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## How Do General Education Teachers Feel Prepared to Teach Individuals with Autism in the Classroom

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HOW DO GENERAL EDUCATION TEACHERS FEEL PREPARED TO TEACH  
INDIVIDUALS WITH AUTISM IN THE CLASSROOM

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

of the Department of Leadership Education

College of Education

of Winona State University

By:

Colin A. Valley

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree of

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## **Abstract**

This paper will deal with ways general education teachers can better serve individuals with autism in their classroom. This can be accomplished in many ways, and these ways will be discussed throughout. Research for this topic has been done in many different ways but overall, the root of how general education teachers feel about having individuals with autism in their classroom has not (Jones, A. P., & Frederickson, N. 2010). Throughout his study, the researcher will find ways to make general education teachers k-12 feel more prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Many general education teachers struggle with confidence when teaching individuals with autism in the general education classroom (Majoko, 2018). For student success to happen in the general education classroom, teachers must have confidence in themselves and the trainings they have received (Anglim, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018). IDEIA (2004) mandates that students with disabilities be educated in their Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Erpelding, 2012). For autistic individuals to achieve success, they must be in their LRE (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson & Scott, 2013).

There are two independent factors that affect general education teachers regarding their involvement in the education of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The first is an increase in children being diagnosed with ASD, while the second is an emphasis on the inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom (William, Johnson & Sukhodolsky, 2005). Teaching students with ASD requires the use of teaching strategies and approaches for which general education teachers may not have the training. General education teachers may also struggle to implement inclusion successfully in order to meet the needs of their students if the special education teachers do not provide support (Leach & Duffy, 2009). Individuals with autism in the general education classroom have both academic and behavioral needs that need to be met. A characteristic of individuals with autism is resistant to change (Reed, 1996). When changing an environment for an individual with autism more behaviors may occur resulting in less academic work being completed. Individuals with autism also have social deficits (Reed, 1996). These social deficits can show in many ways. One being hard to build a

positive and meaningful relationship with the general education teacher (Reed, 1996). Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), refers to the class of neurodevelopmental disorders characterized by deficiencies in the social interaction and communication, as well as the presence of behaviors, activities and interests that are repetitive and restrictive (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). When an individual with autism is placed in the general education classroom, their social interactions and lines of communication change. This can result in behaviors such as inappropriate laughing or giggling to cover up the discomfort they may feel (Reed, 1996). In general, students with ASD do not reach the same academic outcomes as typical developing students (National Research Council, 2001). Independent classroom activities are hard for students with ASD. They are easily distracted and often show off-task behaviors (Ruble & Robinson, 2007). This can cause an issue between the relationship development of the general education teacher and the student with autism in the classroom (Caplan, 2016). The flow of this interaction depends on the characteristics of both the student and teacher, along with the teachers experience in teaching students with ASD (Caplan, 2016).

### **Problem Statement**

To provide students with ASD an education tailored to their needs, appropriate and flexible curriculum and instructional methods are needed, as well as enough time for teachers to familiarize themselves with materials needed to plan a lesson (Van Der Steen, Geveke, Steenbakkens & Steenbeek, 2020). When teachers feel prepared and capable, this positively influences students learning progress. The general problem is the prevalence of students with ASD is increasing (Lovanne, 2003), and general education teachers do not feel capable of teaching these students (Wresting, 2010). General education teachers reported they had less

available resources and support compared to their colleagues in special education (Buell, Hallman, McCormick & Scheer, 1999). General education teachers indicated they need appropriate in-service training to optimize their curriculum and find ways to assess the progress of students with ASD in their classroom (Buell, Hallman, McCormick & Scheer, 1999). Research has shown that these experiences improve teacher efficacy and lead to an increased level of confidence when teaching students with ASD (Jung, 2007). While instructing students with ASD, teachers need to understand each student's needs are different (Sears, 2010).

School is not always the best place for individuals with ASD to show who they truly are (Sears, 2010). This can sometimes make the student with ASD come off as frustrated or uninterested towards the materials being taught (Eprelding, 2012). Teachers become frustrated because they are trying to teach individuals with ASD the same way as general education students, and some teachers do not have the expertise to provide the range of the necessary inclusive teaching strategies to meet students with ASD learning needs (Sears, 2010).

The worldwide trend towards inclusion makes it important to provide educational professionals with the resources they need to optimally teach students with ASD in the general education setting (De Leeuw, De Boer & Minnaert, 2017). The purpose of this study is to examine if general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

### **Background of the Problem**

In 2000, the CDC reported that one out of every 154 children have been diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2016). In 2016, the CDC reported that one out of every 54 children have been diagnosed with ASD (CDC, 2016). The number of children identified with ASD is growing

dramatically due to the diagnosis expanding to include children with milder symptoms (CDC, 2016). Students diagnosed with ASD have limitations regarding functional and effective communication, show repetitive behaviors, and have impairments in initiating and sustaining reciprocal social interactions (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

The concept of a continuum of services refers to the notion that a full range of services or placement options may be necessary to meet the needs of special education students identified with a disability (McDuffie, 2010). Students with ASD are to be serviced in an inclusive setting when possible (Erpelding, 2012). Since teaching ASD students in an inclusive classroom is a fairly new concept, ensuring that general education teachers have appropriate training is necessary for student success (Erpelding, 2012).

According to the Center of Disease Control and Prevention, autistic students may exhibit the following characteristics: Social awkwardness, deficits in nonverbal communication, emotional reciprocity, reduced sharing of interests and affection. Individuals with autism can easily become over stimulated which can lead to behaviors in the general education classroom (Reed, 1996). The severity of a student with autism can be based on social communication impairments and restricted repetitive patterns of behavior (Erpelding, 2012).

### **Research Questions**

Throughout research, it has become clear that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach individuals with ASD in the general education classroom (Anglim, Johanna, Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018). The researcher has proposed questions that are designed to find out if general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with ASD in the general education classroom. The following research questions guided this study.

RQ1: What do general education teachers grades k-12 need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

RQ2: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

RQ3: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

### **Limitations/Delimitations**

A limitation that the researcher will run into during this study is the number of participants that will be interviewed. Because of Covid- 19, general education teachers are asked to teach in-person and virtually. Teachers are not given a lot of prep time due to Covid- 19 restrictions and do not want to take the time to participate in a research study.

### **Definition of Terms**

**Autism.** A developmental disorder characterized by problems with social interaction, language and other communication, and learning. It can also involve repetitive behavior, the desire for routine, and remarkable mental abilities. Individuals with autism have a lower IQ and are slow to develop language (Teitelbaum & Teitelbaum, 2008).

**Autism spectrum disorder (ASD).** A developmental disorder characterized by problems with social interaction, language and other communication, and learning. It can also involve repetitive behavior, the desire for routine, and remarkable mental abilities. Individuals with ASD have a higher IQ and develop language at a normal age (Teitelbaum & Teitelbaum, 2008).

