). A successful
education facilitates an examination of the practices used for special education students and is needed because these students are the ones who need the special education (Lloyd and Lloyd, 2015). According to Kent and Giles (2016), “Too many teacher education programs prepare beginning teachers for a classroom of homogenous students that simply does not exist” (p. 2).

Another integral part of successful teacher education is understanding the needs of students with ASD. Students with ASD need adequate supervision within their daily schooling to understand their needs to oversee manipulations and be aware of social situations (Lahm, 2015). This adequate supervision comes in the form of a trained and skilled teacher. In some circumstances, that adequate supervision is shifted to the special education teacher because the general education teacher feels he is unable to handle the inclusion practices. Hence, the responsibility in the inclusion classroom shifts to the special education teacher, which is beneficial to the inexperienced general education teacher (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011).

Not only does the lack of pre-service training affect ability, general education teachers must have the ability to include and teach students with ASD directly. General education teachers need direction in planning for interventions that will facilitate learning for the diverse needs of students with ASD (Finnegan & Mazin, 2016). Behavior and cognitive issues can present a challenge for the general education teacher, and the teacher is more apt to include the children with mild disabilities versus the difficult behaviors (Gavish & Shimoni, 2011). In these instances, specific communication is required between the general education and the special education teachers in the collaborative setting. When co-teaching is effective, the advocacy of the special needs student is evident as the student with ASD is given opportunities for learning (Solis et al., 2012). Thus, the benefits of general educator training are of paramount importance (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014).
Teaching Students with ASD

Education of students with ASD is statutorily guaranteed in the United States today unlike the early 1900s (Antony, 2012). Despite the knowledge of serving students with ASD in the inclusion classroom, there remain gaps in the literature to address (Wei, Wagner, Christiano, Shattuck, & Yu, 2014). There were 498,000 students aged 3-21 served with special educational services for ASD in the 2012-2013 school year. That number increased from the 36,000 being served in early 2002 (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). Transforming the mainstream of the public school classroom is underpinned by inclusive pedagogical approaches, learning without limits, and universal design for learning (Goodall, 2015). Often general education teachers support inclusion practices, yet they feel inadequately trained to work with students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Condrey, 2015). According to the research, general education teachers report needed experience and preparation in teaching students with ASD (Brown & McIntosh, 2012). Due to the lack of training for teaching students with ASD, professional development has become a sense of urgent need for many school districts (Sugita, 2016). Pre-service teachers and veteran teachers have limited knowledge that deters their ability to plan effectively and overcome issues prevalent with the students with ASD (Colombo-Dougovito, 2015).

The learning environment for students with ASD can impact their academic ability, social behavior and communication skills (Lauderdale-Littin et al., 2013). Access to general education is paramount for students with ASD and can be a provision of the IEP (Patti, 2016). The number of students with ASD served in the inclusive environment is growing drastically in recent years (Able et al., 2015). IDEA (2004) dictates that students with ASD and other disabilities must be educated in classrooms typical to their peers to the maximum extent possible (McCurdy & Cole, 2014). Research shows that the little red schoolhouse no longer exists with the current needs of
educating students (Parsley & Barton, 2015). Regarding the instruction of students with ASD, special consideration needs to be taken into account (Flores et al., 2016). Students with ASD have unique characteristics that can present challenges for children and teachers in the inclusion setting (McKeating, 2013). Overcoming those challenges and producing effective growth occurs when students with ASD can transfer skills to a variety of academia and settings (Sugita, 2016).

Teachers and practitioners in the educational field must be informed of behavioral-based interventions carried out in the inclusive setting and evidence-based practices that are used to support children with ASD in the classroom (Camargo et al., 2014). Validated classroom strategies strengthen intervention and treatment programs for students with ASD (Sainato, Morrison, Jung, Axe, & Nixon, 2015). Leung and Zakzanis (2014) explain why these interventions and treatment programs are necessary:

Inflexible adherence to specific routines, resistance to change, difficulty in transitions between different locations or events, or circumscribed interests and inordinate preoccupation with particular objects or activities are commonly observed in individuals with ASD. Issues that arise from such inflexibility may perpetuate assumptions that such individuals are ‘difficult’ and interpret these behaviors to be problem behaviors. (p. 2629)

These situations are where the teachers and practitioners must understand those needs of the child with ASD. Needed experience can influence the attitudes towards students with ASD and placement in the inclusion setting. Additionally, the quality of training is a significant issue to teacher preparation for teaching students with ASD (Brown & McIntosh, 2012).

Determining the best placement for students with ASD is decided by the IEP team (Hayes, 2014). Considering all the variables of the placement is the charge of this team.
comprised of special education personnel, teachers, and parents. Therefore, teaching students with ASD can often be realized in the LRE. The roles and responsibilities of the teachers working collaboratively to teach students with ASD in the LRE are paramount as a point of legality. Federal mandates place students with ASD in general education classrooms, causing teachers to play critical roles in supporting social and academic goals. Although guidelines in education may differ among states, educational mandates include the role of the general education teacher in the inclusive setting (Talib & Paulson, 2015).

Accordingly, elementary general education teachers need support services to be successful in teaching students with ASD (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010). Competent educators who are qualified to teach in the inclusion setting serve a significant role in skill development of the student with ASD (Güleç-Aslan, 2013). In the general education setting, professionals from a variety of backgrounds and special educators serve as the support services to the elementary general education teacher (Heward, 2013). Often the elementary general education teachers feel they need the support due to their lack of sufficient knowledge to successfully implement inclusion (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010; Sadioğlu, Bilgin, Batu, & Oksal, 2013). Significant instructional challenges are often present when teaching students with ASD (Ruble et al., 2011). Even though the inclusive setting has many benefits, challenges can be evident without the support of special education teachers and paraprofessionals (Able et al., 2015). Implementing inclusion requires necessary steps to assure teachers feel prepared. Having a sense of ownership and commitment to believe in the inclusion process is crucial (Costley, 2013). Educators must consider the various weaknesses and strengths of students with ASD in the general education setting (Talib & Paulson, 2015).
Equally important is the work between the two teachers charged with working in the inclusive setting. The interaction between two equally certified teachers, or collaboration, provides opportunities for sharing teaching, setting goals, making decisions, and working with a diverse student population (Hamilton-Jones & Vail, 2014). The special education teacher is often responsible for the direct instruction of students with disabilities. In an inclusion setting, the special education teacher takes a secondary role to provide support to the general education teacher (Humphrey & Hourcade, 2010). Ultimately, general education and special education teachers have different skills sets, but it is important to join forces to give collective content as well as instructional expertise in the inclusive environment for students with ASD (Rimpola, 2014).

Subsequently, many variables strongly influence the collaboration of general education and special education teachers, such as the severity of the student with ASD’s disability, the availability of support from school personnel, teacher training, and teaching styles (Marks et al., 2014). Not only does the collaboration between the general education and the general education teachers occur in the inclusive setting, but also speech-language pathologists (SLPs) can be an integral part of classroom collaboration (Donaldson & Stahmer, 2014). Educators can meet the needs of the students with ASD with the expertise of several entities working collaboratively. SLPs target many of the same skills as the general education and the special education teachers in the inclusive environment (Donaldson & Stahmer, 2014).

Summary

The relevant literature showed that for effective education of students with special needs to occur, the collaboration of teachers is an important factor (Tzivinikou, 2015). Hence, two or more adults are working together to serve diverse learners in a voluntary arrangement, not a legal
requirement (Tzivinikou, 2015). Included in this chapter, was a detailed explanation of the DSM-5 and its up-to-date diagnosis of students with ASD. Understanding the diagnosis of ASD was a pertinent aspect of this chapter as well. The current research provided a detailed description of teaching students identified with ASD in the general education setting. The review of literature outlined specifics regarding ASD and the historical aspects of special education. Next, the literature defined inclusion and explained how inclusion works within the school setting. Finally, Chapter Two illustrated the preparation of teachers and their practices with students with ASD in their classrooms. Through the review of the literature, I noted a significant gap regarding general education teachers’ experiences teaching students with ASD (Berry et al., 2011). Sharing the voices of those general education teachers’ experiences filled the gap found in the literature outlined at the core of this phenomenological qualitative study (Creswell, 2013).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of elementary general education teachers instructing students diagnosed with ASD in the elementary general education setting in six schools in northwest Georgia. The research provided a voice to the lived experiences of elementary general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the elementary general education environment. I defined these lived experiences as inclusion of students with ASD by general education teachers (Moustakas, 1994). This chapter consists of the research design and the research questions guiding this study (Creswell, 2013). I specified the participants, the setting, and the procedures for this research in this chapter. The final sections of this chapter include the data collection and analysis along with trustworthiness and ethical considerations involved in the research.

Design

A transcendental phenomenological approach was used to identify the problem requiring further study and exploration (Creswell, 2013). The transcendental phenomenological approach applies to this study, as it requires expertise, competence, and rigor from the researcher (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spalding, 2014). Sharing common context is a theme of transcendental phenomenology as experience and meaning of individuals allow a methodology to arise surrounding the common phenomenon (Henriques, 2014). The transcendental phenomenological approach allows the researcher to examine underlying structures and provides a detailed description of the participants’ experiences regarding the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, reducing individual experiences with the phenomenon and developing the study into a universal descriptive essence was the goal of this study (Barr, 2014). Furthermore, transcendental
phenomenology seeks to bracket one’s prejudgments regarding the phenomenon and to focus on collecting data from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The core result of transcendental phenomenology is meaning that explicates human experience essence (Moustakas, 1994).

For this transcendental phenomenological qualitative study, I purposefully described the general education teachers’ experiences in detail using deep, rich descriptions (Creswell, 2013). Phenomenology permits me, as the researcher, to comprehend the essence of general education teachers teaching students with ASD (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). Getting to the heart of the general education teachers’ experiences and their understanding of working with students with ASD is the common context of meaning. Gathering the perceptions of these general education teachers and the participants in the online focus group was beneficial. Sharing the voices of the elementary general education teachers as they work collaboratively with special education teachers in their general education classrooms to serve students with ASD was the primary focus of this study. “Specifically, the goal of an eidetic study is to describe a phenomenon from the perspective of those who have experienced it” (Milacci, 2003, p. 53).

**Research Questions**

**Research Question One:** How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms?

**Research Question Two:** In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion?

**Research Question Three:** How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?
Research Question Four: How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

Setting

The setting for the qualitative study was a suburban northwestern school district in a Georgia county where the four schools for this study reside. The Matthews County School District (MCSD) is the ninth largest school district in the state of Georgia comprised of 43 schools. The 43 schools include six high schools, seven middle schools, one alternative daytime program for grades 6-12, one evening program for grades 9-12, one charter school, one psycho-educational center, two preschool centers, and 24 elementary schools. MCSD operates on a $343.5 million-dollar budget with $7,691 going to per pupil expenditures. The district employs 2,432 teachers and serves over 41,000 students.

I chose six schools for this study, and selected 10 elementary general education teacher participants from the six schools. Out of the six elementary schools, four were schools with 60% of the students on free or reduced lunch. The population of students at each of these elementary schools consisted of 800-1,200 students with general education classrooms for students diagnosed with special needs such as ASD, gifted students, and general education students.

Current records from the six schools chosen for this study indicated a total of 35 students with an eligibility of ASD. Out of the 35 students, 29 are males, and six are females. Six of the students are African American, and 29 are Caucasian. Special education resource classrooms exist in each school. Each grade level contained one or two inclusion classrooms. There was a total of 64 inclusion classrooms in grades K-5 at these schools with an equal number of general education teachers. The total number of special education teachers was 45 considering these teachers serve multiple grade levels. The rationale behind choosing this school district lies in the
fact that this county served a large population of students diagnosed with ASD. The diversity of each of these elementary schools and the presence of inclusion settings with ASD students offered an excellent setting for this study.

**Participants**

Participants for this study were selected using a combination of purposeful and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1990). Purposeful sampling was used to ensure the participants were general education teachers teaching students with ASD in inclusion classrooms, thus meeting the criteria for this qualitative study. Using snowball sampling, I guaranteed maximum variation in choosing the general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Participants included elementary general education teachers from the various schools in MCSD and an online focus group comprised of four participants to discuss the results of this study.

I solicited participants with the assistance of known special education facilitators and administrators with the approval of the MCSD. The potential participants were general education teachers working in inclusion classrooms teachings students with ASD who spoke to the experiences of this phenomenon. A potential participant size of 10-15 general education teachers was solicited using snowball sampling (van Manen, 1990). Once I received a list of possible participants, I reached out to them with formal written invitations via email (see Appendix A). The written invitations included the details and procedures of this study as well as the expectations and responsibilities of the participants. Also included in the invitations was my personal contact information and a detailed timeline of the commitment expected. After reviewing responses from the invitations, I began selecting the 10 general education teachers. Participants were asked to sign an informed consent form (see Appendix B).
Next, I selected the online focus group participants. Four of the elementary general education teacher participants were used in this study. Discussing the results of the study with the online focus group of general education teacher participants enhanced the future implications of this study. Since the selection directly associated with Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), I began with this sample size of participants (Smith, 2004). Accordingly, snowball sampling was used to reach data saturation (van Manen, 1990).

