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Jenine M. Sansosti  
*University of South Florida*

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The Meaning and Means of Inclusion for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders:  
A Qualitative Study of Educators' and Parents'  
Attitudes, Beliefs, and Decision-Making Strategies

by

Jenine M. Sansosti

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of Psychological and Social Foundations  
College of Education  
University of South Florida

Co-Major Professor: Linda M. Raffaele Mendez, Ph.D., NCSP  
Co-Major Professor: Kelly A. Powell-Smith, Ph.D., NCSP  
Teresa Nesman, Ph.D.  
Rose Iovannone, Ph.D.

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Keywords: autism, least restrictive environment, general education, beliefs, parental involvement

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This work is dedicated to

My parents,

Jean and Dave Westerhold and Andrew Ziemann,

whose constant encouragement, intellectual curiosity, and unwavering confidence in me  
sustained me throughout this entire project

and

My husband,

Frank. J. Sansosti, Ph.D., NCSP

whose patient professional wisdom and unending personal support  
earned him the title of “Honorary 5<sup>th</sup> Committee Member”

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THE MEANING AND MEANS OF INCLUSION FOR STUDENTS WITH  
AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS:  
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF EDUCATORS' AND PARENTS'  
ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND DECISION-MAKING STRATEGIES

JENINE M. SANSOSTI

ABSTRACT

The practice of inclusion, and even the term itself, have been the subject of controversy over the last several decades and it appears that “inclusion” may look very different depending upon the student, educator, and setting (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Recently, placement in general education settings has become a dominant service delivery model for individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), (Simpson & Myles, 1998), yet Individual Education Programs (IEPs) for students with ASD tend to be the most often disputed and often contain procedural errors, including failure to consider the Least Restrictive Mandate (Yell et al., 2003).

This study represents a qualitative case study of a school district in West Central Florida working to build capacity for inclusive education. Qualitative case study methodology was used to explore (a) educators' definitions, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions regarding inclusion of students with ASD, (b) how the understandings and attitudes regarding inclusion impact the way educators make decisions about inclusion and educational programs for students with ASD, and (c) educators' and parents' criteria for determining “successful” inclusion and their perceptions about the success of current inclusion efforts. A team of educators (general education, special education, specialists, and administrators) who were involved in inclusion efforts were purposively selected for recruitment in this study. Two focus groups were conducted to engage them in discussion and decision-making regarding educational plans for students with ASD. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted individually with each member of the team as a follow-up to the focus group. Additionally, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of included students with ASD.

Results indicated that educators understood inclusive education to be a highly individualized enterprise which is developed on a “case-by-case basis” but were

generally positive about inclusion for students with ASD. Educator participants articulated the characteristics of students they believed to be “ideal inclusion candidates;” students’ behavioral functioning and potential for disrupting typical peers was a major consideration. Parents and educators shared very similar goals for students with ASD, but shared stories suggesting their interactions often involve conflict and ill will. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are offered.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

### Brief Review of the Literature

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA; Public Law 94-142, 1975), educators have been obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Jacob-Timm & Hartshorne, 1998). According to the continuum or “cascade” model of LRE suggested by Deno (1970), more restrictive placements (e.g., self-contained classrooms, center schools) tend to offer intensive services and segregate students with disabilities from their typically-developing peers and the general education curriculum, while less restrictive placements (e.g., resource, pull-out, or inclusion) are those that include less intensive supports and integrate students with disabilities into age-appropriate general education environments with their typically-developing peers (Taylor, 1988). Although the continuum model of LRE provides numerous service-delivery options, placement issues have been a matter of considerable debate among parents, educators, and legislators. The concept of LRE has been consistently controversial and, for the last three decades, educators and advocates for individuals with disabilities have engaged in a heated debate about how decisions should be made regarding the best classroom placement and LRE for individual students (Kavale & Forness, 2000).

#### *The Debate over Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) and Inclusive Education*

Federal statutes, regulations, and case law offered some degree of clarification, but also have resulted in some tension and confusion (Huefner, 1994). Across the standards and tests set forth by several legal challenges since the passage of P.L. 94-142, six key themes emerge for determining LRE and making placement decisions: (1) maintain the continuum of placement options; (2) make services and supports “portable,” such that they can be delivered in multiple environments; (3) assess the relative educational benefit of all relevant placement options; (4) consider impact on general education peers; (5) examine potential of costs of each option, including resources and time, and (6) offer participation with general education peers to the greatest extent

possible. Despite these rulings by the circuit courts, however, examination of the academic literature on special education placement suggests that educators, parents, and child advocates have had difficulty resolving these issues into a consistent approach to implementing LRE in daily educational practice. If anything, the legal requirements of LRE did more to confuse and polarize the issue among educators, giving rise to a value-laden debate about the appropriateness and feasibility of including students with disabilities in general education environments. Over the 30 years since the passage of P.L. 94-142, numerous interpretations of LRE, educational reform movements, and decision-making strategies were proposed by a number of educational scholars and disability advocates, offering a multitude of possibilities for educating students with disabilities in relation to their general education peers.

Initial conceptualizations of LRE were consistent with a *mainstreaming* approach, which consists of the partial or total placement of students with disabilities in general education classes based on the individual's needs (Heron & Harris, 1987). Mainstreamed placements are often developed from a readiness perspective (Taylor, 1998) and are typically written into students' IEPs for the purposes of receiving instruction in a less restrictive setting or for the potential social/emotional benefits they may afford the exceptional student (Powell-Smith & Ball, 2002). Mainstreaming was perceived by some educators and scholars as a divisive view of LRE in that it characterized special and general education as two separate systems and emphasized special education decision-making in reference to *where* a child is educated instead of *how* (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). In reaction to this interpretation of LRE, alternative perspectives emerged. The *Regular Education Initiative* (REI), jumpstarted by an influential position paper by Assistant Secretary of Education Madeline Will (1986), sought to merge general and special education into one seamless system and, by doing so, dramatically increase the number of children with disabilities in general education classrooms. Unfortunately, the REI movement itself was characterized by divisiveness and two distinct camps with somewhat divergent goals emerged: a "low-incidence" group and a "high-incidence" group (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). Ultimately, the factions among the REI movement made mobilization and systems change a challenge and it remained primarily a special education initiative with little impact on general education practices.

As the REI movement struggled to unite itself, another approach to widespread inclusion evolved among REI advocates and eventually became a movement in its own



right. The *full inclusion* or *inclusive schools* movement was conceptualized not as a merger of special and general education systems, but rather the total elimination of special education and the continuum of placements. The primary goal among “full inclusionists” was not just to eliminate the bottom end of special education placements (i.e., residential or day programs) nor exclusively the top end of the continuum (i.e., resource services), as the REI proponents did, but rather to remove the entire range of options represented by the continuum and provide all special education services by infusing specialists in mainstream environments. A second, less publicized goal for the full inclusion movement was improving the social competence of students both with and without disabilities, ensuring the normalized community participation of students with disabilities and promoting attitude change and acceptance among teachers and students without disabilities who will someday become parents, taxpayers, and service providers (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). This goal contrasted sharply with those of the REI movement, which often focused on meeting ambitious academic goals.

Still others maintained that inclusion was not a sweeping movement or initiative but rather a case-by-case decision-making process. They noted that one unfortunate outcome of the inclusion debate was that special education came to be conceptualized as a place, rather than a process or endeavor. Placing focus on the *where* students with disabilities should be educated caused teachers to shift away from considering *how* best to provide instruction to diverse groups of students. By defining LRE in terms of geography, the assumption among many educators became that, for all students, the general education classroom in the neighborhood setting constituted the very least restrictive placement and ostensibly the only place where students with disabilities could receive an appropriate education (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). Yet many educators posit that setting, in and of itself, has a limited impact on outcomes; it is the dynamic teaching-learning process that has far greater importance for students with disabilities (Kavale, 2002).

To address some of these concerns, *reintegration* was introduced as a mechanism for matching students’ instructional needs to supports available along the special education continuum and, when appropriate, transitioning into general education instruction for areas where data suggests they are capable of performing consistent with their peers (Fuchs, Fuchs, & Fernstrom, 1991). Advocates of this approach maintained the readiness view of LRE as articulated by Taylor (1988), expanding the concept to

include decision rules and assessment of students' skills in reference to general education expectations to determine which current special education students would be most likely to benefit from a general education placement. In addition to skill-based assessment in reference to the general education curriculum, reintegration also takes into consideration the instructional ecology of the present and potential classroom environments, including the nature and quality of teacher-student interactions, curricula, and materials, all of which can have a considerable impact on a student's outcomes (Fuchs, Fernstrom, Scott, Fuchs, & Vandermeer, 1994). Other similarly *dynamic*, *ecobehavioral* conceptualizations of the LRE principle have been proposed. For example, Crockett and Kaufmann (1999) have suggested that the LRE will vary from student to student and often from time to time for a particular student as well, based on changes in instructional needs or behavior. From an ecobehavioral perspective, one could suggest that general education constitutes a *more* restrictive environment if it does not match the student's present needs; it does not allow the student to access necessary supports, and the student's needs prevent him/her from deriving educational benefit in the mainstream setting. Relatedly, Cooper (2004) proposed that any environment could be considered inclusive to the extent that it promotes the active social and academic engagement of a student. By contrast, an "exclusive" setting is one in which the individual's social, emotional, and cognitive engagement is not promoted, regardless of its proximity to general education or "typically-developing" peers.

Given these disparities in approaches to integrating students with disabilities, "successful inclusion" might be designed and evaluated differently depending upon the philosophy and understanding of inclusion held by a given student's IEP team (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). For "full inclusionists," success might be measured by the yardstick of friendships and age-appropriate opportunities for socialization and independence while, for "reintegrationists", academic competency in reference to general education peers might be the most important benchmark. "Mainstreamers" might consider part-time inclusion to meet particular instructional or social/emotional goals, while "ecobehaviorists" might posit that there is no one "correct" placement for a student and that it may vary over time as needs change and skills develop. There appears to be a tentative consensus within the field of special education that many approaches to inclusion and integration are necessary; however, this variability in philosophy and practice creates a particular challenge for schools or systems seeking to create a

consistent approach to placement decisions and instructional planning (Putnam, Spiegel, & Bruininks, 1995). Currently, the prevailing terminology for educating students with disabilities in general education includes the terms “inclusion,” “mainstreaming,” and “reintegration,” but the underlying approach to meeting the LRE requirement for students with disabilities does not appear to have been reconciled.

#### *Attitudes Toward Inclusion*

Clearly, the way in which a teacher, administrator, school building, or district defines and conceptualizes both the LRE principle and inclusion philosophy will have an impact on the attitudes educators hold about inclusion, as well as the way placement decisions are made for students with disabilities and the goals and strategies used to guide their instructional programs. General agreement exists that inclusion is most likely to be effective when the school personnel who will be most responsible for its success – general education teachers – are receptive to its principles and demands. A considerable literature base documenting educators’ attitudes and beliefs about integrating students with a variety of disabilities in general education settings exists. Positive attitudes toward the integration of students with disabilities in general education settings are consistently identified in the literature as an essential ingredient for effective inclusion as they are likely to impact how it is ultimately implemented in a given school or classroom setting (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002). Conversely, negative attitudes of teachers, administrators, or parents can decrease the likelihood that inclusion will be implemented in a given school. In a study of attitudes toward inclusion among educators at multiple school sites, negative attitudes were the most commonly described barrier to including students with disabilities in general education settings (Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, 1997).

Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) synthesized 28 studies on teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion surveying a total of 10,560 general and special education teachers between the years of 1958 and 1995. Overall, most teachers (65% of 7,385 teachers) indicated that they generally supported inclusion as a desirable education practice and a majority of respondents (53% of 2,193) reported that they were personally willing to teach students with disabilities. Across studies, Scruggs and Mastropieri reported that teachers were consistently more supportive of including students with mild disabilities who require minimal teacher support or attention (e.g., learning disabilities, mild mobility or sensory problems); teachers indicated lower levels of support for including students

with moderate to severe intellectual, behavioral, sensory, or physical impairments. Although participants of the synthesized studies conveyed a general willingness to endorse inclusion as a concept or personally work with students with disabilities, they mixed in their belief that inclusion was likely to yield educational benefit for students both with and without disabilities. Teachers expressed concerns that they lack necessary supports to effectively implement inclusion and that class size would need to be reduced to accommodate students with special needs. No significant differences were found in responses or attitude as a function of a study's publication date. As such, the authors hypothesized that teachers regard students with disabilities in the context of procedural or logistical concerns about inclusion (which have remained a challenge over the last four decades), rather than in the context of social justice and attitudes toward social integration (which have improved dramatically in the last four decades). Additionally, no differences in attitudes were identified among other demographic variables such as geographic region, amount of teaching experience, or special/general education certification, except as stated above.

Additional research has been conducted on teachers' attitudes toward the potential reintegration of special education students into general education settings. Data from the mid-1980s, when reintegration and inclusion debates first began to take place on a national level, suggested that both special education and general education teachers were not supportive of the idea of reintegration and generally believed that general education settings were not the best instructional environments for students with disabilities receiving pull-out services (Gans, 1985, 1987; Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Knoff, 1985; Stephens & Braun, 1980). Research also has examined the variables influencing teacher attitudes toward reintegration. Teachers' willingness to reintegrate students with disabilities may be positively impacted by several variables, including (a) teachers' self-perceived degree of success in dealing with special education students (Larivee and Cook, 1979); (b) teachers' views of students' classroom behavior and problem severity, with students rated as having fewer problem behaviors considered more appropriate candidates for reintegration (Shinn, Baker, Habedank, & Good, 1993); and (c) the presence of curriculum-based measurement (CBM) data suggesting that the reintegration candidate is performing at levels consistent with their general education peers (Rodden-Nord, Shinn, & Good, 1992; Shinn, Baker, Habedank, & Good, 1993).

Of late, qualitative studies have become a common way of capturing the

complexity of educators' thoughts and feelings regarding inclusion. Understanding educators' perspectives often requires more than a simple rating scale, but rather an examination of their stories and experiences that have shaped their beliefs. For example, Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell (1996) found that teachers *not* currently involved in inclusion had strong, negative feelings about it, believing that decision-makers were out of touch with the realities of classrooms engaged in inclusion and that it might be imposed upon them without their consent. Teachers expressed many fears regarding inclusion with regard to impact on academic achievement for both general and special education students, excessive workload, changes in roles, and student safety. Interestingly, participants in the Vaughn et al. study indicated that a concrete and operationalized definition of inclusion was necessary; they reported feeling apprehensive about potentially becoming involved in inclusion when they did not understand fully what it was.

Although the fears and concerns of teachers not involved in inclusion provide a valuable insight into potential influences in decision-making, there is also considerable evidence to suggest that teachers who *are* engaged in inclusive practices often have positive experiences (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Again, qualitative research has been a useful tool by which these experiences can be illuminated. Janney, Snell, Beers, and Raynes (1995) provide such an example, with regard to a state-wide, grant-funded initiative to increase the integration of students with moderate to severe disabilities in general education settings. Participants representing all levels of education (elementary, middle, and high; general and special education) overwhelmingly reported that inclusion efforts had been successful in their schools, and the overall theme summarizing teachers' evaluation of inclusion was "benefits outweigh costs." Consistent with Vaughn et al., teachers also echoed the sentiment that resistant teachers should not have inclusion forced upon them; rather, administrators should solicit volunteers who might be more "open-minded," "flexible," and "willing to take risks" (p. 433). In agreement with the literature on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, participants believed that positive experiences and examples of inclusion were the best mechanisms for overcoming resistance and creating a new generation of teachers willing to include students with disabilities.

Regardless of the variability in people's views about inclusion, including how they define it and their beliefs about it, the practice of educating students with disabilities in

the general education setting part- or full-time appears to be occurring with greater frequency. In its 27<sup>th</sup> annual report to Congress on IDEA, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reported that across all disabilities categories, 52% of students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their day in settings with nondisabled peers (USDE, 2004, most recent data available). Between 1990-1991 and 1999-2000, the number of students receiving special education services rose 29.8%; during the same period, the number of students with disabilities served in the general education setting for more than 80% of the day rose by 16.8%.

With increasing rates of inclusion comes an increasing need to thoroughly evaluate inclusive education programs to determine best instructional practices, essential skills for educators, and outcomes (both desired and collateral) for students with and without disabilities. The inclusion literature is replete with outcome studies examining the effects of inclusion from a variety of philosophical and empirical orientations. For example, Hunt and Goetz (1997) synthesized 19 investigations of inclusive education for students with severe disabilities representing a broad array of research questions, methodologies, and participants. Despite methodological and sampling limitations presented by the studies included in the synthesis, Hunt and Goetz concluded that in inclusive settings, students with severe disabilities can achieve positive academic and learning outcomes, particularly as a result of curricular modifications and adaptations, and often realize acceptance, interactions, and friendships. Moreover, students without disabilities experience positive outcomes when students with severe disabilities are their classmates. Parents are a valued contributor to the inclusion process and are viewed by others as key stakeholders; their perceptions of the outcomes of inclusions were generally consistent with the findings of the studies reviewed by Hunt and Goetz.

#### *Inclusion for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)*

The inclusion debate and the recent growth of inclusive education have even greater significance for students with autism, which is the fastest-growing disability category in the United States (Autism Society of America, 2003). Autism is a developmental disorder of neurobiological origin present from birth or early in development that affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas effectively, and the establishment of relationships with others (National Research Council, 2001). The umbrella term “Autism Spectrum

Disorders” (ASD) is often used to describe a range of diagnoses that share characteristics of autism, including Autistic Disorder, sometimes referred to as “classic autism”, Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger’s Disorder (Frith, 2003). Recent epidemiological data points to a significant increase in the number of reported cases of autism within the last one to two decades. Traditionally, the prevalence rate of autism has been reported to be 4 to 5 per 10,000 children (Fombonne, 1999). However, more recent statistics suggest that the prevalence of ASD may be considerably higher than previously suspected. Most recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in 2008 that prevalence rates for ASD may be as high as 1 in 150 children.

As rates of ASD continue to rise, so does its impact on public schools. U.S. Department of Education statistics suggest that the number of children under IDEA’s autism category has grown more than fivefold during the 1990s (USDE, 2004). Autism was added as a special education exceptionality in 1991 and is now the 6th most commonly classified disability in the United States. While it is clear that more children are getting special education services under the “Autism” category than ever before, it is important to remember that this classification was only recently added, and the growth of children classified may be in part due to the addition of this as a special education category. Nevertheless, when federal data are translated into trends at the state level, increases in services for children with autism just under the Autism category of IDEA have been found to range from 10% (e.g., Massachusetts) to 48,600% (e.g., Illinois). In round terms, for every two children with autism registered through IDEA in 1991-92, there were roughly twelve registered in 2000-2001.

Education is currently the primary form of treatment for ASD, providing opportunities for acquisition of knowledge and skills and fostering independence and social responsibility (NRC, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 1999). Due to the nature of ASD and its associated difficulties, educational goals for students with ASD often address such areas as communication and language, social interaction behaviors, and self-help skills. In addition to meeting academic proficiencies emphasized as a part of standards-based educational reform movements (e.g., No Child Left Behind), students with ASD often need to be taught certain behaviors that typically developing children often learn without instruction. A wealth of research has been conducted in the last two decades examining the most effective strategies for instructing students with ASD (Heflin &

Simpson, 1998). Due in part to the considerable variability of individuals with ASD, no single intervention or instructional approach has been demonstrated as universally successful for this population (NRC, 2001). However, several core components of effective education for students with ASD have been distilled from a recent review of the autism literature (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003). These components include (a) individualized supports and services, (b) systematic instruction, (c) structured environments, (d) specialized curriculum content, (e) functional approach to problem behaviors, and (f) family involvement.

Recently, placement in general education settings has become a dominant service delivery issue for individuals with autism (Simpson & Myles, 1998). A primary goal for educating students with ASD is normalizing their exposure and responses to environmental stimulation, such that it is as similar to their typically developing peers as possible. General education placements are believed to offer numerous other benefits for students with ASD, including instructional continuity, expanded curricular options, and enhanced skill acquisition and generalization (Simpson & Myles, 1998). It should be noted, however, that research on the benefits of inclusion for students with ASD is presently inconclusive. Examination of OSEP (2004) trend data on inclusion relative to each disability category suggests that although students with high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disability or speech/language impairment are most likely to be included in general education settings, students with ASD are increasingly likely to be served in inclusive settings. Since 1991 (earliest data available), participation of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the general education curriculum 80% or more of the day increased at a faster pace than that of all disabilities categories combined. While only 4.8% of students with ASD were included in 1990-1991, 29.1% were in general education for 80% or more of their day in 2003-2004, representing a growth rate of 24.3%. Increases in inclusion of students with ASD from 1991-2004 outpaced that of other low-incidence disabilities such as mental retardation (8% growth) and emotional disturbance (17.4% growth) and were comparable to that of high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disability (26.4% growth).

Despite the potential benefits of including students with ASD in general education, the issue continues to be highly controversial. There is a growing recognition that some students with ASD, particularly those with severe behavioral problems and overall significant disabilities, represent a major challenge for general education



teachers (Simpson & Myles, 1998). While research has generally demonstrated that students with ASD can be physically maintained in general education settings, even the strongest inclusion advocates suggest that some students with ASD may benefit from time in pull-out programs where they can develop skills that are difficult to train in general education classrooms (e.g., self-help skills; Simpson, 1996). Both educators and parents are increasingly accepting of the notion that some students with ASD are better suited for inclusion than others, but no criteria or guidelines exist for making this determination (Simpson & Myles, 1998). There seems to be consensus that, consistent with stipulations of recent court decisions, successful general education placement is contingent upon a combination of student needs and availability of appropriate supports (e.g., paraprofessionals, related-service personnel, trainings, planning time, etc.), but there is little in the literature that elucidates how these judgments and decisions are made. Clearly, decisions about including a student with ASD require consideration of multiple complex factors, including individual student needs and educational goals, available supports and best practice approaches to instruction, and the potential impact of introducing a student with significant behavioral and instructional support needs into a general education environment. Additionally, these decisions are filtered through educators' understandings of inclusive education and its goals, as well as their personal beliefs and attitudes about the appropriateness of including students with ASD.

#### Context and Purpose of the Study

This study explored the attitudes, experiences, and decision-making processes associated with inclusive educational within several elementary schools in a mid-sized suburban fringe/rural school district in west central Florida. At the time of data collection (June-July 2006), the participating district had a total enrollment of approximately 62,200, including 37 elementary schools, 20 secondary schools, four alternative/technical schools, and five charter schools. The district was expected to grow considerably in the next several years and by the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, a total of 28 school sites will be added to the district to accommodate its rapid growth. Within this recent period of expansion, one particular population that has grown in disproportionate numbers is that of students with ASD. The number of students receiving exceptional student education (ESE) services under the IDEA Autism category increased 288% from 2000 to 2006. The ESE Supervisor of Autism suggested that there were approximately 300 total students with ASD in the district at the time of

data collection, including students receiving special education services under the categories of Autism, Developmentally Delayed (DD, for students under the age of 6), “Other Health Impaired” (OHI, including many high-functioning students diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder), and Speech/Language Impaired (S/LI, including Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS).

This influx of students with ASD had a considerable impact on the district, and the ESE-Autism supervisor estimates that nearly every school currently has one or more students with ASD. Four of the five elementary schools with significant numbers of students with ASD developed “autism inclusion teams” in which a special education teacher serves as a consultant, co-teacher, and case manager for several students with autism within a general education instructional team. Additionally, the district developed numerous supports for educators working with students with ASD, including a CORE Team of district-level consultants and several Trans-Disciplinary Teams of school-based team members. Despite these new instructional configurations, support structures, and numerous professional development opportunities, many schools within the district continued to struggle with accommodating students with ASD. Furthermore, supervisors and district-level personnel lacked a consistent definition of inclusion, which has sometimes led to conflicts due to discrepant beliefs and values among district decision-makers, administrators, and school-based personnel. To address these concerns, the district entered into a partnership with the Florida Inclusion Network (FIN) to participate in an ongoing professional development and systems change initiative with the goal of increasing inclusive practices at the district, school, and instructional team levels (known as Best Practices in Inclusive Education, or BPIE). At the time of data collection, the district had completed a comprehensive self-assessment as a part of the BPIE process and developed an action plan to articulate goals for increasing the district’s implementation of best practices in inclusion.

The target district provides a compelling demonstration of some of the challenges of inclusion described in the literature. In particular, the practice of inclusion, and even the term itself, have been the subject of considerable controversy over the last several decades and to this day it appears that “inclusion” may look very different depending upon the student, educator, and setting (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). At a local level, information from the ESE Supervisor of Autism in the participating school district suggests that varying definitions of, attitudes toward, and strategies for inclusion exist at

all levels of implementation (district, school, team, and individual). There is a wealth of data on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, but studies over the course of the last 40 years indicate mixed feelings about inclusion and a preference for including predominantly students with milder disabilities and learning support needs (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1996).

Despite these ambiguities, what is clear from federal special education data is that (a) including students with disabilities into general education settings is a more prevalent educational practice, and (b) inclusion of students with ASD is a more frequent occurrence as the numbers of students in this group have grown disproportionately in the last decade (OSEP, 2004). This trend is clear in the participating district, which has seen a 288% growth in their autism population in the last six years and has recently established inclusion programs in four schools. With regard to educational supports for students with ASD, a marked increase in research on mechanisms for educational support is evident, with several best practice recommendations emerging as consistent themes in the intervention and instructional literature (Iovannone et al., 2003). Yet IEPs for students with ASD tend to be the most often disputed and often contain procedural errors, including lack of consideration for LRE (Yell et al., 2003). These contradictions and ambiguities beg the following questions: How do students with ASD come to be included? By what process do educators make decisions about inclusive placements, and what considerations have the greatest impact on these decisions? What does inclusion mean for their teachers and what constitutes success? Is "success" universally defined, or do parents and educators have different ideas about the important outcomes for these students? These questions are all the more salient in the district chosen for this study, given data indicating both an increase in the number of students with ASD in the district and an increased likelihood that these students will be educated in the educational mainstream. Creating a systematic district-wide process for recommending and developing inclusive education for students with both ASD and other disabilities is a main priority for both the ESE Supervisor of Autism and for the school district as a whole.

The purpose of this study was to explore (a) the meanings and understandings of inclusion for schools engaged in the process of educating students with ASD in general education settings, (b) educators' attitudes and beliefs at the individual and school level regarding inclusion of students with ASD, (c) how the understandings and attitudes

regarding inclusion impact the way educators make decisions about inclusion and educational programs for students with ASD, (d) the sources of educators' attitudes and ideas about inclusion (e.g., experience, philosophy, training, research, etc.), and (e) educators' and parents' criteria for determining "successful" inclusion and their perceptions about the success of current inclusion efforts.

Qualitative research methodology was used to address the articulated purpose and corresponding research questions for this study. Four schools that included a significant number of students with ASD were identified by district personnel and the researcher and were purposively selected for recruitment in this study. Two focus groups were conducted with a team of educators who were involved in inclusion efforts to engage educators in a decision-making simulation regarding developing educational plans for students with ASD; subsequently, semi—structured interviews were conducted individually with each member of the team as a follow-up to the focus group. Additionally, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents of included students with ASD. Themes emerging from data at each school were examined qualitatively to link the meanings, definitions, and attitudes toward inclusion to the strategies and daily realities of inclusion in each school setting as perceived by interview participants. Educators' decision-making processes and strategies also were linked to both desired and perceived outcomes for students with ASD. Finally, educators' descriptions desired/perceived outcomes were compared to those of parents. The research and epistemological paradigm of phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967), as well as attitude theory (Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), served as dual frameworks for understanding and interpreting information obtained from this study.

#### *Research Questions*

The following list of questions was developed to guide the present study.

1. How do educators operationally define inclusion?
2. What are educators' beliefs regarding inclusion of students with ASD?
3. What are educators' emotional reactions to inclusion of students with ASD?
4. What types of past experiences have influenced teachers' current understandings of inclusion and their feelings toward it?
5. How do educators make decisions about instructional placements?
6. On what information sources (e.g., personal experience, second-hand experience, research/best practices) do teams draw when making these decisions?

7. What outcomes do educators wish to see as a result of students with ASD participating in general education and do educators think students are achieving these outcomes?
8. What are educators' perceptions of the overall effectiveness of their schools' inclusion efforts?
9. Using the following domains of functioning as a general framework, what are the specific outcomes that parents wish to see in their children as a result of inclusion, do parents perceive these outcomes as being attained?
  - a. Academic/Vocational Skills
  - b. Communication
  - c. Behavioral/Social-Emotional Functioning
  - d. Community Integration & Normalization
  - e. Recreation/Leisure Skills

### *Definitions*

#### *Attitude*

Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) describe an attitude as “an evaluation of someone or something along a continuum of like-to-dislike or favorable-to-unfavorable” (p. 31). There is general agreement that three interrelated concepts that work simultaneously to form what we have come to know as an attitude: (a) the cognitive aspect, concerning the beliefs or thoughts one may have about the issue/object; (b) the affective aspect, concerning the emotional response or feelings one may have regarding the issue/object; and (c) the behavioral aspect, or an individual's previous actions or experiences with regard to the issue/object (Katz & Stotland, 1959; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). In sum, the term “attitude” may be defined as an evaluation that is based upon cognitions, emotional reactions, and past experiences. Furthermore, attitudes can themselves influence cognitions, affective responses, and future intentions and behavior (Zanna & Rempel, 1988).