**Inclusive education.** The integration through education of disabled students previously segregated, into general education classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers (Leach & Duffy, 2009).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA):** IDEA is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities. (IDEIA, 2004).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):** An environment in which special education students are to be educated with general education students, to the maximum extent that is appropriate to meet that student's needs (Richard, 1997).

### **Summary**

Chapter one discussed the problem statement, background of the research question, limitations for the study, and the definition of terms. In chapter two the researcher will be discussing the review of the literature, historical overview of the problem, the origin of the problem, the last ten years of the problem, and the theoretical framework.

## **Chapter II:**

### **Review of the Literature**

Research has shown that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. General education teachers do not feel they have received the proper training to assist students with ASD in their classroom and help them reach their full potential (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson & Scott, 2013). The lack of understanding on how to properly structure an inclusive classroom by general education teachers has led to students with ASD needs not being met (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). Research has shown that implementing inclusive classrooms can cause issues for general education teachers and takes their time away from focusing on curriculum when not given the proper trainings. Research shows that arranged professional development does not answer the questions that general education teachers have on how to properly run an inclusive classroom. General education teachers want to learn how to effectively and ethically implement inclusive strategies into their classrooms to meet the needs of students with ASD (Humphrey & Symes, 2011). When inclusive classrooms are implemented correctly, research shows that the skill development of all students in the classroom rises (Major, 2020). This gives the general education teacher more confidence in their abilities to teach students with ASD in the classroom (Major, 2020).

Inclusion is the approach by which special education students are educated in the general education classroom (Sears, 2010). Along with the need for a more comprehensive approach in preparation, researchers have also addressed the inconsistent competencies for teachers preparing to teach students with autism in the general education classroom (Barnhill, 2011).

## **Historical Overview of the Problem**

Autism is stated to be a highly heritable disorder with a complex inheritance pattern (Toth & Stobbe, 2011). It is mandated that students with disabilities receive their education in their least restrictive environment (IDEIA, 2004). The IDEIA (2004), states students with disabilities should be educated in the general education setting.

The role of a special education teacher has changed over the years. They must now develop meaningful educational programs that are grounded in research-based practices and produce results to improve student's life's (Yell, Shriner & Katsiyannis, 2006). The relationship between the special education teacher and general education teacher is important because to align instructional activities with state standards, they need to have a working knowledge of content standards in the core academic areas (Eprelding, 2012). This alignment leads to inclusive classrooms.

The use of inclusive classrooms started to become more of a focus in schools throughout the last decade (Majoko, 2016). Inclusive classrooms put more stress on general education teachers to adapt their roles and curriculum for individuals with autism (Majoko, 2018). Inclusive classrooms are becoming an effective strategy for meeting the needs of special education students worldwide (White, 2005).

## **Origin of the Problem**

The origin of the problem started when the decision was made to move towards inclusive classrooms (Majoko, 2018). The overall goal for inclusive classrooms was to help individuals with disabilities find their LRE (Prendeville & Kinsella, 2018). The goal is to provide an education in the general education classroom for all students. General education teachers are not

prepared to meet each student's needs without the proper training on how to effectively run an inclusive classroom (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson & Scott, 2013).

For inclusive classrooms to succeed, general education teachers must receive the proper training and feel like they are backed up with the help of administrators and coworkers (Eldevik, Hastings, Jahr & Hughes, 2012). For inclusive classrooms to be effective, teachers need to individualize content knowledge for individuals with autism in the class (Eprelding, 2012). This presents issues for teachers and administration in districts that struggle with class size, demands of their time, and reduction of available resources (White, 2005). When students with autism can participate in the general education curriculum, it provides them with a higher order of thinking skills, problem solving, collaboration skills, sense of responsibility, and self-esteem (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). The special education teacher and general education teacher need to collaborate more now than ever due to special education students being in the general education classroom (Eprelding, 2012).

### **The Last Ten Years of the Problem**

Autism is a medical condition. It is a spectrum disorder that can range from mild to extreme or severe and can worsen overtime. Autism is diagnosed by observations and evaluations of development and behavior (Sears, 2010). Each person with autism is affected differently since some will show evidence of a few characteristics while others will exhibit them all (Eprelding, 2012). There are four different time frames when autism becomes noticeable. The first is early onset. These individuals do not develop typical eye contact and social interaction during the first few months of life. The second is regression. These individuals are playful, happy and interactive. Eventually they stop using language they know and have no social interactions.

This is the most common frame for an individual to be diagnosed with autism. The third stage is halted progression. These individuals do not progress like normal individuals do after the age of one. Language and lack of social interactions are not the typical standards for individuals their age. The last frame is Asperger syndrome. This is the most high-functioning form of autism and hardest to diagnose. It is diagnosed by lack of social interactions and abnormal behavior compared to peers (Sears, 2010).

Many times, special education students can be fully educated in the general education classroom (Eprelding, 2012). Individuals with autism LRE is often in the general education setting (Hardman & Dawson, 2008). General education and special education teachers are to provide the appropriate services that will most likely lead to successful outcomes for special education children as well as their peers, parents and teachers (Patterson, 2005). Teachers can help guide this process by addressing the physical structure of the classroom, introducing basic routes to the student and have a positive attitude while in the classroom.

### **Theoretical Framework**

How do general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom can be broken down into two points. The first being that individuals who have autism learn differently than general education students. The second being that research shows that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. The process to help general education teachers feel more prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom can be accomplished by using the constructivism learning theory in the inclusive classroom.

Constructivism learning theory takes an approach in which students are actively involved in the learning process (Fernando & Markiar, 2017). It requires students to engage in the learning process by observation, interpretation and adaption (Al-Shammari, Faulkner & Forlin, 2019). Constructivism is designed around the teacher being the facilitator. They are to provide essential information and organize materials that help students discover their own learning (Liu & Ju, 2010). General education teachers can design lessons that will allow students to be actively engaged in the learning process which will enhance the learning of individuals with autism in inclusive classrooms.

Visual images, hands-on activities and social interactions are ways inclusive classrooms can use the constructivism learning theory. The belief is that autistic students in an inclusive classroom using constructivism learning theory will be able to learn from experiences and real-life applications (Al-Shammari, Faulkner & Forlin, 2019). Since the teacher is the facilitator, it is their job to make sure the lesson is designed around the knowledge of the students and find ways to make it engaging and active to fit the learning abilities of all students in the classroom (Al-Shammari, Faulkner & Forlin, 2019). The constructivism learning theory will be used in chapter five to discuss the finds of the research study and give suggestions to help general education teachers feel more prepared to teach individuals with autism in their classroom.