**Procedures**

Upon approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Liberty University (see Appendix C), I began the work. Next, I obtained approval from officials in the MCSD, a pseudonym for the northwest Georgia school district (see Appendix D). A detailed request for permission to the MCSD included the timeline, procedures, and purpose of the study. The purpose of this qualitative study and the data collection procedures were explained thoroughly to the administrators from the MCSD.

After I obtained approval, I conducted a pilot study with two teachers to review the interview questions and ascertain any potential issues. Kvale (1996) suggested that piloting questions allows for possible revisions prior to the actual implementation in the study. I conducted the pilot study with two teachers meeting the criteria mentioned in the participants’ section. A pilot study strengthened the research and yielded initial observations that assisted me with managing the research and understanding the interview process (Marshall & Rossman, 2010). I used neither the data from the pilot study nor the participants from this pilot study in the final study.

After the pilot study, I solicited participants for my research. Once participants agreed to participate, open-ended interviews were conducted face-to-face with each participant (Creswell,
Interviews were recorded using audiotaping and then transcribed by a professional transcriptionist. Accordingly, bracketing was used to reduce researcher bias and opinions (Moustakas, 1994). In the interview process, I requested that some of the participants participate in the online focus group to review the results of the study. The online focus group responded to the findings from the data collection (Smith, 2004). In addition to the participant interviews and the online focus group, I kept a journal of my experiences throughout this process. I reviewed the journal, and included any pertinent findings in the final results of this study.

**The Researcher's Role**

I currently serve as a full-time special educator in northwest Georgia. My duties include instructing students diagnosed with ASD, other health impairments, development delays, and significant learning disabilities. As a special educator, I work collaboratively with colleagues, especially those general education teachers who work with students with special needs for whom I am responsible. In my role, I write IEPs for students throughout the year and assist in testing students for learning disabilities and possible placement in special education programs. I have training in numerous programs for special education students such as Orton-Gillingham Multi-Sensory Program, Wilson Reading Resource Program, and Lucy Calkins Writing Project. Additionally, I am National Board Certified and have received two advanced degrees in curriculum and instruction.

Imparting the benefits of inclusion is my lifelong desire as an educator. I have worked on both sides of the phenomenon I am researching. Prior to special education, I taught general education in grades K-5 and worked collaboratively with special education teachers, speech and language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists who were serving students with special needs within my general education classroom. For my research, I used school
district personnel and schools with whom I had no connection, to help reduce bias on my part. Furthermore, I conscientiously bracketed my own thoughts and feelings to set aside any preconceived notions so that I may better understand the experiences of the participants (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Collection**

Data collection included a variety of methods to understand the phenomenon of this study better. The 10 general education teacher participants were interviewed using an open-ended questioning method. Questions in the interview provided background information and experiences of the participants and their explicit thoughts about teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting. A follow-up online focus group with the elementary general education teachers was used to discuss the experiences or changes based on the study’s findings.

The online focus group composed of four of the participants provided insight into this study. Obtaining the perspective of the elementary general education teacher participants to look at the analyzed data via the online focus group provided opportunities for the participants to add to the findings or to even add to the implications for future studies.

Finally, I included two other pieces for documented analysis. My reflective journal was attained and reviewed as part of the process. Additionally, the participants responded narratively to one question daily for a two-week period regarding their experiences with students with ASD in the inclusion setting.

**Interviews**

In qualitative research, interviews are a principle means of data collection (Barr, 2014; Creswell, 2013). I conducted pilot interviews with two general education teachers using the
open-ended questions. I did not use the data or participants from the pilot interviews in the actual study.

Phenomenological interviews involved an informal interaction with the general education teacher participants using open-ended survey questions (Moustakas, 1994). I began with a standardized open-ended interview of each of the general education teacher participants. Use of the standardized open-ended interviews was helpful because of the structure and wording of the questions. The interview questions were identical and worded such that the participants’ responses were open-ended for easy follow-up by the researchers (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 2003). I digitally recorded the interviews, and I took notes throughout the process to explain any specific gestures or facial expressions that might occur throughout the interview. Participants received their transcribed interview to add any other thoughts or to provide correction of misunderstood information (van Manen, 1990). Follow-up interviews were not necessary.

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. Why did you decide to enter the teaching profession?
2. What is your current position?
3. How many years have you been teaching?
4. Describe your experiences of teaching students with ASD in your elementary general education inclusion setting.
5. Describe your relationships with your students with ASD.
6. Describe the relationship between the ASD students and other students in your classroom. Does that relationship add or detract from your classroom in attention, student performance, or discipline?
7. Is there a special educator working with you in your inclusion classrooms? If so, what is the relationship between the students with ASD or students and the special educator in your classroom?

8. How would you describe your attitudes towards teaching before instructing students with ASD in your inclusion classroom?

9. How would you describe your attitudes towards teaching after instructing students with ASD in your inclusion classroom?

10. Has the presence of students with ASD in your classroom changed your feelings about teaching in general?

11. Is there anything related to teaching students with ASD in your classroom that you would like to add?

12. If needed for clarification or further explanation, would it be suitable for me to contact you via phone or email?

In addition to the interviews with elementary general education teacher participants, I conducted an online focus group comprised of four of the elementary general education teacher participants to elicit their perspective on the results from the data. The purpose of this online focus group was to disseminate the findings (Creswell, 2013).

**Online Focus Group**

An online focus group of the general education teacher participants was used to review the information and themes obtained from the initial interviews. Using an online focus group provided an opportunity for a relatively homogeneous group to offer more extensive insight into the phenomenon (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). The focus group provided a fresh perspective on the outcomes of the research (Creswell, 2013). Equally important, this online focus group of general
education teacher participants was part of this phenomenon, and they related to it through their lens of teaching students with ASD (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, n.d.). The online focus group participants answered informal interview questions in an online format (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). I took notes, and the online session information was transcribed to add to the final implications and findings of this study.

**Online Focus Group Open-Ended Interview Questions**

1. What are your initial thoughts after reading over the themes present in this study?
2. Based on your participation, is there anything you feel would you like to add as a participant that you feel may not be noted or emphasized in the data?
3. What are some specific surprises you note from the data?
4. What specific conclusions did you expect to see in this data?

**Document Analysis**

Document analysis occurred from the journal I maintained as well as participants’ narrative response journals. The journal I kept included some specific thoughts, biases, and details regarding the process from the beginning after IRB approval to the end of this study. These documented thoughts/biases/details were valuable when looking over the themes that arose in the final transcribed documents. Challenges can occur when collecting data from documents regarding access, accuracy, and linking to the research (Patton, 2002). In this study, there were no challenges. Keeping a self-reflective journal aided in the reflexivity of the researcher (van Manen, 1990). My journal provided insight into the experiences of the general education teachers who were teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Reflective journals demonstrated transparency in the research process and impacted the critical reflections on research design (Ortlipp, 2008).
Likewise, the narrative response from the participants offered their personal thoughts on their experiences from participation in this study. Responding to the prompt provided by me, as the researcher, afforded another document to add to the findings (Ortlipp, 2008, van Manen, 1990).

**Narrative Response Journal Prompt**

All 10 participants agreed to respond to the narrative journal prompt:

1. Describe one or more interactions with any of your students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Please respond to this same prompt daily for at least a two-week period.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data to provide specific meaning to the phenomenon of the general education teachers and their experiences of working with students with ASD in the inclusive setting. Husserl (1913) identified and Moustakas (1994) formulated transcendental phenomenology by providing a systematic design that is regimented and logical. Interviews had an integral role and were evident in this systematic design. Consequently, the language from interviews of the general education teacher participants and online focus group had a significant impact on the research (McVey, Lees, & Nolan, 2015). I frequently and extensively reviewed the transcripts from the interviews of the participants and the online focus group. Ultimately, the rich and thick descriptions of participants brought emphasis to the purpose statement of the phenomenological qualitative study.

**Bracketing**

The first step in this transcendental phenomenology was bracketing. Because of my background and teaching experiences, I needed to bracket my personal experiences as I analyzed
the data from this study (Moustakas, 1994). I was a special education teacher working in inclusion setting with students with ASD and other disabilities. Bracketing my experiences included setting aside any bias or prejudgments regarding the phenomenon of general education teachers and their experiences with teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Creswell, 2013). One way of assuring bracketing was by using a researcher’s journal (see Appendix E). This journal provided a concrete way of recording my thoughts and preventing any biases. Recording these reflective notes, or memoing, provided me one way to understand information from the data. Describing the personal experiences of the participants with bracketing posed a fresh perspective on the data (Moustakas, 1994).

**Horizontalization**

I followed this next step to list significant statements regarding the elementary general education teachers’ experiences teaching students with ASD in the classroom (Moustakas, 1994). By interpreting the transcriptions of the data, I noted those significant statements and specific quotes that played an important role in the data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). Consequently, I removed statements or comments that were repetitive or had no meaning to the study. Following this process prevented me from recognizing themes that were inadvertently evident. Ultimately, horizontalization brought relevance to the topic giving it value (Creswell, 2013).

**Organization of Files**

I created files and organized for the data from this study. I utilized a professional transcriptionist to type the interviews, and the ATLAS.ti software to analyze, classify, and interpret the data.
Data Description

Coding, summarizing field notes, and memoing were the strategies used for data analysis of the participants’ interviews. Once a professional transcriptionist had transcribed the audiotapes from interviews, the next step occurred. The ATLAS.ti software was useful for this aspect of data analysis. ATLAS.ti, Qualitative Data Analysis Software (QDAS), was used for this qualitative study. The QDAS programs helped me organize the data. Once the interviews were transcribed, I uploaded the responses using the software to ascertain trends, repetitive phrases, and key words from the participant interviews. I analyzed and coded the information for a deeper understanding.

Codes and Themes

Once data were transcribed and organized, I looked to classify and interpret the data into codes and themes (Creswell, 2013). Describing the experiences of the participants with epoche, or bracketing, found a distinct perspective regarding data (Moustakas, 1994).

Essence

As a final step, I showed the essence of the phenomenon through the use of rich descriptions of the experiences of the general education teachers working with students with ASD (van Manen, 1990). This final step was explored and understood through the use of a journal I kept along with the discussions from the online focus group. Triangulation was evident in my use of the multiple methods (Creswell, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was established in this study to increase credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Strategies for trustworthiness used in this study included triangulation, peer review, rich and thick description, and member checks.
Member checking was used to provide each of the research participants with the opportunity to review the transcriptions and the summary of the final results (Barr, 2014). The use of member checks upheld the validity of the study. The documentation used in member checking was stored in a locked cabinet and available upon request (Barr, 2014). Triangulation proved worthy utilizing multiple methods (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, n.d.). I used multiple research methods including interviews, a focus group, and journals in the study of this phenomenon.

Credibility

Credibility maintained truth and accuracy in this research. Triangulation was a key method in this qualitative study when used with a variety of forms of data. In this study, I used triangulation via three types of data. Three types of tangible data included interviews, an online focus group, and journal writings from me and the participants. I used member checks to provide participants an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and the textural and structural descriptions of the participants’ experiences. Both formal and informal member checks occurred throughout the process of reviewing the interviews of the general education teachers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, the credibility in this study was evident in the online focus group’s opportunity to review the data from the interviews.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability speaks to the consistency and the reliability of this qualitative study (Barr, 2014). Dependability is similar to reliability in quantitative studies. I established dependability throughout the analysis of the data through coding and though repeating the process to compare results. Triangulation not only strengthened the dependability, but it also provided detail that was rich in context to affirm the interest of the phenomenon’s (Creswell, 2013). Triangulation improved the probability that the findings and the interpretations were credible (Lincoln & Guba,
Therefore, interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim to increase dependability (Creswell, 2013; Reynolds, 2016).

Likewise, confirmability ensured that the study’s findings reflected the experiences of the elementary general education teachers as they worked with students with ASD (van Manen, 1990). For confirmability in this study, I used an external auditor to review the findings in this research. The external auditor was familiar with elementary general education teachers in inclusion settings teaching students with ASD. This auditor had no knowledge of the participants in this study. The auditor reviewed the research and found it was grounded in events rather than my personal interpretations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, peer review from the online focus group allowed debriefing to occur for external checks of the research process (Creswell, 2013). I provided each participant with an opportunity to review the transcribed interviews and the summary of results (van Manen, 1990).