#### *Autism Inclusion Pod*

The district's Continuous Progress model (defined above) was uniquely applied to instruction for students with ASD, such that four of the five elementary schools in the district with self-contained autism units had also developed “Autism Inclusion Pods” in the general education setting. These pods had the same primary or intermediate configurations as described above, but their “fifth teacher” was a special education

teacher who served in the role of “autism inclusion teacher.” The autism inclusion teacher was the case manager for not only the included students with ASD but for all of the ESE students within the pod. Among his or her primary responsibilities were development of instructional supports to meet the needs of both ESE students and those at-risk for experiencing academic difficulty (e.g., small-group supplemental instruction, co-teaching support during large-group instruction), working with the rest of the teachers on the team to collaboratively address many of the social and behavioral needs of the students with ASD, and consultation with the school-based behavior specialist or other personnel (e.g., District Inclusion Facilitators) when needed.

#### *Autism Spectrum Disorder or ASD*

Autism is a developmental disorder of neurobiological origin present from birth or early in development that affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas effectively, and the establishment of relationships with others (National Research Council, 2001). Currently, autism is characterized as a spectrum of related disorders that vary in severity of symptoms, age of onset, and associations with other disorders such as mental retardation, specific language delay, or epilepsy. The umbrella term “Autism Spectrum Disorders” (ASD) is often used to describe a range of diagnoses that share characteristics of autism, including Autistic Disorder (sometimes referred to as “classic autism”), Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger’s Disorder (Frith, 2003).

#### *Continuous Progress*

According to the district’s vision statement, CP is defined as

...a curriculum which allows a student to progress at his or her own rate, within a framework of high expectations, without conforming to an externally imposed time limit on learning or a fixed amount of subject matter in a fixed amount of time. *Continuous Progress* requires that students should neither spend time on what they have already adequately achieved nor proceed to more difficult tasks if they have not yet learned material or acquired skills essential to that new level of knowledge. (No citation provided to protect district identity)

At all district elementary schools, educators were grouped into teams or “pods” using a “Continuous Progress” model where children were able to participate in flexible multi-age instructional groupings based more on student skill needs than age or grade. Primary-level teams, locally referred to as “pods,” typically consisted of four classrooms

in a configuration such as Kindergarten, Kindergarten-1<sup>st</sup> grade combination, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> grade combination, and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. A similar approach at the intermediate grade levels resulted in a pod consisting of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grade combination, 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade combination, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. In many teams, a “fifth teacher” was added to the team to work with students as needed across these classroom configurations, pulling out additional multi-age instructional groups or fusing into the classroom to co-teach lessons.

### *Inclusion*

Over the 30 years since the introduction of the LRE clause in P.L. 94-142, numerous interpretations of LRE, educational reform movements, and decision-making strategies were proposed by a number of educational scholars and disability advocates, offering a multitude of possibilities for educating students with disabilities in relation to their general education peers. These various definitions of inclusive educational approaches are described at great length in Chapter 2. A broad, all-encompassing definition of inclusion is *the practice of educating all or most children in the same classroom, including children with physical, mental, and developmental disabilities.* (McBrien & Brandt, 1997) No operational definition for “inclusion” will be used in this study, because one major goal is to discover how educators make meaning of this very controversial word both conceptually and in practice. However, the district’s own definitions of all instructional options along a continuum of services is displayed in Appendix B, and the district’s specific definitions and vision of inclusive education can be found in Appendix K.

### *Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)*

The concept of least restrictive environment (LRE) is derived from the constitutional doctrine of the “least restrictive alternative,” which generally requires the government to achieve its purposes through the least oppressive and restrictive means (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). The LRE clause of P.L. 94-142 and its reauthorizations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990, 1997, 2004) requires each state education agency to ensure that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), funded and managed by federal law, are delivered in the least restrictive manner possible. Specifically, the LRE clause specifies:

- (1) that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with

children who are nondisabled; and (2) that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities, 34 C.F.R. section 300.550, 1997, p. 44819).

### *Phenomenology*

Phenomenology is an approach to research that attempts to understand the meaning of lived experiences, events, and interactions for people in particular situations (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Phenomenological research takes the position that the facts of a situation are but one way of understanding it; uncovering the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives related to a phenomenon provide another mechanism for understanding its occurrence. As such, phenomenology is descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaging; its aim is to derive the essence of an experience. Two major assumptions underlie phenomenological research: (a) perceptions present us with evidence of life, not as it is thought to be, but as it is *lived*; and (b) human experience is meaningful and is relevant in the sense that people are always engaged in the act of consciousness and making meaning (Morse & Richards, 2003).

### *Self-Contained Classroom*

A self-contained classroom, also colloquially known as “unit,” is a classroom comprised entirely of students with disabilities and is taught/assisted exclusively by special education staff. In the elementary setting, self-contained classrooms were often organized by the students’ grade level (i.e., “primary” for grades K-2 and “intermediate” for grades 3-5) and disability category (e.g., autism, Educable Mentally Handicapped or EMH, Emotionally Handicapped or EH, etc.). However, as the name suggests, Varying Exceptionalities or VE classrooms were self-contained settings in which students with a variety of handicapping conditions could be placed. Within the continuum of services, a VE classroom is considered a less restrictive environment than a self-contained autism classroom and affords its students more opportunities for academic instruction.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the reader with a review of the relevant literature pertaining to this study. Specifically, six areas are addressed: (a) evolving legal interpretations of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE); (b) educational perspectives of LRE and the evolution of “inclusion” as an educational reform movement; (c) previous research on attitudes toward inclusion; (d) the current status of inclusive education, including local advocacy and national reform movements, recent statistics on the rise of inclusive placements for students with disabilities, and research on the various outcomes of inclusion; (e) an overview of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD); and (f) challenges in providing appropriate educational programs for students with ASD, including inclusive education. The final section of this chapter introduces the theoretical framework of the study, including the qualitative research paradigm, phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and attitude theory (Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), which was used to develop research questions and will be used to interpret findings.

#### The Challenge of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

Since the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA; Public Law 94-142, 1975), educators have been obligated to provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE; Jacob-Timm & Hartshorne, 1998). The LRE clause of P.L. 94-142 and its reauthorizations (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990, 1997, 2004) requires each state education agency to ensure

- (1) that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and
- (2) that special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services

cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (Assistance to States for the Education of Children with Disabilities, 34 C.F.R. section 300.550, 1997, p. 44819)

The concept of least restrictive environment (LRE) is derived from the constitutional doctrine of the "least restrictive alternative," which generally requires the government to achieve its purposes through the least oppressive and restrictive means (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). As such, the LRE clause is included within IDEA to ensure that Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), funded and managed by federal law, are delivered in the least restrictive manner possible.

Since the early days of special education services, the LRE principle has been operationally defined as a continuum or "cascade" of potential educational placements, such that a range of service delivery options are available for students with disabilities (Deno, 1970). According to the continuum model of LRE, more restrictive placements (e.g., self-contained classrooms, center schools) tend to offer intensive services and segregate students with disabilities from their typically-developing peers and the general education curriculum, while less restrictive placements (e.g., resource, pull-out, or inclusion) are those that include less intensive supports and integrate students with disabilities into age-appropriate general education environments with their typically-developing peers (Taylor, 1988). Although the ultimate LRE might be the general education classroom, such a placement may not be required or desirable in all cases. The continuum model was developed to provide a range of placement options between general education and self-contained settings that might best fit the needs of each individual student. The most recent reauthorization of IDEA *requires* local educational agencies to prepare a continuum of alternative placements, from least to most restrictive, within which the child's program can theoretically be delivered (20 U.S.C. § 1412(5)(B)). Federal regulations stipulate that the continuum may include, but is not limited to, regular and special classes, special schools, home instruction, and instruction in hospitals and institutions (34 C.F.R. § 300.551 (b)(1)). From this continuum, the local educational agency then must select the option that is least restrictive and allows the student to access all necessary supports and services stipulated by the IEP.

Despite the numerous placement and service-delivery options afforded by the continuum model of LRE, placement issues have been a matter of considerable debate among parents, educators, and legislators. In part, this can be attributed to varying understandings and interpretations of the LRE requirement in IDEA (Crockett &

Kauffman, 1999). For example, some people have interpreted the word *restrictive* as being synonymous with *segregated*, such that the LRE is conceptualized as the environment in which students with disabilities are least segregated from their peers (Villa & Thousand, 1995). Others have taken a more “ecobehavioral” approach, determining LRE by evaluating the potential educational benefit from the interaction among an individual student, a prescribed educational plan, and an instructional setting (Gottlieb, Alter, & Gottlieb, 1991; Greenwood, Carta, Kamps, & Arreaga-Mayer, 1990; Morsink & Lenk, 1992).

### *Legal Interpretations of LRE*

As a result of such varied interpretations, the concept of LRE has been consistently controversial and, for the last three decades, educators and advocates for individuals with disabilities have engaged in a heated debate about how decisions should be made regarding the best classroom placement and LRE for individual students (Kavale & Forness, 2000). Federal statutes, regulations, and case law offered some degree of clarification, but also have resulted in some tension and confusion (Huefner, 1994). The U.S. Supreme Court, as well as several federal circuit courts, have generated a range of distinctive, although overlapping, standards for the determination of least restrictive placements (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). Although there is some similarity among the requirements, there also are differences, sometimes due to the unique facts of the cases and other times due to apparent variations in interpretation of federal statutes. A review of each relevant court case is beyond the scope of this literature review; the interested reader is referred to Thomas and Rapport (1998) and Yell (1995) for more detailed discussion of case law pertaining to LRE. Across the standards and tests set forth by the many legal challenges since the passage of P.L. 94-142, several themes emerge for determining LRE and making placement decisions: (a) continuum of placement options; (b) portability of services and supports; (c) relative educational benefit of placement options; (d) impact on general education peers; (e) consideration of costs, and (f) participation with general education peers.

### *Continuum of Services and Supports*

IDEA and court decisions suggest that mainstreaming is an important objective, but in some cases the education of children in separate classes or institutional settings may be most appropriate (*Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District Board of Education v. Rowley*, 1982). State and local education agencies must

make an effort to educate the child in the mainstream, although they are not required to provide every conceivable supplementary aid and instructors are not required to devote all or most of their time to modify a general education program “beyond recognition” (*Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education*, 1989; *Oberti v. Board of Education of Clementon School District*, 1993). Courts must respect state and local decisions regarding educational programming to the greatest extent possible, as IDEA was written to specifically afford state and local educational agencies the responsibility and flexibility to determine the most appropriate educational methods and practices (*Rowley*, 1982).

#### *Portability*

Whenever possible, services and supports typically provided in segregated settings should be “portable” and made available in general education contexts and neighborhood schools (*Roncker v. Walter*, 1983). IDEA regulations indicate a strong preference for placement in the neighborhood school (i.e., the school the child would attend if he/she did not have a disability) whenever possible, but such placements are not mandatory (Osborne & DiMattia, 1994 in T&R, 1998). Courts have upheld placement in non-neighborhood schools in cases where the child’s needs, as identified in the IEP, required placement elsewhere.

#### *Educational Benefit*

Consideration of the relative benefits of each potential setting for the child in question is imperative to determining LRE (*Roncker*, 1983; *Briggs v. Board of Education of Connecticut*, 1989; *Daniel R.R.*, 1989; *Sacramento City Unified School District, Board of Education v. Rachel H.*, 1994). IEPs must be designed to provide some educational benefit (*Rowley*, 1982), although there is no “guarantee” that educational benefit will necessarily be conferred. Benefits of general education are not exclusively academic, including the opportunity for socialization and communication with age-appropriate peers who are not disabled (*Daniel R.R.*, 1989; *Rachel H.*, 1994). However, districts are not obligated to provide the most beneficial or “maximizing” benefit (*Rowley*, 1982).

According to a decision by the 6<sup>th</sup> circuit court in *Doe v. Board of Education of Tullahoma City Schools* (1993), IDEA “requires that ... schools provide the educational equivalent of a serviceable Chevrolet to every handicapped student... We hold that the Board is not required to provide a Cadillac” (pp. 459-460). Although this statement seems to create a tension between the provision of FAPE and the assurance of LRE, Thomas and Rapport (1998) contend, “there is no need to balance appropriateness and restrictiveness” when

determining placement (p. 74). Under IDEA, the FAPE mandate is the ultimate objective, and LRE is one of many other additional requirements that enable the district to meet the demands of FAPE (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). The least restrictive placement is not necessarily the most appropriate option, but the most appropriate educational placement *must be* the least restrictive option.

#### *Impact on General Education Peers*

LRE decisions should also consider of the impact of the student with the disability on his/her general education peers (*Roncker, 1983; Daniel R.R., 1989; Rachel H., 1994*). The courts have repeatedly acknowledged that some children may represent a danger to themselves or others, or may cause substantial disruption in the classroom, even with the assignment of an aide, creating a situation where the learning environment would suffer for all students involved (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). However, an attempt to use supplementary supports and services in the general education classroom is generally necessary prior considering a more restrictive or segregated placement. Additionally, the courts have suggested that schools consider how much of a teacher or aide's time will be devoted to working specifically with the child with a disability, and what, if any, impact that will have on the learning of the other children in the same class (*Daniel R.R., 1989*).

#### *Consideration of Costs*

Analysis of costs (both financial and nonmonetary) is appropriate when making placement decisions (*Roncker, 1983; Rachel H.H., 1989*). Such considerations might include (a) what are the costs of educating the child in the general education environment, and (b) are the costs so excessive as to deprive other children of an education? When the costs of a general education placement are so substantial that they significantly affect the quality of education for other children, or when the child requires his/her own full-time teacher to successfully participate in the mainstream, courts have suggested that the burden on the school district may supercede the preference for mainstreaming (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). Unfortunately, legal guidelines or regulations that establish the point at which costs become "excessive" do not exist (Osborne, 1997, p. 1024) and often these decisions are made on a case-by-case basis.

### *Participation with General Education Peers*

If a general education placement is deemed inappropriate for a particular child, the school must develop a placement in which the child is with their typically developing peers to the maximum extent appropriate (*Daniel R.R.*, 1989). The 1997 reauthorization of IDEA required that each IEP state, among other things, the extent to which the child with disabilities participates with nondisabled children in the general education classroom and/or other school activities. Furthermore, the IDEA 1997 amendments require at least one general education teacher to be a part of the IEP team if the child is or may be participating in general education in anyway.

Clearly, determining of LRE for children with disabilities is a complex and dynamic endeavor involving consideration of many critical factors. Development of an “appropriate” educational program appears to be the chief concern of many circuit courts, with delivery of that program in the LRE as an essential component of any “appropriate” program.

#### *Educational Interpretations of LRE: The Evolution of Inclusion*

While the legal analysis of LRE over the last 30 years has highlighted some of the most essential issues related to placement decisions, examination of the academic literature on special education placement suggests that educators, parents, and child advocates have had difficulty resolving these issues into a consistent approach to implementing LRE in daily educational practice. If anything, the legal requirements of LRE did more to confuse and polarize the issue among educators, giving rise to a value-laden debate about the appropriateness and feasibility of including students with disabilities in general education environments. Fuchs and Fuchs stated in 1994, “inclusion means different things to people who wish different things from it. For the group that wants the least... maintain the status quo. To those who want more, it means... a fundamental reorganization of the teaching and learning process” (p. 299). Clearly, the way educators interpret both LRE from a legal perspective and “inclusion” from a philosophical perspective will have an impact of their feelings about the issue and their ideas for making inclusion a reality. The next section reviews the various interpretations of LRE, educational reform movements, and decision-making strategies offering a multitude of possibilities for educating of students with disabilities in relation to their general education peers.

### *Mainstreaming*

In the early years following the implementation of EHA, delivery of education in the LRE was conceptualized as “mainstreaming.” Definitions and uses of this term vary in the literature, but one representative definition is *the partial or total placement of students with disabilities in general education classes based on the individual’s needs* (Heron & Harris, 1987). This term, though not specifically used in P.L. 94-142 or subsequent reauthorizations, suggests that students’ placement within the continuum is based on a readiness model in which students must prove their readiness for an integrated placement (Taylor, 1988). Powell-Smith and Ball (2002) noted that mainstreamed placements are typically written into students’ IEPs for the purposes of receiving instruction in a less restrictive setting or for the potential social/emotional benefits they may afford the exceptional student. Mainstream placements generally do not necessarily mean that the student no longer needs intensive or specialized instruction/supports or that they have been dismissed from special education services. In fact, Mesibov and Shea (1996) suggest that the term “mainstreaming” often denotes that the student’s primary placement or “home base” is still the SE setting, with periodic placement into GE classrooms when educators think the child will be successful there.

### *Regular Education Initiative (REI)*

Mainstreaming was perceived by some educators and scholars as a divisive view of LRE in that it characterized special and general education as two separate systems and emphasized special education decision-making in reference to *where* a child is educated instead of *how* (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). In reaction to this interpretation of LRE, alternative perspectives emerged. The Regular Education Initiative (REI), jumpstarted by an influential position paper by Assistant Secretary of Education Madeline Will (1986), sought to merge general and special education into one seamless system and, by doing so, dramatically increase the number of children with disabilities in general education classrooms.

Unfortunately, the REI movement itself was characterized by divisiveness and two distinct camps with somewhat divergent goals emerged: a “low-incidence” group and a “high-incidence” group (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). The “low-incidence” group (e.g., Biklen, Lehr, Searl, and Taylor, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1984) represented advocates of students with severe intellectual disabilities whose primary concern was the integration of children with severe disabilities into neighborhood schools rather than residential/day

settings. The “high-incidence” group was further subdivided into two smaller factions. One group set their sights on “large-scale mainstreaming,” whereby most students with mild-to-moderate disabilities such as learning disabilities, behavior disorders, and mild/moderate mental retardation would be transferred to general education settings on a full-time basis (e.g., Reynolds, Wang, & Walberg, 1987). Another group within the “high-incidence” camp was still interested in preserving the cascade of placements and advocated for increasing the number of students served in general education not by “large-scale mainstreaming” but rather by a data-based decision-making process known as “responsible reintegration” (e.g., Fuchs, Fuchs, & Fernstrom, 1991). Both of these positions are discussed in greater detail in the following sections, as both of the positions advocated by these REI proponents eventually became distinct inclusive education approaches in their own right. Across the numerous opinions and factions formed in response to REI, proponents generally agreed that there was a need for shared responsibility among general and special educators (i.e., co-teaching, consultation, etc.) to provide individualized instruction with a basic skills focus and cooperative learning to make the goal of large-scale mainstreaming a reality (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Yet despite the goal of integrating the special and general education settings, the divisiveness of the REI movement rendered it primarily a special education initiative with little impact on general education practices (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994).

#### *Full Inclusion/Inclusive Schools Movement*

As dissention and confusion dissipated the REI movement, another approach to widespread inclusion materialized in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The “full inclusion” or “inclusive schools” movement was conceptualized not as a merger of special and general education systems, but rather the total elimination of special education and the continuum of placements. According to Fuchs and Fuchs (1994), this perspective evolved over the course of several years. Individuals who previously had advocated for the maintenance of the continuum of placement options in neighborhood schools within the context of the REI (e.g., Lipsky and Gartner, 1989; Stainback and Stainback, 1984) argued forcefully for its elimination just a few years later: “The concepts of Least Restrictive Environment – a continuum of placements and a cascade of services – were progressive when they were developed but do not promote the full inclusion of all persons with disabilities in all aspects of social life” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1991, p. 52).

The primary goal among “full inclusionists” was not just to eliminate the bottom



end of special education placements (i.e., residential or day programs) nor exclusively the top end of the continuum (i.e., resource services), as the REI proponents did, but rather to remove the entire range of options represented by the continuum and provide all special education services through the infusion of specialists in mainstream environments. Pearson and Forest (1992) claimed, "The inclusion option signifies the end of labeling, special education, special classes, but not the end of necessary supports and services... in the integrated classroom" (p. xvi). A second, less publicized (but nonetheless valued) goal for the full inclusion movement was the improved social competence of students both with and without disabilities, to ensure the normalized community participation of students with disabilities and promote attitude change and acceptance among teachers and students without disabilities who will someday become parents, taxpayers, and service providers (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). This contrasted sharply with the goals of the REI movement, which often focused on meeting ambitious academic goals. Given these disparities in approaches to integrating students with disabilities, "successful inclusion" might be designed and evaluated differently depending upon the philosophy and understanding of inclusion held by a given student's IEP team (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). For "full inclusionists," success might be measured by the yardstick of friendships and age-appropriate opportunities for socialization and independence while, for REI advocates, academic competency was the most important benchmark.

As the term "inclusion" has grown in popularity and utilization, confusion about the distinctions between this practice and that of "mainstreaming" have arisen. By way of clarification, the TEACCH Autism program at the University of North Carolina states in a position paper on their website,

While the arguments for inclusion sound similar to another movement, mainstreaming, there are important differences. Mainstreaming handicapped children has typically involved integrating children when the child was able to demonstrate that he/she could successfully participate in the regular planned activities within the regular education class. Inclusion advocates typically argue that mainstreaming efforts have forced the handicapped child to "earn" time in the integrated settings. Inclusion advocates typically support the notion that each child has a right to be included, and that necessary support services and accommodations to the child's handicap must be made within the regular

education classrooms. (TEACCH, 2006)

This statement suggests that the difference between inclusion and mainstreaming lies less in its implementation than it does in the way decisions are made about how students should be integrated into the educational mainstream and when. From a “mainstreaming” perspective, decisions are based on a child’s readiness for the GE setting relative to their personal characteristics and demonstrated support needs. By contrast, individuals promoting inclusion emphasize making the GE environment to accommodate the existing needs of any child with a disability, regardless of their current skills, behaviors, or overall “readiness” for that setting. While Mesibov and Shea (1996) suggested that “mainstreamed” students are still considered to be SE students with temporary visitation in the GE setting, “full inclusion assumes that the regular class is the home base, not a placement to be earned” (pp. 337-338).

### *Reintegration*

In the heated climate of reactionary approaches to inclusion that characterized the early 1990s, still others maintained that inclusion was not a sweeping movement or initiative but rather a case-by-case decision-making process whereby a student’s instructional needs are matched to instructional supports available along the special education continuum. Fuchs, Fuchs, and Fernstrom (1991, 1993) introduced this process as “reintegration” or “transenvironmental programming.” Powell-Smith and Ball (2002) defined *reintegration* as a process for fading and eventually removing special education services for a student in one or more areas (e.g., academic content areas, behavioral/emotional supports, language, physical disabilities, etc.). Advocates of this approach maintained the readiness view of LRE as articulated by Taylor and others, expanding the concept to include decision rules and assessment of students’ skills in reference to general education expectations to determine which current special education students would be most likely to benefit from a general education placement. In addition to skill-based assessment in reference to the general education curriculum, reintegration also takes into consideration the instructional ecology of the present and potential classroom environments, including the nature and quality of teacher-student interactions, curricula, and materials, all of which can have a considerable impact on a student’s outcomes (Fuchs, Fernstrom, Scott, Fuchs, & Vandermeer, 1994). Essential to all reintegration efforts is the notion of case-by-case decision-making, described as *Responsible Reintegration* by Fuchs, Fuchs, and Fernstrom (1991). In contrast to

inclusion movements advocating for sweeping changes in the placements of students with disabilities, reintegration advocates emphasized the need for individualized comparisons of student achievement in reference to the general education environment, consistent with legal decisions regarding LRE such as *Rowley* (1982).

#### *Dynamic Interpretations of LRE*

An unfortunate outcome of the inclusion debate was that special education came to be conceptualized as a place, rather than a process or endeavor. Placing focus on the *where* students with disabilities should be educated caused teachers to shift away from considering *how* best to provide instruction to diverse groups of students. By defining LRE in terms of geography, the assumption among many educators became that, for all students, the general education classroom in the neighborhood setting constituted the very least restrictive placement and ostensibly the only place where students with disabilities could receive an appropriate education (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). Yet many educators posit that setting, in and of itself, has a limited impact on outcomes; it is the dynamic teaching-learning process that has far greater importance for students with disabilities (Kavale, 2002).

Crockett and Kaufmann (1999) have suggested that the LRE will vary from student to student and often from time to time for a particular student, as well. For example, frequent and intensive challenging behavior (e.g., tantrums, inappropriate comments, self-injury, etc.) is considered a major barrier for including students with special needs (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1996) and, as such, may precipitate a change in placement if the behavior cannot be successfully prevented or managed in the general education setting. From an ecobehavioral perspective, one could suggest that general education constitutes a *more* restrictive environment because it does not match the student's present needs; it does not allow the student to access necessary behavioral supports, and the student's challenging behavior prevents him/her from deriving educational benefit in the mainstream setting. The very same student, however, could be returned to a general education classroom once more appropriate replacement behaviors have been taught in a more intensive environment. In Crockett and Kauffman's view, LRE is not an all-or-nothing proposition in which a student's diagnosed disability or characteristics render them permanently eligible or ineligible for participation in general education, but rather an ongoing decision-making process that requires assessment of a student's support needs and ability to make educational progress in the

mainstream.

Similarly, Cooper (2004) proposed that any environment can be considered inclusive to the extent that it promotes the active social and academic engagement of a student. Using a cognitive framework first conceptualized by Bennathan and Boxall (2003), Cooper stated that a child is “actively engaged” when he/she gives purposeful attention, participates constructively, makes connections between experiences, shows insightful involvement, and engages cognitively with peers. These behaviors are considered to be the precursors of successful educational experiences; thus, a classroom setting is considered “inclusive” if it facilitates the active engagement of the student. By contrast, an “exclusive” setting is one in which the individual’s social, emotional, and cognitive engagement is not promoted, regardless of its proximity to general education or “typically-developing” peers. A comparable position was advocated by the TEACCH program (Treatment and Education of Autistic and related Communication-handicapped Children), a leading educational program for individuals with ASD (Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2005). A position statement on the TEACCH website suggested that placement decisions should be made in reference to the LRE mandate, but must also consider the extent to which the child will experience “meaningful learning and functioning” within any given educational placement (TEACCH, 2006).

Though the views of Kauffman, Cooper, TEACCH and the like have by no means been universally adopted, it does appear that by the mid-to-late 1990s the field of special education began to reach a tentative consensus that many approaches to inclusion and integration were necessary (Putnam, Spiegel, & Bruininks, 1995). This consensus is consistent with findings of numerous circuit courts affirming the need for a continuum of placement options, with general education placement as just one of many potentially viable options for students with disabilities (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). Nevertheless, numerous understandings remain regarding both the intention behind inclusive education and the means by which it should be achieved. Currently, the prevailing terminology for educating students with disabilities in general education includes the terms “inclusion,” “mainstreaming,” and “reintegration,” but the underlying approach to meeting the LRE requirement for students with disabilities does not appear to have been reconciled. Cooper (2004) recently mused: “Inclusion’ is a much used and abused word... in danger of losing its meaning” (p. 219). Likewise, O’Hanlon and Thomas

(2004) observed,

‘Inclusion’ has become something of an international buzz-word. It’s difficult to trace its provenance or the growth of its use over the last two decades, but what is certain is that it is now *de rigueur* for mission statements, political speeches, and policy documents of all kinds. It has become a cliché – obligatory in the discourse of all right-thinking people. (p. x)

As no one model for including students with disabilities appears to have garnered universal support, nor have the courts deemed one uniform approach for ensuring LRE, it has become the responsibility of educators and schools to consider the various options and define the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and goals for their chosen approach to inclusion (Martin, 1995). The necessity of clarifying and defining inclusion was illustrated in an ethnographic investigation of school reform efforts by Mamlin (1999) entitled, “Despite Best Intentions: When Inclusion Fails.” Although Mamlin initially set out to document how a school engaged in a university-supported restructuring process to implement inclusion on a school level, she ultimately concluded that differing ideas of what constituted inclusive education and cultural factors at the building-level led to a failure to implement inclusion at all. The building administrator and the site-based restructuring facilitator had very different ideas about inclusion and how it should be implemented. The principal’s approach to inclusion involved individualized schedules for students in self-contained classes, such that they could be included in general education on the basis of their own strengths. While this idea seemed compatible with a school-based restructuring effort, the schedules led to very few general education placements and an increase of at-risk students receiving special education services. When it became clear that this system was not producing desired results, the principal appeared determined to go ahead with the plan and eschewed alternatives suggested by the planners of the restructuring initiative.