## **Summary**

In chapter two the researcher discussed the historical overview of the problem, the origin of the problem, the last ten years of the problem and the theoretical framework. The current data shows the general education teachers do not feel prepared to best serve individuals with autism in the general education classroom. For this to change, the results will have to not only show this

but give affordable, strict, and research-based trainings to help general education teachers feel more confident in their skills.

### Chapter III

The purpose of this study is to better understand if general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom. A qualitative research approach was used in this study to better understand if general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in their classroom grades k-12. Qualitative research focuses on the input from teachers and staff to develop numerous forms of data that can better understand a problem (Cömert, 2018). Qualitative research is designed to give a systematic review of a situation that is thought through by individuals that are directly dealing with the issue (Wagner, Kawulich & Garner, 2019).

A qualitative research approach is appropriate since the researcher is seeking understanding from teachers regarding how teachers perceive their preparedness to teach autistic students in the general education classroom grades k-12.

This study was conducted by doing interviews. These interviews were done over video conferencing. Interviews helped the researcher to take control of what was being asked, making it clear and concise (Cömert, 2018). Interviews allowed the researcher the ability to word the questions in such a way that made the participant answer with more detail. The researcher followed proper interview protocols throughout the data collection process.

Qualitative research is designed to allow individuals to give their perspective on a subject or matter (Cömert, 2018). Often times qualitative research is done on peers or coworkers that allow them to state their opinion on a matter through a professional lens (Cömert, 2018). This research study fits that professional lens and allowed the subjects to express their opinion on if they feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom grades k-12.

## **Sample and Setting**

The target population of the research study was general education teachers grades k-12. Six general education teachers grades k-12 who have had individuals with autism in their classroom, were chosen to be subjects in this study. The researcher chose general education teachers who have been in the profession for at least one year. Due to covid-19, the researcher did not want a subject who has not been able to see all their students face to face. These subjects were sent emails to see if they would be willing to volunteer in the research study.

The researcher chose participants from the school district he is employed at. The subjects chosen have been teaching grades k-12 for at least one year. The six participants currently teach in the elementary school, middle school, or high school setting within the district.

The setting for the qualitative research was conducted following proper covid-19 protocols. These interviews were conducted via video conferencing. The researcher asked each participant ten questions that directly aligned with the overall research question.

## **Instruments**

The qualitative research method that was used to gather data was interviews. Interviews were conducted on eight general education teachers that taught for at least one year in a classroom grades k-12. Participants were given a consent form before the interview was conducted. The interview consisted of ten questions that were directly related to the researcher's objectives. The interview questions included but were not limited to:

- How are student's IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?
- What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?
- What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?
- How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

- How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?
- How does your school support inclusive classrooms?
- What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?
- What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?
- How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?
- What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

### **Data Collection**

Due to this research study using interviews, the Institutional Review Board exempted the project. In the school setting, it is safe to say that hundreds if not thousands of interviews happen each year (Husband, 2020). The researcher scheduled the interviews to be done via video conferencing due to covid- 19 protocol. To keep the participants identity confidential, the researcher gave each participant a code with a number instead of their name. The coding system started with participant one, and followed that system until all participants were interviewed. The researcher followed the research questions and objectives while conducting the interviews. The researcher used open-ended interview questions to find the qualitative data. The researcher recorded each interview using a private recorder to transcribe the data at a later date.

### **Informed consent**

The Institutional Review Board declared the research study exempt and the subjects were provided with the consent form. The researcher assured that proper research ethics were followed throughout the interviews. Before any interviews were conducted, the researcher informed the participant that all information was to be stored on a secure computer that required a passcode to access. The researcher informed each participant that they were given a label and a number. The

researcher informed the participant this was to keep their information confidential. After one year, all data will be destroyed making it untraceable.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis for qualitative research is designed to create and find codes, themes, and categories (Chenail, 2012). After the researcher conducted the interviews and collected the data, a data analysis was completed by the researcher. The researcher used the same data analysis strategy for the objective questions that were asked. The data analysis the researcher used, was done using the following steps. Transcribing the interviews, sort the data into certain categories, and identifying common themes and codes between the data. The researcher was able to do this by recording each interview and transcribing the data at a later date. The researcher broke down the data into the three research questions. The researcher looked for themes and patterns within those questions and the objective questions. The researcher found the common patterns between the three research questions and reported the findings.

The researcher is responsible for being honest and disclose all information that was collected during the data collection process. The researcher analyzed all data equally and reported what the participants stated in the data collection process.

### **Summary**

In chapter three the researcher discussed sample and setting, instruments, consent, and data analysis. The information discussed in chapter three was used by the researcher to collect data that the subjects provided throughout the interviews. Chapter four discusses the data the subjects provided to the research questions and objective questions the researcher asked throughout the interviews.

## Chapter IV

Data analysis consisted of transcribing all the interviews, coding the interviews, looking for themes throughout the transcripts, and writing up the results. For the researcher to identify rich themes, the researcher coded all the data. The researcher did this by reading each transcript thoroughly, then reading again to identify main themes throughout the data collected. The following sections discuss the results.

### Demographics

Six general education teachers participated in the study. All participants were teachers in the same district and have been teaching for one year or longer. The range of teaching experience was between two and thirty-four years. The six subjects interviewed currently hold a Minnesota Teaching License, a requirement to teach in the state of Minnesota.

### Data Analysis

To explore, “How do general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism the general education classroom?” The following research questions were proposed:

**RQ1:** What do general education teachers need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

**RQ2:** How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

**RQ3:** How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interview questions used to answer research question one were:

**IQ1:** How are students Individual Education Plans (IEP) beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

**IQ2:** What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

In response to IQ1: How are students Individual Education Plans (IEP) beneficial before the student comes into the classroom? Five out of six (83%) subjects stated that an Individual Education Plan (IEP), is the most beneficial information to have before a student with autism comes into the general education classroom.

Subject two stated:

Fortunately for me, I know all the special education teachers and have had personal relationships over the years. I believe that our, maybe a little biased here, but I believe that our special education department does a very good job of letting us know weeks ahead of time and so then I can read through the students IEP and if I have questions I can personally go down and talk to them, or now a days, google meet. Just get to know that young man or women better. Helps me prepare for the classroom when I have that student. The information they give to me is invaluable. If I have questions for myself or questions for them, that helps me get to know that student a little better.

Three out of six (50%) stated that it is beneficial to know what accommodations and modifications a student needs before they walk into the classroom.

Subject four stated:

Before a student enters the classroom a teacher really needs to know what modifications and accommodations that student needs. So, having the snapshot it very beneficial. General education teachers usually do not want the whole IEP, so we have a good system to send it to them if they ask for it but that is usually too much information. Just knowing things like the student needs to sit in the back corner because they get anxious, or the student needs to sit in the front because they don't pay attention. Also, things like the student may need more time or

guided notes. Things like that are beneficial to have when getting started. Can be hard to add later.