**Transferability**

Transferability was the ability of this study to be applied to other areas or contexts. The detailed descriptions of the general education teacher participants’ experiences were transferred easily to other settings and groups (Patton, 2002). The experiences of general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the inclusion setting was analyzed and could transfer for use in other inclusion settings. As I worked to make sense of the experiences of the participants, I strived to use explanations that would transfer to further research. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stressed the importance of the researcher providing an index for transferability. The rich, thick descriptions afforded operational details of the data collection and analysis and enabled readers of this study to make decisions regarding transferability (Creswell, 2013).
Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations followed the steps as provided by Creswell (2013). Obtaining IRB approval and gaining local permission from the site and participants was the first ethical consideration. Full disclosure of the purpose of this study and respecting the privacy of the participants was taken into serious consideration to avoid any disclosures of information that may harm participants (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spalding, 2014). I used pseudonyms in place of participants’ and schools’ names to ensure confidentiality (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spalding, n.d). Data gathered was shared with participants and the online focus group when necessary. Finally, I kept all documents under lock and key (Creswell, 2013). Following IRB instructions, I placed paper documents in a locked file, and password protected electronic files are stored on a computer files for three years (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spalding, n.d).

Summary

Chapter Three offered the specifications of the methodology of this phenomenological study. In this study, I sought to understand the experiences of general education teachers instructing students with ASD in the general education inclusive environment. The research was significant and provided a voice for the experiences of general education teachers facing challenges in the inclusion classroom working with students with ASD. This study addressed the gap that exists in current research of general education teachers’ experiences with students diagnosed with ASD.
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

In this chapter, I provide a description of the elementary general education teacher participants and the results of this phenomenological study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to provide a voice to the lived experiences of the elementary general education teachers instructing students diagnosed with ASD in inclusive settings (Carson, 2015). In this chapter, I also present the data gathered from the interviews and written journal prompts of the general education teacher participants, and from the researcher’s journal. Prior to beginning the interview process, I piloted the interview questions with two colleagues, and they found no issues during this process. This process allowed for me to ensure the quality of the audio equipment and the app used on the iPhone and iPad. Often neglected in qualitative research, the piloting process provided valuable insight in the research (Pritchard & Whiting, 2012).

Once the piloting concluded, I began the interview process. I conducted the interviews with the 10 general education teacher participants at the location of the participants’ choice. All but one of the interviews took place in the participants’ classrooms at their school. The other interview was completed a local coffee establishment at the request of the participant.

A transcriptionist transcribed the interviews within a 24-hour period of the actual submission. The transcriptionist requested the use of an app called Express Dictate by NCH software. The app was used to record with the iPhone and iPad. Then the recorded interview was emailed directly to the transcriptionist who then downloaded the audio recording and transcribed. A copy of the transcription was given to each general education teacher to provide a
member check to verify the accuracy of the interview. The data answered the following research questions:

**Research Question One:** How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms?

**Research Question Two:** In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion?

**Research Question Three:** How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

**Research Question Four:** How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting?

Each of the participants was a general education teacher in elementary schools in the MCSD in suburban north Georgia. I contacted six elementary schools based on the recommendations from the MCSD assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Once I contacted the school principals, they referred me to the school wide special education facilitators who provided a list of the general education teachers teaching in inclusion classrooms. I sent an informational letter via email introducing my research prospectus. I received interest from 11 general education teachers. Upon sending the next email with more detailed information, I received interest from 10 general education teachers from four of the six schools contacted. Table 2 describes the schools of the participants.
Table 2.

**MCSD Elementary Schools Solicited**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>General Education Inclusion Classrooms</th>
<th>General Education Teacher Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rutland Elementary</td>
<td>972 Students</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary Elementary</td>
<td>780 Students</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray Elementary</td>
<td>1027 Students</td>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daniel Elementary</td>
<td>1187 Students</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miller Road Elementary</td>
<td>876 Students</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lee Elementary</td>
<td>703 Students</td>
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**Participants**

The general education teacher participants taught in general education inclusion classrooms with special education teachers. The group of participants had a total of 191 years of experience. Their years of experience range from 11 to 29 years of experience, and they work in grades kindergarten through fourth. Each participant had experience working with students with ASD in their general education classrooms. Participants were provided with pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. Table 3 details the demographics of each general education teacher participant.

Table 3.

**Participant Demographics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Years’ Experience</th>
<th>Grade Level</th>
<th>Education</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
General Education Teacher Participants

Descriptions of each participant are provided below as well as a synopsis of their journal entries.

**Lottie.** Lottie taught Grade four in the MCSD. She has taught for 24 years. Lottie has known since she was a little girl that she wanted to be a teacher. She stated, “It is one of the greatest contributions one can make to society.” As a general education teacher, she has worked collaboratively with special education teachers in her classroom’s inclusive setting for six years. Lottie shared her experiences with students with ASD in the following description:

Well one of the things I’ve found out is they’re just like all of the other kids. They have their little quirks about them, but I think you find that in all kids. They want to be loved, they want to be heard, they want to be respected and when you take the time to get to know them, you find out that they have so many valuable things to share that they are an integral part of the classroom and I’ve enjoyed working with kids that you know suffer from autism. (personal communication, March 16, 2017)

Lottie enjoyed the relationships developed with students with ASD over the years. One student was particularly meaningful to her. The entire family came and met with her before the start of school when their son was going to be in her classroom. The family wanted to share strategies and certain tendencies of their child with Lottie before he ever entered the classroom. Lottie noted that meeting with the student and his family helped to relieve his anxieties or apprehensions about entering his new classroom. Having students with ASD present in her classroom over the years was beneficial in many ways. Observing the positive aspects, Lottie articulated that students with ASD tend to be more literal and follow the classroom rules implicitly. This trait can be helpful when working with a partner or a small group on lessons or
projects. She stated, “The student with ASD follows the letter of the law and keeps the
group/partners on track” (Lottie, personal communication, March 16, 2017). Her general
education students learned to develop compassion and empathy because of the presence of
students with ASD in their classroom.

Lottie noted no specific challenges of having students with ASD in her general education
classroom. Over the six years she had students with ASD in her inclusion classroom, she has not
noticed anything significant to be a challenge. The students with ASD did not interfered with the
learning or affected the interactions among students in her classroom. She further noted that
these students with ASD added so much to the classroom. Although she was somewhat
apprehensive about the idea of teaching students with ASD, the experiences have been great.
She noted that having the support of a special education teacher, engaging with the students with
ASD, and interacting with parents make a tremendous difference.

Betty. Betty taught for almost 17 years. She became a teacher because she enjoys
working with kids and watching them experience new things. In her 17 years of teaching, Betty
worked with approximately nine students with ASD in her inclusion classroom. Her experiences
have been good as she stated, “All the ones I have taught have been very bright” (Betty, personal
communication, March 16, 2017). Betty formed great relationships with her students with ASD
as she enjoys looking at how these particular students work with mathematics. Observing
students solving mathematical problems helps Betty see the students’ ability to work together to
find solutions. Betty saw the relationships with the students with ASD and their general
education peers in the inclusion classroom as positive in most instances. The greatest challenge
she observed is the communication between the students with ASD and the general education
students. Students with ASD and general education students face a steep learning curve as they learn to communicate effectively with each other.

Over the years, Betty had several special education teachers working in her classroom. Typically, those teachers were helpful, especially with the students with ASD. The special education teacher helped the students with ASD follow through on instructions as well as assignments. Betty found that the special education teacher had been quite helpful with all the students in her classroom.

Prior to teaching students with ASD, Betty admitted that she made the assumptions of “behavior problems, outbursts, difficulty following directions and verbal disruptions in the classroom” (personal communication, March 16, 2017). However, she had not experienced any of those particular problems. Having students with ASD in the classroom made her more flexible in a variety of situations. Those situations include being able to handle the communication deficits, behavior and social issues, and academic weaknesses of students with ASD. Overall, she enjoyed watching the students with ASD grow and work independently.

Kay. Kay’s mother was a teacher, and she knew that was her destiny. She fondly remembered always being at school with her mother. She realized that as she grew older, she wanted to work with kids because of the joy it brought her. She has taught for 23 years and at the time of this study taught second grade.

In her inclusion classroom, Kay worked with students with ASD for the past two years. She taught several students with ASD. In years past, she had students with Asperger’s in her general education classroom. When she taught kindergarten, she had a student identified with ASD, and now she is teaching that same student in second grade. She noted, “It has been
interesting to see the changes in this particular student” (Kay, personal communication, March 3, 2017).

At the time of the study, Kay had two students with ASD in her general education classroom. Kay said they were two of her favorites. She shared, “I think the students with autism have such unique personalities” (personal communication, March 3, 2017). Kay loved getting to know them on a personal level by having conversations with the two students with ASD. These conversations included simple things such as what the student may have eaten at lunch or what occurred on the playground during recess. Some of her interactions with past students with ASD had not been quite as animated, and she had not been able to interact with them as she had her students this year. Forming relationships with her students with ASD this year were quite meaningful.

**Lynn.** Lynn was in her 11th year of teaching. She decided to become a teacher when a cousin mentioned that she would make a great teacher. Lynn noted that entering the teaching profession was not a conscious decision at all. College brought an introduction to education class, and Lynn was hooked. At the time of this study, Lynn was teaching first grade and working with several students with ASD in her inclusion classroom.

She shared an experience surrounding one student with ASD. “He is probably one of my favorite students ever, even though he did not speak much” (Lynn, personal communication, March 21, 2017). His musical ability was amazing, and Lynn enjoyed hearing him sing and hum. When thinking of this student, she remembered how her general education students were drawn to him and would often interact with him. Because he was not verbal, his classmates wanted to foster relationships with him so much that they tried everything to make that happen. Boys and girls in Lynn’s class would attempt to play with this student at recess. From Lynn’s
observations, she noted there have always been two types of general education students regarding their relationships and interactions with the students with ASD. Some students want to develop relationships, and others are not interested.

Regarding how the placement of students with ASD in her classroom affected the interactions, attentiveness, and discipline, Lynn stated that her general education students often tried and included the students with ASD as much as possible in all classroom activities and lessons. Equally important to note was that at times, the students with ASD, could indeed detract from a lesson. In those situations, Lynn had to rally the students back to their tasks. Lynn appreciated having the special education teacher working in her classroom.

Prior to having students with ASD in her classroom, Lynn said “fear” was the word to describe her feelings about teaching students with ASD. She was certain the process would be hard, and she feared the unknown. However, her attitude after experiencing students with ASD in her classroom was definitely different. Her students with ASD opened her eyes to unique teaching experiences. Lynn conveyed that although the presence of students with ASD may not have changed her general feelings about teaching, she noted, “I have definitely grown as a teacher” (personal communication, March 21, 2017).

MK. At the time of this study, MK had been teaching 29 years. He coached little league when he was in high school and was encouraged by a parent to become a teacher. Those words of encouragement caused MK to start thinking, and he decided to choose the teaching career. At the time of this study, he taught third grade and had many years of experience as a teacher, including teaching students with ASD. MK said it had been a fantastic experience:

I think it has been a fantastic experience because you get to see kids of so many different spectrums. I think you have to have some patience with those kind of kids too and a lot
of love when you look at them. I just enjoy seeing the different kinds of kids and think it has made me a better teacher. I have to have a different kind of patience for this kind of behavior. It’s something that’s made me reevaluate how I look at teaching, and I think it has been a blast in a way (personal communication, March 6, 2017).

He was especially pleased when he continued to hear from his students with ASD who kept in touch years after they left his classroom. He had developed relationships with many of the students with ASD. He enjoyed running into them in the community and hearing about their lives since elementary school.

Regarding the interpersonal relationships with the students with ASD, MK said that their peers learn how to relate better to people with differences. MK said the interaction had been positive. MK noted that all students are different. He hoped all of his students found a better understanding of those differences. He remarked that his general education students had learned compassion, understanding, and patience with their peers with ASD in the inclusion classroom. MK had learned many things as he has worked collaboratively with a special education teacher in his classroom. MK was fortunate to have worked with the same special education teacher for 13 years. Collaborating with the special education teacher to plan lessons and discuss students was beneficial to MK. He also appreciated the way the special education teacher worked with students in his classroom. Her interactions with students made it appear she was working with all students, not just the students with ASD.

MK’s feelings before and after working with students with ASD were not remarkably different. He stated, “Until you walk a mile in someone else’s shoes, you really do not understand what teaching students with ASD means” (MK, personal communications, March 6, 2017). He shared that he learned not to pigeonhole kids but to accept them as they are without
hesitation. His feelings, about teaching in general, have changed considerably over the years as he worked with students with ASD. MK conveyed, “It just changes your whole life” (personal communication, March 6, 2017). He loved all the kids he taught, but affirmed that the students with ASD had a special place in his heart.

