

**A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Educator Perspectives on
Full Inclusive Teaching Environments**

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Abstract

The problem was general education classroom educators in a rural northeast Ohio school district did not identify as prepared to provide effective instruction to learners of wide-ranging academic and physical abilities in inclusive classroom. Study significance was evident in organizational shifts benefiting inclusive model educators and students. Stakeholders may benefit from research findings, with positive impact on inclusive models. Literature gaps existed regarding teacher training and need identification supporting inclusive students. Transformational leadership and social constructivist theories provided the theoretical framework for the study. Key research questions prompted seeking lived experience of inclusive educators, documentation of the experience, instructional strategies, and administrative elements supporting teachers. The purpose of the study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction in inclusive classrooms. In this hermeneutic phenomenological study, data were collected using semistructured interviews from 15 K-12 general education teachers in inclusive classrooms at the site, excluding intervention specialists. Data collection included professional development transcript analysis, demographic inquiry, and semistructured interviews utilizing a researcher-created instrument, with thematic analysis model examination of data. Transcriptions were member-checked by participants. Multiple data encounters established familiarity, initiating coding for theme identification and labeling. Latent expression and patterns were evaluated to saturation, and codes collapsed for interpretation related to research questions. Key results yielded insufficient training and ineffective application of least restrictive environment (LRE). Co-teaching models were identified as ineffective resulting in failed authentic differentiation and tiered instruction. Recommendations included time for professional development and increasing opportunities for co-planning and cooperative teaching.

Keywords: IDEA, ESSA, inclusive teaching, inclusive classrooms, inclusive efficacy, student outcome inclusion, characteristics of learners with disabilities, teacher preparedness for inclusion, social learning theory, social constructivism, transformational leadership

Dedication

This work is dedicated to the many people who have supported and guided me in life and in this process. Thank you, Mom and Dad, for encouraging me to believe that anything is possible if you're willing to work hard. You have been my cheerleader for the celebrations and trials of my life, helping me make my dreams come true. Sarah and Alex, you have been with me through every step of this journey as supporters, encouragers, draft reviewers, and sounding boards.

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	12
List of Figures	13
Chapter 1: Introduction	14
Background of the Problem.....	15
Statement of the Problem	17
Purpose of the Study	18
Significance of the Study	19
Research Questions	20
Theoretical Framework	21
Definitions of Terms	22
Assumptions	23
Scope and Delimitations.....	24
Limitations	25
Chapter Summary	26
Chapter 2: Literature Review	28
Literature Search Strategy	29
Theoretical Framework	30
Research Literature Review	33
Background.....	34

Evolution of the Inclusive Concept.....	34
Legal Protections	35
Overall Efficacy.....	36
Barriers.....	37
Student Outcomes	40
Teacher Attitude	42
Stress	42
Fearing Loss of Autonomy	43
Teacher Preparedness	44
Training Needs.....	45
Chapter Summary.....	53
Chapter 3: Methodology	56
Research Design and Rationale.....	57
Research Design.....	57
Role of the Researcher	59
Research Procedures	60
Population and Sample Selection	60
Instrumentation.....	61
Interview	62
Instrument Validation	62
Document Analysis.....	63
Data Collection	63

Data Analysis	65
Reliability and Validity	66
Ethical Procedures.....	67
Chapter Summary.....	68
Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results	69
Data Collection.....	70
Data Analysis and Results.....	71
Phase One: Data Familiarization	72
Phase Two of Data Analysis.....	73
Phase Three of Data Analysis.....	74
Phase Four of Data Analysis	74
Phase Five of Data Analysis	75
Phase Six of Data Analysis.....	75
Reliability and Validity	83
Chapter Summary.....	83
Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion	85
Findings, Interpretations, Conclusions.....	86
Limitations	91
Recommendations	92
Implications for Leadership	94

Conclusion.....	95
References.....	97
Appendix A: SME Initial Contact Email	115
Appendix B: Inclusion in General Education Classroom: Research Instrument	118
Appendix C: Demographic Data.....	119
Appendix D: Site Approval Request.....	120
Appendix E: Signed Site Approval.....	121
Appendix F: Recruitment Letter/Invitation to Participate	122
Appendix G: Informed Consent.....	123
Appendix H: Sample of Initial Coding Process	127
Appendix I: Sample of Initial Coding Process to Theme Development.....	128

List of Tables

Table

1. Participant Educational Demographics	69
2 Annotation Example from Transcript Review	71

List of Figures

Figure

1. A Graphic Representation of Theme and Research Question Relationships 74
2. A Comparison of Gifted Versus Special Education Professional Development Hours 77
3. A Visualization of Strategy Sources and Types of Strategies Implemented 79

Chapter 1: Introduction

Transformation of instructional models in education is continuous. One of the emerging models is the instruction of learners with varying academic and physical abilities in the same classroom as inclusive education (Besic, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2018a). With the passage of special education legislation beginning in 1965, students with special needs were most frequently educated in specialized resource classrooms by specialists. Conversely, students with special needs in inclusive settings were instructed by a general education teacher with little to no specialized training for the inclusive model (Akar, 2020; Ekstam et al., 2017; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2018b; Williams et al., 2020). Teacher evaluation systems based on student assessments impact morale, and the situation is further negatively affected by teacher perception of inadequate preparation to work within an inclusive setting (Derrington & Campbell, 2018; Duhan & Devarakonda, 2018; Specht & Metsala, 2018). Understanding general educators' lived experiences may assist administrators and educators in identifying potential areas of growth and concern, guiding the implementation of strategies and practices to improve the model's effectiveness and student outcomes.

With inclusive classrooms as an initiative at the research site, the study was conducted to understand teachers' experiences and perceptions of the practice. Educators should be given a voice to identify current implemented strategies, training needs, and support elements necessary for successful inclusive settings (Bemiller, 2019; Boujut et al., 2016; Farrell, 2020). The background and statement of the problem are included in this chapter, the purpose and significance of the study set forth, research questions identified, and theoretical framework established. Terms are defined, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations expounded upon, concluding with a chapter summary.

Background of the Problem

The practice of inclusive classrooms in the United States has evolved since the era of one-room schoolhouses in the mid-18th century and subsequent mid-19th century expectations of academics being taught in public schools (American Board for the Certification of Teacher Excellence, 2015). Further transformations occurred when President Lyndon Johnson authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1965 with a legislative goal to provide equal education opportunities for all students, including those with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2018c). There were multiple evolutions of the original legislation, including The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 Section 504, Education for All Handicapped Children Act, the impetus for free appropriate public education, and the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 (IDEA), with the reauthorization of the bill in 2004 (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Klein, 2015; Kurth et al., 2020; Murphy, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018d). Mandates for free and appropriate public education (FAPE) asserts all children with disabilities are entitled to services designed to meet the individual learners' needs, with nondisabled peers, in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2018d). Though never mentioned in the law, the concept of inclusive learning was implemented to align with the directive for instruction with non-disabled peers (Kurth et al., 2018, 2020).

As legislators compared academic preparation in the United States against other developed countries, a need for increased accountability resulted in additional legislation (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act both rely heavily on standardized assessment results and adequate yearly progress (U.S. Department of Education, 2018e), but no safeguards were incorporated to protect or assist learner subgroups in achieving these new goals (Fusarelli &

Ayscue, 2019; Klein, 2015). Given the mandates of the Individuals with Disabilities Act for free appropriate public education and individualized education plans for each learner with instruction occurring in the least restrictive environment, administrators began including learners of all variances in the same classroom for instruction by general education teachers (Al Shoura & Ahmad, 2020; Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Kurth et al., 2018; Slaten et al., 2016; U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Failure to recognize inclusive classrooms as not representative of the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all learners resulted in educators being insufficiently trained and equipped to teach in such a setting (Bennett, 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Hussar et al., 2020; Kena et al., 2016). Thompson and Timmons (2017) explored the differences between physical placement in a classroom and authentic inclusion, reporting effective inclusion should pervade all aspects of the educational environment, not be limited to the classroom. Further research explored the influences of stakeholder attitude on learner placement and effectiveness with favorable views of inclusion resulting in improved student outcomes (Hux, 2017; Kim et al., 2020; Thomas & Rose, 2020; Yu & Park, 2020).

Several elements impacted teacher attitude toward inclusion, among them adequate training, cooperative and collaborative learning among instructors, and support from leadership (Duhan & Devarakonda, 2018; Ozokcu, 2018; Strong & Yoshida, 2014; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Instructional strategy training and awareness of unique learner characteristics are critical elements in improving inclusive educator efficacy (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Ekstam et al., 2017; Narkun & Smogorzewska, 2019). Ozokcu (2018) stressed the value of stakeholder and professional collaboration. These findings corresponded with the work of others, including Elder (2020), who advocated the strategy of intentional professional development for teacher attitude and efficacy improvement (Ekstam et al., 2017; Hansen et al., 2020; Sheppard, 2019).

Leadership support was necessary on multiple levels, including training in characteristics of students with special needs (Boujut et al., 2016; Kalgotra, 2020; Yoro et al., 2020), classroom management in an inclusive setting (Bemiller, 2019; Simpson et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020), and inclusive instructional practices (Williams et al., 2020; Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021). While research existed regarding the concerns mentioned earlier, a gap in the literature existed regarding perceived educator training and support needs to provide adequate support for learners in an inclusive classroom.

Statement of the Problem

The problem was general education classroom educators in a rural northeast Ohio school district did not identify as prepared to provide effective instruction to learners of wide-ranging academic and physical abilities in inclusive classrooms. The study site district has adopted an inclusive education model with learners of all academic and physical abilities receiving some level of instruction in a general education classroom. Similar inclusive models are a growing trend in education, requiring more understanding of the elements necessary for successfully implementing the model to yield student growth (Besic, 2020; Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Particularly concerning were the educator perceptions of not being trained in the characteristics of the variety of learners or knowledge about providing specialized services for the students (Akar, 2020; Bogen et al., 2019; Ekstam et al., 2017; Kalgotra, 2020; Li & Ruppar, 2021; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018).

Research has addressed the historical evolution and current legal mandates for inclusive education but has largely failed to consider teacher experiences, strategies, and support needs (NCEO, 2019; Warman, 2021). Teachers are increasingly evaluated based on student achievement and growth, a challenging task for various learners, making a comprehensive

understanding of these learners vital to effective instruction and authentic inclusion (Haug, 2017; Thompson & Timmons, 2017; Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021). The current study explored teachers' perceptions of the experience inclusive implementation, encouraging open-ended exposition identifying preparation needs for specific instructional strategies and additional support elements. Offering teachers, a reflective voice regarding an inclusive educational setting can be an impetus for change and improvement in the process (Crowther & Thompson, 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusive learners of multiple physical and academic abilities. The study was needed because educational transitions and inclusive mandates have created difficulties for educators and learners facing inclusive settings resulting in certified general education teachers at the research site being inadequately prepared to serve diverse learners. Qualitative methodology allowed exploring general educator participant experiences, particularly the meaning attributed to those experiences (Busetto et al., 2020). A criterion-based sampling of certified educators at the research site provided a sample of participants able to answer questions regarding experience with inclusive teaching (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mohajan, 2018). Teachers in the pre-Kindergarten program, intervention specialists, and gifted instruction specialists were excluded as participants due to the nature of the research focus seeking data from teachers not possessing specialized instructional training.

Open-ended questions with responsive structure shepherding semistructured interviews provided first-person accounts about the reality of the inclusive phenomenon, yielding valuable experiential details for analysis (Husband, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Coding transcripts of

interviews for emergent themes in participant responses were interpreted for meaning attribution, consistent with hermeneutic principles (Crowther et al., 2017; Peck & Mummery, 2018). Data analysis adopted the tenets of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), using field and transcript notes to direct coding and theme identification. All elements of the study design were aligned with the research purpose to better understand teachers' perceptions unequipped to provide successful instruction in the defined setting.

Significance of the Study

As a result of this study, knowledge was gained regarding teacher lived experiences within an inclusive setting relating to instructional strategies and support teachers' needs from administrators. Multiple stakeholders benefit from an understanding of the inclusive phenomenon (Bemiller, 2019; Bogen et al., 2019; Dukes & Berlingo, 2020; Giangreco, 2020; Haug, 2017; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018), and when well equipped for the task, educators can provide comprehensive instruction designed to meet the needs of a diverse group of learners (Narkun & Smogorzewska, 2019). Students could undergo the most significant changes as educational, social, and emotional needs are met within an inclusive setting (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Bradley-Levine, 2021; Cole et al., 2021). Previous research had reported a greater sense of belonging accompanied by engagement, self-efficacy, and academic gains when inclusion is effectively implemented (Carter et al., 2015; Olivier et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). Gains for the organization could be found in improved teacher and student self-efficacy, inclusive school climate, and an overall positive attitude toward education (Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Such benefits may include enacting policy changes or transformations in leadership philosophy regarding the provision of services (Bennett, 2020; Bogen et al., 2019; Elder, 2020; Sheppard, 2019).

Findings from the study may result in organizational policy changes to better serve all students. Clarification of expectations from inclusive educators can be gleaned from the results of interviews and identified themes. As leadership becomes aware of the current perceptions of teachers actively working in inclusion, the information should be used to modify the organizational vision and practices to reflect the findings (Bennett, 2020; Kurth et al., 2018). An immediate impact of the study results could be a transformation of professional development opportunities. Prior research indicated a need for additional training and support throughout inclusive endeavors. Such support began with adequate and appropriate training concerning characteristics of diverse types of learners and effective strategies for interacting with these learners (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Elder, 2020; Kalgotra, 2020; Murphy, 2018; Williams et al., 2020). Preparing educators to perform the job effectively was beneficial to all stakeholders (Bogen et al., 2019; Elder, 2020; Slaten et al., 2016; Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Positive social change was an overarching advantage to be attained from study results. As students learned to interact appropriately with peers possessing different abilities and challenges, less emphasis was placed on variances, and stakeholders appreciate the uniqueness of each other (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Carter et al., 2015; Cole et al., 2021). A climate of acceptance extended beyond classroom walls, creating generations learning with and from one another, and such mindsets and views of others can have long-lasting societal benefits (Carter et al., 2015; Coyer et al., 2019; Thompson & Timmons, 2017),

Research Questions

The study strove to establish the lived experience of teachers lacking specialized training in inclusive practices. Information was gathered about the personal experience of the educators,

including instructional strategies being implemented. A final query explored teacher-identified supports necessary for effective implementation of the inclusive classroom.

Research Question 1: What are the preparation experiences of general educators for inclusive teaching of learners with various academic and physical abilities in a rural northeast Ohio school district?

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies implemented to facilitate instruction in the inclusive classroom?

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of general educators regarding administrative support in preparation to teach in an inclusive setting?

Theoretical Framework

Transformational leadership and social constructivist theories formed the framework for the current study. Social constructivism was a critical element in consideration of inclusive placements because historically, learners with special needs in such settings have reported being excluded or inferior to peers (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Nichols, 2006; Slaten et al., 2016). Originating with Vygotsky, social learning models asserted knowledge is gained from mistakes in the zone of proximal development (Cole et al., 1978). Authentic learning required a growth mindset possibly compromised in an inclusive classroom, particularly for learners with special needs (Carter et al., 2015; Murphy & Gash, 2020).

Transformational leadership theories were an essential factor in the study findings as organizations and educators strive for the best education for each student (Bass, 1990; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Coyer et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2020; Mintz, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017). As teachers shared their experience teaching in inclusive settings, leadership should use the feedback from the findings to modify or improve training and practice (Naraian &

Schlessinger, 2018; Sheppard, 2019). Teachers adopting the role of adult learners was an essential factor within the transformational leadership theory when leaders considered the next steps in addressing the concerns in the study findings (Salvador et al., 2020). Both social constructivists learning theory and transformational leadership theory applied to the research purpose and provided valuable information for educators instructing in an inclusive setting (Bennett, 2020).

Definitions of Terms

Understanding research topic terms is vital for a reader's understanding of the context of the terms in the study. Several terms important to the study should be recognized as relevant to the topics under consideration. The following terms are defined to aid in such understanding:

Cooperative learning. Cooperative learning is a group learning format, allowing learners to exchange information with peers while working toward common goals with equity in accountability and responsibility, improving social awareness, and enhancing skills of communication (Ismail & Al Allaq, 2019).