The restructuring facilitator, however, wished to see “full inclusion,” describing desired outcomes consistent with that of inclusion advocates – “when you go into anybody’s classroom... you won’t be able to pick out a special needs child from an anybody else child... they’ll all be working together and working as a group” (Mamlin, 1999, p. 44). Yet the reality of the inclusion effort she described consisted of situations in which a select few students with individual schedules were integrated in only one general education class a day. Moreover, although the restructuring facilitator’s role was

to coordinate the initiative and serve as liaison between university, school district, and staff, she ultimately ended up “being taken advantage of... she seemed to be seen as an extra pair of hands” (p. 42). She spent considerable time engaged in clerical work and was the designated substitute teacher for all special education teachers.

Mamlin’s work provides a rare window into the way educators’ understandings of and beliefs about inclusion impact its implementation. She further concluded that, in the school she studied, a culture of segregation and an authoritarian administrative style also contributed to the demise of the restructuring initiative. Special education was seen as separate from general education; collaboration across systems was a foreign concept. Students in special education classes were viewed as qualitatively different from those in general education classes, which Mamlin noted is precisely the view that inclusion advocates wish to overcome. This view was so ingrained in their way of operating that it was difficult to picture another way of doing things. Mamlin reiterated that, when planning large-scale school reform initiatives involving inclusion, it is imperative to examine the school’s culture and belief system, readiness for inclusion and change understanding of proposed changes.

The path toward the educational integration of students with a variety of disabilities has been a long and winding one, traveled by various pioneers, bandwagoneers, scientists and skeptics. Though the concept of inclusion has become more familiar to educators in a variety of contexts, the lack of agreement about precisely what constitutes “inclusive education” remains a major barrier to its effective implementation. To the extent that inclusion polarizes educators, it remains a philosophical or civil rights issue for some and a pedagogical issue for others; as a result, its potential impact on reforming special education has yet to be realized.

#### *Attitudes toward Inclusion*

Clearly, the way in which a teacher, administrator, school building, or district defines and conceptualizes both the LRE principle and inclusion philosophy will have an impact on the attitudes educators hold about inclusion, as well as the way placement decisions are made for students with disabilities and the goals and strategies used to guide their instructional programs. Research suggests that attitudes and beliefs affect a person’s perceptions and how new information is processed; individuals will use their current belief system to filter new information (Oskamp, 1991). Cafferty (1992) suggested, “schools, like all complex organizations, are attitude arenas” (p. 25).

Members of several diverse groups—parents, teachers, students, administrators, staff, and the community—develop and maintain attitudes toward each other, as well as toward policies and practices relevant to school functioning. According to attitude theorist Daniel Katz, attitudes serve several useful functions, including (a) helping people get what they want and avoid what they do not want, (b) helping people avoid internal conflicts and anxiety, (c) helping people understand and integrate complex sources of information, and (d) reflect our deeply held values (Katz, 1960). In large systems and organizations such as schools, attitudes have particular value in their ability to help organize information and beliefs about various objects, making the system more predictable and manageable for those in it. Because of their impact on the implementation of policy and practice, attitudes are of direct or indirect interest to school reform agents such as school psychologists.

There is general agreement that inclusion is most likely to be effective when the school personnel who will be most responsible for its success – general education teachers – are receptive to its principles and demands. A considerable literature base documenting educators' attitudes and beliefs about integrating students with a variety of disabilities in general education settings exists. Most research on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion has utilized surveys, questionnaires, or other self-report measures. Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996) synthesized 28 such studies surveying a total of 10,560 general and special education teachers between the years of 1958 and 1995. Overall, most teachers (65% of 7,385 teachers) indicated that they supported inclusion as a desirable education practice; a majority of respondents (53% of 2,193) also reported that they were generally willing to teach students with disabilities. Notably, responses to both of these item types (support for inclusion and willingness to be involved in it) covaried with both the intensity of inclusion in question and the severity of student disability. Across studies, Scruggs and Mastropieri reported that teachers were consistently more supportive of including students with mild disabilities who require minimal teacher support or attention (e.g., learning disabilities, mild mobility or sensory problems); teachers indicated lower levels of support for including students with moderate to severe intellectual, behavioral, sensory, or physical impairments.

Teachers in studies synthesized by Scruggs and Mastropieri were mixed in their belief that inclusion was likely to yield educational benefit for students both with and without disabilities. This finding is particularly interesting in light of numerous legal

decisions suggesting that general education placements are only obligated to offer *some* level of educational benefit for students (e.g., Rowley, 1982), including nonacademic benefits such as socialization opportunities (Thomas & Rapport, 1998). Scruggs and Mastropieri found that special education teachers were more likely than general education teachers to believe that inclusion would be beneficial for students with disabilities (67% of SE teachers vs. 51% of GE teachers). Furthermore, general education teachers were more likely to indicate support for items written in general terms suggesting that inclusion *may* be beneficial (e.g., “Retarded children could receive an appropriate education in the regular classroom”; Baker & Gottlieb, 1980) than when written in absolute terms suggesting that inclusion *always* is beneficial (e.g., “Children with special needs would be best served by instruction in the regular classroom setting”; Horne, 1983). Related to teachers’ concerns about including students were the beliefs that:

1. Students with disabilities may cause problems in the general education classroom or may require significant accommodations in order to learn effectively
2. Teachers lack essential supports necessary for effective inclusion, such as planning time, expertise or training, personnel, and materials
3. Class size would need to be reduced for classrooms that include students with disabilities, with lower numbers necessary as the severity of disability increases.

Scruggs and Mastropieri noted that although the studies included in their study span four decades, there were no significant differences in responses or attitude as a function of a study’s publication date. As such, the authors hypothesized that teachers regard students with disabilities in the context of procedural or logistical concerns about inclusion (which have remained a challenge over the last four decades), rather than in the context of social justice and attitudes toward social integration (which have improved dramatically in the last four decades). Additionally, no differences in attitudes were identified among other demographic variables such as geographic region, amount of teaching experience, or special/general education certification, except as stated above.

One potential limitation in interpreting these findings lies in the lack of definition of “inclusion” or “mainstreaming” across studies in the synthesis. Because inclusion often means different things to different people, encompassing a variety of assumptions,



goals, and techniques, it is not clear how the respondents in the 28 studies understood “mainstreaming” or “inclusion.” Differences in item wording (e.g., “inclusion” versus “mainstreaming”), as well as variations in the implementation of inclusion programs across schools and regions, may have had an impact on the responses of teachers in these studies. For example, teachers who believed “mainstreaming” or “inclusion” to refer to the part-time, needs-based integration of students with disabilities into general education settings might have been more supportive than teachers who equated those same terms with “full inclusion” movements aiming primarily for social integration of students with disabilities. Because no single term nor definition universally captures this practice, this type of ambiguity is likely to be an impediment to most studies of educators’ attitudes and beliefs regarding inclusion.

Additional research has been conducted on teachers’ attitudes toward the potential reintegration of special education students into general education settings. Data from the mid-1980s, when reintegration and inclusion debates first began to take place on a national level, suggested that both special education and general education teachers were not supportive of the idea of reintegration and generally believed that general education settings were not best the instructional environments for students with disabilities receiving pull-out services (Gans, 1985, 1987; Garvar-Pinhas & Schmelkin, 1989; Knoff, 1985; Stephens & Braun, 1980). For example, Knoff (1985) surveyed 200 general education and 200 special education teachers in two states using a list of 30 statements about special education students’ placements. When asked if general education teachers would be willing to accept special education students into their classes if special education were phased out, a majority of both general education and special education participants (79%) responded negatively. Similarly, Stephens and Braun (1980) surveyed 795 general educators with a 20-item reintegration willingness scale. Almost 40% of the teachers indicated a strong preference for not reintegrating students with disabilities into their classroom.

Some research has examined the variables influencing teacher attitudes toward reintegration. Larivee and Cook (1979) indicated that teachers’ willingness to reintegrate students with disabilities was most strongly associated with their self-perceived degree of success in dealing with special education students ( $r = .36$ ). Shinn et al. (1993) also found that teachers’ views of students’ classroom behavior and problem severity were related to teachers’ willingness to reintegrate; students that general education teachers

rated as having more problem behaviors were considered less appropriate candidates for reintegration. Although several studies have suggested that teachers' attitudes toward reintegration are fairly stable over time, several studies have suggested that attitudes are affected by data. When teachers are provided with curriculum-based measurement (CBM) data suggesting that the reintegration candidate is performing at levels consistent with their general education peers, they are more willing to consider the possibility of reintegration (Rodden-Nord, Shinn, & Good, 1992; Shinn, Baker, Habedank, & Good, 1993).

Shinn, Powell-Smith, Good, and Baker (1997) used CBM reading data for potential reintegration candidates (students receiving pull-out special education instruction in reading) and low-reading general education peers to lead teachers through a systematic reintegration decision-making process (Shinn, Habedank, Rodden-Nord, & Knutson, 1993). A team generally consisting of general education teachers, special education teachers, and parents decided to reintegrate 23 of 30 nominated students (77%) for a 12-week trial reintegration period. The authors monitored students' progress with CBM measures in reading across four time periods: Pre-reintegration, Week 4, Week 8, and Final Week. Data on teachers (general and special education) and parents ratings of the success of and satisfaction with the reintegration effort were also collected on this same schedule, to examine how attitudes toward reintegration changed over time and in light of student data.

Over the 12-week period, CBM reading data suggested that reintegrated students "held their own" as a group, making nearly identical rates of progress as their low-reading peers but at a slightly lower level of performance. Teacher and parent ratings indicated that they were neutral to slightly positive in their confidence that the reading program would meet the needs of the reintegrated students and that they could make progress consistent with their low-performing peers; these beliefs were consistent across raters and did not change significantly over the reintegration period. Interestingly, however, general education teachers were somewhat more likely than special education teachers or parents to recommend a general education placement for the reintegrated students before, during, and after the reintegration period. General education teachers consistently recommended a general education placement for all students over the 12-week trial (approximately half with special education consultation, half in general education alone). Special education teachers and parents were

somewhat more reluctant about general education, making similar general education recommendations for approximately 90% of the reintegrated students, but consistently recommending special education placement for the remaining 10% across all 4 weeks of assessment. Shinn et al. (1997) concluded that two key factors contributed to the success of the reintegration trial and teachers' acceptance of the program: (a) a systematic, team-based identification process used to nominate and certify reintegration candidates; and (b) continuous progress monitoring of reading (shared with teachers at four-week intervals). Although this line of research sheds light on factors associated with teachers' reintegration attitudes both prior to and during reintegration, it is relatively limited in scope. Only a few such studies have been conducted and have primarily focused on the reintegration of students with learning disabilities, as opposed to students with more pervasive difficulties such as mental retardation or developmental delay, Autism Spectrum Disorders, language impairments, or emotional/behavioral disorders.

*Qualitative Research on Attitudes Toward Inclusion*

Since Scruggs and Mastropieri's synthesis in 1996, additional studies have been published that further elucidate educators' views on inclusion. Qualitative studies, in particular, have become a common way of capturing the complexity of educators' thoughts and feelings regarding inclusion. Pugach (2005) refers to qualitative research in special education as "disciplined stories," which represent months and years of systematic planning and countless hours of fieldwork to gain trust and produce credible findings. One clear advantage of qualitative research in studying attitudes and beliefs toward inclusion is its strong foundation in the contextual specifics of a situation. As previously indicated, inclusion remains a highly idiosyncratic endeavor shaped by local interpretations of LRE, external sources of influence (e.g., university research projects, state policy, etc.), availability of resources, and assumptions about which students are best served in mainstream environments. Understanding educators' perspectives often requires more than a simple rating scale, but rather an examination of their stories and experiences that have shaped their beliefs.

One example of this kind of research is a study by Vaughn, Schumm, Jallad, Slusher, & Saumell (1996), in which focus groups with Title I, gifted, special, and general education teachers were conducted to examine the perceptions of inclusion among teachers *not* currently involved in it. They found their participants had strong, negative feelings about inclusion; they also believed that decision-makers were out of touch with

the realities of classrooms engaged in inclusion. Teachers were extremely concerned that inclusion might be imposed upon them without their consent. One middle school teacher stated, "If you try to cram it down their throat, most of our faculty would just say, 'No way, not on your life. I would rather pump gas'" (p. 100). Most participants felt that decisions to include students with disabilities in general education environments came from "people who sit on high chairs above the rest of us," who do not work in classrooms and are unaware of both the procedures and consequences of implementing their recommendations (p. 101). Many of their fears regarding inclusion echoed the themes reported by Scruggs and Mastropieri (1996), including impact on academic achievement for both general and special education students, excessive workload, and changes in roles. One unique concern was that of safety of students, often expressed in terms of worst-case scenarios such as, "It's going to take some horrendous situation, like a kid having a seizure and a teacher not knowing what to do and a child, God forbid, dying," or "Last year I had a child who was legally blind... every time we came to a step, somebody had to be there to make sure she didn't fall. And those are the kinds of things you worry about..." (p. 100). This fear echoed considerations deemed relevant by various circuit court cases, asserting that consideration of time, safety, and financial costs are appropriate when determining LRE (Thomas & Rapport, 1998).

Interestingly, participants in the Vaughn et al. study indicated that a concrete and operationalized definition of inclusion was necessary; they reported feeling apprehensive about potentially becoming involved in inclusion when they did not understand fully what it was. One teacher stated, "I think there's an awful lot of reaction to a word where nobody knows what the word means. No one has a definition. Maybe we're doing it already" (p. 99). Relatedly, elementary-level teachers in the study believed that inclusion was not a different endeavor than mainstreaming, or that inclusion was "just mainstreaming for a longer period of time" (p. 99).

Vaughn et al. emphasized that these perceptions are limited to a group of teachers presently *uninvolved* in inclusion, with many participants having no direct experiences with inclusion at all. Considerable evidence suggests that teachers engaged in inclusive practices often have positive experiences, although some negative experiences have been reported (Kavale & Forness, 2000). For example, Janney, Snell, Beers, and Raynes (1995) interviewed 53 teachers in five Virginia districts involved in a state-wide, grant-funded initiative to increase the integration of students with moderate

to severe disabilities in general education settings. Participants represented all levels of education: elementary, middle, and high, as well as general and special education. All interviewees but one reported that inclusion efforts had been successful in their schools, and the overall theme summarizing teachers' evaluation of inclusion was "benefits outweigh costs." The dissenting teacher, a secondary-level special educator, did not disagree with the inclusion initiative. Instead, this teacher believed that the process was too slow and that *not enough* students had been included. Teachers tended to weigh the benefits of inclusion against the costs in terms of their own time and resources and generally believed that it was worth the effort. Acknowledging the fears of teachers facing the prospect of inclusion for the first time (as noted in Vaughn et al.'s work), one teacher stated, "I'd tell them to do it. I think it's really beneficial and it's not as difficult as you might first anticipate it to be. I think you see the benefits right away in children with disabilities and children without disabilities" (p. 431). Teachers also echoed the sentiment that resistant teachers should not have inclusion forced upon them; rather, administrators should solicit volunteers who might be more "open-minded," "flexible," and "willing to take risks" (p. 433). In agreement with the literature on teacher attitudes toward inclusion, participants believed that positive experiences and examples of inclusion were the best mechanisms for overcoming resistance and creating a new generation of teachers willing to include students with disabilities.

In another study, Gallagher (1997) focused on the perspectives of a cohort of former classroom-based special educators as they embarked on their first year as community-based consulting teachers facilitating the inclusion of children with disabilities ages 3 to 5. After just starting their new positions in August, participants initially described feelings of trepidation, particularly with regard to the responsibility for a child's IEP on a part-time basis and the demands of interacting with their former classroom-based colleagues in their new role as a consultant. Yet Gallagher noted that, "as early as October, all the teachers had many success stories to share" (p. 376) and at the May focus group, near the conclusion of their first year, teachers were delighted by how well the children had fared. One teacher observed,

I would say that at least 90%, maybe 95%, of the children labeled "significantly developmentally delayed" that I have served this year are now functioning within 10 months of their [chronological age], overall. It is just unbelievable. I'm so proud of these kids, I don't know what to do. When it's the right place, it really

works and it works beautifully (p. 377).

Positive attitudes toward the integration of students with disabilities in general education settings are consistently identified in the literature as an essential ingredient for effective inclusion as they are likely to impact how it is ultimately implemented in a given school or classroom setting (Pivik, McComas, & LaFlamme, 2002). Van Reusen, Shoho, and Barker (2001) hypothesized that “the attitudes and beliefs that teachers, administrators, and other school personnel hold towards inclusion and the learning ability of students with disabilities may influence school learning environments and the availability of equitable educational opportunities for all students” (p. 8). Some indirect evidence of the relationship between educator attitudes and implementation of inclusion has been described in the literature. In some cases, the attitudes and beliefs of teachers can shape the school’s overall climate and ability to engage in meaningful reform. In an investigation of an innovative bilingual inclusion program in California, Hunt, Hirose-Hatae, Doering, Karasoff, and Goetz (2000) indicated that teachers were consistently identified by multiple stakeholder groups (e.g., parents, administrators, support personnel) as the driving force behind the unification of general and special education systems. The study revealed that the foundation of the grass roots restructuring effort was a commitment to sustaining a “school community” with shared responsibility for the education of all students. Outcomes of inclusion at the target school, including collaboration within and across classrooms, modifications to instructional grouping, academic gains for students with disabilities and low-achieving general education students, and improvements in the social interactions between students with and without disabilities were all linked back to the pervasive sense of community. Hunt et al. noted that the narrative of the study’s participants reflected a strong sense of group identity, which likely contributed to the school’s successful restructuring of two complex service delivery systems (i.e., bilingual education and special education).

Conversely, negative attitudes of teachers, administrators, or parents can decrease the likelihood that inclusion will be implemented in a given school. In a study of attitudes toward inclusion among educators at multiple school sites, negative attitudes were the most commonly described barrier to including students with disabilities in general education settings (Downing, Eichinger, & Williams, 1997). One special education teacher in a noninclusive school commented, “I think a lot of times people have perceptions that it’s going to be a real problem and it ends up not being that. Lots

of times fear is greater than the reality” (Downing et al., 1997, pp. 137). In schools where inclusion has already been adopted and attempted, negative attitudes can have a detrimental impact on implementing change and creating an atmosphere conducive to inclusion. As previously described, Mamlin’s (1999) ethnographic study of a failed inclusion attempt provides a compelling example of this phenomenon. A key barrier to implementing inclusion in this study was a pervasive culture of segregation within the school. The school’s restructuring plan included individual schedules for students with special needs to create more opportunities for inclusion; however, she reported that this plan not only resulted in very little inclusion but also led to the view that students on individual schedules were qualitatively different from other children. Resulting from this belief, general and special education systems within the school were treated as distinct, and the notions of shared responsibility and collaboration were foreign to the staff. Mamlin concluded, “segregation was such a significant tradition at [the school] and in the school district that it was difficult for participants to picture another way of operating” (p. 45).

#### *Administrators’ Views on Inclusion*

Research on inclusion repeatedly emphasizes the vital role of administrators in guiding the process. Proactive, flexible, visionary building principals can validate the experiences of school personnel, acknowledge and reward achievements, build consensus among stakeholder groups, and facilitate large-scale restructuring efforts (Hunt et al., 2000). Most importantly, they can have an important impact on the climate and culture of a school with regard to inclusion. Salisbury and McGregor (2002) studied the leadership styles and beliefs of principals at five schools with innovative inclusion programs and found that *commitment* strategies, rather than *control* strategies, were critical for leaders working to reform schools. In Mamlin’s ethnographic examination of a failed inclusion initiative (1999), the building administrator’s controlling, authoritarian leadership style was cited as a major barrier to the implementation of inclusion. She reported that the school did not lack a strong leader, as often lamented in most failed inclusion efforts, but rather lacked the kind of flexibility and guidance that allowed inclusion to occur. The principal “used techniques to control her staff that kept them suspicious of her and of each other, making it difficult for staff to make their own decisions” (p. 46). By contrast, Hunt et al. (2000) described a principal at a successful inclusive school using the words of a teacher at that site: “I think it’s been more than just

leadership, and it's been more than just allowing teachers to have a vision and the consensus building and all that – it's really been [the principal] believing that all things can happen” (pg. 311).

Given their importance to inclusion and school reform efforts, it is critical to incorporate administrators' views in studies examining attitudes and beliefs regarding inclusion. Some research has suggested that administrators are more optimistic about inclusion than teachers, possibly because they are removed from the daily classroom demands of inclusion and have less direct experience with the negative outcomes of inclusion (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Davis & Maheady, 1991). Barnett and Monda-Amaya (1998) surveyed 65 principals of elementary, middle, and secondary schools to understand their (a) definitions of inclusion and populations of students to whom they apply those definitions, (b) attitudes toward inclusive education, and (c) perceptions regarding use and effectiveness of instructional practices essential to successful inclusion programs. To obtain a definition of inclusion in a survey format, principals were asked to select five descriptive items from a list of 22 that were most essential to their definition of inclusion. Across all grade levels, the three most often chosen items were “supportive environment” (56%), “shared responsibility” (48%), and “cooperative” (41%), though no clear, consistent definition emerged from the data. Principals indicated that their definition of inclusion predominantly applies to students with learning disabilities (97%) and students at-risk for school failure (83%); students with moderate to severe/profound mental retardation were least likely to be linked with inclusion (20-36%). The authors noted that elementary and high school principals were more likely to indicate that inclusion could be applied to students with moderate to severe mental retardation than their colleagues at the middle school level. However, few principals were able to completely agree (rating of 3 on a 3-point Likert scale) with the item, “I feel that the school community is supportive of the implementation of inclusion in our school,” and, in fact, four principals indicated total disagreement with the statement, “I feel that inclusion can work in my school.” The authors also cited a low level of agreement (M=1.29 on a 3-point Likert scale) with the statement “All children should be educated in the regular classroom” as further evidence of the lack of consensus on inclusion, as well as some degree of apprehension about providing appropriate levels of support in the educational mainstream for all students with disabilities. Finally, with regard to instructional practices essential to inclusion, heterogeneous and/or multi-age



groupings, collaboration, and cooperative learning were ranked among the most commonly used and the most effective. In-service training, which is often advocated in the inclusion literature as a mechanism for promoting change among educators, ranked among the lowest for both utilization and effectiveness ratings.

In summary, attitude research has a well-established place in the inclusion literature, providing important insight into the belief systems and logistical concerns that often affect its implementation. It should be noted, however, that most of the studies mentioned above tend to focus almost exclusively on the *affective* component of attitudes toward inclusion. Some research has attempted to examine (both directly and indirectly) how educators' attitudes impact their actions in implementing school reform and inclusive education (e.g., Downing et al., 1997; Hunt et al., 2000). Yet there appears to be a major gap in the study of attitudes toward inclusion with regard to the impact of educators' *cognitions* relative to inclusion (i.e., how they define it, what goals they believe can be achieved by inclusion) on the affective and behavioral components of inclusion. One notable exception is the line of reintegration research suggesting the positive influence of curriculum-based reading data on teachers' willingness to reintegrate special education students into general education settings, when data suggest that the reintegration candidates performance is within the range of his/her general education peers (e.g., Rodden-Nord et al., 1993, Shinn et al., 1994). Unfortunately, these types of studies have been mostly conducted with students with learning disabilities and do not address the impact of student data on decision-making for more significant types of disability. In a survey of 47 "experts" in special education, Jackson, Ryndak, and Billingsley (2000) reported that over half of the respondents described a need for "procedures that are designed to help people reflect on and clarify their values" with regard to inclusion and stressed the need for "open discussion of values at the class, school, and community levels, and the importance of encouraging teachers to discuss 'their views of inclusion,' such as 'Why include?' 'Why not include?' and 'What's hard about inclusion?'" (pp. 133). Given the variability in definitions of inclusion, it seems critical to understand how educators define inclusion before attempting to describe their feelings and actions toward it.

#### *Current Status of Inclusion*

Despite the variability in people's views about inclusion, including how they define it and their beliefs about it, the practice of educating students with disabilities in

the general education setting part- or full-time appears to be occurring with greater frequency. In its 27<sup>th</sup> annual report to Congress on IDEA, the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) reported that across all disabilities categories, 52% of students with disabilities spend at least 80% of their day in settings with nondisabled peers (USDE, 2004, most recent data available). Between 1990-1991 and 1999-2000, the number of students receiving special education services rose 29.8%; during the same period, the number of students with disabilities served in the general education setting for more than 80% of the day rose by 16.8%.

#### *Local Advocacy and National Reform Influences*

OSEP data suggest that in the face of a growing population of students requiring special educating services, students with disabilities are more likely to be placed in predominantly general education settings than they were just one decade ago. One potential reason for this increase is the rise of parent involvement and advocacy for their children with special needs. Parent advocacy was a key factor in the passage of P.L. 94-142 (EHA, 1975), and subsequent reauthorizations of IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004) have underscored the importance of parent involvement in the IEP process and afforded myriad due process rights (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997). Going beyond mere “involvement”, however, many parents see themselves as the navigators of their children’s educational journey, shouldering an enormous amount of responsibility for finding, obtaining, and maintaining comprehensive services and an appropriate education for their child (Choutka, 1999; Grove & Fisher, 1999). Stoner, Bock, Thompson, Angell, Heyl, and Crowley (2005) interviewed parents of children with special needs regarding their interaction histories with medical, early intervention, and educational professionals as they sought services for their children with autism spectrum disorders. These parents reported quickly developing a sense of mistrust after repeated difficulties convincing physicians to listen to their concerns about their child’s development; they learned from these early interactions that it was their responsibility to force experts to focus on their child. Stoner et al. suggested that parents’ assertive and sometimes aggressive advocacy on behalf of their child is reinforced each time it is rewarded with professional attention, thereby becoming more likely to occur again in the future.

This contention is supported by an emerging body of evidence suggesting parents’ central role in obtaining comprehensive educational services for their children with disabilities. Erwin and Soodak (1995) interviewed nine parents who actively sought

inclusive educational placements for their children with moderate to severe disabilities. Parents indicated that they defined inclusion as a sense of belonging and being part of the group, of not being separate. Interestingly, they also stated that parents should have the right to choose whether they want their child to be included or not; access to a variety of educational options and the opportunity for a meaningful role in decision-making seemed more important to participants, regardless of what they ultimately chose for their children. Accordingly, 8 of 9 parents in Erwin and Soodak's study were the ones who first mentioned the idea of including their child to the IEP team; over time, more than half of the parents had to pursue due process and legal channels when their efforts to negotiate failed. In a similar study by Grove and Fisher (1999), parents described exhaustive efforts to pursue inclusion for their children to help advance socialization, communication, and independent functioning goals.

Although parents are often perceived to be the loudest voice suggesting inclusion, recent school reform developments on the national level are also pushing inclusion to the forefront of educators' awareness. First, in early 2002, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, which established the federal framework for the provision of public education throughout the country was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2002. NCLB built upon the foundation of ESEA by adding four philosophic pillars of its own to ensure that every child, particularly the neediest, receives a quality education: (a) accountability for results in education; (b) flexibility in the way states and communities are allowed to use educational funding; (c) research-proven instructional methods and materials in the classroom; and (d) influence, information, and choice for parents (Schrag, 2003). Among the high expectations set for traditionally under-achieving groups, including students with disabilities, was the goal that all students will be reading on grade level by 2014. Schrag (2003) notes that if students are to participate in high-stakes assessments with their typically-developing peers and are expected to meet high levels of proficiency, they will need to have access to the general education curriculum: "Clearly, students with disabilities cannot demonstrate knowledge about content that they have not been taught" (p.10). Nealis (2003) acknowledged the concerns that many educators share regarding the challenge of getting all students with disabilities to levels of academic proficiency but noted that the failure of special education students to reach proficiency or make adequate yearly progress at an "otherwise fine school" underscores the importance of assessing *all* children, as it would

documents the result of having excluded them from the general education curriculum for so long.

Another portion of the NCLB accountability measures calls for “highly qualified teachers,” requiring educators to obtain certification in all content areas (reading, math, etc.) they teach. This poses a particular challenge for special educators, who often have a generic special education certification but do not have specific content area credentials. One potential response to this problem listed on the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) website is to pair special education teachers not meeting the certification requirements with a “highly qualified” general education teacher in a variety of instructional arrangements, including co-teaching, team teaching, cooperative teaching, collaboration, and consultation (CEC, 2005). Although special educators are encouraged by most professional organizations and school districts to obtain additional certification, the “highly qualified teacher” requirement creates an added impetus for pooling instructional resources for students with disabilities in the educational mainstream.

At approximately the same time as NCLB’s development and passage in Congress, the President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE) was created by President George W. Bush to provide recommendations for improving the educational performance of children with disabilities. The PCESE report was issued in July 2002 and, though not law, represents the data, expertise, and voices of thousands of researchers, scholars, parents of and individuals with disabilities. In general, the report echoes the sentiments of NCLB, adding emphasis to issues pertinent to special education students. One of the most notable recommendations was the call for general and special education to share responsibility for students with disabilities and to “consider children with disabilities as general education children first” (PCESE, 2001, p. 9). Such bold statements have implications for inclusion on many fronts, including assessment and intervention, funding, and instruction. Relatedly, the report endorses the high expectations for students with disabilities set forth by NCLB (e.g., participation in high-stakes assessments, graduation rates, post-graduation outcomes, etc.). Finally, the PCESE report reiterates the importance of empowering parents in the IEP process with information on their child’s performance and opportunities for school choice.