**JJ.** JJ articulated that for as long as he can remember, he wanted to be a teacher. At the time of this study, JJ was in his 15th year of teaching first-grade inclusion as the general education teacher. JJ described his experiences with students with ASD as positive. He taught numerous students with ASD over the years. In a previous school, JJ recalled that students with ASD were placed in the general education classrooms full time and did not receive any services outside of the classroom. The students with ASD were physically aggressive and disruptive in the classroom. However, JJ found the strengths in each of the students with ASD and worked to help them fit in and learn within the general education classroom.

When building relationships with students with ASD, JJ valued the importance of helping the students feel confident and comfortable in his classroom. Developing relationships with general education students is also important for students with ASD. Often the students in JJ’s classroom began by simply being helpers and friends to the students with ASD. JJ’s goal was to facilitate relationships by helping the general education students and the students with ASD make connections with each other. JJ added that an inclusion classroom helped all students show their capabilities.

Working with a special education teacher in his classroom is valuable to JJ. He stated that if one were to observe in his classroom, it would be difficult to distinguish the students with ASD from the general education students because he treats the special education teacher as his equal. Prior to teaching students with ASD, JJ never had any hesitations about teaching students
with ASD. He stressed that he would rather have an environment that included and interacted with different people than an environment that excluded. JJ finds it unacceptable when colleagues say that having students with ASD in the general education classroom is not feasible. Some of his colleagues felt that students with ASD must receive services in more restrictive environments. Overall, he felt his experiences had been positive and have made a difference for him and hopefully his students with ASD.

**Cassie.** Cassie knew from a young age she wanted to be a teacher, and for the last 16 years, she realized that desire in the classroom. Throughout those 16 years in her first grade and kindergarten classrooms, she taught many students with ASD. Cassie shared that those experiences have all been positive. With the support of a special education teacher in her general education classroom, the students with ASD flourished. Cassie watched students grasp difficult concepts and become successful academically. Within her inclusion classroom, Cassie was appreciative of the way her general education students accepted and formed relationships with the students with ASD. Cassie noted the only thing that hindered her inclusion experiences with students with ASD was behavioral problems that appeared from time to time. Those behavioral problems included communicating inappropriately, refusing to complete tasks, making noises or singing, and disturbing students nearby. Often those behavior problems were solved with time and patience as she and her special education partner collaborated to help the students with ASD.

Working with the special education teacher in her general education classroom was a positive experience for her. Cassie was somewhat reluctant and afraid to work with students with ASD when first approached about the teaching position. However, once she was involved in the inclusion classroom, she affirmed she would do it anytime. The most positive thing for
Cassie about teaching students with ASD was watching them make connections and establish relationships with peers in the inclusion setting.

**Shelley.** Shelley began her adult life in the business industry. It was not until she had her own child that Shelley realized how much she wanted to change her career focus to teaching. For the last 15 years, Shelley has been a second-grade teacher. In those 15 years, Shelley commented that she had no idea she would end up teaching students with ASD. However, she ended up feeling just fine about teaching students with ASD because of the support she received from the special education teacher working with her. Shelley was extremely nervous about working with students with ASD. She was eventually able to overcome her fears and face the challenges.

Over the years, Shelley formed some genuine relationships with the families of the students with ASD. She enjoyed the fact that the families of former students often contacted her to share about their lives years later. As far as the relationships with peers in her classroom, the students with ASD were “tolerated and nurtured” by their general education peers (Shelley, personal communication, March 9, 2017). Shelley found more pros than cons with the relationships and considered the experiences as life lessons for her general education students in the inclusion setting. At times, some of the students with ASD had meltdowns in the general education classroom, and she had to deal with the situation. Nevertheless, such occurrences turned into learning experiences for all.

Shelley was appreciative of the relationships that special education teachers had with her and the students in her classroom. She was truly glad that the special education teachers could meet specific needs of the students with ASD and helped her as the collaborating teacher in the inclusion setting. Needs that included communicational, emotional, or behavioral.
Prior to teaching in public schools with students with ASD, Shelley had significant experiences with her cousin with ASD. She bonded with him by communicating and giving him a sense of belonging. She developed a close relationship with this cousin. Because of her family experience, she always felt comfortable around students with ASD. Therefore, her experiences were all positive. Shelley was quite interested in learning all she could about teaching students with ASD.

Nisa. Nisa, who began her college education going into premed, decided to explore some education classes, and was hooked on teaching immediately. She has taught for 22 years and at the time of this study worked in a third-grade classroom with students with ASD. Over her years of experience, she taught many students with ASD and recalled some of those experiences. Two students came to mind. One of the two was fixated on a specific subject and loved sharing books on that subject. Nisa also enjoyed one of her students with ASD who loved to sing. Nisa shared, “The students with ASD are just like any other kids in my classroom” (personal communication, March 18, 2017).

When Nisa recalled the interactions with the general education students in her classroom as they built relationships with the students with ASD, there were always those students who wanted to help and be the peacekeepers in the classroom. These students did not want anyone to be left out, so they worked hard to build community with all students in the inclusion classroom. When working with the special educator in her classroom, Nisa emphasized the fact that the special educator was “their little angel” (personal communication, March 18, 2017). Interestingly enough, Nisa did not allude to the fact that she was teaching collaboratively with the special educator but that she was an extra set of hands when needed.
In describing her attitudes prior to teaching students with ASD, Nisa felt her attitude would be no different from that of general education students. She said, “It’s really no different than having any other kid with an emotional or academic problem” (Nisa, personal communication, March 18, 2017). Now that she has taught the students with ASD, she noted that she could not imagine a classroom without them. Overall, her experiences have been good as she sees things differently as the teacher of students with ASD.

**Penny.** Penny claimed teaching chose her. She reflected that in every situation, she was the teacher throughout her life. Penny began her teaching career before she had her first child. After staying home with her first child for three years, she returned to the classroom and taught several grade levels. Penny shared that some of her initial experiences with students with ASD came about when she was teaching first grade. Unfortunately, some parents, especially those of an only child or a first-born, do not see the milestones or understand what a “normal” child should do. Therefore, when they arrive in their first years of formal education, they find their child has some unusual struggles with academics, behavior, or communication. Penny noted it is difficult to be the bearer of bad news when a child is struggling. However, it is refreshing to finally go through the evaluation process and get help for the child. In her experience, she also noted that the struggles could be more difficult in upper grades.

In her current situation, Penny recalled a student who would come and go from her classroom throughout the day. He received services for some academics in her inclusion classroom, but sent to different classrooms for other subjects. Penny felt it was unfortunate that the student had to move around so much throughout the school day. Apparently, this student was not the only one who had the constant movement throughout the day, as this was the norm with schedules at Penny’s school. When they were interacting with the general education students,
her students with ASD were accepted and fit right in with their peers. She enlisted the help of her general education peers to serve as buddies for a variety of organizational matters such as following class schedules, keeping personal belongings organized, and completing academic assignments. She said that everyone got along because of acceptance.

Penny relied on the collaboration of the special education teacher in her classroom to help with lessons and to keep the students with ASD on task. She did not have any issues with disruptions or problems with relationships between the students as a whole. Even though Penny graduated from college in the early 80s, she noted that teaching special education and general education had changed drastically. When she began teaching, special education students were sent out to self-contained classrooms for all academics. Today, teachers group children together, which is far more beneficial to all. Penny felt it was important to include all children in the general education environment with caring and compassionate peers and teachers alike. She saw numerous benefits to teaching in the inclusion classroom.

**General Education Teacher Participant Journals**

General education teacher participants responded to a daily prompt for two weeks (see Appendix E).

**Lottie.** Lottie writes about her experiences with a student with ASD in her mathematics’ inclusion classroom. Lottie noted the student was eager to share some of his struggles with his classmates. After he asked her repeatedly, she gave him an opportunity to speak before the class. While this particular student has made friends easily, he still has immense difficulty focusing in class. This particular student is medicated for his attention deficits and often forgets to take his medication. When he forgets to take his medication, it is a challenge in the classroom. Lottie tries to give the student frequent breaks.
When working on small group activities, this student often wants to complete the activity independently. Lottie asks the student to choose a partner for the small group activities as she notes his challenges to stay on task. The special educator in the classroom helps facilitate this small group activity. Fortunately, mathematics is a strength for him, so even though his attention and small-group skills are challenging, he can do the assigned work. Overall, Lottie noted challenges and benefits that arise having a student with ASD in her general education classroom. The challenges can include academics, communication, and interaction with peers while the benefits can be seeing a student with ASD join in a group activity or ask to speak in front of his peers to share his disability.

JJ. JJ had a unique situation with one of his students with ASD who came to his class for mathematics and language arts. The student made repetitive noises throughout the day which was disruptive to those around her. JJ provided gentle reminders to the student to quiet down, yet she continued to be disruptive with her noises or singing. When JJ conferenced individually with the student, she noted that her classmates enjoyed her noises and really liked her when she made loud noises. The special education teacher who worked in JJ’s classroom often sat in close proximity to the student to help keep her noises under control. Another challenge was her inability to complete work. The student became quite angry if she made a mistake and usually had a meltdown. She had to leave the classroom with the special education teacher to take a short walk, which helped her to settle down. Socially, the student played well with her peers on the playground, but she often needed encouragement from a friend or one of the adults to initiate play with peers.

The student could also be rather sneaky when she was trying to do things her way. For example, when she wanted to use colored pencils rather than crayons on a particular assignment
she would often hide the pencils in her desk so that it looked like she was using crayons instead of colored pencils. JJ had to find unique ways of confronting her rather than possibly causing the student to meltdown. With the crayon and pencil issues, JJ told her that she had to use crayons on that assignment, but on the next assignment she could use the colored pencils. That seemed to appease her enough to follow through with the crayons. Although challenges were evident, being a part of the inclusion classroom was advantageous for that student.

**Shelley.** Shelley’s experiences were somewhat different from the experiences of her colleagues. She struggled to communicate with two girls with ASD who attended her classroom for two academic subjects each day. These students were non-verbal. They were seldom able to communicate their needs, and they struggled to communicate with peers and teachers. When one student was asked how she was doing, she responded and asked the same question back. Yet, she enjoyed giving hugs and joining her peers in activities.

Shelley and her special education colleague tried to repeat the same conversation daily with each girl to get her to respond as they participated in the inclusion classroom. In Shelley’s journal, she noted that after five days of asking questions of the girls and hoping they would respond or take turns in a conversation, one of the girls began to talk to Shelley. She hugged Shelley and asked her how she was doing. Suddenly, the other little girl with ASD walked up to Shelley and did the exact same thing. The second little girl never made eye contact; however, she was making progress. Shelley noted that at times she felt it was more important to get the trust of these two students rather than focusing on their academics. Shelley wanted the two girls to understand she believed in their ability.

**MK.** MK shared similar thoughts to his peers in his journal. He wrote about a particular child with ASD who enjoyed talking with him each day when he arrived in class. MK always
found a few minutes to catch up with him about what he did over the weekend or what he did in
his previous classes throughout the day. The student enjoyed telling MK what he was reading in
his other class or what his favorite writing topic was for the day.

MK commented that he definitely had a connection with this student and was enjoying
building a relationship with him as he joined his inclusion class each day for mathematics. He
said that this student appeared to need attention and especially that of a male role model. The
reason he felt the need for a role model was the student lived with his mother only. He only
visited his father twice a month, so when MK met the student’s mother, she remarked about the
fact that she was excited about her son having a male teacher. The student with ASD had the
tendency to respond more to a male. MK wrote in the last part of his journal that he felt that
making the connection with this student made him feel like he was making a difference.

Nisa. Nisa found her interactions with her students with ASD enjoyable. Instead of
being a teacher, she stated she had become a caregiver for one student who suffered miserably
with allergies and often came to school too sick from his allergies. Nisa tried to help him push
through and get through the day. In her journal, she was most worried when it became time for
state testing. His eyes were swollen, red and watery. He was trying his best to maintain focus
and do well on the state mandated testing, but Nisa had her doubts that the testing would show
just how much he knew.

When allergy season passed, the student was more focused on his classroom studies.
Nisa said he joined right into whatever the topic was and immediately became an expert on that
topic. When this student showed an interest in a particular subject or topic, he wanted to share
with everyone. Often, Nisa set aside some time to let him share his findings or his research. She
said, “He loves to stand in front of the students and command their attention as he teaches about
subjects he has researched” (Nisa, personal communication, March 18, 2017). Making him feel included helped this student build relationships with his peers as they loved to hear about his research. Nisa considered this one of the many benefits of her inclusion classroom.