Differentiation. The practice of educational differentiation accommodates diverse learner needs, tailoring instruction to meet identified needs (Kaplan, 2018).

General education classroom. In general education classrooms, instruction complies with the state-defined curricular standards for typically developing learners with a strong content focus (Webster, 2019).

Inclusive education. The practice of inclusive education places all learners in the same general educational environment as non-disabled peers as accepted and full members of the group, with elevated expectations and a standards-based curriculum customary among learners with individualized support when necessary (Giardina, 2019).

Intervention specialist. In the educational setting, intervention specialists serve as experts regarding support needs for learners and persistently assess problems and concerns, adjusting as needed for student environmental adaptation (Farmer et al., 2016).

Least restrictive environment (LRE). The least restrictive environment is Section 300.114 of the Individual with Disabilities Act, mandating children with disabilities are educated with their non-disabled peers in regular classes (U.S. Department of Education, 2018a).

Professional collaboration. Professional collaboration occurs when two or more educators work together toward common goals, sharing resources and responsibility for the outcome (Da Fonte & Barton-Arwood, 2017).

Assumptions

Researcher beliefs and philosophical assumptions were embedded in the research process and should be acknowledged (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontological assumptions examined the nature of reality and researchers reporting findings based on multiple perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Epistemological assumptions characterized researchers as relying on evidentiary quotes to ensure objectiveness (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Social, personal, political, and professional positionality defined the axiological assumptions and should be recognized by researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Semistructured interviews with initial probe questions allowed the formulation of additional questions as the interview proceeded, encouraging detail and vividness in responses (Husband, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The first assumption was participants would understand the questions on the research instrument, responding to the interview questions thoroughly, honestly, and willingly based upon completion of informed consent and removal of identifiable

information from the data. A second assumption stemmed from the research site and population inclusive criteria and asserted participants would have knowledge of the study's topic and share genuine experiences relevant to the research questions. Validity and reliability assumptions were established through Subject Matter Expert validation (see Appendix A) for development of the interview research instrument (see Appendix B), with study demographic data collected separately to ensure data anonymity (see Appendix C). Such a method of instrument development was completed as no validated instrument could be found designed to address the topics under consideration in this study. The final assumption posited ethical practices were maintained by the researcher in all aspects of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Tolich, 2016). Acknowledgment of these assumptions was essential to collect valuable data in response to the research questions.

Scope and Delimitations

Implementation of a qualitative research design required a clear scope of the study, delineating the depth and breadth of the study by defining the boundaries of the work (American College of Education, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The scope of the study was limited to recruiting participants from a single northeast Ohio school district grades K-12, contacted through district email. The selected site and population were chosen due to the district initiative of inclusive classrooms, providing a knowledgeable participant pool. Recruitment occurred for a period of one week and concluded at the end of the week, at which time purposive sampling occurred, resulting in a sample size of 15-20 subjects. Sample size and recruitment period were determined based on phenomenological guidelines and the practicality of data collection and analysis within the selected timeframe (Sim et al., 2018). Site permission was requested (see Appendix D) and obtained (see Appendix E), and the time frame for the

remainder of the study proceeded with recruitment using the Invitation to Participate (see Appendix F), completion of informed consent (see Appendix G), purposive sampling, scheduling, and completion of interviews within a four-week period. Teachers with specialized educational training (special education and gifted providers) were excluded from the study as such participation would have been counterintuitive to the research purpose.

Delimitations of the study included elements preventing the application of research findings to all situations (American College of Education, 2021). As research decisions were made, the population being studied was limited to general educators only. Though benefits could be gained from understanding perceptions of students, specialized educators, and administrators about inclusive education, such data were too broad for the scope of this study. The selection of one research site was a delimitation of the study. The purposeful selection of the district was based on the site's implementation of the inclusive educational setting model being studied. Not all districts in the catchment area have adopted such a model, so data collection outside the district would not have yielded relative information. An additional reason for the selection of a single site was the result of constraints on time and resources. All schools in the study were within a ten-mile radius easing completion of all aspects of the study. Decisions made about using a single site and a small sample size means transference of findings to other school districts may be affected (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Limitations

Several elements were inherent in the qualitative phenomenological design of this study focused on exploring general education teachers' perceptions about the experience of teaching in an inclusive setting. Quantitative methodology was not appropriate for seeking to understand participant experiences with the phenomenon. The number of recruited study participants was

limited by educators' voluntary response to the Invitation to Participate (see Appendix F), and the generalizability of the findings was limited by the use of participants from a single research site and the use of the qualitative research design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Replication of full interviews was a limitation and could not be possible due to the nature of the semistructured interview format with follow-up probes based on initial participant responses (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). The qualitative nature of the study with findings limited to teacher perceptions could not yield causative data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recognition of limitations of the study and possible personal biases created an open mind to novel ideas when coding for themes and assigning meaning to the findings (Holmes, 2020).

Chapter Summary

Consideration of teaching learners with diversities in academic and physical abilities is a growing topic among classroom teachers. Classroom teachers have reported difficulties adhering to federal mandates being interpreted to require all learners to be educated in a general education classroom (Akar, 2020; Bemiller, 2019; Ekstam et al., 2017; UNESCO, 2017). While the inclusive problem has evolved, standardized accountability escalated the need to understand teacher experiences and perceptions of shortcomings to achieve effectiveness (Kalgotra, 2020; Olivier et al., 2019; Slaten et al., 2016). A gap in the research occurred regarding practice strategies and the identification of additional support needed, and the purpose of this study was to gain information about such experiences.

The significance of the study was critical to advancing understanding of inclusive practices and authentic occurrences based on first-hand accounts of practitioners in the classroom. Research questions were designed to encourage open-ended responses to initial probes, with subsequent investigative discussions providing participants opportunities to fully

describe their experiences (Crowther et al., 2017; Husband, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Content on the semistructured interview tool aligned with social constructivist and transformational leadership theoretical contexts, based on learners creating meaning from the environment and academic occurrences within the environment (Pieridou & Kambouri-Danos, 2020). Terms have been defined, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations have been identified and elaborated.

Subsequent information incorporates the literature review, including a detailed explanation of the theoretical framework and a comprehensive review of literature relevant to inclusive education. Background and evolution of the concept of inclusion will be reviewed, particularly legal protections for diverse learners. Efficacy, barriers, and inclusive outcomes will be explored alongside contemplation of teachers and preparedness for the undertaking. Various instructional strategies and support methods are explored. The literature review is a comprehensive explanation of the elements of inclusive classrooms.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Inclusive classrooms are becoming more prevalent as attempts are made to close achievement gaps for diverse learners, yet teacher preparedness has not advanced at the same rate. The problem was general education classroom educators in a rural northeast Ohio school district did not identify as prepared to provide effective instruction to learners of wide-ranging academic and physical abilities in inclusive classrooms. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusive learners of multiple physical and academic abilities. Topics discussed included the theoretical basis for the study and teachers' lived experiences teaching in a full inclusive classroom. The study was based on a theoretical framework of social constructivist learning and transformation leadership theories (Cole et al., 1978; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017). The literature review included peer-reviewed evidence regarding the social constructivist and transformational leadership theories, background of the inclusive education model, efficacy of the model, teacher attitude regarding the model, and teacher perceived preparedness to teach in an inclusive classroom.

Educational mandates for inclusive classrooms have transformed the face of education across the country placing general education teachers in classrooms without adequate preparation to meet the needs of learners outside typical development (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). The IDEA mandated free and appropriate education for learners with disabilities, a written individual education plan (IEP), and placement in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (U.S. Department of Education, 2018d), however, the edict of least restrictive environment was often misapplied (Dukes & Berlingo, 2020; Giangreco, 2020). Teachers may lack the competencies for inclusive pedagogy, particularly in the culture of increasing pressure for college and career readiness for

all learners with emphasis on high stakes test scores (Haug, 2017; Kalgotra, 2020). The number of students with learning disabilities served in a general education classroom setting has risen from 33% in 1990–1991 to 64% in 2018, but given that significant increase, educator training and equipment have not been commensurate to effectively educate all learners in the same instructional setting (Bennett, 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Hussar et al., 2020; Kena et al., 2016; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). A gap in the literature existed regarding educator needs to provide adequate support for learners in an inclusive classroom.

Included herein will be the literature search strategy, theoretical framework, and the literature review. The background of the problem will include a discussion of legal mandates and lack of uniform definition. An examination of inclusive efficacy will encompass barriers and student outcomes. A consideration of teacher attitude and preparedness will address stress, loss of autonomy, training needs, classroom management, instructional practices, and stakeholder collaboration.

Literature Search Strategy

Relevant theoretical and empirical articles were sought and collected using Ebsco, Google Scholar, and Sage. Key words for background information included *IDEA*, *ESSA*, and *inclusive history*. *Inclusive teaching*, *teacher attitudes toward inclusive teaching*, *inclusive classrooms*, *efficacy of inclusive setting*, *inclusive education*, *teacher efficacy inclusion*, *inclusive teacher stress*, *student outcome inclusion*, *characteristics of learners with disabilities*, and *teacher preparedness for inclusion* were key words for elements of inclusion and barriers to the process. Theory key words included *social learning theory*, *social constructivism*, *constructivism*, *transformational leadership*, *transformational learning*, and *experiential learning*.

Considering a preliminary set of articles, references were examined for further sources relevant to the search. Classification of articles was based on subtopic and organized by year. Each article was then read for consideration of relativity to the research topic and its benefit to the research process and knowledge.

Theoretical Framework

Applications of the dimensions of the transformational leadership theory and dimensions of the social constructivist theory supported the study's purpose of exploring teachers' lived experiences with inclusive classroom models across disciplines. Creating and differentiating curricula for multiple academic levels in the same classroom can be a daunting task. Combining the transformational leadership and constructivist theories resulted in an instructional model that eased meeting the needs of varied learners. The theories were relevant to the curriculum and instructional leadership degree program as strategies were sought for effective inclusive education settings that could be created, implemented, and supported by organizational instructional leaders.

Understanding the well-developed scope of the social constructivist theory to support inclusive instruction models was an essential factor in this study. Vygotsky extended Bandura's social learning theory to include an extensive understanding of educational social-environmental factors (Cole et al., 1978). In this model, according to Vygotsky, learners created knowledge by making mistakes and learning innovative ideas built on existing beliefs in the zone of proximal development. Such learning encompassed cognition in understanding how learners gather and process information, including collective agency when working with others (Yilmaz et al., 2019). Growth mindset and student empowerment were important for all learners, but exceptional care

was taken to guide these processes in an inclusive classroom (Cole et al., 1978; Murphy & Gash, 2020).

When working with learners exhibiting multiple levels of academic preparedness, teachers must understand and differentiate for everyone without causing students to feel ineffective (Yilmaz et al., 2019). Social constructivist concepts emphasized learning from mistakes and accepting errors as a step on the learning path. Heterogeneous grouping can sometimes result in learners feeling insecure (or conversely, overconfident), leading to varied responses to instruction or work tasks. When students were grouped in heterogeneous settings with collaborative expectations, social goals supplemented academic goals, and the educator was prepared to promote positive social interactions for all learners (Akar, 2020; Ghergut, 2020; Hux, 2017; Olson et al., 2016). Constructivist theorists created an environment where students used their mistakes to gain knowledge when given the opportunity to take risks in a safe environment. These factors were relevant to the problem as instructional leaders work with, and guide, educators in creating the most effective inclusive classroom and school setting.

Transformational leadership theory was appropriate for the study as educators became adult learners in the field of inclusive teaching models. As participants shared lived experiences, there may have existed a need for changing perspectives. When considering educational outcomes of knowledge, skills, and attitude, competence was acquired through experiential learning and reflection (Coyer et al., 2019; Salvador et al., 2020). Murphy (2018) asserted that recognition of a need for additional knowledge acquisition occurred when school leaders felt inadequately prepared to oversee the special education services, involving inclusive instructional settings. Leadership should establish a positive inclusive culture through trust and confidence, supporting needs of teachers to improve efficacy and attitude (Murphy & Gash, 2020; Salvador

et al., 2020). Bass (1990) encouraged leaders as mentors, providing intellectual stimulation with innovative methods of examining existing problems and collaboratively seeking solutions.

Social constructivist theory and transformational leadership theory were appropriate for the qualitative phenomenological methodology approach to gather data regarding participants' lived experiences with the phenomenon of providing instruction in a full inclusive classroom setting. Homogeneous and heterogeneous grouping can be used variably to suit specific needs. These theories together assert that if provided with effective leadership and appropriate pace and material, learners could feel safe making mistakes, processing the mistakes, and learning from them, often with typically developing peers (Olivier et al., 2019; Yilmaz et al., 2019). The resulting theoretical framework supported inclusive education settings in which students are encouraged to create their own meaning and explore learning in a benign environment, with a variety of peers helping one another based on acceptance and belonging (Salend, 2011, as cited in Hornby, 2015, p. 237). As related to this study, if teachers were not prepared to provide this depth and breadth of instruction, an inclusive classroom may lack effectiveness for all learners (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017).

The methodology of the study aligned with the principles, concepts, and tenets of the theoretical framework acknowledging the existence of multiple, context-bound realities in social research and the meaning attributed to those experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019). The significance of the study aligned with social constructivism and transformational leadership seeking to close gaps in teacher preparedness creating an inclusive environment for diverse learners. The research questions developed aligned with the theory seeking the lived experience of educators with learners of various abilities, the strategies used to facilitate instruction in the inclusive environment, and support deemed necessary by teachers to

create a setting in which learners can make connections, create their own meaning, and explore learning, advancing their understanding for academic achievement.

The literature review was created using the theoretical framework as a guide for search terms and focus on supporting evidence. Literature related to social constructivism and transformational leadership yielded instructional strategies for inclusive teaching. This framework narrowed the focus of the literature, maintaining a clear path for the literature review.

The data analysis plan evaluated interview transcripts and documents for themes and concepts related to the theoretical framework. Themes included collaborative learning among students and educators in an inclusive setting. The value of student choice and voice as critical elements in differentiation were also valuable concepts. Additional strategies for effective models will be included as they appear in the data (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Crowther et al., 2017; Hopkins et al., 2017; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Research Literature Review

Current literature supported the increasing implementation of inclusive classrooms as defined by typically developing learners being taught in the same classroom as learners with disabilities, identifying strengths and weaknesses within the model (Al Shoura & Ahmad, 2020; Olson et al., 2016). Because there was no universal definition of this educational setting, service provision varied across districts, resulting in efficacy variances, increasing the challenge to target factors occasioning successful instruction (Cole et al., 2021; Giangreco, 2020; Hux, 2017; Kurth et al., 2018). Commonalities existed in barriers to effective inclusive classrooms, including teacher attitudes, educators' preparedness for teaching in the model, specifically the necessity for adequate training and professional development for educators (Bogen et al., 2019; Dukes & Berlingo, 2020; Ekstam et al., 2017; Murphy, 2018).

Background

Global education needs are more prevalent as technology advances and many of the jobs for which students are being prepared do not yet exist. Paramount to these advancements is equal access to education for all learners, including those with special needs. Simultaneously, national accountability for assessment achievement has led to greater disparity for learners with disabilities by denying them an opportunity to engage with curriculum created for their individual needs (Elliott et al., 2019; Hornby, 2015; NCEO, 2019). While definitions of inclusive education (henceforth IE) varied, government policies mandated the model at a national and international level (UNESCO, 2017; UNESCO, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). The United States and Canada were at the forefront of such developments, but there were still gaps in expectations and realities of IE as the concept evolved.

Evolution of the Inclusive Concept

Beginning with the inclusion of learners with special needs, i.e., mainstreaming or integration, IE now extends to students with disabilities, social or economic disadvantages, and other diversity (Besic, 2020; Warman, 2021; Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021). Inclusive education was differentiated from special education in philosophical assumptions and implementation, with inclusion encompassing an organizational transformation regarding access to educational services. Special education has been defined by specialized services provided by specialized educators and service providers, while inclusive education incorporated a philosophy of acceptance, collaboration, celebration of all learners, and valuing learning alongside peers (Hornby, 2015). The shift in thinking was necessary to address needs of global awareness and preparation of all learners for participation in a global community. Ainscow and Messiou (2018) amended the definition of inclusion to reveal a process of continuous development and

reflection, identifying and removing barriers such as physical classroom presences, participation with peers in all activities, and comprehensive learner achievement, with a moral responsibility to identify and monitor those at greater risk for underachievement. UNESCO (2020) specifically described inclusion as an educational system to ensure that each learner feels value, respect, and belonging, without barriers based on gender identification, socioeconomic status, disability, race, or religion. Ferguson (1995, as cited in Thompson & Timmons, 2017) defined inclusivity clearly as:

a unified system of public education that incorporates all children and youths as active, fully participating members of the school community; that views diversity as the norm; and that ensures a high-quality education for each student by providing meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports for each student. (p. 286)

As evidenced by the broadness of these definitions, there has been a failure to define this legally mandated practice uniformly and comprehensively.