#### *Outcome Research*

With increasing rates of inclusion comes an increasing need to thoroughly

evaluate inclusive education programs to determine best instructional practices, essential skills for educators, and outcomes (both desired and collateral) for students with and without disabilities. The inclusion literature is replete with outcome studies examining the effects of inclusion from a variety of philosophical and empirical orientations. Hunt and Goetz (1997) synthesized 19 investigations of inclusive education representing a broad array of research questions, methodologies, and participants. Several categories of inclusion outcome research were discussed, including: (a) parents' perceptions of outcomes, (b) issues and practices in inclusive schools and classrooms, (c) educational outcomes for students in inclusive classrooms, and (d) social relationships and friendships in inclusive settings. The findings of Hunt and Goetz (1997) relative to these areas are summarized below, with more recent findings noted where relevant.

*Parents' perceptions of outcomes.* A considerable body of literature has examined parents' roles in the special education process, focusing in particular on their satisfaction with services. In general, parents appear to be mostly satisfied with the special education services their children receive, whether in self-contained, resource, or inclusive settings (e.g., DiPietro, Luiselli, Campbell, Cannon, Ellis, & Taras, 2002; Green & Shinn, 1994; Leyser, 1988; Lynch & Stein, 1982; Male, 1998). However, studies examining parent satisfaction with their child's special education services have placed little emphasis on the reasons for parents' positive attitudes and provide little insight into the information parents use when evaluating services. A qualitative study by Green and Shinn (1994) suggested that parental satisfaction of services might not be related to academic outcomes. For example, the majority of parents suggested that they especially valued the extra help or individual attention their child received or warm and caring teachers; few mentioned specific factors such as curriculum or skills gained as a results of the services. With regard to changes they saw in their children, nearly all parents (90%) cited developments such as increased self-esteem or improvement in attitude, while less than one-third of participants mentioned improvement in skills. Most parents in the Green and Shinn study perceived that their children were making progress as a result of their special education placement but typically made this determination by observing skills at home or an improved attitude; few relied on objective data such as IEPs or test scores to make an evaluation of progress. Despite the limited reliance on data for evaluating their child's progress, many parents reported they would be

interested in getting more specific feedback about their child's progress. Interestingly, parents' assessment of the appropriateness of their child's placement (e.g., resource services versus reintegration into general education) was most influenced by the views of the special educator. Parents were more willing to see their child reintegrated into general education if the *special education* teacher was in support of such a move; parents noted that this teacher's daily contact and familiarity with their child's needs made them a valuable source of information and support. Similarly, Ball (1997) found that parents relied on special education teachers to help them make decisions about reintegration.

As key contributors to the decision-making and planning stages of inclusion, parents' perceptions of the degree to which their child's inclusive placement is leading to meaningful educational and social outcomes carries significant weight in an overall evaluation of the effectiveness of the inclusion model (Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Staub, Schwartz, Galluci & Peck, 1994; York-Barr, Schultz, Doyle, Kronberg, & Crossett, 1996). Similarly to Green and Shinn (1994), Hunt and Goetz (1997) suggest that parents' perceived outcomes of inclusion tend to focus mostly on social, emotional, and behavioral functioning or quality of life issues, rather than on specific academic skill improvements. Across several studies reviewed, Hunt and Goetz (1997) reported that many parents perceived dramatic growth in the speech, language, and communication skills of their children following placement in inclusive settings, with some parents also finding that their children had more friends and interactions with peers, more appropriate social behaviors, and were more accepted by others overall. With regard to students without disabilities in inclusion classrooms, the majority of parents perceived that (a) their child felt comfortable interacting with his or her classmate with a disability, (b) the opportunity to interact with the classmate with a disability had a positive impact on their child's social/emotional growth, (c) their child felt positively about having a classmate with significant disabilities, (d) the inclusion of a classmate with disabilities did not interfere with their child's receiving a good education, and (e) having a classmate with significant disabilities had been a positive experience for their child. Similar results have been found in more recent studies. For example, Hunt et al. (2000) found that, according to parents and teachers, being a member of an inclusive classroom promoted feelings of competency and self-esteem for both the students with and without disabilities.

*Issues and practices in inclusive schools and classrooms.* Within the inclusion outcomes literature, there is a growing body of best practice recommendations for successful inclusion. Among the most commonly mentioned practices essential to achieving quality inclusive education is collaborative teaming (Hunt & Goetz, 1997; Hunt et al., 2000; Hunt et al., 2001; Jackson, Ryndak, & Billingsley, 2000; Kruse & Little, 2000). Besides the obvious time-saving benefits of collaboration among educators, collaborative team work in inclusion endeavors allows for ongoing opportunities to “share knowledge and skills to generate new and novel methods for individualizing learning” (Villa & Thousand, 2000, p. 255). Curricular adaptations and modification are also recognized as a vital component in effective inclusion efforts (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Because inclusion opens the doors of general education to students with a wide variety of strengths and educational needs, skills in differentiating instruction, individualized instruction, and alternative assessment are necessary for ensuring an appropriate education plan for each individual student.

Similarly, the inclusion of students with a wide range of needs creates the possibility for increased behavioral challenges in the classroom. Both general and special education teachers have consistently reported that student behavior is the number one difficulty and biggest disruption in their classrooms (e.g., Coates, 1989; Merrett & Wheldall, 1993). Teachers’ abilities to effectively manage challenging behavior are likely to affect both their willingness to teach students with disabilities, as well as the overall effectiveness of any inclusion program. Furthermore, many schools take an “eliminative” approach to behavior, such that students with disabilities are not placed in general education classrooms until their behavior is considered “under control” (Meyer & Evans, 1989). Positive behavior support (PBS), however, offers an “educative” alternative that emphasizes teaching appropriate, functionally equivalent behaviors that replace undesired ones. As such, PBS has been repeatedly cited as an essential ingredient of any inclusion or school reform initiative (Kennedy, Long, Jolivette, Cox, Tang, & Thompson, 2001; Sugai & Horner, 1994; Weigle, 1997).

*Educational outcomes for students in inclusive classrooms.* Although numerous “outcomes” studies on inclusion exist, surprisingly few of them are experimental or quasi-experimental studies that investigate the effect of membership in inclusive classrooms on the educational achievement of students in the class. The dearth of experimental research on learning outcomes may be due to the fact that arguments for

inclusion tend to be based in civil rights, legal, and ethical considerations rather than in theories of learning or research on effective teaching (Hunt & Goetz, 1997). Furthermore, much of the research on the outcomes of inclusion has focused on students with high-incidence disabilities such as learning disabilities (LD) or speech/language impairment (S/LI). However, there appears to be a tentative consensus in the literature that students with severe disabilities can achieve positive academic and learning outcomes in inclusive settings.

Reports from schools districts as part of a national study on inclusion suggested that placement in inclusion programs led to academic gains for students with disabilities, including improved performance on standardized tests, mastery of IEP goals, grades, on-task behavior, and motivation to learn (National Center for Education Restructuring and Inclusion, 1995). In fact, some research has suggested that the academic growth of students with disabilities in general education classrooms parallels the gains of students without disabilities over the same period (Banjeri & Dailey, 1995; Fuchs, Fuchs, & Fernstrom, 1993; Shinn, Powell-Smith, Good, & Baker, 1997). However, the present body of literature precludes making unequivocal statements about the effectiveness of inclusion. Manset and Semmel (1997), in reviewing 11 academic outcome studies suggested there is some evidence of benefits of inclusion for some students with mild disabilities, but there is insufficient data to suggest that “wholesale inclusive programming... is superior to more traditional special education service delivery models” (p. 178). Similarly, in a review of three outcome studies, Zigmond et al. (1995) reported that approximately half of students with disabilities in inclusive education programs failed to show evidence of increased academic performance.

*Social relationships and friendships in inclusive settings.* In addition to examining the academic impact of placement in general education, studies also have been conducted to examine the noneducational, social, and self-concept outcomes for students with disabilities. Much of the literature in this domain focuses on the impact of including students with severe or low-incidence disabilities, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, significant mental retardation, or severe physical handicaps, into general education settings. Some evidence exists to suggest that inclusive educational programs, to a greater extent than self-contained classrooms, structure educational environments to promote communicative and social interactions between the students with disabilities and their classmates in integrated settings. Results of studies in this



area indicate that students with even the most severe disabilities can experience acceptance, interactions, and friendships in inclusive settings (Hunt & Goetz, 1997).

Hunt, Farron-Davis, Beckstead, Curtis, and Goetz (1994) compared the social interaction opportunities for students with disabilities in inclusive settings and in self-contained classrooms by conducting direct observations and reviewing IEPs. The findings related to the social outcomes for the participating students included (a) a significant increase for students in inclusion programs on the number of IEP objectives that required participation with schoolmates without disabilities; (b) a significant increase for the included students with mild disabilities in the amount of time that they were engaged in activities with schoolmates who were not disabled; (c) a significant increase in the amount of time that students in inclusion programs spent in integrated school, general education classroom, and community settings; and (d) a significant increase for students with severe disabilities in the degree to which they initiated and engaged in interactions with others.

Similarly, Fryxell and Kennedy (1995) examined the social networks of two groups of students with severe disabilities, matched on all demographic and instructional variables (e.g., gender, age, disability, social/communication skill levels, staff interaction, access to systematic instruction, classroom management, and family/school partnership) except GE participation. One group was educated in general education settings, while the other was in a full-time self-contained class for students with disabilities. Fryxell and Kennedy found that the general education group had more social contacts, had richer friendship networks that included students without disabilities, and received more social support than the group educated in a self-contained setting.

While these studies reveal quantitative patterns in opportunities for and rates of interaction among students with and without disabilities, they do not provide information on the nature of relationships among students in inclusive settings. Several qualitative studies have been conducted to document the nature of friendships among students with disabilities and their typically-developing classmates. A collective case study by Staub, Schwartz, Gallucci, and Peck (1994) provided a rich portrait of four friendships, describing the uniqueness of each relationship as well as the similarities among them. Similarities across the four friendships included (a) relationships based on give-and-take where students were co-equals, rather than emphasizing the typical student helping the child with the disability; (b) supportive parents who endorsed both inclusive education in

general and their children's friendships with classmates with disabilities, as well as supportive teachers and other school personnel who recognized and supported the friendships; and (c) relationships where students *without* disabilities brought both strengths and needs to the relationships.

Unfortunately, not all investigations of social interactions in inclusive settings yield such positive findings. Evans, Salisbury, Palombaro, Berryman, and Hollowood (1992) used observations, sociometric analysis, and social competence ratings to study the peer interactions and social acceptance of eight students with disabilities and eight randomly selected students without disabilities. Students in the study ranged from 5 years, 3 months to 8 years, 1 month. Their results indicated that some of the students with disabilities were very popular and some were not. The level of acceptance of the children with disabilities was not related to their level of social competence, nor was it associated with the number of social interactions initiated or received. The authors suggested that "when students are so obviously disabled as the target children, they are somehow categorized differently by nonhandicapped children. That is to say, they are not judged in the same way as other peers: for example, they were identified as 'friends' even by children who reported not playing with them" (p. 211). Classroom observation data revealed that the students with disabilities were more often responding to approaches from classmates, rather than initiating those interactions; in addition, the interactions between the students tended to be tutorial in nature, although talk, play, and physical affection were also present. In addition, the number of interactions declined over the school year.

It should be noted, however, that the authors did not address the young age of the some of the children, nor the extent to which their level of social-emotional development might have played a role in their classroom behavior. Social behaviors at a 5-year-old level are notably different from those at an 8-year-old level. For example, children at the younger end of this age range tend to use the term "friend" in a more general way, synonymous with "playmate" or "peer" (Bukato & Daehler, 1995). Friendships at this young age are developed on the basis of shared activities or common membership (e.g., participation in the same class) and do not typically encompass the full range of psychological complexities characteristic of older children's friendships. By age 8, however, children are increasingly concerned with acceptance and avoiding rejection. These developmental differences may have had a considerable impact on the

results of the study by Evans et al., including their observation that children with disabilities were called “friends” even when there was limited evidence to suggest a relationship existed.

#### *Summary: Inclusive Education*

Despite the clear trend toward greater integration of students with disabilities, questions of who should be included, how inclusive education programs should be designed, and what aims inclusion seeks to attain are still subject to considerable debate. In a comprehensive review of the inclusion controversy over the last several decades, Kavale and Forness (2000) stated, “Inclusion appears to be not something that simply happens, but rather something that requires careful thought and preparation” (p. 287). Yet the thoughts, questions, and considerations when making placement decisions are not well described or understood in the literature. The ambiguity of understandings, goals, attitudes, and strategies related to including students with disabilities also makes the evaluation of inclusion a challenging enterprise.

#### Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

The inclusion debate and the recent growth of inclusive education have even greater significance for students with autism, which is the fastest-growing disability category in the country (Autism Society of America, 2003). Autism is a developmental disorder of neurobiological origin present from birth or early in development that affects essential human behaviors such as social interaction, the ability to communicate ideas effectively, and the establishment of relationships with others (National Research Council, 2001). Autism manifests uniquely and heterogeneously in a given individual as a collection of symptoms that are rarely the same from one individual to another. Two children with the same diagnosis, intellectual ability, and family resources are more likely to be recognized more for their differences than their similarities. As such, autism is currently characterized as a spectrum of related disorders that vary in severity of symptoms, age of onset, and associations with other disorders such as mental retardation, specific language delay, or epilepsy. The umbrella term “Autism Spectrum Disorders” (ASD) is often used to describe a range of diagnoses that share characteristics of autism, including Autistic Disorder (sometimes referred to as “classic autism”), Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger’s Disorder (Frith, 2003).

Although each disorder has its own unique features, ASD is generally characterized by repetitive and restricted behavior and/or interests, as well as impaired communication and social interaction skills relative to developmental level, often referred to as the “triad of impairment” (Lord & Risi, 2000; Frith, 2003). Presentation of these broad characteristics varies considerably among individuals diagnosed with ASD. Restricted patterns of behavior may include stereotyped movements, such as hand-flapping or snapping, or may manifest as interests that are abnormally intense or narrow, such as bus schedules or the mechanics and physics of vacuum cleaners. Communicative impairments may affect verbal and/or nonverbal communication, including delayed language development or a total lack of speech in lower functioning individuals with ASD (e.g., individuals with classic autistic disorder) to a precocious vocabulary with poorly developed nonverbal or pragmatic language skills, such as gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice in higher functioning individuals with ASD (e.g., individuals with higher-functioning autism or Asperger’s Disorder). Social difficulties are often the first indications of impairment, noticed by parents and caregivers early in development as a lack of interest in social games and either a passive tolerance or complete dislike of physical contact with others. While typically-developing children tend to be intensely interested in other children, children with autism tend to be intensely interested in the world of objects (Frith, 2003). Of course, as with all issues pertaining to ASD, exceptions exist; children and adolescents tend to be interested in making friendships with their same-age peers, but often lack the social skills or confidence to approach and interact with these children in an age-appropriate way.

It has been widely reported that as many as 75% children with ASD have mental retardation, indicated by slow development, poor learning, and intellectual quotient (IQ) standard scores below 70 on standardized tests of intelligence (Frith, 2003). Yet there has been a recent recognition that, although children and adults with more severe forms of ASD tend to obtain low scores on standardized tests of intelligence, individuals with ASD may be more intelligent than their scores suggest. A population-based estimate suggests that only 35% of children diagnosed with ASD, including Asperger’s Disorder, had IQ scores below 70 (Baird et al., 2000). However, Frith (2003) notes that the presence of generally average-range IQ scores among many individuals with ASD should not be considered evidence of normal brain development.

More recently, conceptualizations of ASD are expanding beyond a social-communicative disorder. A new frontier of research suggests that individuals with ASD are by no means unintelligent but rather take in and process information differently with regard to socialization and communication. Neuropsychological research indicates that individuals with ASD demonstrate functional differences that affect various cognitive information processing and executive functioning mechanisms such as planning, sustaining attention, comprehending, cognitive flexibility (i.e., shifting from one task to another), and inhibiting behaviors (Meyer & Minshew, 2002; Shultz, Romanski, & Tsatsanis, 2000). One hypothesis is that the brains of individuals with ASD have fewer neural connections in areas associated with socialization, communication, and restricted patterns of behavior, resulting in poor coherence or simultaneous processing ability (Frith, 2003). Although this line of research is new and still developing, neuropsychological theories about the basic deficits and manifestations of ASD provide new possibilities for better understanding of the thinking and behavior of individuals affected by these disorders and potential for creating new and innovative treatments and interventions to maximize outcomes.

#### *Autism on the Rise*

Recent epidemiological data points to a significant increase in the number of reported cases of autism within the last one to two decades. Traditionally, the prevalence rate of autism has been reported to be 4 to 5 per 10,000 children (Fombonne, 1999). However, more recent statistics suggest that the prevalence of ASD may be considerably higher than previously suspected. For example, the California Department of Developmental Services (1999) estimated that the number of diagnosed cases in the state grew 273% during the 1990s. Hyman, Rodier, and Davidson (2001) suggest prevalence rates for ASD to be about 60 per 10,000 children. Similarly, Scott, Baron-Cohen, Bolton, and Brayne (2002) report the prevalence of ASD to be 57 per 10,000 children. Most recently, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported in 2005 that prevalence rates for ASD may be as high as 1 in 166 children; this statistic is consistent with Hyman et al. (2001) and Scott et al.'s estimate, but brings the prevalence of ASD into harshly clear view. As a result, news media have taken notice of these data, describing an "autism epidemic" in which new cases are "exploding in number" (*Time*, May 6, 2002). What accounts for the increase in ASD? Theories abound, implicating various environmental factors and toxins that might explain the rapid

appearance of symptoms or sudden regression of development that is often seen in children with autism.

Intensive research in recent years has been unable to pinpoint a specific environmental cause for the increasing prevalence of ASD; most experts seem to have concluded that an autism epidemic of environmental origin is unlikely (Gernsbacher, Dawson, & Goldsmith, 2005). Common explanations include (a) more frequent diagnosis of ASD due to heightened awareness of the disorder in recent years; and (b) modification of diagnostic criteria from a singular diagnosis of autism to the broader spectrum of disorders, which now may include higher functioning individuals with diagnoses such as PDD-NOS or Asperger's Disorder (Fombonne, 1999). A study by Shah, Holmes, and Wing (1982) supports these conclusions; when an institution for individuals with mental retardation closed and its 893 residents were all assessed to facilitate new placements, 339 of these individuals (38% of all residents) met diagnostic criteria for a disorder on the autism spectrum. Frith (2003) points out that if a large portion of individuals who previously would have been diagnosed as having mental retardation are now often being diagnosed with ASD, then prevalence rates of mental retardation should show a simultaneous decrease. Evidence of this trend comes from California, where diagnoses of "autistic disorder" increased from 5.79 per 10,000 in 1987 to 14.89 per 10,000 in 1994 (Croen, Grether, Hoogstrate, & Selvin, 2002). The rates for diagnosis of mental retardation over the same period showed a decrease from 28.76 per 10,000 in 1987 to 19.52 per 10,000 in 1994. Most notably, although news media and research suggest an alarming increase in prevalence over the last decade, ASD remains a "low-incidence disability" and constitutes only 1.2% of the overall special education population age 6-21 (OSEP, 2004).

#### *The Challenge of Educating Students with ASD.*

As rates of ASD continue to rise, so does its impact on public schools. U.S. Department of Education statistics suggest that the number of children under IDEA's autism category has grown more than fivefold during the 1990s (USDE, 2004). Autism was added as a special education exceptionality in 1991 and is now the 6th most commonly classified disability in the United States, behind Specific Learning Disability (SLD), Speech/Language Impairment (S/LI), Mental Retardation (MR), Emotional Disturbance (ED), and Other Health Impairments (OHI), which includes Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (CDC, 2008). While it is clear that more children are

getting special education services under the “Autism” category than ever before, it is important to remember that this classification was only recently added, and the growth of children classified may be in part due to the addition of this as a special education category. Furthermore, not all children with a diagnosis of ASD receive special education services under the classification of Autism. In many states, children with medical diagnoses such as Asperger’s Syndrome or PDD-NOS can receive special education services under the OHI category. Additionally, many children with ASD identified through Early Intervention programs receive services under the broad category of Developmentally Delayed (DD) until their 6<sup>th</sup> birthday. Occasionally, children with ASD are made eligible exclusively under IDEA categories relevant to their specific educational needs, including S/LI, MR, or Multiple Disabilities. As a result, U.S. Department of Education data citing only students under the Autism category underestimate the actual prevalence of the ASDs. Nevertheless, when federal data are translated into trends at the state level, increases in services for children with autism just under the Autism category of IDEA have been found to range from 10% (e.g., Massachusetts) to 48,600% (e.g., Illinois). In round terms, for every two children with autism registered through IDEA in 1991-92, there were roughly twelve registered in 2000-2001.

Education is currently the primary form of treatment for ASD, providing opportunities for acquisition of knowledge and skills and fostering independence and social responsibility (NRC, 2001; Kavale & Forness, 1999). Due to the nature of ASD and its associated difficulties, educational goals for students with ASD often address such areas as communication and language, social interaction behaviors, and self-help skills. In addition to meeting academic proficiencies emphasized as a part of standards-based educational reform movements (e.g., No Child Left Behind), students with ASD often need to be taught certain behaviors that typically developing children often learn without instruction. For example, while students without disabilities generally learn how to interact with peers through practice and trial-and-error, students with ASD might require specialized instruction in social skills and initiating conversations in order to effectively engage their peers.

A wealth of research has been conducted in the last two decades examining the most effective strategies for instructing students with ASD (Heflin & Simpson, 1998). Due in part to the considerable variability of individuals with ASD, no single intervention or instructional approach has been demonstrated as universally successful for this

population (NRC, 2001). However, several core components of effective education for students with ASD have been distilled from a recent review of the autism literature (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003). These components include (a) individualized supports and services, (b) systematic instruction, (c) structured environments, (d) specialized curriculum content, (e) functional approach to problem behaviors, and (f) family involvement.

#### *Individualized Supports and Services*

Given the heterogeneity of students with ASD with regard to behaviors, ability, learning styles, interests, and preferences, schools should provide flexible placements and supports to meet each individual student's goals and match supports and services with each student's unique profile (Dunlap & Fox, 2002). Iovannone et al. (2002) suggested that, in particular, individualized services should be focused on a common goal of *high rates of engagement*. One of the best predictors of positive student outcomes is opportunity to respond and active engagement in activities and/or environments (Logan, Bakeman, & Keefe, 1997; Rogers, 1999). However, because students with ASD have difficulty attending to and interacting during activities, deliberate environmental supports will be necessary (Dunlap, 1999), including a physical environment arranged to encourage interactions (Hurth, Shaw, Izeman, Whaley, & Rogers, 1999) and materials and instructional activities which incorporate the child's individual interests into instructional activities (Baker, Koegel, & Koegel, 1999).

#### *Systematic Instruction*

In addition to individualized considerations of instructional and environmental supports, careful planning for instruction using a data-based decision-making approach to each individual child's instruction is recommended (Hurth et al., 1999; Westling & Fox, 2000). Such a process should include identifying educational goals, outlining instructional procedures, implementing instructional procedures, evaluating effectiveness of procedures, and changing instructional procedures as necessary, based on data. Furthermore, it is essential that teachers incorporate in their teaching plans opportunities to promote generalization and maintenance of learned skills, because this is an area of particular difficulty for students with ASD.

Typically, applied behavior analytic (ABA) principles have been advocated as most effective intervention techniques for students with ASD. Discrete trial training (DTT), with heavy reinforcement for desired behaviors, is most often associated with



systematic instruction of students with ASD, but data-based instruction is by no means limited to only DTT strategies. Instructional approaches such as precision teaching (Lindsley, 1991) also incorporate ABA components in techniques that target fluency in basic academic skills (known as tools skills) through the use of data-based decision-making, graphing of observable, measurable behaviors, and decision rules for evaluation and modification of instruction based on student progress.

### *Structured Environments*

An environment is considered structured when the curriculum (e.g., activities, schedule, environment) are clear to both the student(s) and the educational personnel (Iovannone et al., 2003). In particular, structured environments are arranged in such a way to elicit, facilitate, enhance, or support the acquisition of certain skills (Hurth et al., 1999) by allowing students to (a) predict current and future activities, (b) anticipate requirements in particular settings (i.e., discrimination), and (c) learn and generalize a variety of skills (Gresham, Beebe-Frankenberger, & MacMillan, 1999). The most common strategy for creating such an environment is to incorporate visual cues/supports that organize the instructional setting, provide a schedule of activities, carefully allow choice-making opportunities, provide behavioral support, define specific areas of the classroom and school settings (i.e., boundaries), and facilitate transitions, flexibility, and change.

### *Specialized Curriculum Content*

Core deficits of children with ASD are in the areas of communication and socialization. Accordingly, curriculum should incorporate systematic instruction in social engagement skills, using Pivotal Response Training (PRT; Koegel, Koegel, Harrower, & Carter, 1999), social skills instruction modeling, and/or role-play, Social Stories™ (Gray & Garrand, 1993) and peer-mediated strategies (Odom & Strain, 1986; Oke & Schreibman, 1990). In addition, communication skills may need to be taught directly using picture communication systems (e.g., Picture Exchange Communication System or PECS, Bondy & Frost, 1994), discrete trial training, or augmentative communication and assistive technology. For students who have adequately developed vocabulary and need instruction in fine-tuning language skills (e.g., pragmatics), social skills instruction also might help meet some of these goals. In addition, instruction should focus on functional life skills that are most likely to be useful in the student's life to control his/her environment (making choices, creating opportunities), which will increase the student's

independence and quality of life, as well as the student's competent performance (Dunlap & Robbins, 1991).

#### *Functional Approach to Problem Behaviors*

The National Research Council (NRC, 2001) has suggested that for educational interventions that address problem behaviors to be successful, positive and proactive behaviors should be considered. Instead of eliminating problem behaviors, interventions should focus on replacing problem behaviors with an appropriate alternative that results in the same or similar consequence. In particular, positive behavior support (PBS) strategies can be used to build individualized support plans that use data to determine functions and environmental determinants of the behavior. Typically, individual support plans take a "package" approach to intervention, using several concurrent interventions that prevent problem behavior from occurring (i.e., antecedent manipulations), as well as additional strategies to change the way others respond to the behavior (i.e., consequences). The goal is to expand the student's existing behavioral repertoire and adjust the learning environment so that more active engagement can occur. A secondary goal is to reduce problem behaviors by rendering them inefficient, ineffective, and irrelevant (Carr et al., 1999).

#### *Family Involvement*

Iovannone et al. (2003) asserted that families are essential partners in educational planning and delivery of services, and strategies have a better chance of effectiveness if they are implemented across all settings, including the home and community. Promoting family involvement in educational programs requires an ongoing dialogue between educators and parents such that environmental and behavioral (and to some extent, instructional) supports and strategies that are used in the school setting can be generalized in the home and vice-versa, such that the student with ASD receives supports that are consistent and complementary, rather than contradictory.

Although empirical evidence suggests that the above strategies are often effective for increasing social interaction skills, promoting language development, and decreasing challenging behavior in students with ASD, it is not clear to what extent these strategies are routinely considered and implemented in the typical Individualized Education Plan (IEP). A recent analysis of litigation and administrative hearings related to special education services for students with ASD suggested that a major source of procedural violations stems from the development of inadequate IEPs that result in the

denial of FAPE (Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003). IEPs may be deemed inadequate due to (a) failure to provide services such as those described above that are necessary for FAPE, (b) programming that does not result in student progress, and (c) lack of meaningful data collection to document student progress. Unfortunately, most teachers receive relatively little, if any, formal instruction in evidence-based practices for children with autism (NRC, 2001). Although evidence-based approaches to instruction and intervention for students with and without disabilities have proliferated in the educational literature, less emphasis has been placed on evaluating the extent to which these approaches have been integrated into everyday instructional practice (Kratochwill, 2005).

### *ASD and Inclusion*

Recently, placement in general education settings has become a dominant service delivery issue for individuals with autism (Simpson & Miles, 1998). A primary goal for educating students with ASD is normalizing their exposure and responses to environmental stimulation, such that it is as similar to their typically developing peers as possible. Koegel, Koegel, Frea, and Smith (1995) emphasized that children with ASD and other developmental delays can most efficiently learn age-appropriate behaviors in inclusive environments with same-aged typical peer models. General education placements are believed to offer numerous other benefits for students with ASD, including instructional continuity, expanded curricular options, and enhanced skill acquisition and generalization (Simpson & Myles, 1998). It should be noted, however, that research on the benefits of inclusion for students with ASD is presently inconclusive. Simpson and Sasso (1992) pointed out that much of the debate of inclusion of students with ASD has been rooted in “references to ‘the moral and just thing to do’ rather than scientifically established benefits” (p. 3).