**Penny.** Penny enjoyed the challenge of interacting with students with ASD receiving services in her inclusion classroom. As a general education teacher, Penny worked with students with ASD for quite a few years. She noted in her journal that a particular student had difficulty taking turns in conversations, so Penny was determined to help the student learn to respond appropriately in conversations. Each time the student walked in Penny’s classroom, she greeted her with a simple good morning and a conversation starter.

Throughout Penny’s journal, she received similar responses daily. The student seldom responded to the how-are-you-question. She immediately began to tell Penny something else that happened to her that morning. For example, one day her dog had surgery, and she told Penny all about the surgery. Another day, she told Penny that her whole family was sick. One day she told Penny she wanted to eat her snack and proceeded to sit down and eat her snack. Penny received little eye contact, and she stated the student seldom slowed down long enough to carry on the short conversation. She was determined to get to her seat and do whatever she was supposed to be doing. Penny said the student was often bothered that she had to respond to her teacher’s greeting.

**Kay.** Kay worked with two students with ASD this year in her inclusion classroom. Both students were communicative, performed well academically, and enjoyed having discussions with her. One student was often tardy, which made him moody when he arrived. He knows he has missed things in class that morning, and he struggles to explain why he is late as he muddles through trying to get things done. He often said he did not feel well when Kay
interacted with him. He would tell her he did not sleep well or he did not want to get up and come to school. Kay took a few minutes of her time to talk privately with him, and she tried to understand his feelings. By relating to him in that manner, Kay seemed to make a connection with him, and it helped him get over the hurdle of being late or not getting his assignments completed in a timely manner. Throughout her interactions with this student, Kay encouraged him to do things he found difficult. He was stressed in social situations such as recess or PE when he had to play with his peers. Kay and other teachers understood his needs, so he thrived on their encouragement.

Another student in Kay’s room was quite the opposite. This student made an entrance like no other. There were mornings that he came in and stood on his chair to call attention to himself. Kay often had to redirect his attention to what he should be doing. This student followed directions in a literal way. Abstract concepts were quite a challenge for him. For example, he enjoyed writing, but he would stick with writing factual material. Writing a creative story was quite difficult for him. Kay continued to try to give him ideas for his writing, but he wanted to stick with the concrete ideas. Kay worked well with this student as evidenced in her journal. She faced challenges yet reaped the benefits from her efforts with each child.

Cassie. Cassie had several students with ASD who participated in her general education classroom. She had a set of twins, a boy, and girl. The boy was non-verbal in a large group. The class was practicing a play for the end of the year, and this particular student was a little terrified of being on the stage with his peers to sing for parents. Cassie had given him a peer buddy to be right beside him during practices and the final performance. He did well with this plan and always looked to be sure the student was right beside him. Because he was non-verbal most of the time, Cassie faced many challenges with him in the classroom. She was most
appreciative of the special education teacher who was with her throughout the school day for several academic segments. During the class lesson, Cassie enlisted the help of the special education teacher to pull this student, and a couple of others when the class was breaking up, into small guided reading groups and centers. The student worked well with the small group and answered a few questions, but he did not initiate any conversation.

Cassie noted in her journal that this student and his twin sister had their father join them on a recent field trip, and both students were verbal the entire day. Cassie and her special education colleague were so glad to see his interactions with his father and sister. She always called on him and tried to include him, but he just looked at her and did not answer. On one particular day, Cassie asked him a question, and he yelled the answer aloud for the class with a big grin on his face. Even with the challenges, Cassie was working well with her students with ASD.

**Betty.** Betty was fearful of teaching students with ASD until she experienced her first year with inclusion. The student she shared about in her journal was a particular little girl that Betty stated made her feel a little hesitant about having her in her general education classroom. She shared, “At the beginning of the year, I was reluctant to have this student in my classroom because I had heard about her tendencies to wander off and to seldom ever get any work completed” (Betty, personal communication, March 16, 2017). The student continued to wander when the class was going to the restroom or computer lab. The student with ASD was quite capable but did not always maintain focus on her surroundings. Upon the suggestion of the special education teacher, Betty decided to assign a peer to walk near the student in the class line. Betty nor the special education teacher felt it appropriate to walk beside her or invade her space. Therefore, using the peer was a helpful solution to her wandering problem.
Betty and the special education teacher tried to encourage the student to complete her assignments. She was capable but seemed to be in what Betty described as a “daze” throughout her class period. The special education teacher helped Betty develop a non-verbal prompt system where either of the teachers walking around the classroom could walk by the student’s desk and simply touch the paper or her desk in a way that the student saw their non-verbal prompt. Betty noted it helped tremendously. In Betty’s journal entries, she shared that this student showed improvement with her assignment completion and her ability to stay with the group as they transitioned in the hallway.

**Lynn.** Lynn shared her involvement with one student with ASD in her classroom. The student was mostly nonverbal but loved to sing. Lynn greeted him each day, hoping he would respond. He had a one-on-one paraprofessional who was with him all day long. The paraprofessional often told him to tell Lynn good morning. The student was heavily prompted to respond to adults or peers when asked questions. In another journal entry, Lynn mentioned that she heard him singing over at the computer station, and she went to sit by him and sang the familiar song with him. He stopped singing and smiled without any eye contact, yet Lynn noted this was the first time she experienced this with him. She tried singing with him before or putting a familiar song on in the classroom in hope of engaging him, but he never responded.

Lynn also cited in her journal that her goal from the moment she met this student was to have him respond to her, or at least greet her, and to make eye contact with her. With that being her mission, she made time each day to work on those goals. She and the special education teacher in her classroom collaborated, and while one worked on greetings the other worked on eye contact. During the span of time keeping her journal, Lynn wrote that the student started
saying hello to her. Then, after much prompting, he started saying hello Mrs. L. when Lynn told him hello as he entered her classroom. The eye contact remained a challenge for Lynn.

**Researcher’s Journal**

As the researcher, I kept a journal for the same period as the general education teacher participants (see Appendix F). After spending time reading over the interviews, I took time to write my thoughts about what I found from the interviews. My first thoughts came from the experiences of this group of participants. Another interesting thing I noted was that three of the 10 participants had worked in other careers before deciding to become teachers. I found another commonality in their years of teaching experience. All general education teacher participants had taught over 10 years in the classroom. Additionally, all but two had degrees beyond their bachelor’s degree. However, even though this group of participants displayed diversity, I felt I would want to use a more diverse population for further research. I reflected that I wished I had found some teachers with fewer years of experience in the classroom and perhaps more teachers with only a bachelor’s degree.

The group had diverse experiences and shared memorable moments that occurred in their classrooms. Several of the participants were a little apprehensive about having students with ASD in their classrooms. One participant even mentioned that she questioned her ability to teach in an inclusion classroom. She was quite fearful about the entire process and felt intimidated about having another teacher (special education teacher) working in her classroom. This participant was not the only one who expressed some apprehension.

Two other general education teacher participants were somewhat fearful of the inclusion process as well, which was evidently a challenge for these participants. Unfortunately, because of lack of teacher preparation and experiences, many of the participants saw the responsibilities
of teaching students with ASD daunting. As I interviewed one of the general education teacher participants, she stated that she was not expecting the inclusion experience with students with ASD to be rather troublesome. She based her apprehension on what she had witnessed the year before with one of her colleagues. However, after participating in the process, she was relieved and somewhat pleased with her experiences.

I added some other notes in my journal regarding the general education teachers’ experiences and the benefits of working in the inclusion classroom. I found it interesting to hear their stories about working with students with ASD and the success they witnessed with these students in their inclusion classrooms. As I interviewed the teachers, I found such inspiration in their eagerness to provide an environment where all learners were welcome in their classroom. One of the teachers with the most experience in inclusion found the students with ASD to be the ones who showed the most growth throughout the year. He felt that when the special education teacher and the general education teacher planned collaboratively and worked for the good of all students, they achieved success.

Overall, I filled my journal notes with comments regarding the experiences of general education teachers and their experiences with students with ASD in their inclusion classroom. Common themes emerged from my notes, the interviews, and the journals of the participants. The benefits, challenges, relationships, and beliefs of the general education teacher participants were common themes found in my research.

**Online Focus Group**

I sent the open-ended interview questions to six of the general education teacher participants via a Google group email and received responses from four of the participants.
Along with the questions, I shared the themes that evolved from the interviews and journals. The responses elicited the following answers:

**Participant one.** Participant one was quite interested in the themes that were present in the study. She stated, “I certainly am appreciative of the fact that you wrote about the importance of relationships” (personal communication, May 1, 2017). She expanded that her relationships with all students are significant to her, but she especially feels like the relationships she formed with students with ASD will live on in her forever. With that said, participant one says that she did want to add that her relationships with students with ASD extended to their families, which has meant the world to her over her years of teaching. She shared that the benefits of meeting the students and becoming so close with their families far outweigh any challenges she may have experienced in her general education inclusion classroom.

This participant was surprised that over the years she taught inclusion, she experienced some difficult relationships with the special educators who worked with her in her classroom, and yet she did not feel compelled to share that as a challenge during her interview. She felt certain others would share that in the interview process or even in their journals. She decided to share with me online about her challenges since she had experienced some issues with the special educators throughout the process. She expanded on some of the issues in her interview and her journal. One of the special education teachers who came to her room daily was quite popular among her students. Participant one liked to maintain structure in her classroom. Often when the special education teacher entered, one particular student with ASD wanted to jump up to run and hug the special educator. She just felt it was somewhat distracting for the entire class and her lessons. She stated that she spoke with the special educator, and things improved somewhat; nevertheless, it remained a challenge in their relationship as they collaborated. This
participant did not note any specific conclusions from the data other than what she viewed from her own experiences and the experiences outlined in the data that most inclusion experiences with students with ASD were successful.

**Participant two.** Participant two noted that he was amazed at how similar the participants were concerning experiences with students with ASD. He said he felt like he was in a bubble and completely forgot that other teachers were doing the same thing he did in his general education classroom. He said the themes confirmed his experiences. The only thing he asked to add was that he formed a close bond with the students with ASD who had walked through his doors. He considered it a privilege to work with students with ASD. He did not find any surprises from the data. The conclusions he found were that students with ASD were an intricate part of the classroom and that general education teachers should have no apprehension concerning teaching them in their inclusion classrooms.

**Participant three.** Participant three noted that she was impressed with the relationships the general education students developed with their students with ASD. She felt that one of the most crucial components of inclusion was the relationships built with students and teachers in the inclusion classroom. Therefore, she was pleased to see that as a common theme in the research. She was surprised there were not more participants who were fearful of teaching students with ASD. As a teacher in an inclusion classroom, colleagues often told her they could not possibly teach students with ASD. From the outside looking in, many general education teachers were afraid of any student with an IEP. After reviewing the data, she expressed her interest in further research.

**Participant four.** Participant four shared her thoughts about the themes present in this study. She understood the importance of relationships, and her beliefs about teaching students
with ASD were certainly in line with the other participants. However, she was surprised that there were not more challenges. While she loved working with students with ASD, she had some negative experiences that she did not want to divulge in the interview for fear that someone might find out her true feelings. She was a little fearful about being totally honest during the interview. However, after reading over the themes, she felt she could share more.

She wanted to note that she faced many challenges with teaching students with ASD. She taught one particular student who was quite difficult. His mother made many demands of those who worked with her son as well. While participant four would do anything for this child, his mother could be a hindrance to his learning. The mother brought her son late to school almost every single day, which affected his mood for the day, which, in turn, affected his interactions, his work, and his communication with peers. When he walked in late, he immediately knew he missed things and needed to catch up. The IEP team met with the mother and tried to approach the subject of his tardiness, and the mother explained things would not change. She told the team that it was their responsibility to handle her son during school hours and they would have to find ways to solve the problems.

Therefore, participant four said things had been difficult for her, the special education teacher, and the student. She wanted to share this because it directly related to some of the questions I asked her in the interview, and it related to her experiences teaching a student with ASD. However, even though she faced these challenges, she was appreciative of the presence of the special educator in her classroom. She recalled that having another teacher to bounce off her ideas and concerns was most beneficial. Participant four noted no other conclusions or surprises. She simply stated she wanted to add the experiences with this student.
Themes

Upon conclusion of the data collection process, the general education teacher interviews, the journals, and the online focus group were transcribed and coded. I first highlighted words, statements, and phrases that were related to the participants’ experiences with inclusive practices. Next, I developed those statements into groups and provided codes using the ATLAS.ti software. Themes emerged organically and transcendentally and tied all the participants together (Moustakas, 1994). Four major themes emerged. These significant themes regarding the inclusion of students with ASD included (a) beliefs, (b) relationships, (c) benefits, and (d) challenges. In most instances, all four themes were present with each of the participants. For example, three general education teacher participants stated they believed working with students with ASD was not a challenge at all, while the majority saw challenges. In the same regard, all participants highlighted the relationships and benefits of working with students with ASD. All participants expressed their beliefs in the process. Regardless of benefits or challenges, as the themes emerged, participants noted the benefits of inclusion.