Similar responses were provided for IQ2: “What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?” Two out of six subjects (33%) stated that having a face-to-face conversation with the special education teacher is one of the best ways to receive information prior to the student coming into the classroom. Additionally, two out of six subjects (33%), stated that an Individualized Education Plan snapshot is information that most special education teachers provide prior to the student coming into the classroom.

Subject two stated:

Pretty close, but sometimes I have the special education teacher come right down to my classroom and let me know here’s what’s going on. Maybe they have had this student before during freshman or sophomore year. Or maybe all three years because I predominantly keep seniors. So, they have already built up that relationship and trust with that student. I am just going to use one of our teachers and how they are really close. Teacher and students’ relationships. You are going to really like this student because he will really like your hands-on teaching style. Or this one you have to pull teeth a little bit. Again, that is not written in the IEP, that is just firsthand knowledge of working hands on like they do during 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> grade. That helps me prepare for that senior male or female that I am working with.

Overall, the subjects interviewed preferred an Individualized Education Plan, a list of accommodations and modifications, and a face-to-face conversation with the special education teachers before the student entered the classroom.

Research question 2 asked, “How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?”

Interview questions used to answer research question two were:

**IQ1:** How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

**IQ2:** What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

In response to IQ1: “How does your school support inclusive classrooms?”, two out of six subjects (33%) stated that paraprofessionals are a way the school district helps support general educational teachers with individuals with autism in their classroom.

Subject one stated:

You know, they provide paraprofessional support through it. Which allows more and more students in general education classrooms knowing that you have all hands-on deck. They also just give you access to know the special education teacher and stuff like that.

Once again, two out of six (33%) of the subjects reported that the co-teaching model has been very beneficial when dealing with individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

Subject four stated:

So, we have expanded our coteaching program this year. Cotaught classes for every required class in English and math. Our students with autism specifically are generally eligible for those due to lack of social skills, content knowledge, and organization. But yes, that it one way.

Subject two took a more personal approach to the question and stated:

Yeah, but the one thing I really enjoy, again I am just going to back up here, I have a deaf son, a mentally handicapped brother, physically handicapped brother, and a physically handicapped sister. And I am not going to lie about that. I have a soft spot for students with disabilities and I will say all teachers do. But I will say I have a lot more patients. Saying hey, we are going to make this work for you. And so, when they come into my classroom the talking I do with that special ed teachers is important. Plus we can always go online and research what the student has whether its autism, deaf or hard of hearing, bipolar disorder, whatever. We have a great bank of resources that we can look at online. And that helps too

because again, not all of us are perfect teachers and we need to use that information to help build a better game plan for each specific student.

In response to IQ2: “What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?”, three out of six subjects (50%) stated that they do not feel the district has adequate programs in place to transition students with autism into general education classrooms.

Subject four stated:

I would not call either of the programs we have transitional programs. The programs we have are more to help 9th graders who are struggling to transition into High School, more than students with disabilities. Any student can join academy or stride, just have to be in the bottom 3rd of their class. Often all students in the 9th grade were in the programs due to having two case managers in the program. Strive is more of a Developmental Cognitive Disorder (DCD) program, so I wouldn't call that a transition program either. I feel like we do not really have anything. The cotaught classes help, but generally our students who are more in a self-containing setting, setting two of setting three, are not going to be in those cotaught classes. One of the things we are starting to do more of is get these students into setting one and setting two environments.

Two out of six subjects (33%) stated that they believe the Strive and Academy programs were helpful in transition students with autism in the general education classroom. The Strive program was designed to help students who have more cognitive disabilities. These students need more guidance with physical touch. The Academy program was designed to help students who do not qualify for special education services but are not testing at their current grade level. Both of these programs were designed to help get students back into the general education classroom.

Subject two stated:

I know of, by just working with another coach and teacher, the strive program does a lot for students who are on the bubble. We used to also have our academy school. That has gone to the wayside a little bit, but we still have pockets of that

where we can still help students reach their goals and find those teacher's we can reach out too. They know these young people need help, and there's nothing wrong with that. Again, I said I have a soft spot in my heart and if you are not into teaching to help people, obviously you shouldn't be in teaching. That's the number one goal. Whether they have autistic students, deaf and hard of hearing, find the right path for them and let's work on it. I think our staff has done a great job over the last twenty- two years that I have been here and helping students get their needs met.

Subject six took a different approach to the question and stated:

We filter the students in a little at a time with paraprofessional support. If the student is having success, we allow them to be in the classroom more and more. If the student struggles, we take away time and have them go back to the special education room.

The findings for the second research question show that the subjects interviewed do not feel the district does a good job at supporting them with autistic students in the general education classroom.

Research question 3 asked, "How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?"

Interview questions used to answer research question 3 were:

**IQ1:** What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

**IQ2:** How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

**IQ3:** What ways have classrooms changed since you graduated college?

In response to IQ1, three out of six (50%) stated that no college courses prepared them to teach individuals with autism.

Subject four graduated from college within the last five years and was able to take a more modern-day approach.

Subject four stated:

So, I don't feel like college courses really did anything to teach students with autism. My licensure is general education grades k-6, literacy k-8, and now Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD). Even in my master's program we did not talk about autism at all. I had one class that was about all disability categories and had one chapter on autism. I've learned more from tiktok than I have from my college classes. I don't feel like they really did anything for me besides the stereotypes.

Subject two has been teaching for over thirty-four years. The subject discusses how individuals with disabilities were not brought up much when the subject went through college.

Subject two stated:

Nothing. When I was in college nothing. In all honesty we never discussed in great detail how to help students with disabilities. I can go back to my high school days and we didn't even have a Special Education teacher in the early 80's. Again, we discussed a little bit. It was a teacher from Alexandria Minnesota that came and talked to us at the university. But again that was once a week and that was nothing hands on. But we would bring that up because everyone knows not every student is the exact same. But even our teachers in college, the professors again, they aren't teaching in the classroom. But the teacher from Alexander I remember was like, you are going to run into these students that are going to need extra help. But autism was never brought up. I never remember anything about autistic students. And over the years I would go to a conference, or go to other teachers and remembered that was my very first time I was working with and talking about autistic students. And that was early 90's. It's good to see that we are tackling these issues.

Two out of six subjects (33%) stated hands on and field experiences were the most beneficial in preparing for teaching students with autism in the general education classroom.

Subject five kept is short and stated:

“Unfortunately, the best way for preparation was through practice withing the field. There were conversations and some lessons on inclusive classrooms, but not nearly enough to feel prepared.”

Subject one used their own personal experience in their response stating:

You know this might not be the answer you are looking for, but it really has to be hands on experience to get you prepared. So, any of those classes that gives you fields experience with students with autism is what is going to prepare you. It’s not necessarily what you talk about.

Many different responses were recorded for IQ2, “How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?”