Examination of OSEP (2004) trend data on inclusion relative to each disability category suggests that although students with high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disability or speech/language impairment are most likely to be included in general education settings, students with ASD are increasingly likely to be served in inclusive settings. Since 1991 (earliest data available), participation of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in the general education curriculum 80% or more of the day increased at a faster pace than that of all disabilities categories combined. While only 4.8% of students with ASD were included in 1990-1991, 29.1% were in

general education for 80% or more of their day in 2003-2004, representing a growth rate of 24.3%. Increases in inclusion of students with ASD from 1991-2004 outpaced that of other low-incidence disabilities such as mental retardation (8% growth) and emotional disturbance (17.4% growth) and were comparable to that of high-incidence disabilities such as specific learning disability (26.4% growth).

Despite the potential benefits of including students with ASD in general education, the issue continues to be highly controversial. There is a growing recognition that some students with ASD, particularly those with severe behavioral problems and overall significant disabilities, represent a major challenge for general education teachers (Simpson & Myles, 1998). While research has generally demonstrated that students with ASD can be physically maintained in general education settings, even the strongest inclusion advocates suggest that some students with ASD may benefit from time in pull-out programs where they can develop skills that are difficult to train in general education classrooms (e.g., self-help skills; Simpson, 1996).

Simpson and Myles (1998) suggested that both educators and parents are increasingly accepting of the notion that some students with ASD are better suited for inclusion than others, but no criteria or guidelines exist for making this determination. There seems to be consensus that, consistent with stipulations of recent court decisions, successful general education placement is contingent upon a combination of student needs and availability of appropriate supports (e.g., paraprofessionals, related-service personnel, trainings, planning time, etc.), but there is little in the literature that elucidates how these judgments and decisions are made. Clearly, decisions about including a student with ASD require consideration of multiple complex factors, including individual student needs and educational goals, available supports and best practice approaches to instruction, and the potential impact of introducing a student with significant behavioral and instructional support needs into a general education environment. Additionally, these decisions are filtered through educators' understandings of inclusive education and its goals, as well as their personal beliefs and attitudes about the appropriateness of including students with ASD.

#### Summary of the Literature

The purpose of this literature review was to synthesize the relevant research pertaining to the purpose of this study. In this regard, information was presented illustrating the various legal and educational interpretations of LRE, as well as the

complexity of educators' and administrators' attitudes toward inclusion. Given these disparities in approaches to integrating students with disabilities, "successful inclusion" might be designed and evaluated differently depending upon the philosophy and understanding of inclusion held by a given student's IEP team. Yet, in spite of these conflicts, recent federal data suggest that more and more students with disabilities are educated in inclusive settings. Outcomes research, while far from conclusive, indicates that students with disabilities demonstrate and social/emotional benefits from a placement with their general education peers. In general, parents appear to be mostly satisfied with the services their children with disabilities receive, although there is some evidence to suggest that parents do not base these evaluations on academic progress or objective data. Parents' perceived outcomes of inclusion tend to emphasize social, emotional, and behavioral functioning or quality of life issues over specific academic skill improvements.

Issues pertaining to inclusion are particularly relevant for students with ASD, as ASD is the fastest growing disability category and one in which inclusion is becoming an increasingly prevalent educational practice. Although inclusive placements offer many potential benefits to students with ASD, including normalized exposure and response to environmental stimulation, age-appropriate behavior modeling from general education peers, instructional continuity, expanded curricular options, and enhanced skill acquisition and generalization, there is a growing recognition that inclusion is not for everyone. Based on behavioral, academic, adaptive, sensory, and other environmental needs, some students with ASD may be better suited for inclusion than others, but there is little available in the literature to guide educators and parents in making this decision.

### Conceptual Frameworks

#### *Research Paradigm*

Qualitative research methodology will be used to address the articulated purpose and corresponding research questions for this study. Though the specific methodology to be used will be presented in greater depth in the next chapter, this section will review the basic assumptions and tenets of qualitative research methods to provide a foundation for the proposed study.

The theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research are not a set of strict propositions about the empirical world, as in quantitative research. Rather, qualitative research is more of a *paradigm* or loose collection of logically-related assumptions and

concepts that guide research: a way of looking at the world, the assumptions people make about what is important, and what makes the world work (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Maxwell (2005) emphasizes that “qualitative and quantitative methods are not simply different ways of doing the same thing... instead, they have different strengths and logics, and are often best used to address different kinds of questions and goals” (p. 22). In particular, qualitative research is well suited for:

1. Understanding the *meaning* of events, situations, and experiences from the perspective of participants
2. Understanding the particular *context* within which the participants operate and its influence on their actions and perceptions
3. Identifying *unanticipated phenomena and influences* and generating new theories grounded in such phenomena
4. Understanding the *process* by which events and actions take place and using actual events and processes that lead to specific outcomes to develop explanations of “local causality” (Miles & Huberman, 1984).

The last point, regarding the ability to develop causal explanations, has been a point of contention between quantitative and qualitative researchers. Maxwell (2005) contends that this disagreement is partially due to a failure to recognize that quantitative and qualitative researchers tend to ask different kinds of causal questions. Quantitative researchers tend to be interested in to what extent *variance* in *x* causes variance in *y*. Qualitative researchers, on the other hand, tend to ask how *x* plays a role in causing *y*, or what the *process* is that connects *x* and *y*. This emphasis on understanding processes and mechanisms, rather than demonstrating consistent relationships among variables, is a fundamental difference between the two types of research. Weiss (1994) illustrated this difference by using the following example:

[A quantitative] ... analysis of data collected in a large-scale sample survey might, for example, show that there is a correlation between the level of the wife’s education and the presence of a companionable marriage. In qualitative studies, we would look for a process through which the wife’s education or factors associated with her education express themselves in marital interaction. (p.179)

Of late, there has been a movement within the broad fields of education and mental health, as well as the profession of school psychology, which emphasizes

*evidence-based practice*. Typically, this evidence used to drive decision-making for students and programs is associated with quantitative data generated by experimental or well-controlled quasi-experimental research. Yet many researchers are coming to recognize the complimentary role that qualitative research can play in the process of developing, implementing, and evaluating evidence-based practice, particularly in the realm of school psychology (Meyers & Sylvester, 2006; Nastasi & Schensul, 2005). Meyers and Sylvester (2006) contend that qualitative research offers much promise in answering questions about the social validity or acceptability of evidence-based interventions, the extent to which they are transportable from the structured, controlled environments of research to the realities of daily practice, and the cultural variables that may impact their implementation.

### *Theoretical Frameworks*

Use of theoretical concepts to guide the design and data collection for case studies is among the most important strategies for successful case study research (Yin, 2003). When the study is couched in theory, lessons learned from the case study are more likely to advance the knowledge base on a given topic. To further understand the theoretical underpinnings of this study, it is necessary to present and discuss phenomenology (Berger & Luckmann, 1967) and attitude theory (Zanna & Rempel, 1988; Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), which will serve as dual frameworks for understanding and interpreting information obtained from this study.

Bogden and Biklen (1998) defined *phenomenology* as an approach to research that attempts to understand the meaning of lived experiences, events, and interactions for people in particular situations. Phenomenological research takes the position that the facts of a situation are but one way of understanding it; uncovering the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives related to a phenomenon provide another mechanism for understanding its occurrence. As such, phenomenology is descriptive, reflective, interpretive, and engaging; its aim is to derive the essence of an experience. Two major assumptions underlie phenomenological research: (a) perceptions present us with evidence of life, not as it is thought to be, but as it is *lived*; and (b) human experience is meaningful and is relevant in the sense that people are always engaged in the act of consciousness and making meaning (Morse & Richards, 2003).

This viewpoint presents a stark contrast to the *positivist* view that underlies most quantitative research traditions, emphasizing the study of facts and causes of behavior

through rigorously controlled procedures. Positivist approaches to research are a foundation of the scientist-practitioner model and feature prominently in the undergraduate and graduate training of most psychologists (Hayes, Barlow, & Nelson-Gray, 1999). However, alternatives to positivism such as phenomenology are gaining acceptance with psychological researchers for their ability to offer rich insight into social behaviors and specific social contexts (Medway & Skedsvold, 1992). The phenomenological researcher emphasizes the subjective aspects of behavior, viewing an individual's perceptions as his or her interpretation of lived experience. Despite this orientation, many phenomenological researchers (and qualitative researchers in general) are not so subjective as to deny that there is a true "reality" out there. Rather, they believe that perceptions are a valuable mechanism for understanding how people negotiate their lives within that reality.

To best capture a lived experience, and thereby understand its meaning, it is critical that the phenomenological researcher examine people within their context. Morse and Richards (2002) suggested, "People are tied to their worlds—embodied—and are understandable only in their contexts" (p. 45). For example, context can be used to help elucidate puzzling questions that individuals' perceptions of reality might raise. Without background information about the world in which an individual lives, one's perceptions of reality are decidedly difficult to interpret and it is unclear how one has constructed the meaning of their own experience.

Within a phenomenological perspective, the subjective reality that qualitative researchers wish to uncover is that of the cultural insider who has access to this background information or context. Anthropologists term this perspective *emic*, which contrasts with the *etic* or that of the cultural outsider who attempts to understand a phenomenon separate from or beyond himself (Meyers & Sylvester, 2006). The present study will use a phenomenological approach to describe how teams of educators *make meaning of inclusion*, particularly as they themselves are engaged in providing inclusive education at their schools, and their district is engaged in an action planning process for inclusion. In the school district where this study will occur, students with ASD represent the single fastest growing group of students on two fronts: (a) among disability categories, and (b) among students with disabilities who are educated in general education. For this reason, the present study focuses in particular on how educators make meaning of inclusion of students with ASD.



As previously discussed in this chapter, a great deal of research exists on teachers' attitudes toward inclusion, most of which has raised more questions than it has answered. As such, attitude theory will be used as an additional framework for understanding how teachers' past experiences, beliefs, and values combine to create their attitude toward inclusion. Attitude research encompasses a large portion of the psychological literature base, yet the term *attitude* has eluded universal definition and agreement. Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) describe an attitude as "an evaluation of someone or something along a continuum of like-to-dislike or favorable-to-unfavorable" (p. 31). However, recent conceptualizations suggest that any given attitude is a multi-faceted, complex phenomenon that may incorporate both positive and negative components (Cacioppo & Berntson, 1994). Despite the difficulty in defining attitudes, there is general agreement that three interrelated concepts that work simultaneously to form what we have come to know as an attitude: (a) the cognitive aspect, concerning the beliefs or thoughts one may have about the issue/object; (b) the affective aspect, concerning the emotional response or feelings one may have regarding the issue/object; and (c) the behavioral aspect, or an individual's previous actions or experiences with regard to the issue/object (Katz & Stotland, 1959; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). In sum, the term "attitude" may be defined as an evaluation that is based upon cognitions, emotional reactions, and past experiences. Furthermore, attitudes can themselves influence cognitions, affective responses, and future intentions and behavior (Zanna & Rempel, 1988).

Given the dynamic interactions between components, both past and present, Zimbardo and Lieppe (1991) suggest that cognitions, affective responses, and behaviors coalesce into a comprehensive mental representation of an issue; the specific attitude toward that issue (e.g., "I like it" or "I am against it") is an overall summary of that mental representation. As such, the term *attitude system* may provide a more comprehensive description of the attitude construct and all of its constituent parts. An illustration of the attitude system and the relationships among its component parts is provided in Figure 1.

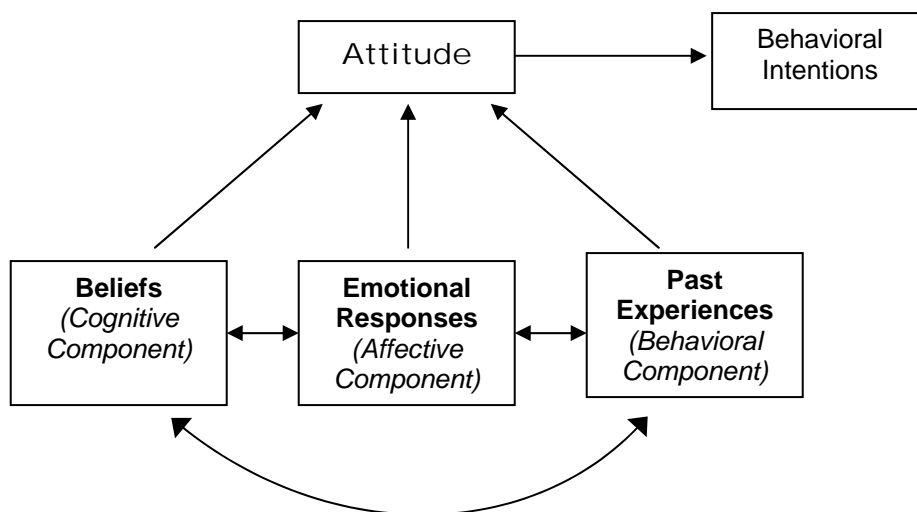


Figure 1. Representation of attitude systems, adapted from Maio et al. (2003) and Zimbardo & Leippe (1991).

With regard to inclusion, understanding the interconnected nature of educators' attitudes, thoughts, emotional responses, past experiences, and behavioral intentions provides a rich insight into their subjective realities—the lived experience of inclusion as an educational professional from a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspective. Attitude systems, and their corresponding mental representations, are easily accessible evaluative summaries, as they are rooted in the human tendency to automatically evaluate nearly everything that is encountered (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Furthermore, attitudes influence perception and thought, which are at the heart of the “meaning” any individual makes of a lived experience. Even in situations where attitudes are initially developed with little or no basis in knowledge, the attitude may subsequently affect how an individual takes in new information and further develops the beliefs, emotional responses, and experiences in the attitude system (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989). As such, it can be said that while thought and knowledge affect our attitudes, the reverse is also true: attitudes affect our thinking and acquisition of knowledge. Given their centrality to perception and interpretation of lived events, the study of attitudes is a natural fit with the phenomenological perspective.

Within this dynamic approach to understanding attitudes toward inclusion, several potential benefits emerge. The issue of educators' cognitive beliefs about

inclusion, or their understanding of what inclusion specifically is, is not clearly described in the inclusion literature. As previously discussed, there are many definitions of what constitutes “inclusive education.” They range from part-time to full-time placement and carry different assumptions about the purposes of and goals for the student’s placement in general education (e.g., social integration, academic instruction, natural proportions, etc.). Clearly, educators’ thoughts about what inclusion is (and what it is not) will impact their beliefs about when inclusion is appropriate and when it is not, depending on student characteristics, supports available, and other circumstances.

Why concern ourselves with what educators think and feel about inclusion? Attitudes are predictors of behavior (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Unfortunately, the link between attitudes and behavior is rarely a clear and direct one; in many instances, other factors mediate the link between attitudes and behaviors. Several factors have been identified in the attitude literature that increase the likelihood that our attitudes will be shown in our behaviors:

1. *Attitude strength*: stronger attitudes are more clearly tied to behavior than are weaker ones.
2. *Amount of information and experience supporting the attitude*: Attitudes based on more information and experience are more clearly linked to behavior than are other attitudes.
3. *Attitude specificity*: More highly specific attitudes are more clearly tied to behavior.
4. *Situational factors*: Current situational factors, such as the presence of influential others, limited options for behavior, or social desirability effects, may impact whether a person behaves in accord with their attitudes.

(Baron & Byrne, 1991; Brehm & Kassir, 1990)

Thus, it can be anticipated that these emotions about inclusion, framed by a particular definition of what inclusion is, the strength and specificity of the attitude, and situational factors (such as ongoing inclusion efforts in the school and district), will affect educators’ behavioral intentions with regard to both their willingness to include specific students and their consideration of the necessary supports/services. Though behaviors and decisions regarding the inclusion of actual students will not be a specific topic of investigation, it is likely that these issues will be discussed in focus group and/or individual interviews, as prior experiences are used as a foundation for present attitudes and beliefs. The

primary way in which the attitude-behavior link will be examined in this study is through a focus group process that simulates educators' decision-making about appropriate placements for students with ASD. The focus group is intended to capture educators' *behavioral intentions*; it is important to recognize that these are only hypothetical, possible responses to students and may in fact differ from the real decisions made about classroom placements for students with ASD.

With a link between attitudes and behavior (or behavioral intentions) comes recognition that attitudes can have considerable implications for educators' instructional decision-making and even student outcomes. Thus, in addition to asking educators to make decisions about hypothetical students, this study will use both individual interviews and focus group sessions to uncover educators' desired/perceived outcomes for students with ASD as a result of inclusion. It should be noted that there will be no effort to draw any causal comparisons between educators' beliefs, attitudes, and behavioral intentions and the desired/perceived outcomes for included students with ASD. In addition to educators' attitudes and beliefs about inclusion, numerous mitigating factors combine to explain the present outcomes of these students, including varying degrees of communicative, social, and behavioral impairment among included students with ASD, exposure to early and intensive interventions, and other instructional support variables. However, examination of the desired/perceived outcomes for these students will provide additional information as to how educators conceptualize and make decisions about inclusion. To further examine how educators' attitudes and behavioral intentions (and assumed behavior) impact children, individual interviews also will be conducted with several parents of children with ASD who are educated in the classrooms of participating educators. Parents' perceptions of potential and obtained educational outcomes for their own children will be examined to determine the extent to which there is a "match" between the goals of educators and parents. Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical connections between educators' attitude systems, behavioral intentions, and student outcomes as perceived by both parents and educators.

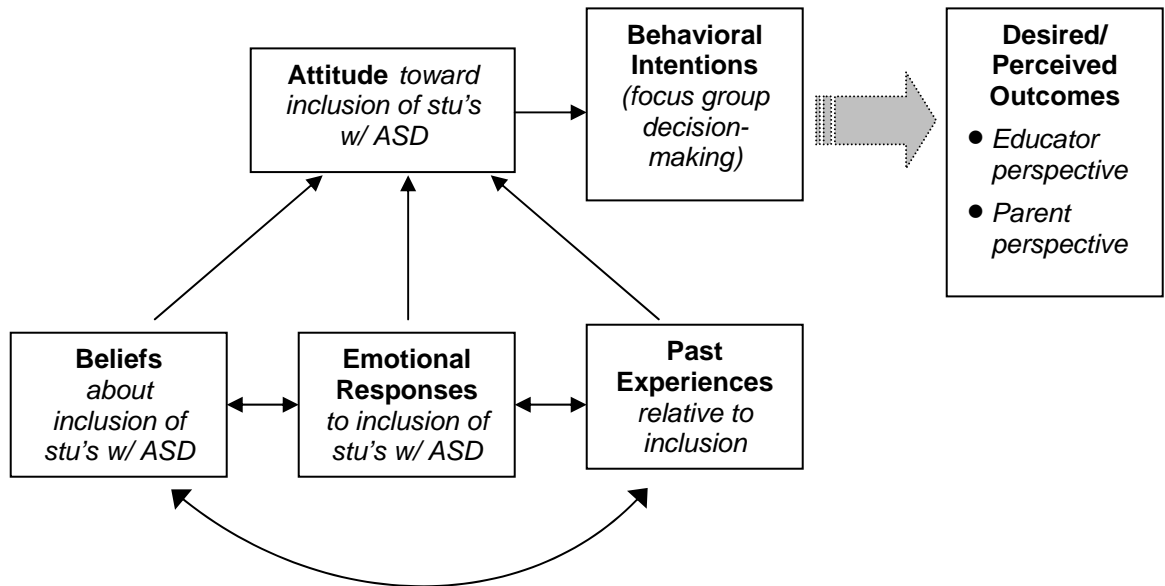


Figure 2. Modified depiction of attitude systems, including cognitions, affective responses, prior experience/behavior, and intentions for future behavior, with perceived student outcomes added.

A final important implication of approaching attitudes as a dynamic system of thoughts, emotions, and behaviors, rather than as a single trait to be measured, pertains to the potential for changing attitudes. Specifically, the attitude system model suggests that change in any one component of the system (thought, emotion, or experience) may lead to change in others (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Such a notion provides three avenues for those individuals aiming to change attitudes: knowledge, emotion, and past experiences. Although there is no formula for how much of each component (thought, emotion, experience) is necessary to have a given attitude, nor is it clear which component has the most influence on attitude development and change (Maio et al., 2003), a systems approach to conceptualizing attitudes allows us to consider whether a person has negative attitudes about inclusion because of a lack of or incorrect information, a strong emotional objection, one or more negative past experiences, or all of the above. It also provides multiple avenues for attempting to increase positive attitudes: provide additional information that is compelling and salient, provide positive emotional support and/or reinforcement, and provide exposure to positive experiences.

## CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the methodology used to conduct this study. First, trends in educational service delivery for students with autism spectrum disorder in the participating district are described to provide a context for the present study and inform the development of research questions. Next, specific participant recruitment and data collection procedures are described. The chapter concludes with a discussion of data analysis procedures designed to answer research questions and demonstrate the credibility of the data collected in this study.

### Research Context

A fundamental tenet of qualitative research is that local context is central to the understanding of a phenomenon (Pugach, 2001). Qualitative studies are *idiographic*, or based on the specific details of a situation, “because interpretations depend so heavily for their validity on local particulars” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 42). To understand the context surrounding the present study, this section provides a description of the specifics associated with inclusive education of students with ASD in the setting of interest. All names (individuals and schools) presented in this and future sections are pseudonyms used to protect the identity of study participants.

This study explored the inclusive educational practices, and associated attitudes, experiences, and processes of several elementary schools in a mid-sized suburban fringe/rural school district in west central Florida. At the time of data collection, the district had 37 elementary schools, 20 secondary schools, four alternative/technical schools, five charter schools, and a total enrollment of approximately 62,200. The most notable characteristic of the district is its rapid growth in recent years. In 2004, local voters approved a one-cent tax increase to raise funds for building a total of 28 additional school sites to be completed by the beginning of the 2009-2010 school year, including 16 elementary and 12 secondary schools.

Within this period of rapid growth, the population of students with ASD has grown disproportionately. The number of students receiving exceptional student education

(ESE) services under the IDEA Autism category increased 288% in the last six years. This growth rate is far greater than all other ESE categories. At the time of data collection, the district's student database listed a total of 219 students with ESE eligibility under the category of Autism, up from only 76 students in 2000-2001. However, this statistic does not capture any of the children with Autism Spectrum Disorders receiving ESE services under the categories of Developmentally Delayed (DD, for students under the age of 6), "Other Health Impaired" (OHI, including many high-functioning students diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder), or Speech/Language Impaired (S/LI, including Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified or PDD-NOS). In an interview with the researcher, the district's ESE Supervisor of Autism, Lisa (pseudonym), suggested that a more accurate estimate would be approximately 300 students with Autism Spectrum Disorders in the entire district as of May 2006.

Lisa suggested several possible reasons for the disproportionate growth of students with ASD relative to the growth of other disability categories. First, she suggested that diagnostic techniques and identification practices had improved, particularly with regard to identification of higher functioning children on the autism spectrum. Secondly, the district was highly regarded among local agencies and advocates; Lisa noted when many parents of students with ASD called the district, they indicated that the district was "recommended" by the nearby Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) or even attorneys representing families of students with disabilities. Finally, Lisa indicated that although the district had been growing rapidly, it was (at the time of data collection) still among the smallest in the nearby area and was able to offer a more "personal" approach to education:

"Parents would call they would say, 'We called [*neighboring district*], we called [*neighboring district*], and we called [you], and you're the only one that's called us back.' I think that just that personal feel... it's hard enough for them to move and transition, but when they can get a personal tour of a campus or someone to talk to, it's different. (Context Interview, Lines 45-49)

Lisa indicated that the growth in the autism population had a considerable impact on the entire district, in part because the increasing number of students with ASD meant that nearly every school came to be affected by autism in some way. Although ESE programs were clustered within the district, with five elementary schools, two middle schools, and two high schools assigned one or more "autism units" (self-contained

programs for students with autism), Lisa reported that nearly every school in the district had one or more students with ASD.

Everybody has had to, in a sense, step up to the plate. There's not a school in our county that doesn't have a child that's on the spectrum, and that, when I started in this job, was not true. Remotely. People felt like children with autism, they belonged in a self-contained setting at that school site that had the specialists... where [now] people have really embraced coming to training, understanding student needs, because [students with autism] are coming there anyways. (Context Interview, Lines 69-74)

Shared responsibility and flexibility was an important component of the instructional philosophy in the participating district, particularly at the elementary level. At all district elementary schools, educators were grouped into teams or "pods" using a "Continuous Progress" model where children were able to participate in flexible multi-age instructional groupings based more on student skill needs than age or grade. Primary-level teams, locally referred to as "pods," typically consisted of four classrooms in a configuration such as Kindergarten, Kindergarten-1<sup>st</sup> grade combination, 1<sup>st</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> grade combination, and 2<sup>nd</sup> grade. A similar approach at the intermediate grade levels resulted in a pod consisting of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 3<sup>rd</sup> – 4<sup>th</sup> grade combination, 4<sup>th</sup> – 5<sup>th</sup> grade combination, and 5<sup>th</sup> grade classrooms. In many teams, a "fifth teacher" was added to the team to work with students as needed across these classroom configurations, pulling out additional multi-age instructional groups or fusing into the classroom to co-teach lessons.

This district-wide Continuous Progress model had also been applied to instruction for students with ASD, such that four of the five elementary schools in the district with self-contained autism units had also developed "Autism Inclusion Pods" in the general education setting. These pods had the same primary or intermediate configurations as described above, but their "fifth teacher" was a special education teacher who served in the role of "autism inclusion teacher." The autism inclusion teacher was the case manager for not only the included students with ASD but for all of the ESE students within the pod. Among his or her primary responsibilities were development of instructional supports to meet the needs of both ESE students and those at-risk for experiencing academic difficulty (e.g., small-group supplemental instruction, co-teaching support during large-group instruction), working with the rest of the teachers



on the team to collaboratively address many of the social and behavioral needs of the students with ASD, and consultation with the school-based behavior specialist or other personnel (e.g., District Inclusion Facilitators) when needed.

Despite this new sense of shared responsibility, Lisa indicated that many schools within the district still struggled with accommodating students with ASD, particularly in those schools accustomed to sending those students to an “autism” school rather than meeting needs locally.

I mean, if they [students with ASD] don't need that additional support of the behavior specialist or specific interventions from someone that's trained to teach autism, then they can be at their home school in a Varying Exceptionalities (VE) setting or a co-teach. And we still struggle with that, what the stereotypical definition was of autism and what those kids look like. I get calls all the time, a parent just recently tried to enroll here at [high school in district], has a child with autism, but he's been in co-teach settings forever, and they turned him away, sent him to [district high school with autism unit]. And [district high school with autism unit] said, 'There's no services that we have that they don't have that he needs.' And so, just making people more aware has been a struggle but there is... the minute they hear that word [autism] sometimes they are so fearful of what that student looks like because they are uninformed. (Context Interview, Lines 74-84)

To address some of these issues, the district developed several mechanisms for supporting teams of educators engaged in inclusive education. Autism inclusion teachers received frequent in-service training from district specialists in autism, behavior, curriculum and instruction, inclusion, and special education. Additionally, a district-level multidisciplinary team known as the CORE Team was available for training and consultation on an as-needed basis for challenging issues for students with ASD in both self-contained and inclusive settings, including curriculum, behavior, instruction, social skills, communication, assistive technology, teaming, alternate assessment, classroom environment, and sensory needs. The CORE Team consisted of school psychologists, behavior specialists (both district- and school-based), an ESE teacher, speech/language pathologists, a district-level autism consultant, and the ESE-Autism supervisor (Lisa).

Finally, in 2004 the ESE department wrote and obtained a grant to establish Trans-Disciplinary (“Trans-D”) Teams *within schools* with autism programs (both self-

contained and inclusion) to provide the ASD student population with “wrap-around services via cross training, intensive case conferencing, and integrated planning and implementation.” The Trans-D team within a given school, including teacher(s), the speech/language pathologist, the occupational therapist, the behavior specialist, and other school-based educators, collaborated on every level possible; all services were provided in the classroom and teaching was done in a cooperative manner. Trans-D teams met on a weekly basis for problem-solving on specific cases, cross-training in which the “expert” in each discipline trains the others in field-specific techniques, and integrated planning with field-specific strategies fused into the classroom within and across disciplines (e.g., academic content addressed in speech/language therapy).