Theme one: Beliefs. Each of the general education teacher participants expressed their beliefs regarding the inclusion of students with ASD. Based on their interviews, their journal entries, and the online focus group, the participants all felt it necessary to believe in the process of including students with ASD in their general education classrooms in order to have successful outcomes. The successful outcomes affect all students in the inclusion classroom.

Therefore, when general education teacher participants (stakeholders) explained that having positive beliefs about the inclusion process was imperative to success for students with ASD, the evidence gathered from the data proved this point. Two of the participants recalled that before they worked in inclusion classrooms, they remembered colleagues on their grade
level complaining about having to work with another teacher in their classroom. These two participants stated that their colleagues felt that the students with ASD belonged in a special class and not in the general education setting. One participant described their feeling of apprehension with teaching students with ASD, but this participant realized their need to put aside the apprehensive feelings and believe in the process. All three of these participants ultimately had successful experiences with inclusion of students with ASD. Each of the general education teacher participants noted the significance of working with students with ASD in the inclusion setting. The willingness of these participants, as each of them shared the power of believing in themselves and the students with whom they were charged to teach in their general education classrooms, proved the significance.

Second, some of the general education teacher participants mentioned believing in the actual students with ASD. According to the participants’ interviews and journals, many of the students with ASD came to the general education class lacking social and communication skills. One of the participants, JJ noted, “Students with ASD must be treated with respect and compassion in order for them to understand and see that the possibilities of success are enormous if given the appropriate experiences in inclusion settings.” Additionally, four of the 10 general education teacher participants felt compelled to share how each saw the need to believe in the abilities of the students with ASD.

MK believed in himself, and he believed in his students with ASD. He wrote, “I could not work with students with ASD every day if I did not have belief in myself and belief in the process” (personal communication, April 7, 2017). Learning can occur for the students with ASD (Bandura, 1986). Belief in the process is that the process is critical to all stakeholders in the inclusion classroom.
Theme two: Relationships. As general education teachers become more involved in and responsible for the education of students with ASD, relationships between all parties are necessary (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003). As Lottie noted in her journal, “I have made tremendous relationships with the families of my students with ASD” (personal communication, April 7, 2017). These relationships help in the decision-making process during IEP meetings and in all other classroom decisions. Cultivating a relationship with the student with ASD and his family can facilitate the process of learning in the general education classroom.

The general education teacher participants cited several instances where they enjoyed the relationships with their students with ASD and their families. In some situations, the participants were surprised at how well the students with ASD responded to a relationship with their general education teacher. Cassie explained that once the students with ASD in her classroom became comfortable with her their work, behavior, and communication improved which in turn helped with the relationships with parents. Penny mentioned an instance where she did not feel comfortable with approaching the parents of one of her students with ASD. However, because the student struggled in mathematics she knew she needed to reach out. Cassie and the special education teacher met with the parents and discussed the challenges their child had in mathematics. Surprisingly, the parents welcomed their suggestions and told Cassie and the special education that they had witnessed such positive changes in their child’s behavior and academic ability. The parents welcomed any advice from their child’s teachers. Therefore, because of the relationships that Cassie and the special education teacher built with the students with ASD, their efforts proved beneficial.
The theories used to guide this study emphasized the need for these relationships that Cassie and Lottie mentioned. These relationships can indeed transform the circumstances in the classroom environment. Consequently, as these transformations of circumstances occur, the students with ASD are often able to find success in the general education setting. Participants Betty and Kay saw significant changes in the way their students with ASD worked on academic tasks. Betty found one of her students with ASD could work collaboratively with one of their general education peers on a science project for class.

Penny, one of the general education participants, saw these relationships developing over the course of the school year as students with ASD found comfort in the inclusion setting. Penny wrote, “Often the child with ASD enters my classroom and my general education students are a little hesitant to engage with him, but after a short period of time, the walls break down and relationships are formed” (personal communication, April 7, 2017). This gives the student with ASD a sense of belonging, which, in turn, improves learning. Many of the general education teacher participants emphasized the need for students with ASD to bond with their peers and the teachers working in the inclusion setting. Another participant, Nisa, stated in her interview, “I cannot emphasize enough the importance of students with ASD feeling like they belong” (personal communication, March 18, 2017). Belonging comes from developing relationships according to several of the general education teacher participants.

When reviewing the findings with the online focus group, the need for good relationships with special education teachers was another aspect of the participant experiences. Participants expressed the need to work collaboratively with special education teachers, parents, and other members of the IEP team to provide the best environment for students with ASD. In Betty’s time as an inclusion teacher, she has had three different special education teachers working with
her in her inclusion classroom. Betty found that the students with ASD received the best support and teaching when she and the special educations opened the lines of communication and planned effectively. Betty recalled that two of the three teachers met with her weekly to plan and review the happenings in the inclusion classroom. The time to sit and talk proved beneficial to Betty and all students in her classroom.

In her interview, Shelley spoke about her need to form a solid relationship with the general education teacher working in the inclusion setting. Shelley said, “Working collaboratively to meet the needs of all students is a beneficial relationship to the inclusion process” (personal communication, March 9, 2017). Each of the online focus group general education teacher participants noted their explicit needs for having good working relationships with the special education teachers in his or her inclusion classrooms. Planning, teaching, and teaming together for the common good of all students in the general education inclusion classroom was based on their relationships.

A third component of the participant experiences was relationships with parents. Through the IEP process and interactions with parents, the participants could build a community that fostered learning and growth for the students with ASD. JJ expressed that building that community with parents was paramount. JJ was one of those teachers who met with every single family the first month of school to build that rapport. JJ noted that he and the special education teacher found it far easier to discuss the hard things with parents of students with ASD if the initial relationship were formed from the beginning. Parents of students with ASD want what is best for their children. When teachers recognize this need, the process of building relationships is evident and thrives in the inclusion setting.
**Theme three: Benefits.** The benefits of working with students with ASD was the third theme that emerged from this study. The benefits are evident in the inclusion setting when general education and special education teachers collaborate to use effective practices promoting the social and academic growth of students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Schulze, 2016). Shelley and Lynn felt compelled to share their experiences of collaborating to use effective strategies in the classroom. Because of their experiences in the inclusion classroom, they both see the benefits of the general education teacher and the special education teacher working to meet the needs of the students with ASD as well as the general education students. Some of the beneficial strategies included differentiation, guided reading, and peer grouping. Those effective strategies added to the beneficial aspects.

The general education teacher participants shared the benefits of having students with ASD in their classroom. Kay was enthusiastic when she proclaimed that two of her favorite students in her years of teaching were both students with ASD who came into her general education classroom for an academic subject. She recalled their unique personalities and their genuine interest in the class lessons. Kay stated, “As I worked with these two students with ASD, I witnessed their growth academically and socially” (personal communication, March 3, 2017). Shelley was another participant who considered seeing the growth of her students with ASD as such a benefit from the process of inclusion. “I was amazed, and quite frankly surprised at the growth of one of my students with ASD” (Shelley, personal communication, March 9, 2017).

As the general education teachers share experiences, the benefits of learning about students with ASD was noted. Lynn described her experiences: “I really feared the whole process of inclusion when my principal first asked me to have a student with ASD in my general
education class” (personal communication, March 21, 2017). Lynn found the experience to be one of her most beneficial learning involvements in her career. Another participant, Lottie, explained how much she felt like she was now an expert in teaching students with ASD. She laughingly admitted, “I really am not an expert, but certainly feel like one” (Lottie, personal communication, March 16, 2017). That feeling was beneficial to the process according to Lottie.

Forming relationships with the families of students with ASD was another benefit found in the data. Nisa expanded on this theme in her interview. She noted that she always contacted the parents of students with ASD the first week of school. The meet and greet is a great time for informal introductions, but she felt that speaking with those parents in particular helped ease their fears and apprehension of having their child in the inclusion setting. The experience of students with ASD in the inclusion process can be overwhelming and in Nisa’s experience, parents were quite relieved to meet with her initially.

Participants were pleased with their connections to parents and family when they were working closely with students with ASD. Often parents of students with ASD welcome the expertise and advice of teachers. Cassie, Lynn, and Penny all provided examples of where they introduced themselves to parents before school even began to help provide a positive experience for the students with ASD. Cassie said she sent daily notes to the parents the first week of school sharing specific things that the students with ASD may have done in class. The notes offered a prompt for parents to initiate conversation with their child. Parents simply wanted to feel comfortable and have their children learn. Lynn and Penny would do a daily journal for parents to see what their child had done during the first few days of school. Penny would also write notes on papers to provide parents with specific information about assignments.
Theme four: Challenges. Challenges of working with students with ASD were prominent when reading the themes of the interview transcriptions, journals, and focus group results. Many of the challenges regarded social skills, communication, and academic difficulties. Betty felt challenged directly from the things that she had watched occur with one of her students before she ever came to Betty’s grade and classroom. She watched the student wander off from her class repeatedly the previous year, and she was a little worried about having that student in her classroom. Betty did not want that challenge. She recalled: “I specifically asked the special education teacher working with me if this student needed more supervision” (Betty, personal communication, March 16, 2017). Ultimately, she and the special education teacher formulated some solutions for her wandering; nevertheless, it remained a challenge in the back of her mind. Other participants noted the fear of having students disrupt the flow of their general education classrooms with potential outbursts or noises. While some of those issues arose in the inclusion setting, most participants relied on the special education teacher to help find solutions.

Lynn relied on the special education teacher working in her classroom to help her with many challenges. One of the students with ASD in her classroom struggled considerably with written expression. He would have a major meltdown if he had to write a paragraph. Lynn and the special educator working with her planned effectively to prepare this student prior to the time for the paragraph assignment. Ultimately, the challenge was faced and eventually the student could write a paragraph with fewer breakdowns.

Shelley mentioned in her journal that she was not prepared from her undergraduate classes to handle the challenges of teaching students with ASD. She was not apprehensive about teaching students with ASD but felt she was not trained to help this population of students. Shelley wrote in her journal, “I honestly felt like a failure at first, because this was a new
teaching experience for me” (personal communication, April 7, 2017). Shelley recalled that it took her a while to understand her students with ASD and to understand their needs. Eventually, Shelley’s challenges were minimized over the course of a few weeks.

Nisa wrote about significant challenges when she responded in the online focus group. She had some difficulties with one special education teacher who was working with her in the inclusion setting. “Finding the right mix with another teacher working in your classroom can be so difficult,” she noted (personal communication, May 1, 2017). She felt that having another teacher in her classroom has its benefits, but some students will take advantage of the situation. Nisa and the special education teacher had some tough conversations about compromising to make a successful environment for all students. She noted that the challenges were present but could easily be resolved if both the education and special education teachers work together.

While challenges were evident in the findings, I found that in most instances the challenges were minimal.

Results

I addressed four research questions in this study using general education teacher participant interviews, participant journals, a focus group, and my researcher journal.

Research Question One

How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms? I answered research question one with data from the general education teacher participants, their journals, and the online focus group. The participants were positive regarding their experiences with students with ASD in their general education inclusion classrooms. The participants described meaningful experiences teaching students with ASD in the inclusion environment.
Each participant concurred that while there may have been some struggles, welcoming the students with ASD into their classrooms added to the learning and the overall relationships among students in their classroom. In their experiences, the participants noted the importance of forming relationships with the students with ASD, their parents and families, and the special education teachers in the inclusion setting.

**Research Question Two**

In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion? General education teacher participants stated that the presence of students with ASD enhanced their beliefs about inclusive education. Those enhancements emerged from three areas: their belief in themselves, their belief in the students, and their belief in the process of inclusion. In each of the interviews, the participants readily admitted they were pleased with the presence of the students with ASD in their inclusion classroom. The presence of students with ASD helped the participants develop a belief in themselves as teachers. Additionally, all participants said they would be willing to continue being an inclusion teacher, and most of the participants have continued to serve their grade level in this capacity. Seven out of the 10 participants have been inclusion teachers for a great part of their teaching careers.

Second, believing in the students with ASD in their inclusion classrooms proved beneficial to the learning process as a whole. The participants strongly believed that inclusion was crucial to the learning of students with ASD and positively affected the learning of their general education students. The sense of belonging for students with ASD was necessary for effective learning in the inclusion setting.

The third aspect addressed belief in the process of inclusion of students with ASD. Inclusion is beneficial and successful when all stakeholders believe in the program. Stakeholders
demonstrated their understanding of inclusion, and they successfully worked in the inclusion setting to foster the belief in the process. When teachers, students, and families came together, belief in inclusion was realized.