Two out of six subjects (33%) stated that their college professors taught them how to make connections with others and co-teaching.

Subject six stated:

The biggest thing our professors taught us was to make a connection with the students. This helps make it easier for students with Individual Education Plans to transition into the classroom. I do wish that we would have learned more about the best practices to help students with IEPs in the classroom.

Subject four discussed how her master course professors helped prepare her.

Subject four stated:

We did, not really in my undergrad that was just in general ed. I had three total credits combine for disability and English language. Was not very helpful at all. In my masters we did have a full class on collaboration and co-teaching which was nice because I was already co-teaching at the time ,but would have been better if I had it before I started co-teaching and before I got my masters because that is basic information.

One out of six subjects (17%) stated that they learned nothing from college professors when it came to dealing with individuals with autism in the general education classroom. Subject two had virtually nothing to say positive about his experience:

Subject two stated:

“Nothing. Virtually nothing. Just touching base, but virtually nothing.”

IQ3 had responses that varied depending on what year the subject graduated from college and what age group they taught. Three out of six subjects (50%) stated that a lot has changed since they graduated from college.

Subject two graduated from college when technology was not used in schools like it is today.

Subject two stated:

Smartboard, chrome book, hands on. I am going to be honest I text some of my student's homework assignments. Texting isn't the right word, but I take pictures and send it to them. Some of them still like the old-fashioned paper and print it off themselves and look at schoology. There are students who aren't real tech savvy either, and you have to try to accommodate. They could be an A student, special education student, I don't really care. You still must find ways to accommodate for all different types of learners that you are working with every single day. And I think that's very important in the high school setting.

Subject three looked at the question just to this year. How a pandemic can affect a student's learning overall.

Subject three stated:

“A lot this year due to the pandemic. A lot more online. How do you support students when you physically don't see them every day?”

Subject six discussed how they have different classroom setups and arrangements compared to other schools in the district.

Subject six stated:

We have neighborhoods instead of classrooms. There are three classes in the neighborhood and the students rotate for different subject areas. The students also spend more time in groups. This allows the students to help each other and teach one another within the groups to help the students who might be struggling.

Two out of six subjects (33%) discussed how not a lot has changed since they graduated college. Both of these subjects have graduated college within the last five years.

Subject four stated:

I graduated with my undergrad in 2017, so there hasn't been a whole lot of change since then. I mean it has changed quite a bit in just our building moving towards a more co-taught model and things like that, but overall, not at all.

Subject one has also not seen much change.

Subject one stated:

“Hasn't been to long so really it hasn't changed a whole lot. Just keeping kids active and engaged and finding things they like to do.”

The findings for the third research question shows a lot of different responses from the subjects. The data collected made it clear that general education college courses do not give a lot of background information on ways to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

**Summary**

Chapter four discussed the themes and results from the six interviews the researcher conducted. The three research questions were answered by the objective questions that the researcher asked. In chapter five, the researcher will discuss ways that can help better prepare general education teachers to teach individuals with autism in the classroom.

## Chapter V

### Discussion and Conclusions

This qualitative study explored if general education teachers felt prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. The previous chapters discussed background information from general education teachers, research questions and the findings of the study. This study demonstrated the challenges that general education teachers face when dealing with individuals with autism in their classroom. Chapter five will present the theoretical connection, conclusions and provide recommendations for future research.

A qualitative research design was used to explore the challenges general education teachers faced while teaching individuals with autism in the general education classroom. This research design was phenomenological in nature by using the perspectives of current general education teachers to answer the research questions. The research questions that guided this study were the following:

Research Question One (RQ1): What do general education teachers need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Research Question Two (RQ2): How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Research Question Three (RQ3): How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Data collection was conducted by performing video conference interviews with six subjects. There were three themes that emerged from the research questions: The practice of

accommodations and modifications, support provided by paraprofessionals in the classroom, and general education teachers do not feel their undergraduate college course work prepared them to teach students with autism in the general education classroom.

### **Theoretical Connection**

It has been well documented that students with autism learn through different methods (Fernando & Markiar, 2017; Al-Shammari, Faulkner & Forlin, 2019; Teitelbaum & Teitelbaum, 2008; Eprelding, 2012). Constructivism learning theory served as the theoretical framework for this qualitative study. Constructivism learning theory takes an approach in which students are actively involved in the learning process. The theoretical framework was built around two points that were discussed in chapter IV. The first being that individuals who have autism learn differently than general education students. The second being that research shows that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

Numerous participants agreed that both the points need to be an emphasis moving forward in order to properly serve autistic students in the general education classroom. In constructivism learning theory the teacher is the facilitator. It is the general education teachers' job to find ways to make it engaging and active to fit the learning abilities of all students in the classroom.

Throughout the study it was evident that general education teachers do not feel prepared to teach autistic students in the general education classroom. Using constructivism learning theory, they can find out which way each student learns best. This will help develop a learning plan that puts the student in charge of their learning. Visual images, hands-on activities and

social interactions are ways inclusive classrooms can use the constructivism learning theory. The belief is that autistic students in an inclusive classroom using constructivism learning theory will be able to learn from experiences and real-life applications.

**Theme 1:**

The theme that emerged from RQ1, “What do general education teachers need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?”, was a list of accommodations and modification from the students IEP.

The researcher found that general education teachers were implementing the practice of accommodations and modifications in the classroom. The findings of Fisher and Nancy (2001), state that accommodations and modifications are a necessary step for individuals with disabilities to make progress in the general education classroom. Other researchers also support Fisher and Nancy (2001) findings (Lee, Wehmeyer, Soukup & Palmer, 2010). Highlighting the effectiveness of accommodations and modifications for student’s success in the general education classroom. These accommodations and modifications are apart of the making of an IEP.

General education teachers are not actively involved in making an autistic students IEP. This means they lack knowledge of the student until the special education teacher hands them the students IEP. For general education teachers to serve autistic students in their classroom, they should be familiar with the list of accommodations and modifications for students with IEPs. Interview questions associated with the emergent theme are:

Subject 1:

Teachers give you a snapshot of what the students need. Hopefully their case manager has IEP meetings and has an outline of details and tools that will help the student to be successful. That allows the teacher to automatically know what accommodations and modifications will be needed to make the student feel comfortable and succeed.

#### Subject 5:

Not only is it important to have a student's IEP before a student comes, but it is also important to be a part of the student's IEP team. In our district, the IEP team consists of administration, special education teachers, mainstream teachers, the social worker, the student, and their guardians. Both of these opportunities allow for the teacher and student to make connections, but also be a part of the plan to best meet the student's educational needs. Teachers who have IEP's before the student comes, allows them time to ask questions, familiarize themselves with the accommodations, and set up a working environment that will allow for the most success. It also puts into perspective how lessons might need a different approach for different students, all while keeping IEP goals in mind.