Despite these numerous avenues for professional development and consultative support for individuals working in autism programs throughout the district, there was a sense of urgency and reactivity in each of these endeavors. Lisa noted,

I felt like we were just running in circles, not knowing what our district wanted to do with inclusion, and everyone had different pictures of, well, we’re at this point, we’re at that point... And I heard that there’s a kind of systematic approach where everybody could come together and do this rating and we’d come up with some outcomes about actions and steps we wanted to take, it was kind-of a no-brainer because it gave us some direction. (Context Interview, Lines 378-383)

As a result, also in 2004, the district entered into a partnership with the Florida Inclusion Network (FIN) to participate in ongoing professional development and systems change initiative with the goal of increasing inclusive educational practices at the district, school, and instructional team levels. In particular, the district’s system change effort utilized a self-assessment tool called the Best Practices for Inclusive Education (BPIE) to focus action planning and system change efforts. BPIE was developed by a consortium of school districts in central Florida known as the Multi-District Networking Group for Inclusive Education (2004) and is used to validate areas of strength in implementation of best practices, as well as identify areas in need of attention in order to maximize the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices for all students. BPIE is used to self-rate and describe district practices in the areas of (a) Values and Climate; (b) Access to General Education; and (c) Policies and Support, including Leadership, Program Development and Evaluation, Instructional Support, and Pedagogy.

Merely completing the self-assessment portion of the BPIE process was valuable but challenging for district personnel. Representatives from many departments participated in the process, including ESE, Transportation, Title I, Curriculum and Instruction, Student Services, and other administrators and personnel from around the district came together to complete the self-assessment. Lisa indicated that representatives engaged in heated debates when it came to assessments of their own professional area:

... And the emotion! When people that were truly involved in the BPIE aspect that we were looking at, if we gave it a rating that that they didn't truly believe, literally it became a very emotional discussion to the point where when we would reconvene, the person would bring back the data to support why they were arguing that. But then we would say, 'But yes, you show us this, but it's not that we know it or we understand it' and they would really advocate for us to revote after they had had a chance to present what their beliefs were. And we just had to laugh because it wasn't meant to be a personal process, but how people perceived the work they were doing and then how the rest of us perceived what the outcomes for that were or what it meant, were totally different. And it was hard I think for everyone, but it was very interesting how emotional, at some points, people got, and literally went back and did homework to come back at the next meeting to argue their validity of that rating. (Context Interview, Lines 399-410)

Another goal of the initial BPIE meetings was to develop a consistent district vision with regard to inclusion. Lisa noted that this was a critical goal for the district at large and the ESE department in particular, as there was no consistent definition of inclusion and professionals sometimes differed on their beliefs and values related to the issue.

I don't even think, as even a district office, we all use the same language, with regards to inclusion and what it should look like. Part of the BPIE was to develop that vision and even start within the district office, superintendent's staff, to understand that and build that from the top-down. Because if we don't believe in it and even speak that language from within our department, how are schools going to buy into it? (Context Interview, Lines 89-94)

After completing the BPIE self-assessment process in December 2004, the district schools developed an action plan in February 2005 to articulate their goals for increasing best practices. A summary of the district's self-ratings on the BPIE matrix can be found in Appendix A. At the time of data collection, the district was in the process of implementing the objectives of the action plan and progress toward these goals with the BPIE. One positive outcome of the BPIE project was the addition of two District Inclusion Facilitators, whose responsibility was to provide consultative support and training for school teams engaged in inclusion of students with all disabilities at the elementary (Rhonda - pseudonym) and secondary (Merri - pseudonym) levels. In her interview one year after the addition of the District Inclusion Facilitators were added to the staff, Lisa indicated that one clear benefit was that teams engaged in inclusion felt more supported and were more willing to try new options. Furthermore, the CORE Team, which was usually overwhelmed with frequent requests for assistance and support, experienced a decrease in demand over the last year. Lisa attributed this directly to the support of Rhonda and Merri, whose roles absorbed many of the training and consultative responsibilities previously placed on the CORE Team. As a result, the CORE Team was able to function in a more proactive manner, developing a training matrix for teachers of students with ASD.

Although the addition of Rhonda and Merri was beneficial for the district, Lisa noted that there is more work ahead to make inclusion a more systematic endeavor across the district, with a large emphasis on proactive planning and consistent support mechanisms instead of crisis management. One particular area Lisa hoped to address in the future was the significant difference in implementation of inclusion from school to school, and even from team to team within a single school. Although differences among school sites can be advantageous in that they allow each team or school to be flexible, Lisa described some unique problems associated with having different approaches to inclusion at each school.

...the problems are that parents hear what other schools are doing and then they go "school shopping." Absolutely, big problem. They school-shop based on what services are offered, and it's been very hard on us, and then schools get inundated with students because they have that certain philosophy or things are working well and they get a really good reputation but then we have to go back

and say, “How can we provide those supports in their home school? How can we make it look a little bit different?” (Context Interview, Lines 151-157)

To that end, district-wide definitions were created to describe each of the service delivery configurations available on the elementary continuum of services. These were developed after the period of data collection and were disseminated to elementary buildings in March 2007; a copy of these definitions can be found in Appendix B.

#### Research Problem

As discussed previously, inclusion has evolved considerably since the passage of P.L. 94-142 in 1975, and numerous court decisions have clarified the various considerations necessary when making placement decisions for students with disabilities. Yet multiple conceptualizations of “inclusion” remain in both the empirical literature and in school programs. The practice of inclusion, and even the term itself, have been the subject of considerable controversy over the last several decades and to this day it appears that “inclusion” may look very different depending upon the student, educator, and setting (Fuchs & Fuchs, 1994). At a local level, information from the ESE Supervisor of Autism in the participating school district suggested that varying definitions of, attitudes toward, and strategies for inclusion existed at all levels of implementation (district, school, team, and individual). A wealth of data exists on teachers’ attitudes toward inclusion, but studies over the course of the last 40 years indicate mixed feelings about inclusion and a preference for including predominantly students with milder disabilities and learning support needs (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 1996). In addition, the evidence for the efficacy of inclusive education is mixed and adds very little to support inclusion of students with ASD (Hunt & Goetz, 1997).

Despite these ambiguities, what is clear from OSEP (2004) data is that including students with disabilities into general education settings has become a more prevalent educational practice. Furthermore, inclusion of students with ASD has become a more frequent occurrence as the numbers of students in this group have grown disproportionately in the last decade. The most current estimates from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2007) suggest that ASD occurs in 1 in every 150 live births, making it the fastest growing developmental disability in the U.S. This trend manifests at the local level, as data from the participating district indicate that students receiving ESE services under the category of “autism” have grown by 288% from 2000 to 2006. In response, the district recently established inclusion programs in four

schools. With regard to educational supports for students with ASD, a marked increase in research on mechanisms for educational support is evident, with several best practice recommendations emerging as consistent themes in the intervention and instructional literature (Iovannone et al., 2003). Yet IEPs for students with ASD tend to be the most often disputed and often contain procedural errors, including lack of consideration for LRE (Yell et al., 2003). These contradictions and ambiguities beg the following questions: How do students with ASD come to be included? By what process do educators make decisions about inclusive placements, and what considerations have the greatest impact on these decisions? What does inclusion mean for their teachers and what constitutes success? Is “success” universally defined, or do parents and educators have different ideas about the important outcomes for these students? These questions were all the more salient in the district chosen for this study, given data indicating both an increase in the number of students with ASD in the district and an increased likelihood that these students would be educated in the mainstream. Creating a systematic district-wide process for recommending and developing inclusive education for students with both ASD and other disabilities was a main priority for both the ESE Supervisor of Autism and for the school district as a whole.

The purpose of this study was to explore (a) the meanings and understandings of inclusion for schools engaged in the process of educating students with ASD in general education settings, (b) educators’ attitudes and beliefs at the individual and school level regarding inclusion of students with ASD, (c) how the understandings and attitudes regarding inclusion impact the way schools make decisions about inclusion and educational programs for students with ASD, (d) the sources of educators’ attitudes and ideas about inclusion (e.g., experience, philosophy, training, research, etc.), and (e) educators’ and parents’ criteria for determining “successful” inclusion and their perceptions about the success of current inclusion efforts.

#### *Research Questions*

The following list of questions was developed to guide the present study. The numbered questions reflect specific research questions that led to the development of the research design and its associated data collection methods. The bulleted questions are not specific research questions, but operationalizations of the research questions and ideas for examination/exploration within participants’ responses.

1. How do educators operationally define inclusion?

- Is the definition the same in all situations or is it different for each student?
  - Is inclusion (and its goals) defined differently for different populations (e.g., students with learning disabilities vs. students with developmental disabilities such as ASD)?
  - How do educators' definitions of inclusion match with those described in the literature (e.g., mainstreaming, full inclusion, reintegration, etc.)?
  - Do educators within and across school sites hold common views of inclusion, or do they have varied definitions?
2. What are educators' beliefs regarding inclusion of students with ASD?
    - What are the benefits of inclusion? Why do we do it?
    - Why do educators think parents of children with ASD want them to be included?
    - Why do educators think teachers or parents might NOT want students with ASD included?
  3. What are educators' emotional reactions to inclusion of students with ASD?
  4. What types of past experiences have influenced teachers' current understandings of inclusion and their feelings toward it?
  5. How do educators make decisions about instructional placements?
    - What are the characteristics of students with ASD who educational professionals believe are "good candidates for inclusion"?
    - How do educators consider issues related to LRE as dictated by circuit court decisions, such as the continuum of placement options, portability of services and supports, relative educational benefit of placement options, impact on general education peers, consideration of costs, and participation with general education peers to the maximum extent appropriate?
    - What would cause educators to discontinue inclusion and move a student to a more restrictive environment?
    - Are decisions needs-based (student-centered) or resource-based (availabilities of supports drive placement decisions)?
    - Does one person dominate the conversation? If so, who is it and what is their dominant perspective?

6. On what information sources (e.g., personal experience, second-hand experience, research/best practices) do educators draw when making these decisions?
7. What outcomes do educators wish to see as a result of students with ASD participating in general education and do educators think students are achieving these outcomes?
8. What are educators' perceptions of the *overall effectiveness* of their schools' inclusion efforts?
9. Using the following domains of functioning as a general framework, what are the specific outcomes that parents wish to see in their children as a result of inclusion, do parents perceive these outcomes as being attained?
  - Academic/Vocational Skills
  - Communication
  - Behavioral/Social-Emotional Functioning
  - Community Integration & Normalization
  - Recreation/Leisure Skills

#### *Research Design*

Under the umbrella of qualitative research, several approaches are available to the prospective researcher. Like so much of qualitative research design, the selection of a particular type of qualitative inquiry is largely determined by the topic of interest and the questions the researcher seeks to answer. This study employed a phenomenological perspective (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Within the phenomenological approach, a case study method was used to develop the research design. Case studies can be particularly useful when questions of *how* and *why* are being asked about a contemporary set of events over which the researcher has little or no control (Yin, 2003). When comparing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various research designs (both qualitative and quantitative) available to a given researcher, case study designs are often believed to be less desirable, weaker forms of research investigation. To adequately develop a case study design into a viable study, issues of construct validity, internal validity, external validity, and reliability must be assessed, though it may be by somewhat different means than in traditional, quantitative social science research. These issues are described in greater detail in the “Credibility Measures” section later in this chapter.



Few set guidelines are available for developing an appropriate case study design. Unlike in other research formats where procedures such as probability sampling, assignment to experimental conditions, and response measures are clearly dictated by the assumptions of quantitative research, case study designs do not follow any empirical formula. Rather, the case study researcher must develop research questions and propositions about the issue of interest, consider the unit of analysis within the case study (e.g., an individual, a program, a process, etc.), and then determine the most appropriate form of data and analysis for examining those propositions (Yin, 2003). In this study, initial questions about how educators make decisions to include and support students with ASD led to a proposition that the way educators define and understand inclusion impacts their attitudes and beliefs about it, and that these beliefs impact decision-making. A secondary proposition underlying this study was that understanding educators' personal or second-hand experiences with inclusion is essential to understanding how they think, believe, and behave about it. Given these questions and propositions about educators in the inclusion process, the primary unit of analysis was the individual educator, as the cognitive and affective components of attitude are most likely to impact decision-making about inclusion on an individual level. In addition, it was possible to draw conclusions about the beliefs, attitudes, and approaches to inclusion for a specific school building by comparing and integrating themes from individuals working at a common school. Finally, the district as a whole was considered a unit of analysis, where broad conclusions were drawn by again integrating data and finding common themes among individuals across school sites and professional roles. These units of analysis linked directly to the chosen data collection methods for the present study.

#### Participants and Settings

Schools and individual participants were selected for participation using purposeful selection (Miles & Huberman, 1994). While quantitative sampling methods emphasize probability sampling techniques to develop a participant sample that approximates the general population, qualitative research calls for the thoughtful and strategic selection of participants for their ability to provide information about the topic of interest due to expertise or unique experiences. Purposeful sampling can be used to examine cases that are critical for studying the theory or phenomenon of interest, or to

establish particular comparisons that illuminate differences in decision-making or processes under investigation.

During the context interview with the ESE Autism Supervisor (Lisa), four elementary schools with Autism Inclusion Pods were nominated for participation. From each of these schools, a list of potential participants was generated based on the following professional roles and inclusion criteria:

1. General education teachers who were directly responsible for the delivery of inclusive education for students with ASD in the 2005-2006 school year.
2. Special education personnel at the school (both self-contained and resource teachers) who were involved with the instructional and placement decision-making for students with ASD in the 2005-2006 school year.
3. Additional personnel who were actively involved in the instructional planning and decision-making about students with ASD, including one administrator and up to two specialists (e.g., behavior specialists, school psychologists, speech/language pathologists, etc.) from each of the target schools.

The single exclusion criterion for participants was that they were not recruited if they had a personal relationship with the researcher from which they may have learned the purpose and specific goals of this study. Thus, two school psychologists from target schools were excluded from participating in the study; one was the researcher's husband and District Autism Consultant (Sergio – pseudonym), the other was a close personal friend. Additionally, the researcher herself was a school psychology intern at one of the target schools at the time of data collection; for obvious reasons, she was excluded from the recruitment pool.

Although there were over 70 educators eligible for participation in this study based on these criteria, the two focus groups were capped at a maximum of 8 participants, thus limiting the potential number of educator participants to no more than 16. Particular effort was made to recruit participants and assign them to focus groups in a manner that balanced the focus group membership with respect to both role (e.g., administrator, specialist, teacher) and school site (see next section for more information). Finally, parents (mother and/or father, referred to hereafter as "parent-sets") of two included students from each target school were recruited for participation in individual interviews (eight parent-sets total). Ultimately, seven parent-sets participated in the study, although one parent-set spoke on behalf of two children with ASD (one in

primary grades, the other in intermediate), both of whom had been included in the general education setting but with different teachers and experiences. A final sample of 15 educators (7 in Group 1, 8 in Group 2) was obtained; a more detailed breakdown of their school site, role, and other demographic information can be found in Chapter 4 (Results).

#### *Protection of Participant Identity*

During the recruitment, data collection, and analysis phases, participating schools were assigned a code letter (e.g., School A, School B, etc.), rather than identifying them by name. Participants were assigned a code that incorporated three components: school code (A-D), participant number by school (e.g., 1-5 of a school with 5 educators participating in the study), and role/grade level (e.g., Admin for administrator, SchPsy for school psychologist, BxSp for behavior specialist, GE-Int for general education teacher at the intermediate level, ESEIncl for special educator/inclusion teacher, ESEPriA for special educator in a primary-level self-contained class for students with ASD, and ESEPkA for special educator in a self-contained class for preschoolers with ASD). For example, the second participant from School B was a teacher of a self-contained classroom for intermediate (grade 3-5) students with ASD; her participant code was B2-ESEIntA. All interview summaries, audiotapes, and any other supporting documentation were labeled using this code to protect the confidentiality and identity of all participants. A participant tracking form was used to keep all information about participants in a single place, including each participant's real name and code, contact information for rescheduling appointments or mailing interview summaries for member checking activities, and the status of their interview's transcription, member check response, coding for themes, and (if relevant) external audit (Appendix C). Once member checking was completed and participants no longer needed to be contacted, these sheets were altered such that "Participant Name" was a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were also listed, along with participant codes, on all interview summaries and related documents. These pseudonyms were used in this manuscript as well as other summaries or information stemming from this study. Codes were useful in the data collection and analysis phase to protect confidentiality but identify participants in a way that is easy for the researcher to remember (using a school/team identifier and their professional role). In the written accounts of this study's findings,

however, it was preferable to use pseudonyms to convey a more authentic sense of schools, educators, and personal experiences.

#### *Participation Incentives/Stipends*

Given the fact that educators and parents volunteering to participate in this study were asked to share personal experiences/beliefs and, in many cases, make arrangements to spend time with the researcher outside of their paid school day, participation incentives were offered. The school district departments endorsing this study (Student Services and Exceptional Student Education/Autism) agreed to provide professional development pay (\$13.25/hour) and in-service points for educators who participated beyond the end of their contract year or after school hours. All but two participants (educators) received such compensation because data were collected in summer intersession months when teachers and specialists were no longer on contract; administrators were still on contract and did not qualify for the stipend. Participating parents were provided with a \$25 cash stipend as a token of appreciation for their role in the study. Information about stipends or the classroom materials was shared with prospective participants during the recruitment process and in informed consent materials.

#### *Interview and Focus Group Sites*

Focus groups were conducted at the district's main offices, after school hours, in a private conference room. The district's main office is in the central part of the school district and was the most easily accessible site for all educators', whose schools were distributed across East, West, and Central parts of the county. Interviews with school personnel also were conducted after school hours, either at the school site or in a private room within the district offices. Parent interviews were scheduled to be convenient to them in both time and location. Four parent interviews were conducted at participants' homes, while three interviews were conducted at local restaurants or cafés at the request of the participant(s) (e.g., Village Inn, Starbucks, Panera).

#### *Procedures*

Essential to the qualitative paradigm of research is the interactive, simultaneous nature of the research process. While many positivist conceptualizations of research design proceed in a linear fashion, much like a flowchart or step-by-step sequence, qualitative research is a reflexive or recursive process (Maxwell, 2005). Traditional, linear approaches to research design are often prescriptive, arranging the tasks of

planning and conducting in an optimal order. In qualitative research, however, a dynamic interaction occurs between researcher, research methods, and data, each transforming each other. As such, the activities proposed for the present study, including data collection and analysis, elaboration and refocusing of research questions, and identifying and addressing threats to validity, should not be viewed as sequential events occurring in isolation of each other but rather simultaneous processes all co-occurring and influencing each other. Qualitative research is an ongoing process that involves “tacking” back and forth between the different components of the design, assessing the implications of goals, theories, research questions, methods, and validity threats for one another.

### *Context Interviews and Document Reviews*

To fully understand the context of inclusive education in the target district, additional information was collected in a group interview with two district personnel leading this change effort: an ESE Supervisor in Autism (Lisa) and a district-level Inclusion Facilitator hired specifically as a part of this reform process (Merri). The goal of this interview was to establish the district's vision for inclusion, trainings and supports offered to schools implementing inclusive education and the overall “state of affairs” of inclusion in the district. Prior to the interview, the two district personnel received via email a brief set of bullet points describing the issues to be covered so they could gather data, materials, and be prepared to address various topics. The researcher used the information obtained in these interviews when developing research questions.

To obtain additional information about the historical context in the research setting, an additional interview was conducted with the current ESE Supervisor of Due Process/Legal Issues and Parent/Family Services (“Connie” – pseudonym). Prior to serving in her current capacity, Connie served as the Director of ESE for many years. The goal of this interview was to obtain historical perspective on how inclusive education has evolved over the last decade in the participating district. Finally, a document search was conducted to identify relevant articles, reports, or other information that provide information about inclusive education in the participating district. Information obtained from additional interviews and document review is included in the results and discussion, to provide more in-depth contextual information about the research site with regard to past, present, and future efforts in inclusion.

### *Pilot Interviews*

Prior to commencing formal data collection, two pilot interviews were conducted with one educator and one parent of an included child with ASD. One interview (educator) was done collaboratively with of the doctoral committee members, Dr. Teresa Nesman, who has extensive experience and expertise in qualitative interviewing. Pilot participants were selected from individuals who are not eligible for participation, either due to conflict of interest (i.e., personal relationship with the researcher) or because their children are no longer included in the target schools. The purpose of the pilot interviews was two-fold. First, they afforded the researcher an opportunity to become comfortable with the overall interview procedures, including audiotaping, questioning, and probing/follow-up responses. Second, the pilot interviews provided a “test run” for the interview protocols, allowing for modification, removal, or addition of questions as necessary before beginning official data collection. Pilot participants were asked directly to provide feedback on the clarity of questions and the overall interview procedure. The latter information obtained from the pilot educator was particularly useful, as it led to an important clarification of the final interview question that asked participants to summarize their overall feelings about inclusion for students with ASD. Transcripts from these initial interviews were not coded and their comments were not used in the final analysis/interpretation of findings. However, informed consent was obtained from pilot participants, and their privacy and confidentiality was protected in the same way as with the other participants in the study (participant codes and pseudonyms).

### *Researcher Identity Memo*

In the qualitative paradigm, the researcher is viewed as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. According to Merriam (1998), “data are mediated through this human instrument, the researcher, rather than through some inanimate inventory, questionnaire, or computer” (p. 7). As such, one of the most frequently mentioned criticisms of qualitative research involves the potential for subjectivity, (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). To counteract this possibility, many qualitative researchers use what is known as a *bracketing interview* to “bracket” away their own views, experiences, and assumptions from those of the participants (Marshall & Rossman, 1988). Use of the term “bracket” suggests eliminating these potential sources of bias but in reality this is neither necessary nor possible. Rather, it is essential that qualitative researchers be *aware* of the potential

impact of their own personal agendas and consider how best to achieve those goals while dealing with their influence. The skilled qualitative researcher processes information “on the spot,” responds sensitively to social cues, and adjusts the research design as data are interpreted and new questions arise. In many cases, recognition of personal ties to the study can provide a wealth of insight, theory, and data about the phenomenon of interest, thus enriching the data and bringing it to life. As such, “the subjectivity of the researcher is... viewed as a resource to be leveraged rather than a source of unwanted bias and invalidity that must be minimized” (Meyers & Sylvester, 2006, p. 26). An alternate, and perhaps more appropriate, term for this technique is a *researcher identity memo* (Maxwell, 2005).

In addition to examining their specific experiences, beliefs, and biases associated with the topic under investigation, qualitative researchers also should consider their reasons for “going qualitative” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 18). Individuals driven by personal goals and desires for conducting qualitative research (e.g., a perception that qualitative is “easier” or a way to avoid statistical analysis), without careful assessment of the implications of these views on methods and conclusions, are in danger of creating a flawed or biased study. Because the qualitative paradigm involves a different philosophical, conceptual, and procedural approach to research, it is essential that the prospective researcher understand the assumptions and general tenets of qualitative research and go into the study with his/her “eyes wide open.”

With regard to the present study, an identity memo was written by the researcher prior to collection of other data, so the researcher could document *a priori* her experiences and beliefs related to the topic under investigation (i.e., inclusive education of students with ASD), as well as her interest in and reasons for pursuing qualitative research. Due to the personal nature of this memo, as well as references to local persons and agencies, the memo was circulated to the committee prior to the study commencing, but was not included in this document. A summary of information in the researcher identity memo can be found in Appendix D.

#### *Recruitment*

A letter of support was obtained from the office of Research and Evaluation at the participating district, indicating approval for teachers and specialists to participate in after-hours interviews and focus groups on the school campus. Recruitment of participants began with a meeting with Lisa, the ESE Supervisor of Autism, and Merri,

the elementary inclusion facilitator, to develop a list of the names and contact information of educators who meet inclusion criteria at the target schools, as well as parents of included students with ASD at each school. Although principal approval at each individual target school was not required by the district for this study, the researcher made an introductory phone call to the building administrator to inform them of the general purpose of the study and estimate the time and involvement of each participant (i.e., one 1-hour interview and one 2-hour focus group after school hours or during the summer session). Each of the building principals of the four target buildings indicated their approval of the study.

School-based participants (specialists and teachers) were contacted by telephone or in person to obtain initial informed consent for participation and personal contact information for over the summer (e.g., email, phone number). Individuals were called in a counterbalanced manner that balanced school site and professional role, to prevent “filling up” participation slots with individuals from one school or professional role. When discussing the study’s topic with all participants, general terms were used so as not to introduce bias for or against inclusion. The study was described as a qualitative investigation of how educators make decisions about instructional supports for students with ASD. Inclusion was not specifically mentioned as a topic of investigation because it might have biased participants’ responses or caused them to consider more inclusive placements in the focus group phase of the study. Information about participation requirements (i.e., interviews and focus groups) and incentives was shared during the introductory contact. Once individuals indicated an interest in participating, educators were assigned to one of the two focus group date/times.

Parents, chosen at random from a list of all included students with ASD at each of the target schools, were invited to participate by telephone. Both of a child’s parents (mother and father) were invited to participate in a single interview, although they were informed that they could also choose to send only one representative for the family (e.g., mother alone, father alone) who was the most knowledgeable about the child’s education. Two parent-sets chose to have both mother and father simultaneously participate in the interview; three additional parents (all mothers) participated in the interview individually. One father participated individually in the interview and provided written input from the student’s mother, as well.



All participants were sent a personalized postcard through district courier mail (educators) or U.S. Postal Service (parents) at least one week in advance to remind them of the upcoming focus group and interview appointments. The postcard contained the researcher's contact information and encouraged them to call if they needed to reschedule the meeting. Finally, all participants were called the day before the focus group and/or individual interview to remind them of the session and confirm their intention to attend. Krueger and Casey (2000) note that this "dentist"-style of reminders serves two purposes: (a) it reminds participants who might have otherwise forgotten, and (b) multiple reminders help to reinforce the importance of the meetings. In the present study, all scheduled participants maintained their appointment times without difficulty or cancellation.

#### *Informed Consent Procedures*

Upon making initial phone contact with educator and parent participants, the researcher provided basic information on the overall purpose of the study, expectations for participants' time investment, availability of participation incentives, and protections of participant identity. To further inform them of the details of the study in advance of their participation, the Informed Consent form was emailed to educator participants prior to the first focus group meeting. At the time of the focus group session, the researcher read the form to the group, answered all participant questions, and reminded parents that they could end their participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable or were unable to continue. The researcher then distributed two printed copies of the Informed Consent form for each educator (one to be signed and returned to the researcher, the other to be kept by the educator). All educator participants signed these forms, indicating their consent to participate. Parents did not receive an advance copy of the Informed Consent form by email, but rather were given two printed copies (one for the researcher, one for the participant) at the outset of the individual interview. The researcher read the parent version of the Informed Consent form, answered all questions, and reminded parents that they could end their participation at any time if they felt uncomfortable or were unable to continue. All parent participants signed the Informed Consent forms, indicating their consent to participate. A copy of the Educator and Parent Informed Consent forms can be found in Appendices E and F, respectively.

### *Focus Groups*

Focus groups include participants who have a specific experience with or an opinion about the topic under investigation and use an explicit interview guide to explore the subjective experiences of participants in relation to predetermined research questions (Gibbs, 1997; Merton, 1987). The focus group method is consistent with a phenomenological view of reality in that they create a forum in which multiple views of reality can coexist and where diverse opinions and perspectives are desired. Hess (1968) described several distinct advantages of focus group interviews over individual interviews, including:

1. *Synergism*: when a greater breadth of data emerges through group interaction
2. *Snowballing*: when the statements of one respondent initiate a chain reaction of additional comments
3. *Stimulation*: when group discussion generates excitement about a topic
4. *Security*: when the group provides comfort and encourages candid responses
5. *Spontaneity*: because participants are not required to answer every question, their responses are more spontaneous and genuine.

In the context of this study, the purpose of the focus group was to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which a group of educators determine an appropriate instructional placement for a student with ASD, as well as the way they discuss, modify, and apply instructional strategies for students with ASD in the setting they have chosen. To examine how a diverse group of educators make instructional programming decisions for students with ASD, a moderator guide was used to move the group from a general discussion about decision-making regarding students with ASD at their school toward more student-specific questions about strategies and procedures (Appendix G). The focus group protocol is designed to function as a “questioning route” (Krueger & Casey, 2000), using specific question types to guide participants through from initial rapport-building (opening question), introduction of the topic (introductory question), preparation to move into the “heart of the matter” (transition questions), discussion of the key issues (key questions), and close the session with an emphasis on summary and reflection (ending questions). Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagum (1996) described the focus group protocol as a moderator’s guide designed to chart a course from the beginning of the interview to the end. It can range from being extremely

detailed with specific probes and responses to being more general with only broad topics and questions.