**Research Question Three**

How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting? Challenges emerged from the data including general education teachers’ fears, the lack of effective preparation, and collaborating with special education teachers. One of the fears noted was communicating with students with ASD. Since communication can be an issue with students with ASD, participants voiced concerns about the students with ASD handling the rigors of interacting in the inclusion setting. Participation in large group and small group settings within the inclusion classroom required communication from all students. Participants noted that not all students with ASD are able to communicate effectively. Using hand signs for yes or no can be effective for students with ASD answering questions. Often the students with ASD struggled with communicating and interacting with their general education peers. One participant noted that she found that if she used prompting with the student with ASD each time she saw the student, he would eventually learn to respond. The biggest fear noted by a couple of the participants was the preconceived notion that students with ASD were all disruptive and possibly physically aggressive.

Several of the participants shared their feelings of inadequacy when working with students with ASD. Lack of teacher preparation and professional development were prominent concerns for working in the inclusion setting. Feeling apprehensive about teaching students with ASD can have impact on the learning in the classroom. Therefore, these participants felt they faced considerable challenges due to lack of training.
The last challenge was in regard to working with a special education teacher in the same classroom. One participant noted she was “a creature of habit” and felt intimidated by having a colleague in her classroom working with the students with ASD. Even though this challenge was evident initially, the participant found that over time, the relationship between her and the special education teacher improved. Another participant struggled with the presence of the special education teacher in her classroom because of her disruption to the class. When she would enter, students jumped up to hug her or welcome her. This challenge improved over time.

**Research Question Four**

How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting? Working with students with ASD, collaborating with special education teachers, and forming bonds with families were three benefits that emerged from the data. All 10 general education teacher participants were open about the benefits they have experienced teaching students with ASD in their inclusion classrooms. One participant wrote about how much she enjoyed her student with ASD and his participation in her classroom. She said the student added to her classroom each day and always did what the teacher asked of him. Another participant shared that his two students with ASD had changed his entire perspective on teaching. He understood that every student was unique and deserved to learn just like any other student.

Participants noted they found it beneficial to work with special education teachers. Collaborating to prepare lessons for students that meet all needs was beneficial for the general education teachers and the special education teachers. Having another teacher to help with challenges or behavioral issues was beneficial. The participants who were apprehensive about teaching students with ASD welcomed the expertise of the special education teacher. The
special education teacher was also useful for explaining the aspects of the IEP to the general education teacher.

Finally, family relationships were a beneficial aspect of the participants’ experiences with students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Understanding the needs of parents as they tended to be pushy or demanding was far easier if a relationship had been formed previously with the general education teacher. Following the IEP, communicating with parents, and being helpful with their child with ASD allayed fears for parents. When all stakeholders were communicating, the benefits of teaching students with ASD in the general education setting surpassed the challenges.

Summary

For this phenomenological study, 10 general education teacher participants who have taught students with ASD in inclusion settings provided information regarding their experiences. I provided descriptions of each participant along with information from their journal writings in this chapter. Four themes emerged from the data analysis. Those four themes included (a) beliefs, (b) relationships, (c) challenges, and (d) benefits. I described each of the four themes in this chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived experiences of elementary general education participants instructing students diagnosed with ASD in inclusive settings. In this chapter, I provide the conclusions drawn from the study in addition to possible contributions to the fields of research and education. I also include limitations and recommendations for future research in this chapter. Lastly, I present the findings as they relate to the research questions, the implications, and the recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

I followed the guidelines given by Moustakas (1994) for this phenomenological study. I collected data from the participant interviews, participant journals, online focus group, and my researcher’s journal. I analyzed the data collected from the 10 participants (eight females, two males) by identifying significant statements and themes. Four themes emerged from this process. I identified the following themes: (a) beliefs; (b) relationships; (c) challenges; and (d) benefits. I explained these themes in the answers to the following research questions.

Research Question One

How do elementary general education teachers in a suburban northwestern Georgia school district describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms? The 10 participants described their experiences in their interviews, their journals, and the online focus group. Overall, all 10 participants shared that they enjoyed their interactions with students with ASD. Participants found that if they set aside their apprehensiveness and welcomed these students into their classrooms, the process was beneficial. Additionally, the 10 participants all
agreed that the benefits outweighed the challenges when working with students with autism in their general education inclusion classrooms.

**Research Question Two**

In what ways do teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD influence their beliefs regarding inclusion? The 10 participants were in agreement that inclusion classrooms are best for students with ASD when possible. Based on their experiences, they believe that inclusion is beneficial for the students with ASD and all general education students. The least restrictive environment affords opportunities to students with ASD not found in other settings.

**Research Question Three**

How do teachers describe the challenges they faced with students with ASD in the inclusion setting? Challenges noted by three of the general education teacher participants included not having enough training in teaching students with ASD. Another challenge was the inability to communicate effectively with some of the students with ASD. Five of the 10 of the participants voiced this particular challenge. Collaborating with another teacher in the general education classroom was a challenge for one participant in particular. She felt somewhat hindered, to be honest with her special education colleague regarding issues with their interactions in her general education classroom. The last challenge included the strain of relationships among students with ASD and general education students in the inclusion setting.

**Research Question Four**

How do teachers describe the benefits they received with students with ASD in the inclusion setting? General education teacher participants recognized many benefits, such as exposing general education students to the diversity of having students with ASD in their inclusion classrooms. Another benefit included the relationships general education teachers form
with their students with ASD. Another noted benefit was the experience of working with a special education teacher to collaborate on lesson planning in the general education inclusion setting.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of elementary general education elementary teachers instructing students with ASD in inclusive settings (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas 1994). The phenomenon investigated was to understand the deep and rich value of elementary general education teachers’ experiences with students with ASD. The theories guiding this study were Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) social ecological systems theory and Bandura’s (2000) social learning theory as each of these theories adopts the perspective that individuals are products of their environments, and their actions can impact the students and teachers in the inclusive setting. The discussion below will provide information regarding the empirical and theoretical findings. I include the four themes (a) beliefs, (b) relationships, (c) challenges, and (d) benefits derived from interviews, journals, and focus group, in the discussion below.

**Empirical Discussion and Findings**

**Beliefs.** Implementation of inclusion requires confidence in the program from all stakeholders (Hernandez, 2013). Belief in the process was necessary to see positive outcomes for students with ASD (Boswell et al., 2014). The experiences of the general education teacher participants voiced the need for the teachers, students, and parents to have belief in the process of inclusion. This belief enhances the learning and the outcomes of the students with ASD in the inclusion setting. The 10 participants were compelled to believe in the process in order for their students with ASD to succeed. Achieving successful inclusion required teachers demonstrating
compassion and understanding for students with ASD, thus believing in the students and the process (Kauffman & Badar, 2014).

**Relationships.** The experiences of the general education teacher participants expressed the need to work collaboratively with special education teachers, parents, and other members of the IEP team to provide the best environment for students with ASD. When reviewing the findings with the online focus group, participants noted evidence of needing good working relationships between the general education teacher and the special education teacher. Each of the online focus group participants noted their explicit needs for having good working relationships with the special education teachers in their inclusion classrooms. Relationships served as the basis for planning, teaching, and teaming together for the common good of all students in the general education inclusion classroom. Additionally, the relationships of the general education teacher participants with their students with ASD and their parents were crucial to their overall experiences.

Opportunity for social growth is an important outcome of the interactions and relationships (Brown & McIntosh, 2012). The relationships that develop between those working in the inclusion classroom is crucial as noted by the 10 participants. Relationships with peers in the general education setting is a positive aspect of inclusion practice for students with ASD (Bock, Borders, & Probst, 2016). The review of literature in this study revealed this, but seeing this as a common theme from the participants proved to be a practical implication.

**Benefits.** The benefits of providing an environment of learning for students with ASD were evident in the data. Teacher participants expressed that their participation in the process was beneficial to them as professionals. This was evident in their responses from the four participants in the focus group. Each of the focus group participants stated that while they may
have initially been apprehensive about the inclusion of the students with ASD, they found the outcomes beneficial. Noting their work with a special education teacher and getting to know students who may be somewhat different from some of the general education students was a common thread among all 10 participants. In addition, working collaborative with the special education teacher afforded new techniques and instructional practices for us in their classroom. These benefits are evident in the inclusion setting when general education and special education teachers collaborate to help students with ASD succeed (Harris, 2014).

**Challenges.** Although many challenges were noted, the online focus group of general education teacher participants noted that challenges only positively added to their experiences in most instances. Dealing with behavioral, emotional, and communicative challenges brought a better understanding and a coping mechanism for working in the inclusion classroom with students with ASD. While challenges were evident, they did not subvert the positive outcomes of the experiences of all general education teacher participants. One participant noted her struggles with the special education teacher working in her general education classroom. The challenges of having students with ASD in the general education classroom and adding another adult can be challenging. In some situations, there is a need for more than two adults in the inclusion classroom. Students with ASD may need more supervision or support in the school setting. Therefore, in many inclusion classrooms, more than two adults are present. However, the inclusion benefits outweigh the challenges for students with ASD working alongside their peers (Grant & Jones-Goods, 2016).

**Theoretical Discussion and Findings**

**Bandura’s social learning theory.** Bandura’s (1997) social learning theory focuses on person, environment, and behavior. From the findings in this research, all three areas of focus
were evident in the experiences of the general education teacher participants as they work with students with ASD. Relating the experiences of the participants with the students with ASD correlates to the Bandura’s (1997) theory, which, in turn, stemmed from the behaviors of all involved. In addition, social modeling was apparent in the findings from the interviews of the general education teacher participants (DiBenedetto & Bembenutty, 2013). As students with ASD communicated and interacted with peers in the general education setting, social modeling occurred.

Another key component found in Bandura’s theory of social learning is that of transforming to one’s circumstances. Each general education teacher participant noted that students with ASD transformed to the circumstances of their environment as did each general education teacher. All participants did this by facilitating change in their classrooms and their mindsets as they welcomed students with ASD into their general education classrooms.

The ability to bring about desired outcomes (See Figure 6) in the classroom is an integral part of the general education teacher participants’ experiences when educating students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Ruble et al., 2011). Teacher self-efficacy produced positive outcomes when educating students with ASD in the inclusion setting (Ruble et al., 2011). Furthermore, teachers revealed that their training enhanced their self-efficacy to some extent (Higgins & Guilliford, 2014). Behavior stems from one’s learning environment and can affect the student with ASD in the classroom as shown in the findings.
Bronfenbrenner’s social ecological system. The general education teacher participants and the students with ASD were considered the individuals within Bronfenbrenner’s microsystem (Christensen, 2016). Shared experiences of this theory provided the setting for the participants. The mesosystems and the exosystems work together to be relationships within the inclusion setting through social interactions with students and teachers. The school environment in the exosystem is where the students with ASD were influenced by their peers and by others in the inclusion setting.

Within the macrosystem of the Bronfenbrenner’s social ecological system lie the overarching influences of the culture, the economics, the education of the students with ASD, and the general education teacher participants’ school communities (Howie, 2013). In this study’s findings, the general education teacher participants all noted how the relationships and environment affect their students with ASD.

Therefore, the theories guiding this study were evident in the results of the interviews, the focus group interviews, and the participants’ journals. Each theory as it related to environments, social interactions, and relationships was evident in the findings. General education teacher
participants agreed that students with ASD could and should belong in general education inclusion classrooms. These environments promoted learning, socialization, and positive interactions.

In reviewing the findings of this research, a clear relationship to the empirical and theoretical literature in Chapter Two was evident. This research offered empirical contributions to help close the gap in research regarding general education teachers’ experiences of teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Placing students with ASD in the inclusion classroom with a general education teacher and general education students was beneficial (Robertson et al., 2003). The benefits of the least restrictive environment affected the learning of all students, especially that of the students with ASD. There was limited research describing the experiences of general education teachers teaching students with ASD (Tremblay, 2013). This study contributed to the field of research regarding general education teachers and their experiences instructing students with ASD. The data from this study contributes to the teaching of students with ASD and the collaborative work between general education teachers and special education teachers within the inclusion setting. Influencing pedagogical practices could be a direct result of this research.

**Implications**

**Theoretical Implications**

**Bandura’s social learning theory.** The general education teacher participants and the students with ASD are the persons working the environment described by Bandura. In an environment like that described by Bandura, those persons (general education participants and students with ASD) exhibit behaviors and those behaviors help them to transform their environments and meet the challenges of their circumstances. Ultimately, those persons and
their behaviors provide successful learning environments that are considered the outcomes of Bandura’s (1977) social learning theory. The outcomes promote self-efficacy in all those involved (Ruble et al., 2011).

**Bronfenbrenner’s social ecological system.** The general education teacher participants and students with ASD are the individuals within the microsystem described by Bronfenbrenner (1977) as crucial. As found in the data, the general education participants have an integral part in participating in these systems where individuals have direct roles in the experiences of their students with ASD. The work of all stakeholders in the inclusion classroom directly influence the outcomes and behaviors of students with ASD. The inclusion setting is the environment that along with the general education teacher influences the students with ASD (Poulou, 2014).