#### Theme 2:

The theme that emerged from RQ2, "How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?", the district offers support by providing paraprofessionals. Throughout the research study general education teachers referred to paraprofessionals.

Paraprofessionals are essential in service, program delivery, and creating a positive impact with the students they work with in the classroom (Hernandez & Smith, 2019).

Paraprofessionals help not only the students they work with, but other students see the big picture and create a positive setting (Hernandez & Smith, 2019). Regardless of a paraprofessionals level of training, they always speak highly of the level of responsibility they hold (Rodriguez, 2010). Paraprofessionals main goal is to assist students with IEP's in the general education classroom, but the positive impact they can have on others around them goes

far beyond any IEP goal (Rodriguez, 2010). The researcher found this to be a themed identified throughout the interviews.

The interview questions associated with the emergent theme are:

Subject 6:

“We try to have the students in the classroom as much as possible. We think it is important for both the students with IEPs and also the rest of the classroom students. A paraprofessional is usually with the student with the IEP.”

Subject 1:

“They provide Paraprofessional support throughout it. Which allows more and more students in general education classrooms knowing that you have all hands-on deck.”

Subject 4:

“We often use co-taught classes for the main subjects Math and English. Students with autism are eligible for those due to lack of social skills and content.”

### **Theme 3:**

The theme that emerged from RQ3, “General education college courses do not give a lot of information on ways general education teachers can teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.” Throughout the interviews conducted, it became clear that general education teachers do not feel their undergraduate college course work prepared them to teach students with autism in the general education classroom.

General education college courses do not give a lot of information on ways general education teachers teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. Since 1976, autism is one of the fastest growing disabilities to be included in general education classroom (NCES Fast Facts, 2019). For inclusive classrooms to succeed, general education teachers must receive the proper training (Eldevik, Hastings, Jahr, & Hughes, 2012). Inclusive classrooms are not just a placement for students with disabilities, but rather a shift in the way the school,

administration and curriculum meet each student to best fit their needs (Ferguson, 2000). General education teachers are not prepared from college courses alone to run an inclusive classroom successfully (Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013). For general education teachers to feel prepared to teach autistic students in the classroom, more training must occur after graduating from college teacher preparation programs. This can be done by utilizing professional development days for a specific district or third-party trainings. The interview questions emergent with the associated theme were:

Subject 2:

Nothing. When I was in college nothing. In all honesty we never discussed in great detail how to help students with disabilities. I can go back to my high school days and we didn't even have a Special Education teacher in the early 80's. Again, we discussed a little bit. It was a teacher from Alexandria Minnesota that came and talked to us at the university. But again, that was once a week and that was nothing hands on. But we would bring that up because everyone knows not every student is the exact same. But even our teachers in college, the professors again, they aren't teaching in the classroom. But the teacher from Alexander I remember was like, you are going to run into these students that are going to need extra help. But autism was never brought up. I never remember anything about autistic students. And over the years I would go to a conference or go to other teachers and remembered that was my very first time I was working with and talking about autistic students. And that was early 90's. It's good to see that we are tackling these issues.

Subject 6:

We only had one class about SPED from what I remember. We might have had two. In the class we really only learned about the disabilities. As a general classroom teacher, we did not learn much about actually teaching individuals with autism. Looking back, I wish we were taught more about the best strategies to help these students.

## **Conclusions**

After conducting individual interviews with six participants, reviewing the literature, and synthesizing the findings in chapter four, the research draws the following conclusions from the study:

1. General education teachers k-12 do not have enough training with college courses alone to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.
2. More paraprofessional help is needed for inclusive classrooms to work.
3. General Education Teachers should help in preparing Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for students in their general education classroom.

### **Conclusion 1:**

General education teachers k-12 do not receive the proper training from college courses alone to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

**Leadership Implications:** With the push for inclusive classrooms at an all-time high, general education teachers k-12 should be granted the proper training to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. General education teachers should have the background knowledge to properly teach individuals with autism the curriculum, and deal with behaviors that might arise. Since the general education teacher is the facilitator of the classroom, others around them will look for guidance when problems arise. For these problems to resolve in a professional manner, the general education teacher needs further training. The more proper training general education teachers receive, the more confidence they will build in themselves and others around them to handle any situation that may arise. This will build confidence in other professionals in the room along with the students they support.

**Conclusion 2:**

Paraprofessional help is needed in inclusive classrooms.

**Leadership Implications:**

For inclusive classrooms to be successful they must have multiple professionals in the room at a time to best serve the students. Paraprofessionals can offer support in inclusive classrooms to meet the needs of these students. If a district does not have the proper support through paraprofessionals, the students are the ones that suffer the consequences. For a paraprofessional to do their best work with the students and staff they are asked to serve, they must feel welcomed and appreciated. Since the general education teacher is the facilitator of the classroom, they must teach the students to give paraprofessionals in the room the same respect they give them. This will help create positive relationships, and in return positively affect each student's learning in the classroom. This will help each student reach their full potential.

**Conclusion 3:**

General Education Teachers should help in preparing Individual Educational Plans (IEP) for students in their general education classroom.

**Leadership Implications:**

The main goal of an IEP is to find a student's Least Restrictive Environment. When a student is in their LRE they are able to learn best. With the worldwide push for inclusive classrooms, most students' LRE is the general education classroom. For students to be properly placed in their LRE the general education teacher should be a part of this decision. The general education teacher will bring a perspective to the discussion that most of their colleagues have not seen before. Since a change in settings is a trigger for most autistic students, the student may

display behaviors in the general education classroom that they do not elsewhere. With the general education teacher's perspective, this will help the team put together an IEP that best serves the student. The general education teacher can then start to build a more positive relationship with the student by following the steps the team puts together. This will help build a positive relationship between the student and teacher, which will directly impact the students learning in a positive way.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

To further understand how to prepare general education teachers to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom, three recommendations for future research came to mind. (1) Expand the study from district wide to statewide. This will help expand the perspectives of educators and get a true reading on how prepared general education teachers are to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom. (2) Are paraprofessionals trained properly to meet the needs of autistic students? Since paraprofessionals are not required to have a four-year degree, proper training for paraprofessionals is left up to each district. For paraprofessionals to best meet the needs of the students they serve, they must be properly trained. (3) Is constructivism learning theory the best method to teach in inclusive classrooms. For this to happen, a district will have to adapt the theory for a given period of time. Once research is properly collected in an inclusive classroom, constructivism learning theory can then be discussed. These three recommendations for future research will help better understand if general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the general education classroom.

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## Appendix A

### Transcriptions

Participant #1:

Research question one: What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Objective question one:

Interviewer: How are students IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant #1: Teachers give you a snapshot of what the students need. Hopefully there case manager has IEP meetings and have an outline of details and what tools will lead the student to be successful. And that allows the teacher to automatically know what accommodations and modifications will be needed to make the student feel comfortable and succeed

Objective question two:

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Participant #1: Yep, usually give us a snapshot of what modifications and accommodations they need. And that's really what they give and sometimes they will give you a heads-up email and have the student reach out as well.