Legal Protections

Regardless of the lack of uniform definition for inclusive education, the practice has developed through a series of laws and acts, making it a mandated service. President Lyndon Johnson authorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965 with the assurance of quality and equalized education for students through the creation of Title I, providing financial support for students with disadvantages (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Klein, 2015). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504 then protected students with disabilities in any program receiving federal funding. In 1975, President Ford expanded protection through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) affording all learners with disabilities the prospect to share their gifts and talents through free appropriate public education

(FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). Ford's legislation transformed into the Individuals with Disabilities Act in 1990 and was reauthorized in 2004, further ensuring safeguards for the population against discrimination (Kurth et al., 2020; Murphy, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018d).

No Child Left Behind legislation proposed in 2001, becoming law in 2002, was an updated version of ESEA, arising out of the fear that the nation was not providing education equal to that of international systems (Klein, 2015). 2015 saw the reauthorization of Johnson's legislation as Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) which later became law under President Obama (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019). The most significant aspect of these legislative actions was the increased demand for success on standardized assessments, defined by adequate yearly progress (AYP). While additional subgroups were defined under these laws, and sanctions were enacted for failure to meet AYP, no additional measures were implemented or mandated to aid diverse or disabled learners in meeting those goals (Klein, 2015). Global attention is now focused on the international application and implementation of inclusive education, including the Education 2030 Framework for Action calling for inclusive, quality education for all learners across the globe. Although the variances were great between countries, the path was clear – all learners needed to be afforded the opportunity for equitable education promoting lifelong learning (NCEO, 2019; UNESCO, 2016).

Overall Efficacy

The efficacy of inclusive practice varied across situations, but several commonalities existed in influencing value of the practice. Barriers to inclusion were broadly identified, however, the elements intertwined to impact teacher efficacy and student achievement outcomes (Al Shoura & Ahmad, 2020; Hassanein et al., 2021). Seeking to avoid becoming a term of

political correctness, it was vital to identify barriers and implement strategies to overcome those barriers with a vision of improved teacher efficacy and positive student outcomes (Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Barriers

Prior to implementing an instructional model or organizational shift, leaders, and teachers must possess a clear understanding of the concept (Ekstam et al., 2017; Haug, 2017; Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021). Strategies, placement, and collaboration of services were dependent on common visions for informed decisions (Bass, 1990; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Lack of awareness or universal definition of inclusive education resulted in decreased teacher efficacy, impacting student outcomes (Cole et al., 2021; Ekstam et al., 2017; Ozokcu, 2018).

Lack of a Clear Definition

The initial barrier to inclusive education services lay in the previously addressed concern with the lack of a standardized definition. Certainly, consideration began with the legal guidelines for free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, though the word inclusion appeared in no educational legislation (Bemiller, 2019; Cole et al., 2021; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Focusing on placement as a potential barrier, Cole et al. (2021) conducted a longitudinal study to compare the instructional setting of “high inclusion” (80% or more time in a general education classroom), first examined in fourth grade and compared to the same population in eighth grade. State assessment scores were used as the outcome measures for 1,669 math students and 1,619 ELA students. The results indicated inclusion as an effective strategy for students with disabilities, however not every learner was best serviced in that instructional placement. These findings supported the tenet that least restrictive environment is a personalized decision for the needs of each learner and may not be a regular education classroom

(Hux, 2017). Kauffman and Hornby (2020) reiterated the view that physical inclusion in a general education classroom is not equal to engagement in instruction, and placement should be an individualized decision.

Educators in a study by Kurth and Forber-Pratt (2017) initially responded to definition inquiries with themes of students adapting to pre-existing settings, determination of physical placement, and support provided in a meaningful environment. The terminal definition attributed in this study was, “students with disabilities as being present in the general education context, with the supports and services provided to the student to be successful” (Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017, p. 196). Comparable results were found in Bemiller’s (2019) needs assessment of two elementary schools’ inclusive beliefs and practices. The pattern of students with disabilities receiving on-level instruction in a general education classroom placed the emphasis on environment (place-based inclusion). Rather than a directed focus on environment, placement should be based on advancing student achievement and learning outcomes (learning-based inclusion), with feelings of belonging and acceptance; this tenet was focused on learning rather than environment (Nichols, 2006).

Creating a sense of community in an environment with high expectations, a realization that all learners are individuals, and recognizing the need for appropriate social interactions were paramount to successful inclusion (Nichols, 2006). The positive social interactions with peers in the classroom environment were best developed through play and hands-on activities such as blended learning. Valuable social skills of conversation, sharing, and reciprocal interaction were developed through such interchanges, particularly when positively promoted by teachers (Hong et al., 2020). Combination of belonging strategies, involvement in school activities, with peer and academic support resulted in 55% of learners describing strong feelings of belongingness

leading to improved relationships (Nichols, 2006). Relationship building and positive attitude attributed to the sense of belonging and have been proven to influence academic progress and success for all learners (Bennett, 2020; Slaten et al., 2016).

Authentic inclusion, versus physical placement, was also investigated by Thompson and Timmons (2017) as interviews were conducted with 34 stakeholders regarding perceptions of inclusive services in their schools. The common theme emerged that inclusion permeated all aspects of the environment. Interactions were natural in all settings, amid no distinction between students with or without disabilities, and all learners were challenged to move beyond their comfort zone in and out of the classroom. Hux (2017) found disparity in beliefs regarding best placement, with teachers and elementary counselors believing needs were not best met in inclusive settings, yet principals, high school counselors, and superintendents asserted inclusion is most appropriate. The discrepancies highlighted the need for further exploration of criteria for an effective inclusive mindset and environment beyond the walls of the classroom to achieve mastery, not merely exposure (Besic, 2020; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017). This consideration of inclusion as an act of social justice and ongoing curricular, social, and ecological factors formed the basis of an effective instructional model (Hansen et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2020).

Teacher Efficacy

Being identified as a significant influencing factor for teacher attitude, understanding self-efficacy was critical to the success of inclusive teaching (Ozokcu, 2018). Mintz (2018) reflected on a connection between teacher efficacy, educational innovation, and academic outcomes, advocating for pre-service teacher development. General pedagogy differed from inclusive pedagogy which was often responsive to specific situations involving learners with disabilities. Higher levels of self-efficacy were reported when pre-service educators experienced

long-term exposure to inclusive classrooms led by veteran educators. The direct involvement afforded opportunities for understanding capabilities of learners with special needs, collaboration with multiple stakeholders, and strategies for managing a variety of classroom scenarios (Mintz, 2018; Narkun & Smorgorzewska, 2019; Specht & Metsala, 2018). Although deemed effective for pre-service educators, it was necessary to create a structure that encouraged the same exposures for general education teachers transitioning to inclusive teaching.

The efficacy of general education teachers working with students with disabilities was dependent on the role of the teacher in the process. Olson et al. (2016) determined several factors improving efficacy of teacher and learner, including examination of students' learning level, style, existing skills, current needs, and demands within the curricular content. This view was sustained in work by Ekstam et al. (2017) where the efficacy was reported lower by content area specialists tasked with teaching learners with disabilities. Efficacy improved when co-teaching or collaborating with special education teachers, and when possessing a clear understanding of characteristics unique to this student population (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). Narkun and Smogorzewska (2019) described the cyclical nature of self-efficacy evidenced as teachers became more engaged in the inclusive process, more knowledgeable with a growing toolbox of strategies, and greater academic achievement, which reinforced the efficacy and led to more positive experiences. Teachers actively engaged in the collaborative process, working to make curriculum accessible throughout the learning process had a more positive attitude and greater student outcomes (Ozokcu, 2018).

Student Outcomes

Although student outcome research has not consistently supported inclusive educational settings, studies existed demonstrating equal, or better, outcomes for learners with disabilities

receiving instruction in an effective inclusive setting (Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017). A case study by Olson et al. (2016) established positive academic outcomes when students were given diverse opportunities to gain experience and progress academically while socializing with peers and building peer relationships. The fully inclusive culture of the school in the study ensured that students with disabilities were functional members of the educational community, with positive views and interactions with peers without disabilities (Olson et al., 2016). Murphy (2018) detailed benefits to student outcomes across groups of learners, with and without disabilities, including social-emotional growth, greater acceptance of diversity, improved self-image, and empathy. These findings were strengthened in brain research by Willis (2007) indicating academic success was not the only benefit of the model, but inclusion also developed curiosity, empathy, opportunities for divergent thinking, and improved self-reliance. Given these findings, in a comprehensive inclusive community, all learners would benefit socially and academically from an inclusive model.

Findings of Saw (2019) and Theobald et al. (2019) emphasized the value of inclusion in career and technical education (CTE) and inclusive STEM high schools (ISHS) for learners with disabilities. Although focused on older learners, the ideals driving the models were applicable to all-inclusive settings. Learners attending ISHSs exhibited improved math performance in ninth grade, completion of additional Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate math credits, and higher graduation rates among learners with financial insecurities. These improved outcomes were attributed to academic advising and counseling support encouraging collegiate paths (Saw, 2019). Theobald et al. (2019) reported strong correlations between participation in CTE, inclusive education, and improved student outcomes. These findings supported claims that active involvement in the school community and preparation for inclusion beyond the

educational system, i.e., CTE, had positive effects on student outcomes (Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017; Olson et al., 2016). At younger grade levels similar advising and counseling supports can be implemented for learners with disabilities to produce similar positive outcomes. The early introduction of social-emotional self-regulation interventions resulted in learners being better prepared for academic achievement, as implementation of this evidence-based approach reduces risk factors, simultaneously improving protective factors (Hart et al., 2021; Slaten et al., 2016).

Teacher Attitude

Many factors influenced teacher attitude in the classroom thereby impacting student achievement. Fearing a loss of autonomy can be daunting for educators of all experience levels (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Perceived fears increased stress, reduce self-efficacy, and result in negative attitudes (Brackenreed, 2011; Ozokcu, 2018).

Stress

Transactional stress occurred when there is disparity between teachers' environment and perceived preparation to effectively cope within that environment. General education teacher attitudes toward inclusion were influenced by feelings of inadequate training producing personal and occupational stress (Brackenreed, 2011). For inclusive educators, sources of stress were identified as support availability and satisfaction with that support (Boujut et al., 2016). Brackenreed's (2011) questionnaire results specifically identified the need for a plan of action focusing on specific goals, as well as possession of a variety of solutions and strategies for the teaching situation. Due to the expertise required for such resources, trained colleagues and administrators must be active participants in the environment. Without effective support, guidance, and collaboration, teachers felt unprepared to meet the needs of learners, creating a failure to achieve personal accomplishments (Boujut et al., 2016).

Educators often experienced stress at the prospect of interacting with learners having needs outside the scope of normal practice. This attitude was partially related to lack of understanding of students' special needs, lack of knowledge about specialized strategies, and general lack of awareness about effective inclusive education (Yoro et al., 2020). Additional stress presented when teachers were tasked with providing wide-ranging services without the basic necessary skill set (Bemiller, 2019). Such stress was not experienced by newly licensed educators trained in specialized inclusive strategies and services. As pressure has increased to improve academic achievement of all learners, the stress associated with inclusive teaching has had a negative impact on attitudes regarding IE (Narkun & Smogorzewska, 2019).

Fearing Loss of Autonomy

Instructional classroom autonomy was identified as a crucial factor in teacher retention and satisfaction (Strong & Yoshida, 2014). Paradoxes appeared as teachers reporting high degrees of autonomy desired an increase in that autonomy, extending to exclusion from external interference and control. This model is not sustainable in the era of high stakes testing and accountability, combined with the push for inclusive teaching. According to Ekstam et al. (2017), the motivating stylization of teachers impacted student engagement. This realization was significant because if teachers perceive a lack of autonomy, it may result in negative regard impacting motivation and effort in learning for students. Because inclusivity success was dependent on attitudes and actions of teachers, negativity from educators can impact student outcomes (Sheppard, 2019). There must exist a balance between educator autonomy, accountability mandates, and motivational factors.

Inclusive education can be daunting to general education teachers as it threatens to decrease their perceived autonomy in the classroom. Consultation and collaboration with various

professionals and specialists were beneficial as the support specialists provided tips, strategies, reflection, and feedback on inclusive practices (Hansen et al., 2020). Further evidence of the need for collaboration was reported by Ekstam et al. (2017) via questionnaire responses from general and special education mathematics teachers. While each professional reported higher efficacy in their respective field, there were lower related efficacy scores for instruction outside the primary area of practice. These findings reinforced the need for collaboration and conversation among all educators contributing to inclusion; each participant can contribute expertise resulting in increased efficacy and success for all stakeholders. Creation of an inclusive ethos, evidenced by a cohesive, sustainable, and collaborative professional development model was necessary for inclusivity success (Sheppard, 2019).

Intentional professional development has been reported to yield better student outcomes, and the approach also improved teacher attitudes about collaboration, reducing the fear of lost autonomy (Elder, 2020). Rather than losing autonomy, educators gained access to specialized colleagues and resources. Although a more difficult mind shift for veteran teachers, a vision that authentically embraced inclusion as the norm rather than the exception promoted shared autonomy building on individual strengths within the classroom (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Sheppard, 2019). The opportunity to learn from colleague experts is invaluable as instructional and differentiation skills are honed.

Teacher Preparedness

Even experienced teachers need deliberate professional development and support for providing instruction in an inclusive educational setting. General education teachers are not typically equipped with a toolbox to meet the needs of multiple diverse learners in one setting. Teachers in the study of Kurth and Forber-Pratt (2017) reported positive attitudes about the

concept of inclusion but felt ill-prepared to provide comprehensive services with limited time, training, and material resources. Lack of teacher preparedness resulted in learners with special needs in inclusive settings without instructional equity, diminishing the expected effects of inclusive teaching (Bemiller, 2019). Conversely, appropriate training and professional development were reported to help educators develop the ability to incorporate a variety of differentiation strategies resulting in a positive impact on learners (Bogen et al., 2019; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Warman, 2021).

Training Needs

Professional development is embedded in teacher licensing, yet often is not specific to teacher needs. Regular education teachers working in inclusive classrooms have identified several areas of training that could improve professional practice. Awareness of characteristics of learners with special needs alleviated educator stress and aided in creation of differentiated resources to best meet needs (Boujut et al., 2016; Kalgotra, 2020; Yoro et al., 2020). Classroom management and instructional practice knowledge in an inclusive setting were also targeted as topics requiring more understanding (Bemiller, 2019; Williams et al., 2020). Intentional professional development contributed to improved educator self-efficacy and productive strategies with ultimate benefit to learner and educator.

Learner Characteristics

Initial distinction must be made between a medical and social model of disablement. The medical model indicated the disability must be diagnosed, treated, and restored to normal (Hansen et al., 2020; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017). The social model considered students with special needs to be the result of external barriers blocking access to inclusion. Naraian and Schlessinger (2017) studied the lived experiences of teachers working toward a master's degree

in disability education and reported difficulty in the transformation of one-dimensional thinking about student learning to a more encompassing view of multiple dimensions impacting student outcomes.

Yoro et al. (2020) found teachers used strategies most effectively when considering disabilities to be a cognitive challenge requiring accommodations and support strategies. The provision of universal design learning enhanced learner strengths regardless of disability (Li & Ruppert, 2021). Boujut et al. (2016) studied teacher experiences providing services to learners with Autism Spectrum Disorder(ASD), finding a need for additional understanding and training for working with the disability for the purpose of developing coping strategies, adaptations, and accommodations. Professional development must be responsive to individual teacher desires and needs, with a directed focus on various learner disabilities within the classroom.