Some of the literature on qualitative methodologies suggests that focus groups may be a better mechanism for tapping into perceptions and beliefs than individual interviews because they allow more anonymity and create less of a social desirability effect than one-on-one situations (Beck, Trombetta, & Share, 1986; Folch-Lyon & Trost, 1981). As such, the focus group interview first asked participants to first consider their personal role in educating students with ASD, what factors influence their instructional decisions for students with ASD, and what outcomes they believed parents of students with ASD were seeking from their child's education. Following the discussion of educational decision-making in a general sense, two vignettes were used to focus conversation on the "key issue" of decision-making for students, provide uniform stimuli and a focal point for conversation, as well as a basis for the comparison of responses within and across focus groups (see Appendix H for details). Each vignette described a case history for a child with ASD; one presented a child with significant delays in cognitive development, communication, and academic skills, while the other described a child with average to above average language skills and academic functioning, with significant behavioral concerns. In an effort to make vignettes as authentic as possible, case histories and descriptions were developed using characteristics of "real-life" included students with ASD enrolled at nonparticipating schools in the target district, although specific identifying information was omitted or altered. Vignettes were distributed to each participant prior to the focus group via email, to provide time to consider the child's characteristics at length. Previous vignette research has suggested that some participants need additional time to consider the research problem before beginning the interview protocol (Sansosti, 2005). Attached to each vignette, a brief statement was provided to prompt participants' thinking with regard to the vignette: "Now that you've read about this student, consider the type of educational program or instructional plan, including appropriate context/environment, supports, and strategies, that would best meet his/her needs."

After the vignette discussions, educators were asked to describe the information sources from which they developed their ideas for educating students with ASD and discuss the weaknesses and strengths of their schools' service-delivery for students with ASD. The interview was intended to conclude with an opportunity for each educator to

provide “words of wisdom” for individuals entering education for students with ASD for the first time. Due to time constraints, however, focus group participants were told to think about the question and be prepared to respond to it in their individual interview.

Focus groups were conducted in June 2006 and were held prior to the in-depth, individual interviews for two reasons. First, the focus group was intended to help “prime” participants for later discussions in the interview about their experiences of inclusion at the school-level. In a relaxed group setting where participants sense that their opinions and experiences are valued, participants may be more likely to express their opinions openly (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagum, 1996). Participation in a focus group also can help individuals to form, modify, or strengthen their opinions on the subject at hand through the exchange of different perspectives (Krueger, 1988). A second consideration was the potentially biasing effect the interview might have if administered prior to the focus group. The interview heavily emphasized beliefs, attitudes, and experiences about inclusion. As such, conducting the interview first could have affected the decisions and strategies suggested by the team in the focus group setting by suggesting that they were expected to describe inclusive placements for the hypothetical vignette cases. Informal review of focus group and individual participants’ transcripts did indeed suggest that participating in the focus group first was beneficial. During individual interviews, some participants echoed themes that had been discussed by the focus groups and used the one-on-one session as an opportunity to explore their own personal experiences with these subjects in greater depth.

#### *In-depth, Semi-Structured Interviews*

Qualitative interviewing is based in conversation, with the researcher’s primary role as that of asking and listening and the participant’s role as that of informant. Furthermore, interview participants are viewed as meaning makers, not passive vessels of answers or information (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

In the present study, an individual semi-structured interview was conducted with each of the focus group participants during June and July 2006. For educators, the purpose of the in-depth interview was to explore participants’ experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding the inclusion effort in an open-ended way (no right or wrong answers) from multiple personal and professional perspectives. To ensure that participants were comfortable expressing any and all experiences, concerns, or beliefs, each participant was interviewed separately from the other focus group members. In addition, individual

semi-structured interviews were conducted with two parents/parent-sets of included children from each school team ( $N=7$ ), in July 2006. The purpose of the parent interview was to ascertain (a) parents' definitions/meanings of successful inclusion, (b) the desired outcomes they wish for their children with ASD, and (c) the extent to which parents believe that these outcomes have been attained as a result of their participation in the general education setting.

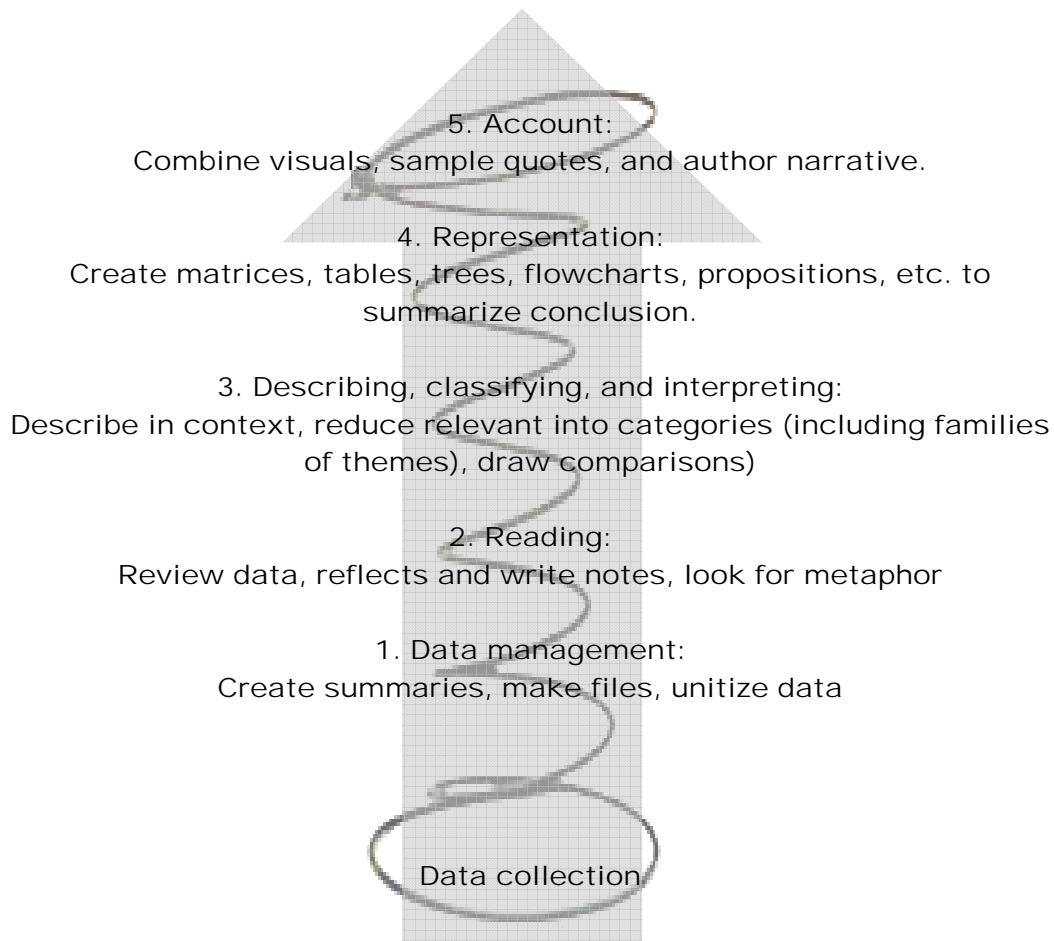
The interview protocol was semi-structured, with a series of open-ended questions and a set of prompts and minimal encouragements associated with many questions to draw out additional information as necessary. A copy of the educator interview protocol can be found in Appendix I, and the parent interview protocol is in Appendix J. Each interview protocol also contains a brief set of demographic questions relevant to each participant type (educator, parent) to obtain more contextual information about participants' background and experiences.

#### *Data Analysis*

According to Creswell (1998), qualitative data analysis may be visualized and conceptualized as a spiral, moving in analytic circles rather than using a fixed linear process (see Figure 3 for an illustration). The following sections describe the data collection and analysis process for the present study in light of Creswell's spiral framework.

#### *Data Collection and Management*

Data were generated in the forms of (a) field notes on the interview protocol during both focus group and individual interviews, and (b) digital audio-recordings documenting the exact comments and interactions occurring during the sessions. Field notes documented participants' responses to questions and were recorded as faithfully as possible during the interview session, with no interpretation or themes noted on the interview protocol. It was originally intended that as each new session was conducted, the new audiotape would be transcribed immediately and both new and previous session transcripts would be read, such that each new transcript was read in light of all others. The goal of immediate transcription and reading of each interview session was to reflect on the interview protocol and assess the extent to which it evoked desired responses. Should data have suggested that questions required modification (to better address the research questions) or elimination (in the case of redundancy), these changes could be made immediately.



*Figure 3.* Data analysis “spiral” (Creswell, 1998)

Unfortunately, data collection occurred very quickly over a short period of time (up to 4 interviews conducted in a single day) and the length of time needed to transcribe a single interview (up to 8 hours for the longest interviews) prohibited immediate transcription/reading of each interview session. To maintain a flexible and dynamic interview protocol, the interviewer used field notes and audio-recordings to reflect on the extent to which desired responses were attained for each of the protocol’s questions. In several instances, such reflection led to minor wording changes that better elicited the desired information. For example, when querying on participants’ emotional responses to various experiences in inclusion, the researcher initially relied on the phrase, “How did that make you feel?” However, among educator participants, this

question was typically followed with a non-emotional response (e.g., “I feel like the bad guy a lot of the time.”) As such, queries on emotional reactions were modified to encourage a more emotionally-based response, such as “Try to put yourself back in that moment. What are some of the emotions you were experiencing at that time?” The reflective interviewing process did not result in any substantial modifications to interview questions in terms of question content or desired response.

Following data collection, the first “loop” of Creswell’s spiral consists of creating a reliable data management system, such as file folders, index cards, or computer files. The researcher transcribed interviews using Microsoft Word to type transcripts and Windows Media Player to play back/pause the digital audio-recording of the interview sessions. In accordance with procedures for protecting the identity of participants, target children, and parents, transcripts were written using participant codes or pseudonyms for names relevant to the study. To block identity other non-essential individuals that were occasionally stated throughout the course of the interview (e.g., previous teacher, target child’s sibling, etc.), blackout highlighting (e.g., ██████) or bracketed descriptions (e.g., [brother]) were used in place of the individual’s name.

An issue of primary importance was developing a high-fidelity transcript that accurately reflected the information provided by participants. There are several challenges associated with achieving “verbatim” transcriptions of spoken data noted in the literature, including deliberate alterations of data (e.g., “tidying up” data to make sentences clearer or more succinct), accidental alterations of data (e.g., typos affecting sentence structure, use of quotation marks, omissions, and mistaking words and phrases for others), and unavoidable alterations (e.g., misinterpretations of intonation, verbal and nonverbal cues; Poland, 1995). To counteract these challenges, Poland suggests using transcription syntax and symbols such as brackets, parentheses, ellipses, etc. to systematically convey pauses, laughing, interruptions, etc. (e.g., Silverman, 1993), as well as identifying interviews that were challenging to transcribe and reviewing the transcription on the computer with audiotape rolling while tallying minor (semantic) and major (meaning-altering) errors. There are no clear guidelines in the literature to suggest tolerable levels of error within transcriptions; as such, the researcher reviewed transcripts against audiotapes for the two pilot interviews and tallied errors as described by Poland. Errors were typically word omissions and occasional additions (e.g., inserting “you know” in the incorrect place) and occurred up to 10 times

per transcript. Errors were mostly semantic but occasionally did alter meaning (e.g., omitting the word “not” in the sentence, “I do [not] think it is necessary for kids to be toilet trained...”). Due to the high frequency of such errors, the researcher rewound and played back interview audio while reviewing transcript text after every 5-10 minutes of interview had been transcribed to catch and remedy these types of errors.

To further validate data prior to analysis, individual interview transcripts were sent to participants so they can confirm their accuracy (i.e., member checking, Brantlinger et al., 2005). Participants received their transcripts via email (in PDF format) or U.S. Postal Service; during the interview, participants indicated which method they preferred. As previously described, transcripts were removed of all identifying information to protect the identity of participants, children, and any other individuals discussed in their interviews. Participants received a cover letter along with their transcript that included both directions for the member checking process as well as a key to transcription syntax, formatting, and use of pseudonyms, to facilitate participants’ understanding of their transcript. Member checking procedures were as follows:

1. Participants who were satisfied with the content of their transcript did not need to respond. Participants were informed that if the researcher did not receive a response within 2 weeks of receiving the transcript, transcript was assumed to be accurate. If the participant needed additional time beyond the 2-week review period, the researcher requested that s/he notify her by email, phone, mail, etc. Participants were also informed that they could request a phone conference with the researcher if they would like to discuss their transcript in depth.
2. Participants who wished to make *minor* changes to their transcript (defined as fewer than 5 individual words or 1 phrase/sentence) were instructed to do either of the following:
  - a. Make the change directly on a printed copy of the transcript, highlight the change, briefly explain the reason they wish to make the change, and send the transcript back to the researcher.
  - b. Contact the researcher by email or phone to set-up a phone conference to discuss the change.
3. Participants who wished to make *major* changes to their transcript (defined as more than 5 individual words or 1 phrase/sentence) were advised to contact the



researcher by email or phone to set-up a phone conference to discuss the change(s).

Few participants responded to member checking, such that 18 of 22 total transcripts (82%) were accepted with no changes. The four responding participants requested a total of 6 minor changes and no major changes. On two occasions, participants revised their wording to better reflect their meaning (e.g., one participant changed her comments from “he’s just a punk” to “he just looks like a punk”); two typos also were identified.

*Reading of the Database, Code Development, and External Auditing.*

“Reading” of the database is an important first step that typically occurs simultaneously with data collection. Originally, all interviews were to be transcribed immediately after the interview session; at that time, the researcher also intended to read and comment on transcripts concurrent with data collection as a way to begin developing a coding structure as themes began to emerge from the data. Due to rapid data collection, however, the approach to “reading the database” was modified and mostly occurred after data collection. While transcribing interview/focus group recordings, the researcher developed a preliminary theme list for each research question, including examples, representative quotes and, if appropriate, contradictory information. Consistent with suggestion by Creswell (1998), the researcher started with a short list of tentative codes that reflected common ideas or themes and expanded the list as additional interviews were conducted and transcribed. As the preliminary list grew, the researcher developed a set of theme/code definitions that described the major themes for each research question and the codes used to identify them. Codes consisted of a number-letter combination reflecting its corresponding research question and a brief name describing what the theme entails. For example, the three themes linked to Research Question #1 were coded “1A: Inclusion is...,” “1B: Inclusion is not:” and “1C: Inclusion varies by...” Codes were developed with accompanying definitions that specified what information the code was used to summarize (e.g., 1B: Inclusion is not... was defined as “characteristics, behaviors, or events described as non-examples of inclusion; things that, if observed, would cause them to say that the instructional setting could not be considered truly inclusive”) and sample phrases that illustrated that theme (e.g., “I mean, when you’ve got a kid sitting in the back of a general ed classroom with a para parked by their side doing everything for them, that’s not inclusion”).

After transcription and theme development, the researcher validated and further modified the initial list by examining both focus group interviews, as well as one interview from each of the educator types (general educator, special educator, specialist/administrator) and one parent. Existing themes were refined further by revising their definitions, including representative quotes, or adding sub-themes as needed to adequately convey the theme's meaning; additional themes were added to code definitions to capture additional information pertaining to research questions. Next, the entire doctoral committee reviewed the code definitions, independent of transcripts, to check for consistency with research questions and eliminate any redundancies or potential conflicts among codes. A total of five changes, mostly minor in nature, were made to the code definitions as a result of this feedback.

To promote consistency and accuracy in coding, a doctoral committee member familiar with both the qualitative methodology and the research questions of this study served as an external auditor for the coding process. A representative transcript from each major participant type (educator, parent), as well as both of the focus group transcripts, were selected for external auditing. Electronically coded versions (using the Insert Comment feature of Microsoft Word) of the four transcripts were reviewed by the committee member to cross-check and confirm coding completed by the researcher. Each coded segment of text was reviewed to evaluate the extent to which it was coded in a manner consistent with the code definition. Additionally, the external auditor looked for un-coded text segments that met a code definition and should have been coded. For all segments in which the external auditor disagreed with the use of the particular code, or with the absence of a code, a new comment was inserted by the external auditor explaining the nature of the disagreement. Of the 575 coded text segments contained in the four transcripts, a total of 16 disagreements were identified (97.2% agreement). Disagreements were discussed among external auditor and the researcher via phone and email and were resolved in one of the following ways: (a) an alternative, more appropriate code was applied to the text segment (4 of 16 disagreements, or 25%); (b) the definition of the currently employed code was modified to incorporate the content of the controversial segment (7 of 16 disagreements, or 44%); or (c) a new code was added and defined to represent the content of the controversial segment (2 of 16 disagreements, or 13%). In the case of 3 additional disagreements (19%), no changes were made because the issue of concern was already captured in the full code

definition. Due to the high level of agreement in coding between the researcher and the external auditor, the remaining transcripts were coded without auditing.

#### *Describe and Code in Detail and Context*

Following the development and refinement of thematic codes and definitions, the third “loop” of the analysis process involved describing data in detail, answering the question “what did you see?” in context of the setting, people, event, etc. Interview transcripts were analyzed in a systematic, sequential, and verifiable process through a clear “chain of evidence,” such that all representative quotes of a given theme could be traced back to their location in the original transcript (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Patton, 1990). To facilitate this goal, all transcripts contained the participant’s identification code, date, and line/page numbers so each segment of text could be verified. Each transcript was read in its entirety to identify responses that were salient to the research questions and representative of emergent themes. On the electronic copy of transcripts, coded text segments were marked using the Microsoft Word Insert Comment feature such that they were enclosed with brackets (e.g., [ ]) and highlighted. The theme’s code or codes (e.g., 1-A) was typed into the comment box and any additional information about how the theme should be coded, as well as notes regarding how that segment related to others (e.g., “This view contrasts those of other participants in this building”). Notes were also taken separate from transcripts to describe themes emerging across research questions or within specific participant groups (e.g., educators from a common school, educator roles, parents versus educators, etc.) Finally, a spreadsheet was made in Microsoft Excel with each code from each transcript listed by participant. Codes were sorted and counted to determine the relative frequency of each of the major themes, as well as how many of the participants of each type voiced the theme (e.g., 13/15 teachers described this concern).

#### *Account*

Once major themes were determined and documented, data were interpreted in light of the research context and in reference to perspectives from relevant literature. In addition to a meanings and implications of the studies findings, Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest including a “lessons learned” section. Equally important is finding a compelling mechanism for representing data, in a visual way if at all possible. Data from this study will be represented in a conceptual model diagramming the context, attitudes/beliefs, and processes used by schools to develop educational programs for students with ASD.

## Credibility Measures

In addition to more general criteria for designing and conducting high-quality studies, qualitative researchers also have the task of ensuring that their data are credible and trustworthy. Because qualitative researchers (and phenomenological researchers, in particular) are tasked with harnessing and summarizing subjective realities, perceptions, and interpretations, they do not claim that the data they collect contains the “truth.” Rather, they claim that their research can be deemed “plausible” or “credible” based on the data they have gathered (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Approaches for demonstrating credibility vary according to the specific type and aims of the research and should not be chosen arbitrarily as if from a checklist (Brantlinger et al., 2005). Credibility measures employed in the current study are discussed next in the context of their potential to support the reliability of data collected and/or validity of conclusions drawn from those data.

### *Reliability*

For the sake of external reliability, the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the research design must be described explicitly, the selection of the case must be described accurately, and as many details as possible must be given with regard to the collection of the data as well as to the analysis procedure used (Ghesquière, Maes, & Vandenberghe, 2004). Yin (2003) recommended, “Make as many steps as operational as possible and... conduct research as if someone were always looking over your shoulder” (p. 38). Such efforts allow for the potential of outside replication of the study. One specific mechanism used in qualitative research is an *audit trail*, or a chain of evidence used to monitor fieldwork, data collection, and decision-making in a way that can be checked by an independent auditor, much like accounting records are monitored in a company (Guba & Lincoln, 1989; Patton, 1990). A dissertation lends itself well to the external auditing process, with a detailed manuscript that clearly outlines theoretical frameworks, procedures, and protocols, as well as a team of experienced faculty supporting the development of the proposal, monitoring of data collection and analysis, and evaluation of final conclusions.

With respect to internal reliability, *intra-individual consistency* (Morse & Richards, 2002) is important for demonstrating that codes and themes were adequately defined and consistently applied. During the reading process, as codes emerge from data, the researcher developed a set of code definitions which was reviewed and modified as

necessary by the entire doctoral committee. Then, during the analysis process, the researcher coded segments of text by constantly referring to these code definitions to promote intra-individual consistency. Subsequently, external auditing was conducted by two doctoral committee members to cross-check coding by reviewing coded summaries against code definitions and discussing/resolving any disagreements by modifying code definitions, applying alternate codes, or adding new codes and definitions.

This approach to establishing reliability is notably different than its application within quantitative research, which comes from a more positivist tradition and seeks to ensure that data are collected and analyzed in an objective and consistent fashion, such that all observers come to the same conclusion. The typical quantitative approach to assessing reliability requires that multiple raters examine data separately and simultaneously. Upon comparing their analyses, the raters calculate the percent of total observations in which they apply the same codes (i.e., percent agreement) and compare that number to an agreed-upon standard (e.g., 80% agreement or more; Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 1987) to demonstrate adequate reliability. In the case of qualitative research, however, the researcher *is* the instrument of both data collection and analysis and, as such, it is entirely possible that different people might come to different conclusions about the data.

Qualitative research is not primarily concerned with eliminating *variance* between researchers in the values and expectations they bring to the study, but with understanding how a *particular* researcher's values and expectations influence the conduct and conclusions of the study (which may be either positive or negative) and avoiding the negative consequences. (Maxwell, 2005, italics and parenthetical notations in original text)

Through her engagement with schools and district through data collection, the researcher sought to obtain a unique perspective as a cultural insider with access to rich background information about the context of inclusion; raters external to the research context without this perspective may not interpret data in the same way. The doctoral committee reviewed a researcher identity memo both prior to the proposal and before development of thematic code definitions, to ensure that the researcher's values and expectations are kept separate from data and analysis to the greatest extent possible. Reliability within this qualitative study was considered in terms of intra-individual consistency and external auditing to ensure that the main research instrument (i.e., the

researcher herself) approached the collection and interpretation of data in the most consistent and thorough way possible (Morse & Richards, 2002).

Finally, with regard to internal reliability, this study used *triangulation* of data collection methods (i.e., context interviews, document review, individual participant interviews, and focus groups) to search for convergence of, or consistency among, evidence obtained from data sources. When addressing research questions related to the attitudes, beliefs, and experiences of educators, multiple informants (i.e., several different types of educational professionals, such as general/special ed/inclusion teachers, specialists, and administrators) also were included to provide numerous sources of information within the same school team/building.

#### *Validity*

One of the greatest challenges for a case study design is to ensure validity of findings. Many critics of case study research have legitimate concerns about the extent to which findings are generalizable beyond the immediate sample of participants (i.e., external validity). Yin (2003) cautioned that, because qualitative case studies are developed and conducted with different assumptions than quantitative designs such as surveys or experiments, external validity of case study research must be judged using different assumptions. For example, while many quantitative research designs attempt to garner large participant samples that are heterogeneous and approximate the characteristics of the general population, case studies employ purposive sampling and recruit specific individuals for participation who are likely to provide useful insights or experiences related to the topic of interest. Similarly, many quantitative studies draw their conclusions using tests of statistical significance, asking whether changes or differences observed are larger than those that would be observed “by chance.” Case studies, by contrast, are developed in reference to a particular theory (in this case, phenomenology and attitude theory) and then consider the extent to which findings provide evidence of that theory. Given these differences, Yin (2003) suggested that case studies rely on *analytical generalization*, in which the investigator strives to generalize a set of results to some broader theory used to guide the study’s development.

In addition, external validity in a case study design also emphasizes *transferability*. Case study research, and qualitative research in general, asks whether inferences and interpretations “ring true” with both participants themselves and others in

similar circumstances. This transferability can be achieved by making explicit the specific research context and, in doing so, ensuring that the results may be transferred to situations with similar contextual features. Ghesquière, Maes, and Vandenberghe (2004) suggested, “Painting a true-to-life picture of the situation (including contextual features) makes it more recognizable” (p. 173, parenthetical comment in original text). To accomplish this, the qualitative researcher uses *thick, detailed descriptions* of both the context and the findings, which Geertz (1973) defines as including many quotes and specifics in written summaries and analyses of data to reflect the reality of the participant within his/her context.

Internal validity also is a critical consideration in the case study process. Although phenomenological qualitative research emphasizes the subjective nature of reality and uses inference and interpretation as analysis strategies, it is essential that the researcher clearly demonstrate that he/she arrived at these conclusions in a logical way with as little bias as possible. With regard to the present study, several attempts have been made to enhance internal validity. *Researcher reflexivity*, or an effort to understand and self-disclose assumptions, beliefs, values, and biases related to the topic of interest, was demonstrated via the researcher identity memo. Following the transcription phase, participants were given the opportunity to review and confirm the accuracy of interview transcriptions (i.e., *member checking*), thus ensuring that their attitudes, beliefs, and experiences were represented with fidelity. *Collaborative work* with doctoral committee members in designing the study, developing code definitions, and concurring about conclusions helped to ensure that analyses and interpretations are logical and data-based, not idiosyncratic or biased. As previously discussed, a *logic model* was used to graphically represent themes and interpretations in light of the theoretical foundations of the study. Finally, in the last stage of writing results and discussion of the present study, *thick detailed descriptions* is evident, with sufficient quotes and field note descriptions to provide evidence for researcher’s interpretations and conclusions.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize the findings of this study, with respect to each of the research questions presented in Chapter Three. Demographic information for each of the participants is shared first. Next, each research question is addressed sequentially, with summaries and representative quotes from interviews provided to answer the question “what did you see?” in context of the setting, people, event, etc. (Creswell, 1998). Finally, “super-themes” are summarized last; these are themes that were described by both parent and educators. Super-themes may highlight particularly salient issues in inclusion for students with ASD as perceived across two key stakeholder groups.

#### Participant Demographic Information

##### *Educators*

A total of 15 educators participated in two focus groups ( $N=7$  in Focus Group 1,  $N=8$  in Focus Group 2) and individual interviews. Educator participants were obtained using the purposeful sampling and recruitment procedures discussed in Chapter Three and, as anticipated, at least two participants were recruited from each of the four elementary schools with Autism Inclusion Pods. Educators from School A constituted one-third of the educator participants ( $N=5$ ), while participants from School D comprised another third ( $N=5$ ); the final one-third of participants were recruited from School B ( $N=3$ , 20%) and School C ( $N=2$ , 13%). Educator participants' roles in the school setting were as follows: special education teachers of self-contained classrooms (teaching only students with ASD on IEPs;  $N=6$ , 40%), general education teachers ( $N=3$ , 20%), inclusion resource teachers responsible for students on IEPs for Autism as well as other disabilities across several general education classrooms ( $N=2$ , 15%), specialists/consultants ( $N=2$ , 15% - one behavior specialist and one school psychologist), and building administrators ( $N=2$ , 15% - one principal and one assistant principal).



All educator participants were female and ranged from 25-55 years of age ( $X=40.8$ ; mean was calculated without the age of one participant). Educators ranged considerably in their backgrounds and professional experiences, having worked between 1.5 and 38 years in education ( $X=12.2$ ). Twelve of the 15 educator participants had spent 80% or more of their career working in the participating district, although they were relatively new to their current positions ( $X=5.1$  years in current position, range=1-15 years). Forty percent of participants had obtained advanced degrees ( $N=6$ , M.A. in varying fields), while another 4 participants (27%) were enrolled in a Master's program or were working toward advanced certification (e.g., Florida Autism Endorsement) at the time of the interviews. Although no participants reported having children of their own with ASD diagnoses, several participants reported having children with Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and one participant reported having a brother with high-functioning autism. A detailed summary of educator participants' demographic characteristics can be found in Tables 1 through 4 on the following pages.

Table 1

School A Educator Demographic Information

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Lauren	ESE inclusion resource teacher	Primary (Gr. K-2)	30	5	5	1	7:82	M.A. (Special Ed)	Worked 4 yrs as a General Ed teacher
Julie	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Pre-K (3-5 yrs old)	26	7	7	2	8:8*	B.A. (Special Ed.)	Worked 5 years as an Instructional Assistant and as home therapist for children with disabilities
Beatrice	School psychologist	Pre-K-Grade 5	55	30	20	15	n/a	M.A. in Educ.	Worked 5 yrs as a General Ed teacher

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Continued on next page

Table 1 (Continued)

*School A Educator Demographic Information*

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Natalie	General education teacher	Grade 2	26	4	4	4	2:18	B.A. (Elem Ed)	Has brother with High-Functioning Autism; Previously worked in aftercare for students w/ disabilities. Working on M. Ed. in Ed. Leadership
Joanne	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Primary (Gr. K-2)	46	3	1	3	6:6*	B.A. (Psych)	Worked in another FL district, including 1 year as sub

\*Self-contained teachers noted that most of their students' IEPs were written under the service category of "Autism." Other potential categories applied to children with ASD include Developmentally Delayed (DD – Under 6 years of age), Language Impaired, and Other Health Impairment.

Table 2

School B Educator Demographic Information

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Brandy	ESE inclusion resource teacher	Pre-K-Grade 5	44	12	12	6	12:150 (6 with other disabilities)	B.A. (Varying Excep's)	Took position as behavior specialist at School A in 2006-2007 school year
Darla	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Inter-mediate (Gr. 3-5)	40	7	7	2	8:8*	B.A. (Psych)	Worked as an Instructional Assistant for 5 years

Continued on next page

Table 2 (Continued)

*School B Educator Demographic Information*

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Melody	General Education Teacher	Kinder-garten	46	18	15	15	1:15 (2 with other disabilities)	B.A. (Primary/Elem Ed)	Looped from Kg to 1 <sup>st</sup> grade in 2006-2007 year to continue working with student with ASD; Own children participated as “unified” team members in Special Olympics.