Research question two: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Interviewer: How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant #1: You know they provide para support through it. Which allows more and more students in general education classrooms knowing that you have all hands-on deck. They also just give you access to you know the special education teacher and stuff like that.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant #1: No I wouldn't say any formal training aside of your professional developments on how to make inclusive classrooms which our school district is constantly providing.

Research question three: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant #1: You know this might not be the answer you are looking for but its really, has to be hands on experience to get you prepared. So any of those classes that gives you fields experience with students with autism is what is going to prepare you. Its not necessarily what you talk about.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant #1: Yep, it's the same thing. Hands on, anytime you are getting out in the field working with kids and seeing how other teachers do it.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant #1: Ah, hasn't been to long so really it hasn't changed a whole lot. Just keeping kids active and engaged and finding things they like to do.

Interviewer: Thank you sir.

Participant #1: Happy to help.

Participant #2

Research question one: What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Objective question one:

Interviewer: How are students IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant #2: Fortunately for me, I know all the special ed teachers and have had personal relationships over the years. I believe that our, maybe a little biased here, but I believe that our special education department does a very good job of letting us know weeks ahead of time and so then I can read through their IEP's and if I have any questions I can personally go down and talk to them or now a days google meet. Just get to know that young man or women better. Helps me prepare for the classroom when I have that student. The information we get to me is invaluable and if I have questions for myself or questions for them, that helps me get to know that student a little better.

Objective question two:

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Interviewer: Assuming it will be close to the first question?

Participant #2: Pretty close, but sometimes I have the special ed teacher come right down to my classroom and let me know here's what's going on. Maybe they have had this student before, freshman or sophomore year or maybe all three years because I predominantly keep seniors. So they have already built up that relationship and trust with that student. I am just going to use one of our teachers and how they are really close. Teacher and students' relationships. You are going to really like this student because he will really like your hands-on teaching style. Or this one you have to pull teeth a little bit. Again, that is not written in the IEP, that is just firsthand knowledge of working hands on like they do from 10th, 11th. That helps me prepare for that senior male or female that I am working with.

Research question two: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Interviewer: How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant #2: Yeah but the one thing I really enjoy again. I am just going to back up here, I have a deaf son. A mentally handicapped brother, a physically handicapped brother, a physically handicapped sister. And I am not going to lie about that, I have a soft spot for students with disabilities and I will say all teachers do. But I will say I have a lot more patients to. Saying hey we are going to make this work for you and so when they come into my classroom the talking I do with that special ed teachers, plus we can always go online and research what the student has whether its autism, deaf or hard of hearing, bipolar disorder whatever. We have a great bank of resources that we can look at online. And that helps too because again not all of us are perfect teachers and we need to use that information to help build a better game plan for each specific student.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant #2: I know of, by just working with another coach and teacher, the strive program does a lot for students who are on the bubble. We used to also have our academy school. That has gone to the wayside a little bit, but we still have pockets of that where we can still help students reach their goals and think again how teachers reach out. They know these young people need help. And there's nothing wrong with that. Again, I said I have a soft spot in my heart and if you are not into teaching to help people obviously you shouldn't be in teaching. That's the number one goal. Whether they have autistic students, deaf and hard of hearing, find the right path for them and let's work on it. I think our staff has done a great job over the last twenty- two years that I have been here and helping students get their needs met.

Research question three: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant #2: Nothing. When I was in college nothing. In all honesty we never discussed in great detail how to help students with disabilities. I can go back to my high school days and we didn't even have a special education teacher in the early 80's. Again, we discussed a little bit. It was a teacher from Alexandria MN that came and talked to us at the University but again that was once a week and that was nothing hands on. But we would bring that up because everyone knows not every student is the exact same but even our teachers in college the professors again they aren't teaching in the classroom but the teacher from Alexander I remember was like you are going to run into these students that are going to need extra help. But autism that was never brought up. I never remember anything about autistic students. And other the years I would go to a conference or go to other teachers and remembered that was my very first time I was working with and talking about autistic students. And that was early 90's, 93ish. It's good to see that we are tackling these issues.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant #2: Nothing. Virtually nothing. Just touching base but virtually nothing.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant #2: Smartboard, chrome book, hands on. I am going to be honest I text some of my student's homework assignments. Texting isn't the right word, but I take pictures and send it to them. Some of them still like the old-fashioned paper and print it off themselves and look at schoology. There are students who aren't real tech savvy either and you have to try to

accommodate. They could be an A student, special ed student, I don't really care. You still have to find ways to accommodate for all different types of students that you are working with every single day. And I think that's very important in the high school setting.

Interviewer: Concluded the interview, thank you participant #2.

Participant #3

Research question one: What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Objective question one:

Interviewer: How are students IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant #3: The IEP allows me to understand certain accommodations that the students need in order for students to be successful in the general education classroom.

Objective question two:

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Participant #3: Most special education teachers just email me a snapshot of the IEP. Every once in a while, a teacher will come and have an actual conversation with me.

Research question two: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Interviewer: How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant #3: Our school tries to push in some students into my regular world history class. I feel like we could be doing a lot more to be inclusive.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant #3: We do not have the academy anymore. I feel like we do not transition students well into general education classrooms. It feels very segregated.

Research question three: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant #3: I took a collection of inclusive teaching courses at UW Madison through my master's program.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant #3: One of my professors for my inclusive ed class. We did a lot of relevant reading and then focused a lot on actually trying to carry out these practices in our student teaching placements.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant #3: A lot this year due to the pandemic. A lot more online. How do you support students when you physically don't see them every day.

Participant #4

Research question one: What do general education teachers need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Objective question one:

Interviewer: How are students with IEP's benefited before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant #4: Before a student enters the classroom a teacher really needs to know what modifications and accommodations that student needs. So, having the snapshot is very beneficial.

General education teachers usually do not want the whole IEP so we have a good system to send

it to them if they ask for it but that is usually too much information. Just knowing things like the student needs to sit in the back corner because they get anxious or the student needs to sit in the front because they don't pay attention. Also, things like the student may need more time or guided notes. Things like that are really beneficial to have when getting started. Can be hard to add later.

Objective question two:

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Participant #4: Just send out the snapshot. Also, certain things that are specific to the student that the teacher should know that are not in their IEP snapshot. The student needs break when they get fidgety. Things the special education teacher sends out.