Classroom Management

One factor in bringing together learners with diverse needs is the concern for behavior and classroom management. A critical aspect in any classroom, behavior expectations were of greater importance in an inclusive classroom (Simpson et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Bemiller's (2019) participants conveyed a need for information and resources for discipline management, specifically to address the tendency to blame behavior on the disability without striving to help the learner assimilate appropriate behaviors. Research has indicated benefits of pre-service placement in inclusive settings, resulting in behavior management efficacy due to exposure to the process (Specht & Metsala, 2018).

Students with behavior and emotional disorders are growing in number in inclusive classrooms, however, strategies for this group of learners can be effective for all learners. Recognizing that the goals are student achievement and social acceptance within the classroom,

teachers required a plethora of classroom management techniques to improve outcomes.

Simpson et al. (2020) identified the Good Behavior Game and behavior-specific praise as effective implementations to improve the classroom environment, therefore improving teacher-child interactions (Fawley et al., 2020).

Instructional Practices

Consideration of differentiated instructional practices is paramount to meeting the needs of diverse learners in the classroom setting. Inclusive classrooms dictated the need for multiple facets of personalized instruction to capitalize on strengths and accomplishments (Williams et al., 2020). Yoro et al. (2020) conducted interviews with recently qualified teachers to determine learning support strategies being implemented for learners with neurodevelopmental disorders. The study revealed inclusive best practices that included cooperative learning with peers in ability groups, the use of visual aids, and overall differentiation of the curriculum. Although general provisions were in place, there continued a need for specialized instructional strategies specific to the disability.

Cooperative Learning. Group learning is increasing in functionality in classrooms but can be ineffective if not designed and implemented purposefully. Peer collaboration extended beyond the classroom as a necessary lifelong skill, and benefits were documented for students as they learned leadership roles, creative thinking, and group member functions (Carter et al., 2015; Yoro et al., 2020). Klang et al. (2020) revealed a gap between reported cooperative learning strategies and tangible practices, specifically, individual accountability and group processing. Because social acceptance was an essential element of inclusive environments, the use of cooperative strategies must consider those factors. Game-based materials with increased opportunities to talk to one another were reported as effective methods of cooperative learning,

increasing social awareness and acceptance (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021). It was important to maintain social acceptance and understanding, even in the process of cooperative or blended learning for maximum effectiveness.

Peer Learning. A strategy related to cooperative learning is the concept of peer learning. Learning material for the purpose of teaching it to others was a respected method of peer learning. This took the form of jig-sawing, student as teacher, or sage on the stage, but the premise was the same; learners of all levels became an expert about a topic and shared that learning with others (Yoro et al., 2020). Additional benefits of peer learning included academic and behavioral role models and support for learners with disabilities. The remunerations of this model were dual as students without disabilities developed compassion and social acceptance of others (Olson et al., 2016). Carter et al. (2015) outlined a peer support plan for effective outcomes for inclusive teaching. Such a plan delineated responsibilities for learners, peers, and facilitators for a variety of instructional situations, including strategies for the start of class, for direct, whole-group teaching, during small groups or labs, during independent work time, and at the close of the class period. Expectations shared prior to class could be reinforced throughout the year, and provisions made for learners of all abilities (Carter et al., 2015).

Visual Aids and Multisensory Teaching. Handouts, posters, and other visual aids are standard tools in most classrooms, but deliberate usage can offer advantages for learners of all abilities. This method offered a mental picture of the concept that could be connected to auditory instruction but was an additional resource beyond the classroom. Most educators used visual aids but had not considered their wide-ranging uses as a differentiation strategy (Yoro et al., 2020). Diversity in visual aids and concrete material resources was identified by educators as an inclusive practice benefitting learners (Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021).

Willis (2007) advocated the use of wide-ranging multisensory occasions to stimulate the information-processing sections of the brain. Students provided cross-curricular lessons with incorporation of physical movement, artistic representation, music, and performance demonstrated activation of more brain regions. Care must be taken to be familiar with individual student needs to avoid sensory overload.

Differentiated Curriculum. The time and detail commitment of differentiated curricula are invaluable as inclusive strategies. The ideals of personalized learning came to life in the differentiated classroom, and participants in the work of Yoro et al. (2020) reported improvement in academics following implementation of strategies such as chunking, mind maps, and literary exercises. Smith et al. (2020) reported evidence for differentiation with technology tools, specifically for those with writing challenges. Consistent with the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), these strategies included the use of videos with explanations, examples that could be reviewed by learners, and electronic graphic organizers (Foxworth et al., 2022). These suggestions were the result of collaboration with instructional coaches, observations, and follow-ups, reinforcing the value of a collaborative professional approach suggested by Olson et al. (2016) for creation of differentiated curriculum.

Bogen et al. (2019) reported an increase in teacher comfort when competent to develop long-range plans for individual students, with modifications of curriculum varying from alternative assignments to accommodations within the regular education program, always focused on learners as consumers (Byrd & Alexander, 2020). One-to-one support for independent work, providing sequential, incremental phases as a differentiation strategy was seen as effective when based on learner needs and curriculum demands (Bogen et al., 2019; Olson et al., 2016). The goal of differentiated curriculum was to afford learners an opportunity to

experience success, building on the current level of ability to advance academic achievement.

Accommodations are not considered cheating but should be thought of as instructional aides to support learning.

Ability Grouping. Tracking, or ability grouping, has ebbed and flowed in educational history, and evidence indicates the value of this practice as a support strategy. Instructional pace, learner work time, modified assessments, and individual attention yielded academic improvements. Conversely, such grouping led to learners feeling isolated or inferior, causing social struggles in otherwise at-risk students (Yoro et al., 2020). Approaches such as those proposed by Smith et al. (2020) took steps to alleviate the concerns of isolation by providing the strategies and tools to all learners. Differentiation was planned and implemented in a manner that does not draw attention to individual learners, through digital differentiation, small group instruction for all, or other less intrusive methods of meeting individual needs. Individual aid and assistance can still be provided to learners with disabilities but within the context of the general education classroom with peers. Such varied instructional practices and strategies are more impactful when implemented as an element of collaboration among stakeholders working together for the best outcomes.

Stakeholder Collaboration

An African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child is particularly relevant for inclusive classrooms. Frequently, inclusive services incorporated regular and special education teachers, support service personnel, and parental input (Bemiller, 2019). Collaboration took one of many forms of co-teaching or advising, but all services required open lines of communication (Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018; Olson et al., 2016). Leading the village began with

organizational leadership with an established vision and mission communicated to all stakeholders, resulting in positive attitudes and outcomes (Kurth et al., 2018; Murphy, 2018).

Communication

Effective inclusion required collaboration among all stakeholders, including parents, primary educators, specialist educators, related service personnel, and administration (Bemiller, 2019). The research of Olson et al. (2016) supported the finding that collaboration is key to successful inclusion. The educators in the study collaborated with all service providers, families, administration, and instructional teams. Benefits of the reported collaboration encompassed support for instructional planning, classroom support, assessment modification, and opportunities for team teaching. The shared responsibility of this approach was a strength when working together to address the needs and concerns of individual learners, particularly the valuable input of experts in various fields.

Given the advancements in technology, collaboration was effective in a variety of forms (Hansen et al., 2020). Shared documents and digital folders created a collaborative platform for resources, accommodations, and modified lessons, ensuring all stakeholders had access to necessary information. Email and text capabilities afforded opportunities for communication with experts across the globe. Byrd and Alexander (2020) identified the objective of multiple avenues of communication as essential for effective service provision to learners with disabilities.

Co-Teaching

Varying models of co-teaching exist with an array of benefits based on the selected model. Murphy (2018) asserted that a model of one educator teaching and one assisting allowed added support within the classroom. An effective version of the co-teaching model paired a

regular education teacher with an intervention specialist. In this scenario, the specialist worked with learners individually or in small groups to support the whole-group instruction provided by the classroom teacher. The supporting teacher also monitored student goal progress with informal assessments during the instructional period. More common was the co-teaching model in which both educators played equal roles in instruction and monitoring (Li & Rupp, 2021; Murphy, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). This model benefited novice educators, as Mintz (2018) advocated attaining mastery takes time and experience. Pairing a new teacher with a veteran educator for co-teaching improved inclusive strategies and practices, increasing self-efficacy and student achievement. Communication about student struggles, successes, and outcomes would be beneficial for identifying areas of strengths and weakness in the curriculum or accommodations.

An alternate, infrequently applied model envisioned someone teaching while another observed and collected data. This method was less enticing as it drew attention to the learners with disabilities, contrary to recommendations from Smith et al. (2020). Station or blended learning instruction was more enticing to learners and educators as it divided learners into small, flexible groups, each with a focused purpose and opportunity for minilessons with educators. Advantages to this model included the prospect of assessing and advancing student understanding more directly. Parallel teaching permitted instruction of the same lesson, but at varying levels based on student needs and academic goals and without singling out specific learners (Murphy, 2018; Smith et al., 2020). Central to success of any instructional initiative or method is direction and support from school and district administrators.

Leadership Support

Strong leaders visualized methods for educators to express their needs and be given access to resources identified as necessary for effective inclusive teaching (Bennett, 2020; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). These resources included, but were not limited to, training, open-line communication, mentoring, collaboration, and emotional support for teachers (Bemiller, 2019). Reflection on the inclusive process was primary for growth of the model within an organization. Shared vision and mission, not only communicated but brought to life within the organization, created a positive culture (Bass, 1990; Coyer et al., 2019). Ongoing monitoring, evaluation, professional development, and instructional leadership were the platform for an effective model (Murphy, 2018).

Effective leaders considered themselves to be part of the collective agency working for the good of educators, students, and the organization as a whole (Li & Ruppar, 2021; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). Working relationships with all stakeholders based on evaluation and reflection, with a willingness to modify inclusive practices as necessary, created an inclusive environment for all learners (Kurth et al., 2018). Leaders and educators should feel safe in discussing and collaborating about the inclusive community within the organization and planning for improvements or changes as necessary to improve outcomes.

Chapter Summary

The inclusion of learners with disabilities in the general education classroom has become more prevalent in response to federal mandates and shifts in educational provision models. The history of the practice, its application, and shortcomings were discussed with their influence on educators' lived experiences (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Dukes & Berlingo, 2020; Giangreco, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2018b). Findings indicated a trend of lacking instructional

support and guidance for regular education classroom teachers now being tasked with teaching learners with disabilities in the inclusive setting.

Insight into the social constructivism and transformational leadership theoretical framework as the basis for research into inclusive educational practices delineated a need for collaboration and communication among stakeholders, including regular education teachers, intervention and special service specialists, and leadership. Addressed in the literature review were peer-reviewed substantiations of the inclusive model background and efficacy. Inclusive practices were deemed most effective when the practice extended beyond the walls of the classroom and into the culture of the educational organization. Given this finding, it would follow that teacher and support service preparedness would be essential to creating such a culture. Additional factors considered were teacher attitudes toward inclusive teaching and perceived preparedness for working in such a model (Bennett, 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Haug, 2017; Hussar et al., 2020; Kalgotra, 2020; Kena et al., 2016; Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Though much research existed regarding teacher lived experiences with inclusive teaching, a gap in the literature existed regarding various strategies and adequate support for teachers to educate learners in an inclusive setting. The evaluation of lived experiences of educators in a district self-defined as a full-inclusive model provided insight into strengths and weaknesses of the model. The open-ended nature of the exploration provided additional insight into solutions or improvement of the process.

Subsequent topics will include the research design and rationale. The role of the researcher will be clarified with research procedures including research population, plan for selecting the sample with criteria for inclusion and exclusion. Research instrumentation and data

collection methods lead to describing the analytical procedures. Study reliability, validity, and plans for ethical practices and sensitivities will be reviewed.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Inclusive classrooms are transforming instruction in education, incorporating students with multiple academic and physical abilities into general education classrooms. Yet general education teachers identify as inadequately prepared to provide effective instruction in the inclusive environment (Duhan & Devarakonda, 2018). The problem was general education classroom educators in a rural northeast Ohio school district did not identify as prepared to provide effective instruction to learners of wide-ranging academic and physical abilities in inclusive classrooms. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusive learners of multiple physical and academic abilities. The following research questions guide the study:

Research Question 1: What are the preparation experiences of general educators for inclusive teaching of learners with various academic and physical abilities in a rural northeast Ohio school district?

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies implemented to facilitate instruction in the inclusive classroom?

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of general educators regarding administrative support in preparation to teach in an inclusive setting?

Included herein will be the research design, rationale, and role of the researcher. Research procedures will be examined, including population, sample selection, inclusion, and exclusion criteria. Instrumentation, data collection, and analysis will be addressed along with reliability and validity measures. Ethical procedures and considerations will be included.

Research Design and Rationale

Qualitative research methodology and a theoretical framework was used and sought to understand the meaning constructed by participants in natural settings (Alase, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Those meanings were determined from an interpretation of themes and schemes derived from the voices of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Suddick et al., 2020). Data collection incorporated purposive sampling with semistructured interviews guided by open-ended questions yielding non-numeric data in the form of themes (Mohajan, 2018). A qualitative methodology was appropriate as participants' experiences with the phenomenon of providing instruction in a full inclusive classroom were explored. The methodology allowed formulation of questions reflecting researcher interests and first-person accounts obtained during conversations and interviews (Alase, 2017).

Using philosophical assumptions to study the problem, themes were examined for patterns regarding the meaning participants attributed to teaching in an inclusive setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Suddick et al., 2020). Experiences occurred in the natural environment with sensitivity for the humanity and complex nature of interactions. Interpretation of findings was emergent, and context focused (Alase, 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative studies acknowledge the interpretation of multiple, context-bound realities in social research as well as the meaning constructed by participants and attributed to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019).

Research Design

The focus of the research was lived experiences, themes, and interpretations of those themes aligning with a hermeneutic phenomenological design (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mohajan, 2018). This design was appropriate for the study and research questions to determine teacher

experiences in inclusive classrooms and what was beneficial in improving the experience. Semi structured interviews were used to gather information in the design regarding the phenomenon under consideration. Information gained in the process was analyzed to produce a thematic structure describing the phenomenon (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A Phenomenology design was used to gain lived experience details with a particular event or phenomenon to determine themes, patterns, or schemes. A Hermeneutic approach to the phenomenology design moved beyond bracketing schemes of language to represent the findings and extended to reflection and interpretation for the purpose of establishing a thematic structure (Crowther & Thompson, 2020; Peck & Mummery, 2018; Suddick et al., 2020). Preexisting biases and beliefs were bracketed to allow an open mind to the experience of the phenomenon. This receptiveness to new ideas sought to control bias in interpretation of the findings, being helpful when assigning meaning to research question responses (Holmes, 2020; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

A Hermeneutic approach to the phenomenology design aligned with time and resource constraints for this study. Participants worked in buildings less than two miles apart, easing completion of informed consent, interviews, and follow-up contacts. Though similar in its descriptive properties, ethnography was not appropriate due to the need for a lengthy period of study and intensive work with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Narrative inquiry was linked to hermeneutics, but in this case, phenomenological interviews were necessary to provide the narratives for analysis, making narrative inquiry an unacceptable design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenological design was connected with the research context in terms of people, organizations, resources, and practical constraints. A full inclusive educational model has been implemented at the research site, providing a population of educators

experiencing the phenomenon being studied. Resources were available for in-person or digital interviews, as necessary.

Phenomenological advantages included the ability to explore phenomena through shared experiences of several individuals (Farrell, 2020; Gong & Yanchar, 2019; Peck & Mummery, 2018). Such a process was advantageous in providing a rich data pool improving understanding of the phenomena. The potential to conduct open-ended interviews provided a thick description of participants' experiences and holistic understanding in a specific setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crowther & Thompson, 2020). Insight into lived experiences and the possible changes occurring as a result of the findings provided universal awareness. Phenomenology allowed for the evolution of the findings as follow-up queries were posed based on initial participant responses (Farrell, 2020).

Role of the Researcher

The role of the researcher in phenomenological qualitative research was described as an immersed observer, data gatherer, and interpreter to depict the structure of the phenomenon being investigated (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). A professional relationship existed with participants working in the same district. No supervisory role existed to create conflict with participants. Participation was voluntary and no incentives or repercussions existed for participation decisions, causing no ethical conflicts. Reliability and validity were controlled using three purposively sampled groups from the same environment used for data collection (Alase, 2017; Daniel, 2019; Munthe-Kaas et al., 2019). Such an approach compensated for weaknesses in data through the strength of data from other groups in the same study, increasing reliability and validity of the research.