**Empirical Implications**

The empirical implications from this study were evident in the voices of the 10 participants. As stakeholders in educating students with ASD in the inclusion setting, the participants bore the weight of the responsibility for working collaboratively with other colleagues to ensure the education of all students (Goodall, 2015). The participants understood their influence as teachers in the inclusion setting teaching students with ASD (Gurgur & Uzuner, 2010; Sadioğlu, Bilgin, Batu, & Oksal, 2013). The participants described their experiences of teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting as positive experiences with more benefits than challenges.

Furthermore, the empirical implications of this study helped in closing the gap of describing experiences of elementary general education teachers teaching students with ASD in inclusion settings (Reynolds, 2015). While participants felt positive about their roles in the inclusion setting, over half of the 10 participants felt the need for further training, especially in
their undergraduate work (Condrey, 2015). Further implications indicated the need to train general education teachers to work in inclusion settings (Talib & Paulson, 2015). Understanding the needs of the students with ASD and believing in the process was described as an intricate part of this study.

**Practical Implications**

Not only are the empirical and theoretical implications evident in this study, but practical implications exist as well. The findings from this research can be useful to general education teachers and special education teachers working in the general education inclusion classroom. Clearly general education teacher participants need opportunities to work collaboratively with the special education teacher co-teaching in the special education environment. This collaboration brings about positive outcomes for the students with ASD as effective practices and instructional practices are provided to ensure success. Additionally, as noted by two of the participants, further professional development regarding students with ASD would be an implication to further explore.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

For this study, the participants were elementary general education teachers in the suburban northwest Georgia MCSD. The rationale behind the decision to choose general education teachers was based on their direct contact with students with ASD in their general education classrooms, which directly correlated to the gap in the literature (Able et al., 2015; Berry et al., 2011). This rationale enhanced the purposes of this study to look specifically at the phenomenon of elementary general education teachers and their experiences with students with ASD. I chose this particular district because of its high number of inclusion classrooms found in the district’s elementary schools.
A few limitations occurred in this research study. Limitations can have effects on the research of a phenomenon (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012). The first limitation in the study was that many of the general education inclusion teachers in the MCSD are females. Research in education has shown that male role models can be beneficial to elementary aged students (Boe, 2013). The male role models can be helpful for the students with ASD in any classroom (Clark et al., 2015). Even though this may be a less diverse group, the experiences of these teachers can still be voiced through their interviews, journals, and responses. I worked to develop as much diversity as possible in the sampling process (Creswell, 2013). Participants’ diverse professional backgrounds, varied years of experience, and distinct teacher preparation programs served as the basis for the diversity within the sampling.

Second, the diverse group of participants came from similar schools. Originally, I had planned to use diverse schools within the MCSD. Because of the parameters provided by the MCSD regarding the research, a limitation existed by using certain schools. I would have preferred to use a more diverse group of schools. The MCSD employee providing permission for research chose the schools for this study, thus restricting my options and control. Therefore, while the general education teacher participants were diverse, they were from schools with similar student populations, programs, and general education classrooms.

Finally, using 10 participants for this study could be considered a limitation. While I gathered significant data, a larger population of participants may have enhanced this study. The research plan called for 10-15 participants. Perhaps using a larger group would have resulted in some differences in the findings.
**Recommendations for Future Research**

The phenomenon explored in this research study was general education teachers’ experiences teaching students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Through reviewing the participants’ experiences from interviews, journal entries, and a focus group, this study sought to provide a voice to these teachers’ experiences. Based on the findings of this research study, I recommend further research. A larger population of participants from more diverse schools, more emphasis on the relationships of general education special education teachers, and further research of teacher preparation for teaching students with ASD are recommendations.

An expansion of this study would entail using a larger population of general education teacher participants. The 10 participants were from similar schools with similar populations of students with ASD. Expanding this research study to larger schools with larger populations of inclusion settings and students with ASD could bring further insight into the phenomenon.

Another recommendation for further research might include using a more diverse selection of schools to enhance this study. Using a comparative case study would be one consideration. I also recommend using schools with Title I programs, or other underprivileged schools. A larger group of participants from more diverse schools would give an additional aspect to the phenomenon in this research study.

Further research including the experiences of general education and special education teachers working in inclusion classrooms would be another recommendation. Perhaps using a case study approach to follow the experiences of several general education teachers would contribute to the phenomenon of general education teachers’ experiences with teaching students with ASD.
Additionally, researching better practices in professional development or preservice training would be future research. Based on the data from this study, expanding the experiences to include further training or professional development for general education teachers would be recommended for further research. The field of education must include more training programs for teaching students with ASD as this population of students has increased drastically.

Summary

This phenomenological study provided a voice to the experiences of general education teachers’ experiences working with students with ASD in their inclusion classrooms. After reviewing the literature, there was a gap found in research regarding the lived experiences of general education teachers and their work with students with ASD.

Findings from the study contributed to closing the gap in the literature by expressing the experiences of the general education teachers teaching students with ASD in their general education inclusion classrooms. The general education teacher participants recognized the importance of relationships with students with ASD as well as the relationships in their classrooms with their peers and the special education teachers. The beliefs of the participants to provide the least restrictive environment for students with ASD is another aspect of this study. One of the general education teacher participants expressed her experiences succinctly in this passage:

As a general education teacher, I had no idea how my life would be changed because of my experiences with students with ASD. I am forever indebted to these children and their families who have taught me to love a whole other aspect of teaching. (JJ, personal communication, 2017)
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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Recruitment Letter

February 9, 2017

Dear Teacher,

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree, and I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are willing to participate, you will be asked to participate in a face-to-face interview, an online focus group, and a response journal. It should take you approximately 2-3 weeks for 2-4 hours to complete the procedures listed. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please review the consent document and respond to my email with your desire to be a possible participant. I will contact you for an interview. At that time, I will provide the consent form for you to sign. The consent document contains additional information about my research.

Sincerely,

Patricia Massengale
Doctoral Candidate Liberty University
Appendix B: Informed Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF ELEMENTARY GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS’ EXPERIENCES TEACHING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
Patricia M. Massengale
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study investigating the experiences of elementary general education teachers teaching students with autism spectrum disorder. You were selected as a possible participant because you have experiences teaching students with autism spectrum disorder in the general education setting. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions before agreeing to be in this study.

Patricia M. Massengale, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to provide a voice to the elementary general education teachers teaching students with autism spectrum disorder in the general education classroom.

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher, which will take approximately one to two hours. The face-to-face interviews will be audio-recorded, but pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality.
2. Respond to a journal prompt for 2 weeks. Over the course of two weeks, the daily writing will take approximately 15-20 minutes. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality.
3. Participate in an online focus group answering several questions regarding the analyzed data. The online focus group will be conducted using an online discussion board format. Participation will take approximately 45 minutes to one hour. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality.

Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:
The risks involved in this study are very minimal and are no more than participants would encounter in everyday life. In the situation that you may feel significant discomfort while in this study, you may choose to stop participating at any time.
The benefits of this study will be the overall benefit of understanding the experiences of elementary general education teachers instructing students with autism spectrum disorder in the elementary general education classroom. While you participation may have potential benefits to education and society as a whole, you may not receive any direct benefits from your participation.
**Compensation:** The study is completely voluntary, and there will be no monetary compensation provided to you as a participant.

**Confidentiality:** The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report I might publish, I 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. We may share the data we collect from you for use in future research studies or with other researchers; if we share the data that we collect about you, we will remove any information that could identify you before we share it.

• Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and locations.
• Data will be stored on a password-protected computer. Documents will be kept under lock and key.
• Interviews will be transcribed by a professional transcriptionist and will only be used by the researcher and the transcriptionist.
• After a three-year period of storing the data, recordings will be erased.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:** Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University and the Cherokee County Schools District. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**How 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.

**Contacts and Questions:** The researcher conducting this study is Patricia M. Massengale. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact her at 770-324-5332/pmassengale@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty advisor, Dr. Rick Bragg, at rbragg2@liberty.edu.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd, Green Hall 1887, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information for your records.

**Statement of Consent:** I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

(NOTE: DO NOT AGREE TO PARTICIPATE UNLESS IRB APPROVAL INFORMATION WITH CURRENT DATES HAS BEEN ADDED TO THIS DOCUMENT.)

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

__________________________  __________________________
Signature of Participant       Date
Signature of Investigator

Date
January 25, 2017

Patricia Massengale
IRB Approval 2719.012517: A Phenomenological Study of Elementary General Education Teachers’ Experiences Teaching Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Dear Patricia Massengale,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year, or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

[Name]

Graduate Dean, IRP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY
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Appendix D: District Approval

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT DATA COLLECTION ACTIVITIES WITHIN THE SYSTEM

Name: Patricia M. Massengale

CCSD Employee: Yes X No

If No list employer:

College/University Supervising Activity:

School of Education, Liberty University

Degree in Progress (Level/Area):

Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction

Locations for Data Collection:

Various Elementary schools

Date of Request:

12/19/2016

Requested Date(s) for Data Collection:

January - March, 2017

Professor’s Name:

Dr. Fred Milacci

Phone #/Email:

434-592-6297/fmilacci@liberty.edu

Include with this request:

➢ A letter from your supervising professor on college or university letterhead indicating support for your research and his/her confirmation of data collection validity.

➢ A brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct. (Page 2 of this form)

➢ Method of data collection assessment (Page 2 of this form); Number of respondents, etc.

➢ Copy of interview questions, surveys, etc. that will be used. If student data/videos are used, a notarized “Release of Educational Records for Research Purposes Confidentiality Statement” and a copy of a letter requesting parent permission to use the data will be required.

Patricia M. Massengale

I hereby agree to not hold the Henrico County School System liable for any findings or commentary involved in this research. I understand that without the express written permission of the Henrico County School System, I am not authorized to conduct any data collection involving system employees or students and/or any other information that is protected by Federal or State Law. Furthermore, a copy of all findings and data collection instruments will be made available to the Henrico County Board of Education. All research is to be sent to the Office of Assessment upon completion of the project.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________ 2017

Signature of Principal (if applicable): ___________________________ Date: __________ 2017

Send completed form to: Director, Office of Assessment

Staff Use Only

Permission given ___________________________ Permission denied ___________________________

Office of Assessment

Conditions of Permission: ___________________________

Denied due to: ___________________________

Revised 01/2012
Please write a brief summary of the issues being researched and the type of data collection you are requesting to conduct. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the lived experiences of general education. The research questions guiding this elementary teachers instructing students diagnosed with ASD in inclusive settings. The research questions guiding the study include: how elementary school general education teachers describe their experiences teaching students with ASD in their classrooms, how does the presence of students with ASD influence teacher beliefs regarding inclusion, and what are the challenges and the benefits that elementary school general education teachers face with students with ASD in the inclusion setting. Participants for this study will be chosen via written emailed notification. Approximately 20 general education teacher participants will be used for this study. The participants will participate in an open-ended interview of

Indicate your method of data collection assessment (surveys, interviews, and/or test data)

Interviews

Check the appropriate box(es) which indicate respondents:

☐ Administrators
☐ Teachers/Certified Personnel
☐ Classified Personnel
☐ Students

Note the number of data collection instruments being used (i.e., number of expected respondents)

No more than 20 participants

Revised 01/2012
Appendix E: Sample Page from Researcher’s Journal

Interview Day

Wow, I have begun my research journey today. I interviewed 3 participants today. I was impressed with their years of experience and their years.

It was amazing to hear some participants share their experiences with teaching students with A.D.D. There were many unexpected stories from some of the participants.

One participant even said she was so grateful she turned down the inclusion program years ago. However, after talking to a colleague she realized she could do it.

I am reading one or two of the transcripts and find it interesting that not all of the participants found their experiences to be challenging. I expected more challenge.
Appendix F: Sample Page from Participant’s Journal

Describe one or more interactions with any of your students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the inclusion setting. Please respond to this same prompt daily for at least a two-week period.

Student A & B are both Autistic.

Student A was upset because he wanted to go back home. He did not feel like working because he didn’t sleep well. He has a hard time coming back after a break. I talked with him about how I felt, that I was also tired and that it was OK to feel that way after having a fun vacation.

Student B came into the classroom running first thing in the morning and stood on his chair. This was very unlike him. I had to very calmly get him seated and help him unpack & hang his backpack. He had a difficult time beginning on morning work so I had to stay beside him until I saw him begin to relax.

Talked with Student A at recess because he was sitting by himself at recess. Tried to talk to him about playing with the other kids, playing ball. He said he was too tired. After we talked he went to play with the girls who were jump roping.