Research question two: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Interviewer: How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant #4: So, we have expanded out coteaching program this year. Cotaught classes for every required class in English and math. Our students with autism specifically are generally eligible for those due to social skills and or content even organization. But yes, that is one way.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant #4: I would not call either of the programs we have transitional programs. The programs we have are more to help 9th graders who are struggling to transition into High School more than students with disabilities. Any student can join academy or stride, just had to be in the bottom 3rd of their class. Was often used that almost all students in the 9th grade were in the programs due to having two case managers in the program. Was a welcoming environment.

Strive is more of a DCD program so I wouldn't call that a transition program either. I feel like we do not really have anything, the cotaught classes help but generally our students who are more in a self-containing setting, setting two of setting three are not going to be in those cotaught classes. One of the things we are starting to do more of is get these students into setting one and setting two environments.

Research question three: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant #4: So, I don't feel like college courses really did anything to teach students with autism. Um so my licensure is general ed k-6, literacy k-8, and now Specific learning disabilities. Even in my master's program we did not talk about autism at all. I had one class that was about all disability categories and had one chapter on autism. I've actually learned more from tiktok than I have from my college classes. I don't feel like they really did anything for me besides the stereotypes.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant #4: Um we did, not really in my undergrad that was just in general ed. I had three total credits combine for disability and English language. Was not very helpful at all. In my masters we did have a full class on collaboration and co-teaching which was nice because I was already co-teaching at the time but would have been better if I had it before I started co-teaching. And before I got my masters, because that is basic information.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant #4: Have not really changed no. I graduated with my undergrad in 2017, so there hasn't been a whole lot of change since then. I mean it has changed quite a bit in just our building moving towards a more co-taught model and things like that but overall, not at all.

Interviewer: Perfect.

Participant #5

Research question one: What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Objective question one:

Interviewer: How are students IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant #5: Not only is it important to have a student's IEP before a student comes, but it is also important to be a part of the students IEP team. In our district, the IEP team consists of administration, special education teachers, mainstream teachers, the social worker, the student, and their guardians. Both of these opportunities allow for the teacher and student to make connections, but also be a part of the plan to best meet the student's educational needs. Teachers who have IEP's before the student comes, allows them time to ask questions, familiarize themselves with the accommodations, and set up a working environment that will allow for the most success. It also puts into perspective how lessons might need a different approach for different students, all while keeping IEP goals in mind.

Objective question two:

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Participant #5: I am given the snapshot from the IEP. If a student has a positive behavior support plan that is given to me. Lastly, if there is an IEP goal that pertains to my specific class, then that is also shared.

Research question two: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

Interviewer: How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant #5: Our district supports inclusive classrooms by using video- assisted learning, hybrid learning, assistive technology, promoting collaboration between students, co- teaching, team meetings for students and interactive teaching.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant #5: Co- teaching models, first students transition to co-taught classes and gradually move to more classes that general education teachers teach. We also have weekly teaming's for students. Innovation to teachers in which the student will be transferring to or moving to.

Research question three: How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant #5: The classes that were the most beneficial discussed teaching strategies on ways to engage students.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant #5: Unfortunately, the best way for preparation was through practice withing the field. There were conversations and some lessons on inclusive classrooms, but not nearly enough to feel prepared.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant #6

What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: How are student's IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?

Participant 6: It is nice to know what students might need a little extra help in the classroom.

Knowing the students with IEPs helps me make my seating chart. This makes classroom management easier. I will put the student either by my desk or by the students who excel.

Interviewer: What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?

Participant 6: I wish I got more information but usually I just get an email at the beginning of the year. The information I get is obviously the disability the student has. I also get the areas that the student struggles with, for example math. This helps me create my schedule, so I know if the student needs extra support or needs to go to another room for silent work time.

Research Question 2

Interviewer: How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?

How does your school support inclusive classrooms?

Participant 6: We try to have the students in the classroom as much as possible. We think it is important for both the students with IEPs and also the rest of the classroom students. A paraprofessional is usually with the student with the IEP, depending on what learning plan the student is on.

Interviewer: What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?

Participant 6: We filter the students in a little at a time with para support. If the student is having success, we have them be in the classroom more and more. If the student struggles, we take away time and have them go back to the SPED room.

### Research Question 3

How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?

Interviewer: What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?

Participant 6: We only had one class about SPED from what I remember. We might have had to. In the class we really only learned about the disabilities. As a general classroom teacher, we did not learn much about actually teaching individuals with autism. Looking back, I wish we were taught more about the best strategies to help these students.

Interviewer: How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?

Participant 6: The biggest thing our professors taught us was to make a "connection" with the students. This helps it make it easier for students with IEPS to transition into the classroom. I do wish that we would have learned more about the best practices to help students with IEPs in the classroom.

Interviewer: What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?

Participant 6: We have "neighborhoods" instead of classrooms. There are three classes in the neighborhoods and the students rotate for different subject areas. The students also spend more time in groups. This allows the students to help each other and the teach to rotate within the groups to help the students who might be struggling.

## **Appendix B**

### **Communication with Participants**

Dear Participants,

My name is Colin Valley and I am currently a special education teacher in the Owatonna School District. I am currently conducting research for my master thesis and looking for general education teachers grades k-12 in the Owatonna School District. My research question is, how do general education teachers feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in their classroom? Participating in this research study is voluntary and non- participating will not affect your relationship with the Owatonna School District. I will be collecting my research data by conducting interviews. The interview will last twenty to twenty-five minutes. The interview will be recorded and stored in a secure file on a computer that requires a passcode. Each participant will be given a number in replace of their name to sustain confidential throughout the research process. The data will be destroyed one year after the interview. Throughout the research process, participants are able to withdraw at any time. Withdrawing from the research will not affect your relationship with Owatonna School District. I look forward to working with you and using the qualitive information you provide to build positive tactics for current and future general education teachers working with individuals with autism in their classroom.

Sincerely,

Colin Valley

## Appendix C

### Interview Questions

| <b>Demographics</b>  | <b>Questions</b>   |
|--|--|
| Interviewing- District teachers k-12   |  |
| <b>Research Questions</b>  | <b>Interview Questions</b>   |
| Research Question 1  | Open-ended   |
| What do general education teacher need to feel prepared to teach individuals with autism in the classroom? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How are students IEP's beneficial before the student comes into the classroom?</li> <li>• What information do special education teachers give you before a student is placed in your classroom?</li> </ul>  |
| Research Question 2  | Open-ended   |
| How does your school support you in teaching individuals with autism?                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How does your school support inclusive classrooms?</li> <li>• What programs does your school have that help the transition for students into the general education classroom?</li> </ul>  |
| Research Question 3  | Open- ended  |
| How well did your college courses prepare you to teach individuals with autism in the classroom?           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What college courses were the most beneficial in preparing you to teach individuals with autism?</li> <li>• How did your college professors prepare you for inclusive classrooms?</li> <li>• What ways have classrooms changed since graduation?</li> </ul> |