Research Procedures

Aligning with a phenomenological qualitative design, purposive, criterion-based sampling was used for participant selection (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). An appropriate site was selected based on implementation of an inclusive model. Inclusive criteria for participants were commensurate with the purpose of the study and research questions. Appropriate IRB approval and informed consent were obtained prior to commencement of data collection (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Population and Sample Selection

The study target population was 150 certified educators providing instruction in an inclusive model classroom. Estimated sample size was 15–20 participants. An Invitation to Participate was sent via email to the target population. Due to the potentially sizeable purposive sample, random sampling was planned to select study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Nonprobability random sampling was appropriate for the study because the goal was acquisition of data for participant meaning, not for generalization of results. Purposive sampling studied the population of specific interest and was used to select a participant group from which the greatest insight can be gained about the topic, based on inclusive criteria (Andrade, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Sample participants were chosen from a variety of grade levels and subject areas, making immersion impossible. Participant inclusive criteria included being a licensed educator (excluding intervention specialists), teaching students in an inclusive setting (learners of variable academic and or physical abilities), and working at the selected site. Pre-Kindergarten educators were excluded from the study because certified intervention specialists provide instruction in an integrated preschool model (Stark County ESC, 2020).

Initial recruitment and invitation to participate were shared via district email server (see Appendix F) to all certified staff in the research site district. The invitation described the criteria for participation with a link to a Google Form if interested in participation. Alternatively, department meetings were attended to introduce the study and provide information to potential participants about how to participate. Selected participants were contacted by phone with instructions for completing the Informed Consent through email or in person (see Appendix G). Participants completed the Informed Consent and returned the document electronically.

The research site was a public rural school district in northeast Ohio, serving learners in Pre-Kindergarten through grade 12. The selected district has adopted an inclusive model of class placement. Site permission was requested following an explanatory meeting with the curriculum director and subsequent formal letter to the district superintendent (see Appendix D). Permission was granted and the Site Approval document was sent via email (see Appendix E).

Instrumentation

The researcher-created data collection instrument comprised open-ended interview questions. Selected queries related to study variables and research questions by allowing participants to discuss their lived experiences with the phenomenon being examined and incorporating follow-up questions based on participant responses (Gong & Yanchar, 2019; Mohajan, 2018). The iterative nature of qualitative research encouraged flexibility in data instruments, allowing subsequent questions to be responsive to initial participant responses (Farrell, 2020; Husband, 2020). Reflexive interaction resulted in depth of findings, contributing to the strength of the study.

Interview

Rationale for development of the instrument was based on the use of qualitative research to study complex matters (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Using Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) interview structure continuum and the responsive interviewing model of Rubin and Rubin (2012), the semi structured, open-ended interview questions were created for the instrument using the research questions and purpose as a guide. Demographic queries were structured and pre-determined (see Appendix C). All non-demographic interview questions (see Appendix B) were used with flexibility and open-ended design to encourage participants to share their lived experiences. This approach provided the liberty to respond to participant responses at the moment, leading to further questioning to gain insight from multiple perspectives (Gong & Yanchar, 2019; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Using the responsive interview structure by Rubin and Rubin (2012), main questions were created mirroring the research questions of the study, probes were added to encourage depth to answers, and follow-up questions gathered details based on interviewee responses (Barman & Khanikor, 2019).

Instrument Validation

An initial instrument was shared electronically with seven educators as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) for validation (see Appendix A). SME designation was based on more than ten years as a certified educator and teaching in an inclusive setting, giving them a deep understanding of the topic (Alase, 2017; Pieridou & Kambouri-Danos, 2020). The purpose of the study and the SME role were explained, and instrument items were included for content validity review and suggested revisions. Of the seven requests sent, six were returned, and three of them provided suggestions for revision (see Appendix A). One of the unused responses offered no modification suggestions, and two of the responses provided answers to the research questions.

Revisions were made to the original questions, and probing questions were added in response to feedback from SMEs (see Appendix B).

Document Analysis

Rationale for the use of document analysis was the need for auxiliary information to improve the quality of the interview and acquisition of data for the research questions. Document analysis aligned with the research questions addressing strategies and supports necessary for successful inclusive teaching (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Electronic professional development transcripts are maintained for employees at the research site, and systematic document analysis was used to examine transcripts provided by the participants. Data collection from the documents was appropriate to gain an understanding of background knowledge and training for inclusive teaching. Document analysis occurred prior to the interview to allow discussion about the contents and participant meaning attributed to the findings (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

An Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent was sent to all certified educators at the selected site. Those responding with interest in being a participant were sent a demographic questionnaire to complete. Those completed and returned were screened for adherence to the inclusive criteria to create a purposive sample of the population (Andrade, 2021). With a total of 15 qualified responses, the group was divided into sub-populations according to grade level taught to establish elementary, middle school, and high school groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

After selection, participants were contacted and asked to electronically submit their professional development transcript for document analysis and to schedule a time for the

interview during a four-week period at the convenience of the participants. Data were collected at the research site via in-person or Zoom interviews. Due to the ongoing pandemic restrictions, participants chose the interview format that was most comfortable for them (Daniel, 2019; Husband, 2020; Lobe et al., 2020). The interviewer used the research instrument to guide the interview, with follow-up questions determined by participant responses (Hopkins et al., 2017; Minikel-Lacocque, 2018; Singh & Walwyn, 2017). Each participant participated in one session lasting 20-45 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with a digital voice recorder for subsequent transcription, and videoconferencing interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform (Lobe et al., 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). All interviews were transcribed word-for-word. Participants reviewed interview transcripts for verification of content and were allowed to ask any questions about the study. This debriefing encouraged trust and rapport with respondents (Minikel-Lacocque, 2018; Thomas, 2017). After all issues were addressed, participants exited the study. Follow-up contact occurred after the conclusion of the study for discussion of findings and results.

All identifying information was removed from interview data and professional development transcripts to ensure privacy and confidentiality for all participants. Electronic files were maintained on an external hard drive, password-protected, and stored for the mandated period of 3 years (Creswell & Poth, 2018; U.S. Department of Health and Human Resources, 2018; U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979). After the study and data maintenance period, data will be destroyed via reformatting and deletion of files on the storage drive.

Preparation of data for analysis began during data collection. Following each interview, transcripts were reviewed to note reflections, preliminary themes, and ideas to explore further

(Crowther & Thompson, 2020; Peck & Mummery, 2018). The process was repeated following each interview, comparing the findings from each set of data for emerging data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Mohajan, 2018). All annotated transcripts were housed in NVivo, an established software designed to describe, evaluate, and interpret phenomena from interviews with the goal of finding themes and patterns (QSR International, 2020).

Data Analysis

Braun and Clarke's (2021) model of data analysis was used to guide the coding and analysis of the data. Coding of the data was necessary for qualitative research to organize categories of themes and concepts from participant interviews. Aligning with the research purpose to determine participant experience with the phenomena and gain meaning from the experiences, searching for trends across the samples was important (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Crowther et al., 2017; Hopkins et al., 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Data coding provided visual representations and relationships among codes and themes in the data thereby answering research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Raskind et al., 2017).

At the completion of all interviews and transcriptions, transcripts were reviewed and annotated for common ideas and thoughts. Word frequency was conducted for identification of preliminary themes. The focus was on themes reflective of participant experience with teaching in an inclusive setting (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Crowther et al., 2017). Field notes and transcript memos guided critical thinking about what was being revealed in the findings (Raskind et al., 2017). Using the themes, a code structure was created, and the transcripts were coded in NVivo (QSR International, 2020). Anticipated themes included inclusion, differentiation, professional development, intervention specialist, strategies, challenges, gifted, IEP, and learning disability

(Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Following the identification of themes, findings were sorted and compared, seeking meaning in the experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Raskind et al., 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Reliability and Validity

Credibility and dependability were established through triangulation, reflexivity, and process logs. The idea that findings were credible given the data being presented aligned with the holistic, multidimensional assumptions of qualitative research. Triangulation was implemented via multiple sources of data from people with different perspectives and multiple methods, including interviews and document analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Member checking allowed participants to review transcripts for accuracy of content and attributed meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Thomas, 2017). Reflexivity process logs recorded all activities of the study, including interview notes, observations, reflections, and ideas from interviews (Connelly, 2016; Crowther et al., 2017; Crowther & Thompson, 2020; Holmes, 2020; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). If discovered, negative analysis would have been reported for an authentic assessment of studied phenomenon. No barriers existed hindering feedback from participants or from findings being shared with participants. Participants were colleagues with no administrative or supervisory roles with each other (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Thick description was used for transferability of findings to similar contexts. Contextual information about the research site, participant recruitment and selection process, and factors influencing data collection were thoroughly discussed. Data collection methods, analysis process, and time frames were fully explained. All aspects of thick description contributed to the

applicability of the research to an analogous situation (Daniel, 2019; Korstjens & Moser, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Trustworthiness was based on eliminating and reducing bias. Reflexive auditing acknowledged past experiences and orientations with the topic of study (Pieridou & Kambouri-Danos, 2020; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Singh & Walwyn, 2017). Care was taken during interviews to avoid any leading or biased questions, encouraging genuine participant reports of their experience with the phenomenon (Hopkins et al., 2017). Peer debriefing aided this process by a knowledgeable peer examining methods, meanings, interpretations, codes, and themes in the analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Raskind et al., 2017).

Ethical Procedures

Prior to recruitment of any participants, all required forms were submitted to IRB for review and approval. The request for site approval (see Appendix D) and signed site approval (see Appendix E) were submitted for consideration. An Invitation to Participate (see Appendix F) and Informed Consent (see Appendix G) were included in the IRB application. All forms related to instrumentation were incorporated, including the demographic data form (see Appendix C) and the Interview Research Instrument (see Appendix B).

Human participants were protected by adherence to all legal requirements governing human participant research, including masking of identifiable information, and respect for participant diversity (Bentley et al., 2019). All principles of the Belmont Report (U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979) were adhered to with voluntary participation, being treated in an ethical manner and protected from harm, with equal opportunities for all participants. Potential participants received Informed Consent documents (see Appendix G) when sent the Invitation to Participate (see Appendix F) via email, with

availability provided for discussion about the documents before agreeing to participate. Subjects received no remuneration and did not incur any costs for participation.

Per Health and Human Resources Office for Human Research Protections (2018), all data will be kept confidential through encrypted storage on an external hard drive and will be backed up on a password protected digital storage platform with restricted access for at least 3 years. At the end of the 3 years, all data will be destroyed via reformatting of the external hard drive and permanent deletion from the digital storage platform. There were no ethical conflicts related to the workplace, conflicts of interest, or authority differentials (Creswell & Poth, 2018; U.S. Department of Health, Education, & Welfare, 1979).

Chapter Summary

Aligned methodology elements of the study encompassed an appropriate research design and rationale, as well as the role of the researcher. Consideration of research procedures included a discussion of the population and sample size with justification given for decisions.

Instrumentation was developed, justified, and validated to align with the research questions and purpose of the study. Data collection processes were clearly delineated with justification supported by citation of research experts. Data analysis procedures outlined in a detailed manner the organization and processing of data for coding and interpretation of meaning. Reliability and validity strategies commensurate with qualitative research were implemented to establish credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness while reducing bias. All legal and ethical procedures regarding human research, data collection, and storage were adhered to with fidelity.

Subsequent topics will include data collection process, data analysis, and results. Any departure from the data collection or instrument plan will be addressed, as well as curious events or occurrences during the data collection process. Coding, theme, and meaning attributions will

be identified and discussed, including any relevant tables or figures. Reliability and validity will be addressed with regard to success with control of the factors and any evident threats.

Chapter 4: Research Findings and Data Analysis Results

The face of education has been changing as learners with varying academic and physical abilities have been served in the general education classroom. Preparedness for this instructional experience was identified as lacking among general education teachers. The phenomenological approach identified challenges experienced by educators teaching in an inclusive setting, as well as identification of supports necessary for successful inclusive teaching.

The problem was general education classroom educators in a rural northeast Ohio school district did not identify as prepared to provide effective instruction to learners of wide-ranging academic and physical abilities in inclusive classrooms. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusive learners of multiple physical and academic abilities. Data collection was guided by three research questions:

Research Question 1: What are the preparation experiences of general educators for inclusive teaching of learners with various academic and physical abilities in a rural northeast Ohio school district?

Research Question 2: What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies implemented to facilitate instruction in the inclusive classroom?

Research Question 3: What are the perceptions of general educators regarding administrative support in preparation to teach in an inclusive setting?

Included herein will be an explanation of the data collection process and a description of data analysis. The results will be discussed in relation to the research questions and emergent

themes. Reliability and validity maintenance will be explained as applicable to the data collection and analysis process.

Data Collection

Data collection began with an email to all certified staff in the research site district, using the site mail server, and included the Invitation to Participate and Informed Consent. A Google Form link was included for demonstration of interest, and responses were screened for adherence to inclusive criteria. Three interest responses were submitted in person. After inclusion in the study was established, signNow (AirSlate, 2021) was utilized for completion of electronic signature of informed consent. All participants were selected, and informed consents were received within two weeks of the initial inquiry. Due to the number of qualified responses matching the minimum number of 15 participants, purposive sampling was not necessary. Following receipt of informed consent, participants were contacted via email to electronically submit professional development transcripts and schedule an interview time. Table 1 delineates participant demographics establishing their subject matter expert status.

Table 1

Participant Educational Demographics

Years of Teaching	Number of Participants
1-5	1
6-10	2
11-15	3
16-20	6
20-25	1

26-30	0
30+	2

An interview using the demographic inquiry (See Appendix C) and research instrument (See Appendix B) was conducted with each participant during a three-week period, at the research site, either face-to-face or via Zoom as determined by the participant. Interview times ranged from 20-45 minutes, within the proposed timeframe of less than one hour. Each interview was recorded using Otter.ai (2021), yielding auto-generated transcriptions. Zoom meetings were recorded in Zoom as well as Otter.ai due to greater transcription accuracy with Otter.ai.

One deviation from the data collection plan occurred with sharing of electronic professional development transcripts prior to the interview due to a technical issue. Although four documents were not received before the interview, document analysis of the PD transcripts occurred as soon as they were received and before initial coding. Completed response rates were 100% for informed consent, professional development transcripts, and interviews. There were no other significant or unusual events or circumstances encountered during the data collection.

Data Analysis and Results

Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis model was implemented in the data analysis process. Data were secured for coding analysis during phenomenological participant interviews as word-for-word transcriptions and interview field notes. Document analysis of professional development transcripts was conducted to acquire auxiliary data regarding background knowledge and professional preparedness for teaching in the inclusive setting.

Phase One: Data Familiarization

In phase one of the data analysis process, familiarity with the data was achieved via repeated encounters with the audio and video recordings of the interviews. Although each of the 15 interviews was auto transcribed, they were revisited and corrected for accuracy allowing the researcher to begin the process of annotation and reflection on the data. Table 2 demonstrates an example of the process of the phase. Annotation and field notes were linked with transcriptions within 48 hours of the interview. An annotated spreadsheet was used for tracking each step of the recruitment and data collection process and ensuring all items were completed in a timely manner.

Table 2*Annotation Example from Transcript Review*

Participant Transcript	Researcher Annotation
<p>“As far as learner needs impact, I think what most impacts the challenge is behaviors.” (Participant 11, Personal Communication, November 3, 2021)</p> <p>“...there were a lot of behavior issues, and my focus during those periods was on the behavior and making sure everyone was safe.” (Participant 12, Personal Communication, October 29, 2021)</p>	<p>Behaviors are a concern at all levels, yet the discipline structure is not consistent across buildings.</p>

<p>“we've really been focused on, because of the state ... targeting and getting our gifted hours...” (Participant 15, Personal Communication, November 2, 2021)</p> <p>“We do a great job with professional development, but maybe not necessarily professional development targeted at inclusion.” (Participant 21, Personal Communication, November 5, 2021)</p>	<p>In compliance with state mandates, gifted education has been the priority recently, but professional development for special education and inclusion has not been addressed as strongly.</p>
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Consistent with the informed consent, all identifying information was redacted from the transcripts and replaced by coded numbers. Following the transcription review process, transcripts were shared via email with each participant for member checking of accurate representation of their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). One minor revision (an incorrect word that changed the meaning) was necessary, otherwise, transcripts were accepted as presented. All data were organized on an external hard drive by participant, then by data source including interview transcriptions and professional development transcripts.

Phase Two of Data Analysis

Coding was initiated with an examination of the interview transcripts, ensuring an answer to every question, and confirming sufficient data existed to document the experience of the

participants with the phenomena of inclusive classrooms. Each interview transcription was prepared for initial coding, with subsequent annotation for frequent terms and reported experiences in each transcription (Braun & Clarke, 2021). The entire dataset was systematically processed using comment boxes in Microsoft Word to label the code and identify the data to which it was related. This process was repeated as the analysis progressed and codes evolved. Appendix H displays an excerpt of the preliminary transcript coding process. NVivo (QSR International, 2020) was also used for initial coding, however, hand-coding yielded more opportunities for deeper coding and easier processing of the evolving clusters and themes.

Phase Three of Data Analysis

The initial codes and transcripts were revisited for latent expression and patterns beyond obvious meanings, specifically seeking overlapping across codes. Saturation was apparent when the same codes were being identified in subsequent reviews of the data, at which point clustering and collapsing of codes occurred (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Crowther et al., 2017; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Raskind et al., 2017; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Appendix I details an example of patterns within clusters used to create candidate themes for further examination.

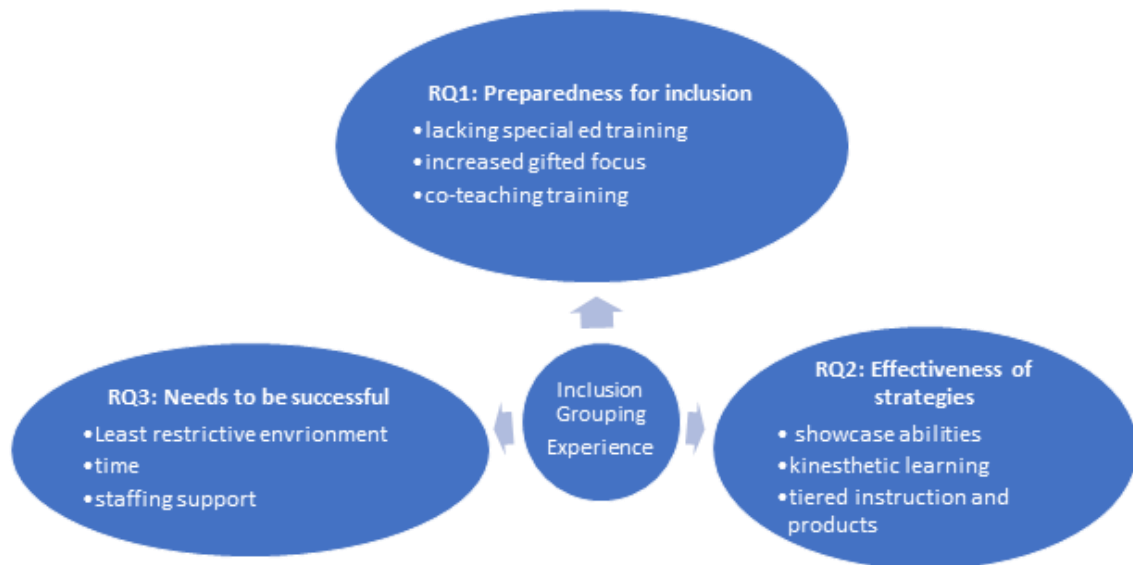
Phase Four of Data Analysis

After collapsing the codes for meaningful data interpretation via revising and removing codes, each theme was reviewed by answering key questions regarding the quality and boundaries of the theme, the sufficiency of supporting data, and coherence of the theme (Braun & Clarke, 2021). Items and codes forming coherent patterns contributing to the data narrative were considered for the next level of review. Any sub-themes or themes that were incongruent or failed to contribute to meaningful interpretation were revised or removed. Themes were examined to determine their relationship and relevance to the research questions and theoretical

foundations of the research. Figure 1 documents the results of this process, yielding three for each of the research questions.

Figure 1

A Graphic Representation of the Relation of Data Themes and the Guiding Research Question



Phase Five of Data Analysis

As codes were collapsed and emerged into themes, each theme was analyzed for its relevance to the research questions. Seeking to document participant experiences with the practice of inclusive instruction, each theme needed to demonstrate relatedness to that experience. Each theme was determined to be internally consistent with clear category definitions, contributing to the narrative of the data. Data items were examined for extracts providing compelling arguments for the selected themes.

Phase Six of Data Analysis

Writing the summary of the results began with an examination of a data summary and consideration of each research question. Themes were supported with participant interview

extracts across participants to demonstrate the consistency of the theme. Significant revelations were extrapolated as the meanings of the findings were explained. Seven final themes emerged related to the three research questions: a lack of training for teaching in an inclusive setting on the lower end of the academic spectrum, ineffective co-teaching model, lack of implementation strategies that showcase abilities of all learners, awareness that hands-on strategies are effective in inclusive settings, value of authentic differentiation with tiered instruction, a need for effective implementation of least restrictive environment, time for collaboration with support and intervention colleagues.

Findings Related to Research Question One

What are the preparation experiences of general educators for inclusive teaching of learners with various academic and physical abilities in a rural northeast Ohio school district? This question sought to explore the experience of teachers preparing for educating multiple ability learners. Evolving themes revealed a shortcoming in preparation for general education teachers.

Lack of Training for Teaching in Inclusive Setting on Lower End of Academic Spectrum. Those experiencing special education professional development did so primarily outside the district through county offerings or organizational conferences. Respondents indicated a need for more specialized professional development specifically related to the inclusive model. “How about every year we have some development on how we can better meet special ed mandates that are coming . . . but then also techniques that might help” (Participant 31, Personal Communication, November 2, 2021). Many respondents discussed wanting to know more about what works and does not work with certain populations. There were experiences of frustration and feeling unsuccessful with learners due to lack of preparation. Behavior issues

were frequently referenced as a concern, and training in this specific area was reported as being necessary for general education teachers in the inclusive setting.

This experience was supported in conversations with participants as they discussed inclusive focuses. “I feel like we were kind of just put into inclusion and we just kind of had to make it work” (Participant 15, Personal Communication, November 2, 2021). Such a view was shared by participants who reported the focus on district professional development to address needs of gifted learners in response to recent state mandates but failing to address strategies for learners at the lower end of the academic spectrum. “I think that sometimes they need to think about people who need special professional development, such as people who teach primarily gifted students or primarily inclusive students, I think it’s kind of forgotten a little bit” (Participant 24, Personal Communication, November 3, 2021). Such experiences were widely reported among participants reporting positive interactions with learners of all abilities, but a feeling of ineffectiveness with such a wide variety of learners in one setting.

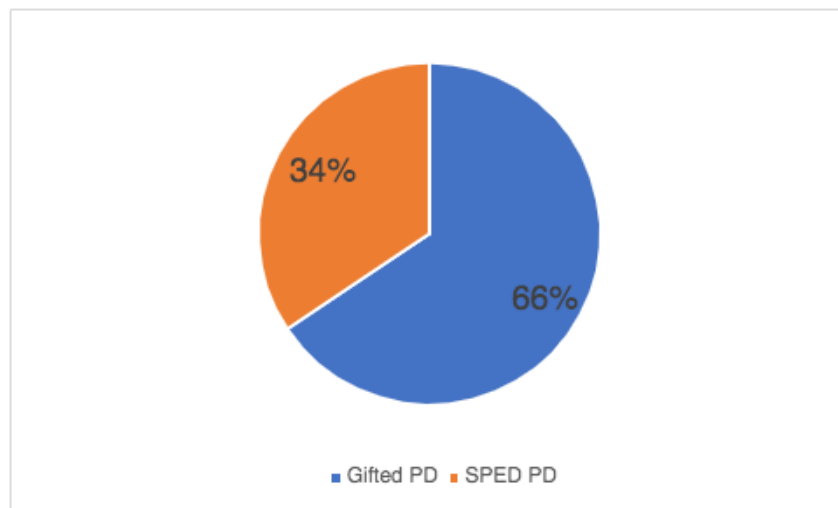
Document analysis supported the findings of the interviews regarding the increased focus on gifted education (See Figure 2). Professional development to provide gifted services was twice as great as that for special education, even though there are no federal mandates to service gifted learners such as those for special education. The majority of time attributed to special education professional learning was completed by two respondents who participated in a district-sponsored book study. The new state model requires that all general education teachers serving gifted learners have a mandated number of gifted education hours each year, but no such mandate exists for general education teachers working in an inclusive setting. The discrepancies in professional development for the two diverse learner populations were experienced and reported by all respondents. Several respondents praised the practice of peer training, specifically

provided by intervention specialists who continually work with a multitude of learners. This is a regular practice at the middle-high school level, but not as common, per respondent reports, at the primary and elementary levels.

Figure 2

A Comparison of Gifted Versus Special Education Professional Development Hours

5 Year Professional Development Document Analysis



Ineffective Co-teaching Model. Respondent's experiences with co-teaching were varied. Some reported good rapport and an authentic sharing of the classroom. “And now she’s teaching like me, and I’m teaching like her. It’s almost like we’re twins. So, I love that ... we mirror each other” (Participant 22, Personal Communication, October 28, 2021). Conversely were participants with negative experiences, “I have other times where I’ve had teachers modify, but that was the extent of their involvement ... modify the tests” (Participant 23, Personal Communication, October 18, 2021). This participant continued by reporting a lack of clarity in the role of the intervention specialists in a co-teaching, as well as discomfort relinquishing control of the classroom without clear expectations for each educator. In general, the findings regarding teacher preparation for the inclusive setting were that preparation was inadequate.

Findings Related to Research Question Two

What are teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies implemented to facilitate instruction in the inclusive classroom? The question was designed to elicit experiences with various strategies in an inclusive setting. The findings indicate effective strategies sourced from educator resources more than direct professional development.

Need to Implement Strategies that Showcase the Abilities of all Learners.

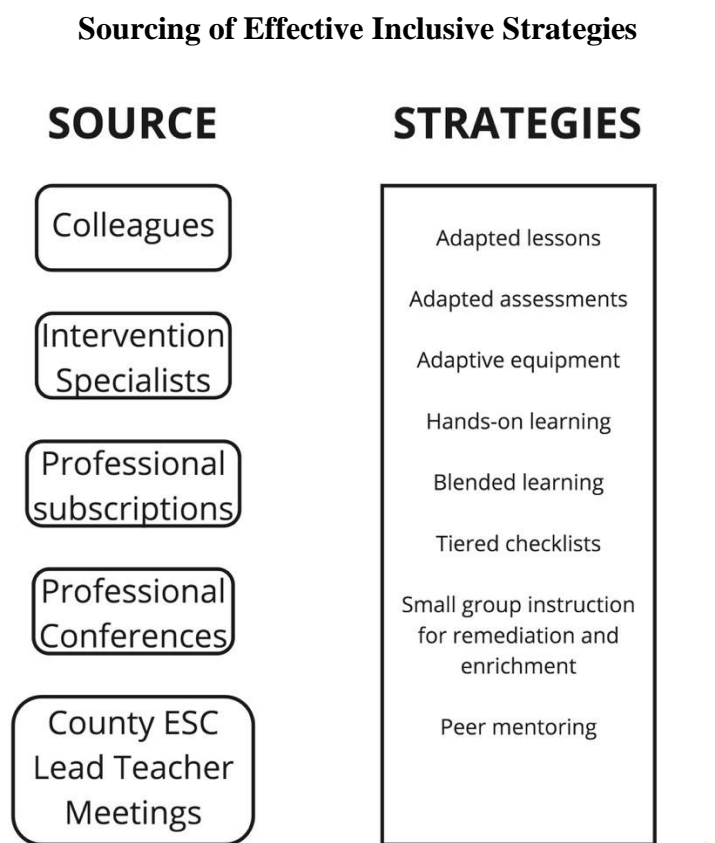
Participants experienced more success with unique ability learners when instruction and expectations were based on identified strengths and needs. "If you showcase what they know and what they can do, there's a difference there, and a lot of times they can surpass the kids who are academically high" (Participant 35, Personal Communication, October 19, 2021). It was suggested that needs are identified, but not always met in the most appropriate manner, i.e., the general education classroom with unreasonable expectations, making success difficult to attain. "I do understand that these four kids should be in a resource room. They will grow a lot more than in an inclusive setting" (Participant 22, Personal Communication, October 28, 2021). Linked to increased strategy effectiveness was the incorporation of student support in the form of adaptive learning or aide support.

Hands-on Strategies are Effective Experiences in Inclusive Settings. Achieved through trial and error rather than from purposeful training, hands-on education strategies were experienced to be effective in the inclusive setting. "The hands-on letting them actually play and be a part of it and do the games" (Participant 32, Personal Communication, October 18, 2021). Sources for the strategies were varied but yielded multiple ideas for implementation (See Figure 3). Station work addressing multiple learning modalities was identified as beneficial to all types of learners, allowing each student to perform within their comfort zone, building on their

strengths. For example, offering choices to author a story, draw a picture, create a digital representation, write a song, or create a poem allows all learners to have control of their learning and experience success.

Figure 3

A Visualization of Strategy Sources and Types of Strategies Implemented



Authentic Differentiation and Tiered Instruction are Critical to Success. Authentic differentiation based on specific individual needs was identified across participant responses as critical to success. Learners must experience the academic material at their level through adapted lessons, adaptive equipment, and hands-on learning. “I really love doing blended learning and those kinds of settings. Checklists are another big thing. Get different kids, different activities” (Participant 12, Personal Communication, October 29, 2021). Blended learning and checklists

have been a district initiative in recent history, and it has proven effective for multiple levels of differentiation. Specifically, the respondents teaching art, music, or physical education focused on adapting the equipment making it easier to meet the needs of the learner. Referencing the creation of an adaptive unified arts class, the respondent stated, “I just wanted to make sure they had their own time because it’s important for them to experience things at their level”

(Participant 35, Personal Communication, October 19, 2021). Through these efforts and strategies, many unique learners were able to excel in non-academic endeavors. Several differentiation strategies were reported as successful for inclusive teaching including tiered learning, blended learning, checklists, and incorporating remediation and enrichment into the group activities. Small group work is extremely valuable, but not easily implemented with multiple academic levels of learners without assistance. Peer mentoring can be a beneficial strategy as reported in the interview. “Pairing them up with a more severe student, pairing them with kids willing to help them has been a big help” (Participant 32, Personal Communication, October 18, 2021). Each of the respondents acknowledged the regular use of differentiation, but often without the guidance or assistance of an intervention specialist.

Findings Related to Research Question Three

What are the perceptions of general educators regarding administrative support in preparation to teach in an inclusive setting? Participants spoke well of administration, however, two themes emerged in these interviews, with this series of questions yielding the most discussion. While educators reported a willingness to implement new strategies, effective planning time was not experienced.

Need for Effective Implementation of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). “My students aren’t always getting things modified in a way that maybe is best for them” (Participant

24, Personal Communication, November 3, 2021). This was a common theme across respondents when discussing difficulties encountered in an inclusive classroom. Teachers reported that for some learners, the general education classroom may not be the most appropriate LRE.

Time is Necessary to Plan and Collaborate with Intervention and Support

Colleagues. “We had some time when we were able to meet more as a team, but right now I have zero at the high school level, which is something I definitely miss” (Participant 25, Personal Communication, October 21, 2021). Time concerns were not just for collaboration, but also curriculum acquisition and planning. This included time to review student records to identify needs, and to prepare multiple versions of assignments or assessments to meet those needs. Several participants have experienced difficulty finding time for authentic differentiation for the multiple academic needs in the classroom. As approaches change and student populations shift, educators need time to process and plan for the differences to best meet the needs of learners.

Due to the number of learners in the classroom and the wide academic gaps, teachers have experienced a challenge that is difficult to overcome. The growing severity of behavior difficulties sometimes put other learners and educators at risk, making it more difficult to meet the academic needs of all learners. All respondents reported the value added by intervention specialists and paraprofessionals in the room with the learners. “...the last few years with inclusion, it’s been co-teaching and teaching in small group...it didn’t have to be inclusion kids that needed this small group. It could be anybody that needs a small group” (Participant 12, Personal Communication, October 29, 2021). While each participant voiced concerns about needing more staff, they also acknowledged funding shortfalls that would make such hiring difficult. In that situation, the intervention specialists are often pulled in a variety of directions, making it difficult to meet learner needs, and harder to build connections with learners and staff.

“Our tier-two kids are getting more support than our tier-three because we’re spread too thin in our tier-three supports” (Participant 15, Personal Communication, November 2, 2021). The notion of inconsistent intervention specialist support was a frequently referenced experience of the participants.

Reliability and Validity

Credibility, dependability, transferability, and data saturation were established through the use of document analysis, reflexive practice, and process logs throughout the interview process, while member checking allowed for authentication of transcriptions to accurately reflect the interview. Data saturation resulted from multiple visits with the dataset as codes were developed and revised, eventually producing similar codes and clusters across interviews. Thick description of research site, recruitment, and selection process for participants contribute to transferability of the results to similar contexts. Methods of data collection, the process of data analysis, and all-time frames were fully explained. Researcher bias was addressed via the use of semistructured interview format, and document analysis to support participant reported experience. Trustworthiness was established through reduction of bias as the interviews avoided leading questions and encouraged participants to report genuine experiences with the phenomenon being studied with the guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity.

Chapter Summary

The study was designed to learn more about the experience of general education teachers working in an inclusive setting. Research question one explored the preparation experiences of the teachers in the inclusive setting, and the results indicated a general lack of preparation in this area. Respondents consistently experience a need for more training specific to various student populations, and more emphasis on learners with special needs. Additional concerns in this area

were a need for clarity on the roles of co-teachers as that model is becoming more prevalent. Research question two explored teacher perceptions of strategy effectiveness within the inclusive classroom. While implemented strategies were reported as effective, the source of those strategies was not expert based, leaving a gap in the knowledge base. Strength was found in strategies that showcase the abilities of all learners based on strengths, as well as kinesthetic learning opportunities. Tiered instruction was also identified as valuable in the inclusive experience for learners and teachers. Research question three explored perceived administrative support for success in inclusive teaching. Responses focused on the need for more time, additional intervention specialist and paraprofessional support, as well as clear and appropriate implementation of LRE. Positive attitudes toward administrators were reported across many participants, but inclusive needs were identified to improve the educational experience for all diverse learners. While some of these needs may be financially challenging, others could be implemented for positive outcomes.

Forthcoming will be a discussion of the findings, interpretations, and conclusions of the results. Limitations will be explored, and recommendations made for further research. Implications for leadership will be examined, specifically related to the potential impact of positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Provision of educational services to learners has shifted and transformed in many ways since the inception of public schools. Legislation guaranteed equal education for all learners in a free and public setting, specifically mandating that children with disabilities receive services to meet their needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with non-disabled peers. Seeking compliance with LRE, inclusive learning models were implemented placing students with disabilities in the same classrooms as typically developing learners. Further legislation, including No Child Left Behind and Every Student Succeeds Act, increased accountability via high stakes testing and adequate yearly progress expectations, without provision of safeguards for subgroups of learners to assist in achievement of these goals or educator training to most effectively instruct this varied group of learners.

Inclusive classroom models are becoming more common in education, however, the preparation of general education teachers to effectively teach in such a model has not advanced at the same rate. Teacher attitude has been found to be an indicative factor of improved student outcomes, therefore addressing elements to improve the attitude should be at the forefront of teacher preparation for effective instruction. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study was to understand how general education teachers perceived preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusive learners of multiple physical and academic abilities.

Research question one was the preparation experiences of general educators for inclusive teaching of learners with various academic and physical abilities in a rural northeast Ohio school district. Findings revealed shortcomings in preparation for inclusive teaching including a lack of professional development and support for co-teaching learners in the lower quintiles of academics. Research question two queried teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of strategies

implemented to facilitate instruction in the inclusive classroom. A need was identified for hands-on strategies highlighting the abilities of all learners, as well as plans for authentic differentiation via tiered instruction and adaptive lessons. Research question three examined perceptions of general educators regarding administrative support in preparation to teach in an inclusive setting. Administrative support was reported as an area of need, specifically related to the application of least restrictive environment placements and time for planning and collaboration with co-teachers and support colleagues. The combination of findings can be used to create a district plan to improve inclusive services for learners and educators.

Included herein will be a discussion of study findings and interpretations of the data and conclusions of the study. Limitations will be discussed as related to transferability, credibility, dependability, and confirmability. Recommendations for further research as well as policy and practice changes will be addressed in terms of the research findings. Included will be a discussion of the potential impact for positive social change at individual, family, organizational, societal, and policy levels, incorporating specific actions that may be implemented based on the results of the study. A conclusion will revisit the key points of the study's findings, a reflection on new knowledge gained from the results, and a summary of the implications of the findings capturing the critical outcomes of the study.

Findings, Interpretations, Conclusions

Given the study site's incorporation of an inclusive model of instruction, the findings contributed valuable reflective information on educator experiences and perceptions about ongoing needs and the effectiveness of the practice. Previous work by Al Shoura and Ahmad (2020) and Hassanein et al. (2021) asserted that barriers to effective inclusion negatively impact

teacher efficacy and student achievement outcomes. The findings of this study support those assertions via teacher experiences with inclusive education.

Findings in Comparison to Literature

As participants explored their experience teaching in inclusive classrooms, lack of preparation for the model was a consistent concern. As a teacher's role changes, professional development and training are necessary for effective transitions (Bemiller, 2019; Kurth & Forber-Pratt, 2017). While the research site does offer educator choice for a portion of the professional development requirements, the study revealed a need for specialized, focused training on the strategies for specific groups of learners with special needs. State mandates have required an increased focus on training classroom teachers to work with gifted students, and many respondents voiced a desire for the same type of focus to be given to special education training for all teaching staff. Of specific concern were problem behaviors causing the educators to feel ineffective in instruction and classroom management.

Previous studies reported similar concerns as inappropriate behavior is often attributed to disability without efforts to assist the student with appropriate behavior (Bemiller, 2019; Simpson et al., 2020; Williams et al., 2020). Specifically, at the lower grade levels, concerns were voiced regarding inconsistent or ineffective consequences for disruptive behaviors, resulting in continuation of the behavior by the students and subsequent disruption of learning for peers in the classroom. Improved classroom environments and staff-student relationships could result from purposeful training and follow-through with a universal plan, such as the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) model the district was exploring (PBIS, 2022). One effective practice discussed at higher grade levels was the use of peer training by

intervention specialists within the district who shared specific strategies for diverse types of learners.

A related theme evolved identifying a need for purposeful training in co-teaching models. Co-teachers having defined and equal roles improves communication, instructional practices, differentiation strategies, as well as student outcomes, and educator self-efficacy (Li & Rupp, 2021; Murphy, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). In the content areas of reading and math, intervention specialists (IS) are often present in the room as a co-teacher, however, respondent experiences with the model were inconsistent. Some reported a genuine sharing of the classroom, while others felt a lack of understanding regarding classroom roles and expectations, with the IS working only to modify tests. The wide variance in co-teaching implementation bids a need for training and role identification within the research site.

Lack of knowledge of effective inclusive teaching strategies was a recurring theme in interview responses. Clear expectations and differentiated instruction based on learners' strengths and weaknesses resulted in more successful outcomes. Several studies reported the benefits of differentiated instruction, including cooperative learning, peer learning, and multisensory instruction, but such practices require training and modeling for inclusive classroom educators (Carter et al., 2015; Willis, 2007; Yilmaz & Yeganeh, 2021; Yoro et al., 2020). Shortcomings were identified in acquisition of various strategies, differentiation, and tiered instruction. Most respondents gained such knowledge via trial and error in the classroom rather than formal training. Effective strategies being implemented as a result of formal professional development included differentiation via blended learning, use of differentiated checklists, and embedded remediation and enrichment. More ongoing support and guidance from

intervention specialists were seen as areas needing improvement due to growing diversity in the composition of the classroom.

Legal protections rightfully exist for all learners, mandating free and appropriate education for everyone yet also strengthening accountability measures through high-stakes testing (Fusarelli & Ayscue, 2019; Klein, 2015; Kurth et al., 2020; Murphy, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2018c). Participants reported inconsistent implementation of inclusive education, with classroom rosters combining students from wide-ranging academic quintiles, suggesting an incomplete understanding of LRE and lack of consideration for individual learner needs. This finding aligned with research of Cole et al. (2021) and Hux (2017) who reported inclusion could produce academic success, however, LRE does not have a uniform definition and may not be appropriate for every learner. Nichols (2006) asserted a necessary focus on learning-based inclusion rather than place-based inclusion. Such a model stresses the student learning rather than the location or environment where the learning is taking place. Examples were given by respondents of learners exhibiting severe behaviors resulting in room evacuations, impacting the education of all students in the class. Considering the high stakes testing influence on teacher evaluations, concern was expressed regarding these interruptions of learning and distraction from educational goals. When this occurs regularly, consideration must be given to the notion that a general education classroom may not meet the criteria for the most appropriate LRE for that learner.

A recurring critical element of inclusive teaching reported by respondents was lack of time to collaborate and plan with colleagues and specialists. The concerns begin with insufficient time for records review of needs and prior successful strategies. Several authors have demonstrated the importance and value of collaboration and shared responsibility when teaching

varied groups of learners (Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Hansen et al., 2020; Olson et al., 2016).

Such time would afford opportunities for creation of differentiated assignments and assessments, as well as professional collaboration time to process and plan the events in the classroom.

Positive action at the research site was identified as the inclusion of paraprofessionals and one-on-one aides accompanying students with those identified needs, however, repeated concerns were expressed about the lack of personnel to uniformly provide these staff resources. Great educational value for all learners was seen as a benefit of the planning and co-teaching practice.

Findings in the Context of the Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the study included transformational leadership and social constructivist theories. Findings of the study demonstrated positive feelings about district leadership, while also revealing themes of ineffective LRE implementation, lack of guidance for co-teaching, training, and staff support via planning time regarding the inclusive model. These themes were related to transformational leadership as evidence of deficiencies existing in the current leadership practice. Transformation of educational practice is ongoing as laws are passed and educational mandates shift, therefore leadership adjustments in response to educator feedback should be incorporated into improvement of practice, however, this was not the perception in the study findings.

Social constructivist learning theory is applicable to student and adult learners in the inclusive setting. Themes evident in the findings included a need for research-based strategies for various learner abilities, hands-on strategies, and tiered differentiation plans. These themes connect as evidence of a greater need for practitioners to be actively involved in preparation for inclusive model instruction, based on current understanding of the skills and strategies via professional development in a scaffolded manner within their zone of proximal development

(Mintz, 2018). Being placed in charge of an inclusive classroom without training represents expectations beyond the zone of proximal development as the required skills are beyond the knowledge base of the educator. Implementing professional development building on existing knowledge represents what can be accomplished without help serving as the basis for scaffolded learning of additional strategies (Cole et al., 1978). Such scaffolded, hands-on learning was not evident in the study findings.

Limitations

Limitations of the study exist due to the use of general education teachers from a single research site. Transferability and application of findings could be extrapolated to other settings and populations where an inclusive model of classroom instruction by general educators has been incorporated without a plan of preparation for effective implementation. The inclusion of teachers across grade levels and content areas aids the application of the findings beyond the research site.

Another limitation is semistructured interviews not fully reproducible due to subsequent probes being guided by initial respondent answers. If the same research instrument were used with a different population, probing questions and responses could result in different themes. Such findings could add to the knowledge base and further advance understanding of inclusive education.

Thick description of methods and data saturation existed in the study, as did member checking and semistructured engagement with the sample participants, establishing credibility and dependability. Confirmability was established through reflexive journaling and triangulation of data, including data collection with respondents having varying perspectives (teaching different grade levels and subjects), interviews, and document analysis.

Recommendations

Consideration of teacher experiences with models of inclusive settings should be viewed openly by leadership as an opportunity to improve professional practice and student outcomes for all learners (Bass, 1990; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Coyer et al., 2019; Kurth et al., 2020; Mintz, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2017; Sheppard, 2019). Findings of the study yield implications for future research. Emergent themes should be further explored as the primary research questions. A mixed-method study would be beneficial to incorporate quantitative data measures of student outcomes experiencing inclusive education versus non-inclusive education to document effectiveness of the inclusive model in a general education classroom.

Leadership should redesign professional development to include training specific to inclusive education models, including effective strategies for specific special needs (beyond those of gifted learners), various disabilities, and methods to implement those strategies in multi-ability classrooms (Bemiller, 2019; Boujut et al., 2016; Kalgotra, 2020; Williams et al., 2020; Yoro et al., 2020). Given the district practice of staff-selected professional development (PD) opportunities, practitioners should seek informational sessions addressing specific strategies and methods. Within this area, staff are permitted to create their own PD and could organize time to learn from an expert within the district, as this practice was reported by respondents as beneficial. Policymakers should create policies placing value on professional development of teachers for instructing learners with special needs at the same level of commitment training for gifted education has occurred in recent years. The policies requiring annual PD for the special needs populations should be in place to prepare educators for all unique learners (Bogen et al., 2019; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Olson et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020). Researchers should more

fully evaluate the needs of general educators teaching in inclusive classrooms in terms of behavior, instruction, differentiation, and co-teaching.

District leadership should emphasize better understanding of classroom roles when multiple adults are working together in a defined environment, specifically time to create resources and plan with colleagues for implementation of the strategies. Too often, planning time is missed due to scheduling of other meetings or events, so making the time sacred (not allowing other things to supersede planning) is critical. Designated sacred time for planning and creation of resources should be scheduled for teachers as they navigate effective instruction in inclusive settings with or without a co-teaching model (Li & Rupp, 2021; Mintz, 2018; Murphy, 2018; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). Practitioners should take an active role in purposeful use of cooperative planning time, including sacred time for planning with co-teachers or intervention specialists. Policymakers at the district level should ensure that each inclusive teacher has flexibility in scheduling to incorporate the dedicated planning time (Murphy, 2018; Olson et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2020). With the embedded late starts and professional development days, time should be allotted for co-planning and review of resources for inclusive classroom educators. Researchers should continue to explore effective co-teaching models for inclusive teaching and share those findings with organizational leaders to improve best practices (Li & Rupp, 2021; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018).

Administrators should provide overall support for teachers in inclusive classrooms; there was a reported general feeling that teachers and students were placed in the setting and expected to just figure it out. Acknowledging educational funding shortfalls, concerns remained about insufficient staff to service learners at all academic levels. More focused training and involvement of general education teachers in special education strategies could assist with those

inadequacies, resulting in more positive student outcomes. Practitioners should maintain open lines of communication with organizational leaders regarding inclusive instruction concerns while continuing to utilize PD to further understanding and knowledge about the effective implementation of the inclusive model. Policymakers and administrators should a plan to provide resources to educators including training, two-way communication, mentoring as needed, time for purposeful peer collaboration, emotional support, and opportunities for reflection and change if necessary (Bemiller, 2019; Bennett, 2020; Coyer et al., 2019; Murphy, 2018; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Researchers should explore teacher perceptions of the effectiveness of inclusive model as policy changes are implemented and administrative support shifts.

Implications for Leadership

Transformational leadership would suggest that site leaders use the research findings to make changes or adjustments for the most effective education for each learner, as teachers are influenced by the support and guidance received during periods of transition and change. Authentic learning begins with a growth mindset and belief of value in the content being studied (Carter et al., 2015; Murphy & Gash, 2020). Providing relevant professional support will aid in teacher efficacy and student outcomes, benefiting individuals, families, and the organization (Bogen et al., 2019; Elder, 2020; Thompson & Timmons, 2017). Individual social change implications as a result of this study may include teachers being active participants in the learning process of inclusive teaching and being prepared to manage various situations. Such change can yield improved job satisfaction, increased emotional support, and personal growth (Bass, 1990; Bemiller, 2019; Coyer et al., 2019). Social implications for family may be increased family engagement in the education process, decreased disciplinary issues, improved student

achievement, and improved stakeholder relationships as educators and families address the findings that emerged in the study.

Organizational social change may be a shared vision and mission resulting in a positive culture for learners of all abilities, as well as the classroom educators. Specifically, social change for leadership could include an active role in the collective agency driven by the goal of success for all, with lack of such support being a finding in the study (Kurth et al., 2018; Li & Ruppar, 2021). Social change in societal and policy realms in response to the research findings could result in a philosophy of authentic inclusion spanning beyond the classroom walls into the community via extracurriculars and relationships built outside school. Such change would produce learners with improved self-efficacy prepared to be part of a global community (Ainscow & Messiou, 2018; Hornby, 2015). Such acceptance encourages mindset changes with long-lasting effects of acceptance and understanding (Thompson & Timmons, 2017).

Conclusion

Historically, educators have experienced a lack of adequate preparation to teach effectively in an inclusive setting (Bogen et al., 2019; Byrd & Alexander, 2020; Ekstam et al., 2017; Kalgotra, 2020; Naraian & Schlessinger, 2018). Seven themes emerged in the research findings including ineffective implementation of the co-teaching model, a lack of training to equip educators for instruction of lower quintile learners, specific research-based strategies to showcase all learners' abilities, awareness of the effectiveness of hands-on strategies in inclusive education, the value of authentic tiered instruction for differentiation, lack of effective implementation of LRE, and lack of time for collaborative planning with intervention and support specialists.

New knowledge was gained regarding the positive impact of peer education among colleagues. Learning differentiation and behavior strategies from experienced intervention specialists could be utilized to address preparation and training concerns. Specific measures included expert peer collaboration and education working with experienced intervention specialists to discuss and learn about specific disability needs. When considering professional development opportunities, existing staff experts should be utilized.

The implications of the research findings are important in considering the future of inclusive education. With continuing mandates for fair and equal educational opportunities, measures should be implemented that ensure positive student outcomes, and feedback from teachers working in the environment is critical to affecting productive change. Realizing a lack of preparation for an instructional model with long-ranging student impacts should be the impetus for organizational change and support for educators and students.

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Appendix A

SME Initial Contact Email

Cheryl Bledsoe

Wed 1/27/2021 9:01 AM

To:



Good morning colleagues,

I am a doctoral candidate preparing the research instrument for my study. I would like for you to serve as my SME (Subject Matter Expert) to provide feedback on my proposed interview questions.

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study will be to understand how the general education teacher perceives preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusion learners of multiple physical and academic abilities.

When considering the following questions, please give feedback on anything that should be included, needs clarification, or does not align with the purpose of the study. Your goal is not to answer the questions but to assist in the creation of the research instrument. Please be honest and critical in your consideration of the questions – my goal is to create a strong instrument to gather useful data about this important issue.

For continuity of information, please respond to this email with your thoughts by Friday, January 29. I understand if other obligations prevent your participation. Feel free to respond to this email if you are not available at this time.

Thank you,
Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

Demographic data:

- Content area(s) taught
- Total number of years teaching
- Number of years teaching in an inclusion setting (various academic and physical abilities)

What has been your experience teaching in inclusion classrooms?

What do you find challenging about working in an inclusion setting?

What strategies do you find successful in the inclusion setting?

What would you identify as necessary to support educators for successful teaching in an inclusion classroom?

Non-demographic Questions for SME Review

What has been your experience teaching in inclusion classrooms?

What do you find challenging about working in an inclusion setting?

What strategies do you find successful in the inclusion setting?

What would you identify as necessary to support educators for successful teaching in an inclusion classroom?

SME Responses:

Response 1



Sent: Wednesday, January 27, 2021 9:43 AM

To: Cheryl Bledsoe

Subject: RE: Doctoral dissertation help

This is exciting!!!! Here are my concerns and thoughts:

- I have always thought it would be so beneficial if the regular ed teachers in an inclusion setting have knowledge of learning disabilities. I feel this would be easier to identify students and also know how to better serve them. (Understanding not just what the learning disabilities by name but understanding what they are)
- What is your ratio of identified students to non-identified students in your inclusion settings?
- Does the Intervention Specialist assist with teaching and grading?

I am not sure if I answered this how I was supposed to or not. So, if you have any questions, just let me know.

Response 2



Thu 1/28/2021 7:29 PM
Inbox

To: Cheryl Bledsoe;

Action Items

+ Get more apps

Just for the record. I don't like analyzing your work. I think you always come up with questions that are very appropriate for the population that you are addressing, and I am always in awe of the products you produce. But, I will gladly help whenever you need it!

Demographic data:

Content area(s) taught

Total number of years teaching

Number of years teaching in inclusion setting (various academic and physical abilities)

*The only thing I thought about adding here was type of inclusion setting. I know I had a completely different experience with inclusion when I had the assistance of an intervention specialist. Knowing that piece of information might help interpret the data, although that might be answered under the first question.

What has been your experience teaching in inclusion classrooms? * I'm trying to think of how someone would answer this question. I might just tell you how many years and what subjects I have taught in an inclusive setting. Is that enough information?

What do *you find challenging about working in an inclusion setting? *Do you think someone answering this would different types of needs including educational and behavioral of students, or should they focus more on administrative/ district challenges? Maybe either one would work here.

What strategies do you find successful in the inclusion setting?

*The only thought I had was this might be too broad. Could you ask them what their top five most successful strategies are?? Or maybe that wouldn't give you enough information??

What would you identify as necessary to support educators for successful teaching in an inclusion classroom?

Response 3





Thu 1/28/2021 9:22 PM
Inbox

To: Cheryl Bledsoe;

Cheryl,

First glance, I think the questions are appropriate. How about adding a question about communication between the classroom teacher and intervention specialist? (what does the IS need from the classroom teacher and vice versa)

Appendix B**Inclusion in General Education Classrooms: Research Instrument**

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe
Doctoral Candidate
American College of Education

What has been your experience teaching in inclusion classrooms?

Probe: What is your ratio of identified students to non-identified students in your inclusion setting?

Probe: Have you had the assistance of an intervention specialist?

Probe: What was their role – co-teacher, advisor, curriculum modification, resource pull-out, grading, other?

Probe: How did the assistance, or lack, of an intervention specialist affect your experience?

What do you find challenging about working in an inclusion setting?

Probe: How do you believe the types of learner needs impact the challenges?

Probe: What do you identify as administrative or district challenges for working in this setting?

What strategies (instructional, behavioral, social, differentiation) do you find successful in the inclusion setting?

Probe: How did you discover and learn about these strategies?

What would you identify as necessary to support educators for successful teaching in an inclusion classroom?

What is your experience with district professional development and preparedness to provide inclusion instruction?

Appendix C

Demographic Data

Content area(s) taught

Total number of years teaching

Number of years teaching in an inclusion setting (various academic and physical abilities)

Appendix D**Site Approval Request**

January 11, 2021

Dear:

My name is Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe, and I am a doctoral candidate at American College of Education (ACE) writing to request permission to interview certified staff for a research study. This information will be used for my dissertation research related to A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Educator Perspectives on Full Inclusion Teaching Environments. The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study will be to understand how the general education teacher perceives preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusion learners of multiple physical and academic abilities.

Approximately 25 participants will be randomly selected from the certified staff within the district.

Important contacts for this study include:

Principal Investigator: Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

Email: cheryl.yates-bledsoe7710@my.ace.edu

Phone: (330) 284-6537

Dissertation Chair: Kelley Walters

Email: kelley.walters@ace.edu

Thank you for your attention to this issue and prompt response. If you agree to grant site permission, please return your signed permission on district letterhead at your earliest convenience to my email address above, or to my work email bledsoecheryl@lakelocal.org.

I appreciate your time and consideration of my request.

Regards,
Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

Appendix E

Signed Site Approval

January 13, 2021

Re: Dissertation Research Related to A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Educator Perspectives on Full Inclusion Teaching Environments

Dear Mrs. Yates-Bledsoe,

Permission has been granted for you to interview certified staff at Lake Local for your dissertation research study.

Sincerely,

Vision: To be the leader in addressing the educational, social and physical needs of students and staff Mission: Educating generations, serving our community

Values: Respect, Integrity, Citizenship, Honesty, Engagement and Responsibility

Appendix F

Recruitment Letter/Invitation to Participate

Date: January 18, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

I am a doctoral candidate at the American College of Education. I am writing to let you know about an opportunity to participate in a dissertation research study.

Brief description of the study

Inclusion classrooms are transforming instruction in education, incorporating 63.4% of students with multiple academic and physical abilities into general education classrooms; however, general education teachers do not feel fully prepared to provide effective instruction in the inclusion environment. This study will seek to gain information regarding experiences teaching in inclusion classrooms for the purpose of identifying common themes, strategies, and needs to benefit educators and students.

Description of criteria for participation:

- Educator certification (Intervention Specialists are excluded)
- Teaching at least one class with inclusion learners, defined as students with varying academic and/or physical abilities

Your participation in the study will be voluntary. If you wish to withdraw from the research at any time, you may do so by contacting me using the information below.

I may publish the results of this study; however, I will not use your name nor share identifiable data you provided. Your information will remain confidential. If you would like additional information about the study, please contact the following:

Candidate Contact Information:

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

(330) 284-6537

Bledsoecheryl@lakelocal.org

Chair Contact Information:

Dr. David Burrage

burrage.david@ace.edu

Informed Consent is attached

Thank you again for considering this dissertation research opportunity.

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

Doctoral Candidate

American College of Education

Appendix G

Informed Consent



Prospective Research Participant: Read this consent form carefully and ask as many questions as you like before you decide whether you want to participate in this research study. You are free to ask questions at any time before, during, or after your participation in this research.

Project Information

Project Title: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study of Educator Perspectives on Full Inclusion Teaching Environments

Researcher: Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe

Organization: American College of Education

Email: cheryl.yates-bledsoe7710@my.ace.edu

Telephone: 330-284-6537

Researcher's Dissertation Chair: Dr. David Burrage

Organization and Position: American College of Education, Core Faculty

Email: burrage.david@ace.edu

Introduction

I am Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe, and I am a doctoral candidate student at the American College of Education. I am doing research under the guidance and supervision of my Chair, Dr. Walters. I will give you some information about the project and invite you to be part of this research. Before you decide, you can talk to anyone you feel comfortable with about the research. This consent form may contain words you do not understand. Please ask me to stop as we go through the information, and I will explain. If you have questions later, you can ask them then.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative study will be to understand how the general education teacher perceives preparation to provide effective instruction to inclusion learners of multiple physical and academic abilities.

You are being asked to participate in a research study that will assist with understanding how to more fully prepare general education teachers for teaching within inclusion classrooms. Conducting this qualitative methods study will provide information about educators' experiences working within the inclusion setting.

Research Design and Procedures

The study will use a qualitative methodology and hermeneutic phenomenological research design. Questions will be disseminated to specific participants within one week. The study will comprise 15-20 participants, randomly selected, who will participate in one semistructured interview. The study will involve an interview to be conducted at a site most convenient for participants (in-person or via video call). After the conclusion of the study, a debrief session will occur (OPTIONAL). All participants will be randomly assigned to groups specific to study criteria.

Participant selection

You are being invited to take part in this research because of your experience as an inclusion teacher who can contribute much to the lived experiences of working in inclusion classrooms, which meets the criteria for this study. Participant selection criteria:

- Educator certification (Intervention Specialists are excluded)
- Teaching at least one class with inclusion learners, defined as students with varying academic and/or physical abilities

Voluntary Participation

Your participation in this research is entirely voluntary. It is your choice whether to participate. If you choose not to participate, there will be no punitive repercussions, and you do not have to participate. If you select to participate in this study, you may change your mind later and stop participating even if you agreed earlier.

Procedures

We are inviting you to participate in this research study. If you agree, you will be asked to participate in one interview. The type of questions asked will range from a demographical perspective to direct inquiries about the topic of providing education services in an inclusion setting.

Duration

The interview portion of the research study will require approximately 60 minutes to complete. If you are chosen to be a participant, the time allotted for each interview will be at a location and time convenient for the participant. A follow-up debriefing session will take approximately 1 hour (OPTIONAL).

Risks

The researcher will ask you to share personal and confidential information, and you may feel uncomfortable talking about some of the topics. You do not have to answer any question or take part in the discussion if you don't wish to do so. You do not have to give any reason for not responding to any question.

Benefits

While there will be no direct financial benefit to you, your participation is likely to help us find out more about the experience of inclusion teaching. The potential benefits of this study will aid the researcher in determining common themes in the experiences.

Reimbursement

As a result of your participation in this research study, you will receive no reimbursement.

Confidentiality

I will not share information about you or anything you say to anyone outside of the researcher. During the defense of the doctoral dissertation, data collected will be presented to the dissertation committee. The data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or encrypted computer file. Any information about you will be coded and will not have a direct correlation, which directly identifies you as the participant. Only I will know what your number is, and I will secure your information.

Sharing the Results

At the end of the research study, the results will be available for each participant. It is anticipated to publish the results so other interested people may learn from the research.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

Participation is voluntary. At any time you wish to end your participation in the research study, you may do so without repercussions.

Questions About the Study

If you have any questions, you can ask them now or later. If you wish to ask questions later, you may contact me. This research plan has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of the American College of Education. This is a committee whose role is to make sure research participants are protected from harm. If you wish to ask questions of this group, email IRB@ace.edu.

Certificate of Consent

I have read the information about this study, or it has been read to me. I acknowledge why I have been asked to be a participant in the research study. I have been provided the opportunity to ask questions about the study, and any questions have been answered to my satisfaction. I certify I am at least 18 years of age. I consent voluntarily to be a participant in this study.

Print or Type Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily. A copy of this Consent Form has been provided to the participant.

Print or type name of lead researcher: _____

Signature of lead researcher: _____

Date: _____

PLEASE KEEP THIS INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOUR RECORDS.

Appendix H

Sample of Initial Coding Process

R: How does that how does the assistance or in your case, lack of intervention specialist assistant affect your experience with the kids like the ones that you think will probably be identified, but aren't yet. How does that affect what happens in the classroom?

P: It has a huge effect, like the one I had last year that didn't get identified till the end of the year. He was so incredibly low. Like, I mean I am I'm sitting beside him all day, what am I doing with the other 23 [REDACTED]. So he did not get the help he needed and deserved because I can't sit by him all day. Right. And the other one was more of a behavior issue and I had no aide with him, either. So he took up so much time that all the average kids got hardly any time, because he was so time consuming. So I really feel like the average and the high kids really are at a disadvantage because you just don't have enough time to get to them like you used to, when the special ed kids were pulled out.



Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe ...
C1 - needs of low level learner not met
@mention or reply

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe ...
C2 - behavior support is lacking
@mention or reply

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe ...
C3 - services for non-special ed learners lacking
@mention or reply

Cheryl Yates-Bledsoe ...
C3 - services for non-special ed learners lacking
@mention or reply

Appendix I

Sample of Initial Coding Process to Theme Development

Participant ID	Data Item	Code Clusters	Candidate Themes	Defined Themes
11	<p>C1 – I’ve had every model.</p> <p>C2 – Intervention specialists started getting spread so thin</p> <p>C3 – Treat all kids as individuals and try to meet their needs at whatever level they are</p> <p>C4 – The numbers anymore are so high and backgrounds of kids who aren’t prepared for school</p> <p>C5 – What most impacts the challenge is behaviors</p> <p>C6 – They have, I have, the defeatism, the ‘I’m not going to do it’</p> <p>C7 – We don’t have space to put kids into small groups</p> <p>C8 – We don’t have money for support</p>	<p>-too many kids in the room</p> <p>-academic gaps are too great for the setting</p> <p>-severe behavior puts others at risk</p> <p>-consistent aide support is critical</p> <p>- paraprofessionals assist and ensure inclusion</p> <p>-intervention specialists co-teach</p>	<p>Too much learner variety in a room (C1, C3, C4, C7)</p> <p>Adequate staffing (C2, C8)</p> <p>Behavior concerns (C5)</p> <p>General education classroom is not always Least Restrictive Environment (C6)</p>	<p>Least restrictive environment</p> <p>Staffing support</p> <p>Special education training is lacking</p> <p>Tiered instruction</p>
12	<p>C4 – I think that was the most challenging to meet the needs of all of those kids at the same time</p> <p>C9 – Having that extra teacher in the classroom and having helped to modify things and just having another</p>		<p>Too much learner variety in a room (C4)</p> <p>Adequate staffing (C2,C9)</p> <p>Behavior concerns (C5)</p>	

	<p>person to co-teach was really nice C5 – I felt horrible for the regular ed students in that room because there was a lot of behavior issues and my focus during those periods was on the behavior and making sure everybody was safe C4 - I feel like sometimes I don't get to everyone C5 – I feel like the behavioral needs make the challenges way harder in the classroom C2 – I think it's just being able to hire enough intervention specialists to meet everybody's needs</p>			
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