\*Self-contained teachers noted that most of their students’ IEPs were written under the service category of “Autism.” Other potential categories applied to children with ASD include Developmentally Delayed (DD – Under 6 years of age), Language Impaired, and Other Health Impairment.

Table 3

School C Educator Demographic Information

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level(s)</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Frances	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Pre-K (3-5 yrs old)	37	13	6.5	4	4:4*	B.A. (Educ of Hearing Impair.)	Previously taught in classroom for students with Hearing Impairments in neighboring district
Helen	Assistant principal	Pre-K-Grade 5	54	28	28	7.5	n/a	M.A. (Curric. & Instruct.)	Worked as Principal/Assistant Principal at two other schools

\*Self-contained teachers noted that most of their students' IEPs were written under the service category of "Autism." Other potential categories applied to children with ASD include Developmentally Delayed (DD – Under 6 years of age), Language Impaired, and Other Health Impairment.

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Table 4

School D Educator Demographic Information

Educator Pseudo-nym	Position	Grade Level	Age	Total Yrs in Education	Yrs in Current District	Yrs in Current Position	Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom	Highest Degree	Other Relevant Info
Rhiannon	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Pre-K (3-5 yrs old)	28	6	6	6	8:8*	M.A. (Spec Ed)	Taking classes for Autism Endorsement; Special Olympics volunteer.
Simone	ESE self-contained autism teacher	Primary (Gr. K-2)	25	4	4	1	5:7* (Also Mental, Emotional Handicap)	B.A. (Psych)	Working on M.A. (Spec Ed); Took job as S/C Autism teacher at School B in 2006-2007
Tracey	Behavior specialist	Pre-K-Grade 5	28	7	7	1	n/a	M.A. (Varying Excep)	Worked as an ESE Resource Teacher for 6 years and as home therapist for children with disabilities

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Continued on next page

Table 4 (Continued)

*School D Educator Demographic Information*

<b>Educator Pseudo-nym</b>	<b>Position</b>	<b>Grade Level</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Total Yrs in Education</b>	<b>Yrs in Current District</b>	<b>Yrs in Current Position</b>	<b>Ratio of Children w/ ASD to Total Children in Classroom</b>	<b>Highest Degree</b>	<b>Other Relevant Info</b>
Maggie	Principal	Pre-K-Grade 5	“over 50”	38	27	8	n/a	M.A. (Guidance)	Experiences with civil rights movement in childhood and son with ADHD influenced her beliefs about inclusion.
Caryn	General education teacher	Grade 2	47	1.5	1.5	1	2:25	B.A (Sci.)	Working on M.Ed. in Curric./Instruc. Had previous careers as graphic designer and dental hygienist.

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\*Self-contained teachers noted that most of their students’ IEPs were written under the service category of “Autism.” Other potential categories applied to children with ASD include Developmentally Delayed (DD – Under 6 years of age), Language Impaired, and Other Health Impairment.



### *Parent-Sets and Children*

A total of 10 parents (3 fathers, 7 mothers) participated in interviews discussing eight children. Four parents chose to speak individually about their child or children, without the other parent present. The mother and father of three children chose to participate jointly, although in two cases, one member of the parent-set (Luke's mother, Carol, and Alex's father, Rick) provided written input for the study because they were unable to complete the interview session. Although two children from each of the four participating schools were represented through their parents' interviews, as specified in Chapter Three, it should be noted that the two children from School C (Abigail and Chris) were siblings whose separate and shared experiences were conveyed by one parent (Marjorie).

Because parents were invited to participate on the basis of having a child with ASD included in the general education setting 80% or more of their day at one of the four target schools, parent participants' demographic characteristics likely do not reflect the overall diversity of parents in the participating district. Of the 10 participating parents, 90% ( $N=9$ ) identified themselves as Caucasian, while 10% ( $N=1$ ) identified themselves as Hispanic/Latino(a). Parents ranged in age from 35 to 48, with an average age of 40.4 years at the time of the interview. All participating parents were married or remarried, with total children in the home ranging from one to four (mode=3). Of the five parent-sets with two or more children in the home, two indicated having an additional child with a disability or behavioral diagnosis besides the child discussed in this study; one parent reporting having a child with ADHD, while another parent reported having another child with comorbid Asperger's Disorder and ADHD.

Parent participants varied in their educational backgrounds, with 20% ( $N=2$ ) completing some college (no degree conferred), 20% ( $N=2$ ) having earned an Associate's degree, 50% ( $N=5$ ) having earned a Bachelor's degree, and 10% ( $N=1$ ) having earned an advanced degree (Ph.D. in Organizational Psychology). Parents' occupations also ranged considerably, with half of participating parents employed full-time in a position outside of the home ( $N=5$ ), 30% of parents staying at home full-time ( $N=3$ , two mothers and one father), 10% employed part-time ( $N=1$ ), and 10% self-employed ( $N=1$ ). Notably, 90% of participating parents indicated that they had roles in their child's classroom above and beyond typical parental responsibilities. Seven parents (70%) were classroom or field trip volunteers and one parent (10%) was a

member of the PTA. Two parents (20%) reported having specific educational roles at their children's schools, in addition to volunteering in their children's classrooms. Shannon was a substitute teacher at School B and Marjorie, an educational consultant, provided trainings to School C on issues related to autism at the school's request.

Seven boys (87.5%) and one girl (12.5%) were discussed in parent interviews. At the time of the interview, the children were all in elementary school, ranging from Kindergarten to 4<sup>th</sup> grades; the average age was 7.7 years (range=6-10). With respect to specific diagnoses, the majority of children discussed had diagnoses of autism ( $N=6$ , 75%), while two were diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder (25%). Several children also had other medical diagnoses (e.g., epilepsy, asthma, allergies, otitis media). The children varied with respect to educational backgrounds; three of the eight children (37.5%) had been previously placed in a self-contained classroom for children with autism (two in previous districts), while the other five (62.5%) had always been educated in mainstream settings. Two children (25%) had been retained in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade for failure to pass the Florida Comprehensive Achievement Test (FCAT). A summary of demographic information for each parent-set and child is presented in Tables 5 and 6, respectively.

Table 5

Parent Demographic Information

School	Child Pseudonym(s)	Parent Pseudonym(s)	Age(s)	Race/Ethnicity	Total Children in Home	Other Children with Disabilities	Highest Degree	Occupation	School Roles
A	Trevor	Beth	40	Caucasian	3	1 - ADHD	A.A.	Nurse	Classroom volunteer
	Alex	Kim	41	Caucasian	1	n/a	B.S.	Occupational Therapist	PTA
		Rick	39	Caucasian			B.A.	Insurance Clerk	Classroom volunteer
B	Miguel	Linda	41	Hispanic	2	1 – Asperger’s/ ADHD	A.A.	Stay-at-home mom	Volunteer (field trips)
	Ryan	Shannon	38	Caucasian	4	n/a	Some college	Substitute at School B	Classroom volunteer

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Continued on next page

Table 5 (Continued)  
*Parent Demographic Information*

School	Child Pseudonym(s)	Parent Pseudonym(s)	Age(s)	Race/Ethnicity	Total Children in Home	Other Children with Disabilities	Highest Degree	Occupation	School Roles
C	Abigail  Chris	Marjorie	35	Caucasian	3	n/a	Ph.D.	Part-time professor; Full-time educational consultant	Classroom volunteer; Did trainings on autism at school's request
D	Luke	Martin  Carol	48  45	Caucasian  Caucasian	1	n/a	Some college  B.A.	Self-employed  Stay-at-home mom	Volunteer (field trips)
	Mark	Irene	38	Caucasian	3	n/a	B.A.	Pharmaceutical sales	n/a
		Nick	39	Caucasian			B.A.	Stay-at-home dad	n/a

Table 6

*Child Demographic Information*

School	Child Pseudonym(s)	Age	Grade	2005-2006 Classroom Placement	Diagnosis	Previously in Self-Contained?	Other Relevant Info
A	Trevor	10	4	Intermediate Inclusion Pod	Autism, Seizure Disorder	No	Retained in 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade for failure to pass FCAT
	Alex	7	1	Primary Inclusion Pod	Asperger's Disorder	No	History of ear infections, allergies; Significant behavior difficulty (SIB, physical aggression); The following year, Alex's parents withdrew him from public school and began homeschooling him.

Continued on next page

Table 6 (Continued)  
*Child Demographic Information*

School	Child Pseudonym(s)	Age	Grade	Classroom Placement	Diagnosis	Previously in Self-Contained?	Other Relevant Info
B	Miguel	9	3	Intermediate Inclusion Pod	Autism	Yes (different school)	N/a
	Ryan	7	Kg	Primary Inclusion Pod	Autism	Yes (in preschool and slowly transitioned during Kg year)	N/a
C	Abigail	6	Kg	Primary GE Classroom	Autism	No	The following year, Abigail and Chris's parents withdrew them from public school and enrolled them in a home-schooling program (Time4Learning).
	Chris	7	2	Primary GE Classroom	Autism	No	

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Continued on next page

Table 6 (Continued)  
*Child Demographic Information*

School	Child Pseudonym(s)	Age	Grade	Classroom Placement	Diagnosis	Previously in Self-Contained?	Other Relevant Info
D	Luke	9	3	Intermediate Inclusion Pod	Asperger's Disorder	No	Retained in 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade for failure to pass FCAT
	Mark	7	1	Primary Inclusion Pod	Autism, Sensory Integration Disorder	Yes (different district)	n/a

## Research Questions

Focus group and interview data obtained in this study were transcribed and analyzed relative to nine research questions. Patterns and trends are discussed below, with sample quotes provided to illustrate specific experiences or to clarify participants' views. In addition, review of documents on the district's website revealed an articulation of the district's position on inclusion, including definition of inclusion, core beliefs about inclusion, and suggested strategies for making decisions about both "inclusion" and "mainstreaming" for students with all disabilities. Rather than jeopardizing the district's privacy by disclosing the website where this document was obtained, copy of this written statement can be found in Appendix K.

### *Question 1: How Do Educators Operationally Define Inclusion?*

Across educator participants, a good deal of variability was observed in their personal definitions of inclusion but a representative overall definition of inclusion that many participants shared was "to take the kids with special needs and include them in with the Basic Ed kids for as much of the time as you possibly can" (Melody, Interview Lines 247-248). Beyond the general notion of educating students with disabilities alongside GE peers, participants' comments in individual interviews indicated that they believed (a) inclusion for students with ASD is fundamentally different than inclusion for students with other disabilities, and (b) inclusion as a general educational practice is inherently flexible and variable; as such, inclusion is likely to look at least somewhat different for each student with ASD and a single definition cannot capture its broad possibilities.

### *Including Students with ASD Is Different Than Other Kinds of Inclusion*

When asked if they felt that inclusion was somehow different for students with ASD as compared to students with other types of disabilities (e.g., Specific Learning Disability or SLD, Emotional Handicap or EH, etc.), two-thirds of educators ( $N=10$ ) answered in the affirmative. Several participants suggested that GE teachers may require more collegial assistance for developing the necessary supports for included students with ASD (e.g., visual/environmental supports, instructional modifications, behavior management, etc.) than for students with other types of disabilities. Relatedly, participants felt that students with ASD in the GE setting often require more support than students with other disabilities, and in particular may need supports mostly unique to students with ASD, including Occupational Therapy and/or "sensory diets," visual



schedules or other environmental supports, and social skills instruction. In addition, the nature of the social, communicative, and behavioral difficulties associated with ASD can be more of a barrier to the student's integration into the GE classroom than the difficulties of a student with a more academically-oriented disability.

For example, a kid with SLD may not appear on the outside as a special needs child, where other kids really would never think there was anything different. Whereas little kids will ask, especially our little Kindergarteners, (imitating voice) "Why is he screeching? Why does he do that?" Whereas a kid with SLD wouldn't necessarily do any of those things, so, um, those are the kind-of things that can make it sometimes harder for them to be included. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 155-160)

Although the majority of educators felt that inclusion for students with ASD constituted a different variety or breed of inclusion, several educators ( $N=5$ ) indicated that they felt the overall goal and implementation of inclusion is the same for all included students regardless of disability and that only minor differences (e.g., amount of time in GE setting) exist for students with ASD. Several teachers also indicated that while the overall strategies, practices, and implementation of inclusion might not differ substantially by disability category, teachers' expectations (particularly those of GE teachers) of student functioning were believed to be impacted by the student's service category. This is discussed in greater detail under Research Question #2, which comprehensively addresses the role of teacher expectations in inclusive education for students with ASD.

#### *Inclusion Is Defined On a "Case By Case Basis"*

Educator participants frequently stated that inclusion was defined on a "case by case basis." In particular, participants reported that a student's age, academic strengths/weaknesses, communication skills, behavior support needs, personal preferences, and overall independent functioning can play an important role in determining what his or her inclusive experience may look like. Notably, a first-year GE teacher succinctly summarized this view by emphatically stating that inclusion "is just another form of differentiated instruction, and I truly believe that" (Caryn, Interview, Line 110-111). This individualized definition of inclusion was seen by educators as both a strength of the approach, in that students' supports matched their needs, as well as a challenge because there was no one clear definition to guide schools and teachers in

developing inclusive education. When teachers are accustomed to having a manual or script that guides their instruction in a particular content area, this type of ambiguity can cause stress and insecurity.

Academically, educators described a variety of instructional delivery methods used to meet individual strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs of students with ASD. For example, in the content areas in which they are the strongest and closest to the level of their typically-developing peers (e.g., reading), a student might be fully included in GE instruction with minimal support, while in their weaker areas (e.g., math) he or she might receive modified instruction (shortened, with accommodations, etc.), small-group instruction, one-on-one support from the GE teacher, inclusion resource teacher, or Instructional Assistant, or a parallel assignment that matches the student's current skills (e.g., a math assignment on place value while his/her peers work on multi-digit addition). Melody, a general education teacher, provided many examples of individualized approaches to instructing a fully included student with ASD in her Kindergarten class.

Melody: Writing we're still working on. He, um, he just, he can't put a string of words together to make any sense. Like he can draw something and label it, but... to actually, I guess because he doesn't communicate... So we started working on where he drew the picture and he, you know, the rest of the kids would all be writing and then my assistant would work with him where he would draw his picture. And then she'd do over and write a sentence for him, and then he'd copy it. And then the next day, we'd work with that same sentence, we'd cut it all up and give it back to him and... 'Cause everything had to be so... everything had to be so structured for him and in sequence for him to get it, and that's why certain things... there were certain math skills we didn't even bother with because we knew that there was no way he was ready to get it.

Jenine: Such as?

Melody: Um, graphing.

Jenine: Okay.

Melody: He just, he just wanted... he saw those blank boxes, he wanted something in every box. Um, he didn't get that. He didn't get the idea of which number is bigger, which number is more. He got things that were very concrete. We did teach him to add and we did teach him to subtract, but we did it with

colors. You know, I did it with a red circle and a blue circle and red bears and blue bears, so he did learn how to do that. But if it wasn't super concrete and super-sequential, it was real difficult for him to get it. Science concepts, he wasn't able to get those... It was... it was a challenge. (Melody, Interview, Lines 299-327)

In addition, because of the district's Continuous Progress model and multi-age groupings, older students in the primary pods (e.g., second grade) might participate in specific content area instruction with their younger peers (e.g., Kindergarten or first grade) if it better matches their individual instructional levels. This approach is not unique to students with ASD, but rather, is core to the district's overall instructional model and is heavily utilized for students with other difficulties such as Specific Learning Disability.

Educator participants often described utilizing the individual preferences, interests, or areas of academic strength of students with ASD as reinforcers, particularly to encourage participation in unpreferred activities. On a few occasions, participants indicated that the child him/herself would be a good source of information about why certain situations are more challenging than others, what specific interests/preferences are, and what type of supports might be helpful.

I was gonna say, maybe do like an interest inventory, to figure out what motivates him to maybe deal with the "It's too hard situation" with like a "First/then" board. You know, if he first does this task that he thinks is too hard then maybe he can have something that is a high motivator. (Tracey, Focus Group 1, Lines 1525-1528)

Many participants spoke of the notion of tailoring length of a student's GE time to their specific needs, such that it appeared to be core to the overall definition of inclusion. Darla, a self-contained teacher of students with ASD in 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grades, stated, "I think inclusion can mean anything from being included in the general curriculum for as little as 15 minutes a day for a socialization time to a full inclusion child, meaning a child who is placed in an inclusion pod and stays there for the majority or all of their day with extra support" (Interview, Lines 203-206). Hence, based on a student's overall support needs and the degree to which they match the instructional offerings GE setting, he or she could be included in the GE setting on a part-time or full-time basis. For example, some lower functioning students in self-contained classrooms may be placed in GE

classrooms on a very limited basis (e.g., one activity) with no further expectation for increased GE participation. For a student in a self-contained classroom whose team wanted him to eventually be placed in GE on a full-time basis, a commonly described practice was to place him in a GE classroom for a short period of time (e.g., for one content area or one activity), and then gradually increase time spent in GE as his became acclimated to the setting, peers, and overall expectations. Higher functioning students new to the district or beginning in Kindergarten might be automatically placed in an Autism Inclusion Pod on a full-time basis, with no participation in or support from the self-contained classroom. Students in the latter circumstances were often referred to as “fully included.” For a discussion of the student characteristics and other decision-making factors associated with “full inclusion” versus more restrictive placements, refer to Research Question #5.

Finally, several educators emphasized that, due to the inherently variable nature of inclusion and all of the previously-discussed individual considerations, inclusion looks and feels fundamentally different than typical GE instruction in terms of student behaviors, need for instructional accommodations, and environmental supports for students with sensory sensitivities (e.g., use of tennis balls on the bottom of chairs to decrease scraping sounds, picture schedules, etc.).

I used to think that sometimes people would walk into my room and think that it looked like absolute chaos, but as long as there’s learning happening, to me, it doesn’t really matter what it looks like. It doesn’t matter if a classroom full of kids are sitting on chair balls, um... One, I just had a teacher create this space this year, a home space or a safe spot, I always had one of those behind my desk, which some people don’t typically have. You know, so you could walk into my classroom and kids are sitting on [tennis] balls and there’s one kid appearing to be hiding behind the desk, and you know, there’s just a lot of things going on, a lot of movement, but as long as there’s learning going on, it doesn’t matter what it looks like. (Lauren, Interview Lines 166-174)

#### *Inclusion Is NOT Being Dependent On an Adult Aide*

Many participants found it helpful to define inclusion by clarifying what they believe it is *not*, or by sharing experiences they found to be non-examples of inclusion (refer to Research Question 4 – Experiences in Inclusion for more non-examples).

Throughout these non-examples, a consistent theme was that if a student is dependent upon a full-time adult aide to be in a GE setting, they are not “truly included.”

To me, including them means including them in a normal education. Does that normal education mean with someone sitting right there with them, 7 hours a day? To me, no. Does it mean having someone available if they need help? Yes. (Frances, Interview, Lines 135-138)

Students with ASD needing very intense levels of ongoing assistance in the GE classroom are sometimes paired with what participants referred to as a “one-on-one” or a “shadow.” In the participating district, this person is typically a Special Education Instructional Assistant (IA). In some cases, the IA is exclusively dedicated to supporting the individual child with ASD in the GE setting and their support role may not be extended to other students in the classroom; in other cases, the IA is assigned to an entire inclusion pod to meet the needs of numerous students but their role may evolve into one of primary responsibility for an individual student with intensive support needs. Although use of a one-on-one IA was occasionally described as a potentially useful support that can facilitate a student’s acclimation to the GE setting ( $N=3$ : Maggie, Tracey, and Simone, all from School D), educator participants mostly felt that the use of a full-time IA can be a barrier to the student’s integration into the GE environment ( $N=9$ , including Tracey and Simone, who were also positive about the use of one-on-ones in some situations).

To explain their resistance to relying on one-on-one IAs for students with ASD, educators described many instances of students becoming dependent on the IA rather than accessing other, more naturalistic forms of support that are available in the GE setting such as their GE peers or teachers. When students with ASD are paired with an IA on a full-time basis,

...the child’s basically just learning to interact with that adult, not really the mainstream. And then the child never has to wait their turn! (laughs) Or share materials or... That one-on-one para provides all of the cues for them to socially interact, “now’s the time, now you do this,” they don’t have it on their own.

(Beatrice, Interview, Lines 715-717, 735-737)

Educators also indicated that students receiving one-on-one adult support may have different experiences because their IA may anticipate and intervene in or prevent conflict situations that might have been beneficial for students with ASD to experience and learn

from (“teachable moments,” according to Tracey). In general, most educator participants believed that students in GE settings with a full-time one-on-one IA would not be exposed to the social, academic, and behavioral expectations of the mainstream setting, and thus may receive fewer benefits from inclusion than their included peers with ASD who had less intensive adult assistance.

Finally, several educator participants suggested that when students who are significantly below grade level do obtain the assistance of a full-time IA, it is most likely the result of parent advocacy. Although parent participants were not asked about this issue directly, two parents did indicate a positive inclination toward a full-time one-on-one. Shannon, Ryan’s mother, stated emphatically, “My idea of successful inclusion for Ryan would be more one-on-one with the aide” (Shannon, Line 595) Beth, Trevor’s mother, spoke more broadly about the need to integrate all students with disabilities regardless of severity, using a one-on-one if necessary to help them access a mainstream setting.

Because a child who needs to be toileted, needs to be fed, needs to have one-on-one because they cannot write and they have to use a computer or whatever the case is, if they have a one-on-one, then by all means, let that child be in the classroom. Because they’re people, for goodness sake! They just want to be with other people! They’re not freaks, they’re not animals, they’re not to be put in a cage just to be observed, you know, they’re just little people who have feelings and desires and strengths and weaknesses, they just have different levels of skill that another child takes for granted. (Beth, Lines 452-459)

#### *“Inclusion” vs. “Mainstreaming:” Distinguishing Terminology*

Analysis of participants’ usage of specific terminology suggests there is some degree of confusion about the difference between “inclusion” and “mainstreaming” as instructional practices. More than half of the educator participants ( $N=8$ ) used the word “inclusion” exclusively to refer to a variety of configurations. For example, Darla, a teacher of an intermediate self-contained autism classroom at School B, used the term “inclusion” to refer to the placement of a student with ASD in a GE classroom on a full-time basis, as well as to brief periods of time that her self-contained students with significant support needs spent in GE classrooms to socialize with their typically-developing peers. By contrast, six of the participants used the words “inclusion” and “mainstreaming” to refer to different approaches to educating SE students with respect

to their GE peers. When participants used the term “mainstreaming” in their responses, they were probed to clarify if they distinguished these two terms as being different in practice and, if so, in what ways. The participants distinguished the practice of “inclusion” from that of “mainstreaming” in two ways: (a) degree of membership in the GE classroom, and (b) degree of support in the GE classroom.

*Degree of membership.* Proponents of the membership view ( $N=3$ : Rhiannon, Tracey, and Melody) described “mainstreaming” in ways that suggested students were there to access things (e.g., curriculum, activities, peer interactions) that were not otherwise available in a GE setting. Students from the self-contained classroom visited GE classrooms on a limited basis with the self-contained SE teacher maintaining responsibility for coordinating the student’s program. By contrast, “inclusion” was used to denote the practice of placing a student with ASD into a GE classroom on a full-time basis, with the GE and inclusion resource teacher taking ownership of that student’s IEP.

*Degree of support.* An alternative definition of “mainstreaming” was articulated by three participants (Helen, Beatrice, and Joanne), indicating that students who are “mainstreamed” when they demonstrate a degree of readiness and who receive less support than their “included” counterparts. Helen, an administrator of a school with programs for students with a variety of exceptionalities, saw that the terms and their corresponding practices were used differently by teachers of students with Emotional Handicap/Severe Emotional Disturbance (EH/SED) and Learning Disability (LD).

Helen: I see... EH/SED and LD “mainstreaming” their kids. I see Autistic teachers “including” their kids.

Jenine: And what’s the difference?

Helen: I think you... they, see, and this is where I’m still cloudy, because I read one thing and I see practice different...Um, I think the EH/SED and LD teachers see kids as being ready for mainstream if they are successful enough in the subject and their behaviors are under control enough to send them without support to another teacher. I see their entire class... going to lunch, recess, and specials as their way of having of having minutes on an IEP saying they’re with the general population. In which case, a para goes with them... I see [inclusion] as different. I see it as the children have supports with them, accommodations are made for them. The time they are out varies child per child, if it doesn’t work

one day, we try again the next. The accommodations will vary from day to day.

It's much more fine-tuned. (Helen, Interview Lines 142-170).

Joanne, a teacher new to the participating district, noted that in addition to observing that "inclusion" and "mainstreaming" are used to convey different approaches to integrating SE students much like Helen describes above, she also noticed that the participating school district almost exclusively used the term "inclusion" to refer to their education of SE students alongside GE peers, while her previous school district of employment (also in Florida) used the term "mainstreaming."

Finally, a noteworthy discussion of the "inclusion vs. mainstreaming" terminology came up in the interview with Marjorie, a parent of two included children with ASD at School C and an educational consultant.

Marjorie: I think when people say mainstreaming, they mean inclusion. And I think that, um (long pause), people use mainstreaming incorrectly.

Mainstreaming is, "Well, we just have to do away with all of our segregated classrooms and put them into the regular ed, uh..." Whereas inclusion is more about including (long pause), um, at their own level, but still a natural environment.

Jenine: Let me see if I'm understanding you. Would you say that mainstreaming is, "We're not doing special ed, we're just putting everybody in there,"—

Marjorie: (overlapping) Yup. From now on, no special ed!

Jenine: Okay.

Marjorie: There you go.

Jenine: No supports in the general ed setting?

Marjorie: Well, I think definitely you would have to, but I think when many, like I said, when they use them interchangeably, it kind-of muddies the waters. But I think that's what most people, when they think of mainstreaming, there's just going to go in the regular room... yeah, when I think people talk about mainstreaming, that's what they believe is that, if the child gets to the point where we can cure them of their disability to the point that they are, um... not two standard deviations below the mean anymore, that's mainstreaming.

Jenine: Oh, okay, so it's more along the lines of... you have been remediated or something's changed and now you can be dismissed—



Marjorie: (overlapping) Or you only need slight, you only need consultative services instead of... (Marjorie, Interview Lines 741-770)

Overall, educators and parents from the participating district seemed to characterize education for students for ASD in the GE setting as “inclusion” rather than “mainstreaming,” primarily due to the ongoing provision of individualized supports and secondarily due to the emphasis on integration and membership for many included students. This distinction between “inclusion” and “mainstreaming” practices is related to themes about the broad purposes for placing students with ASD in GE settings, which are discussed in greater detail under Research Question #7.

Distinctions between “the concept of inclusion” and “traditional mainstreaming” are also highlighted in the district’s written position on inclusion. Notably, the district’s statement suggests that the difference between these two practices is *not* in educators’ approach to integrating or supporting students with ASD in the GE setting; rather, the distinction lies in how educators make placement decisions for students with ASD. The written statement posits:

The essential difference between the concept of inclusion and of traditional mainstreaming lies in the key question the IEP team asks in determining the placement of a student. The difference in the two questions is a fundamental shifting of responsibility from the student proving an ability to survive in the mainstream to that of the staff identifying the specific supports the student needs for a successful placement. The placement decision focuses on the level and nature of supports required by the individual student, not a predetermined label/program delivery model. (From district’s website – see Appendix K for complete document)

This statement suggests that district leaders also view the “inclusion vs. mainstreaming” debate as being mediated by the degree of support a student needs to be successful in the GE setting. In addition, wording of the above statement proposes the need to shift the focus of placement decisions *away* from a readiness model of mainstreaming (i.e., “Has the student with ASD shown they are ready to be placed in a typical classroom?”) and *toward* a need-based model of inclusion (i.e., “What kinds of supports would this individual student with ASD need to be successful, and can we feasibly arrange those supports in the GE setting?”).

### *Question 2: What Are Educators' Beliefs Regarding Inclusion of Students with ASD?*

Educator participants shared a great many thoughts and ideas about inclusion for students with ASD over the course of individual interviews and focus groups. Not only did participating educators espouse their own beliefs about inclusion, they also hypothesized about the beliefs of parents and other teachers, particularly as they related to sources of resistance or conflicts about inclusive education. Participants' beliefs about perceived benefits of inclusion as a service delivery model are described first, including the mutual benefits that inclusion affords students with ASD, their GE peers, and even school personnel. The next section articulates participating educators' beliefs about sources of resistance to inclusion for teachers facing it for the first time, including perceived expectations of inclusion, limited understandings of autism, and a desire to maintain the classroom's status quo. Participants' ideas for overcoming sources of resistance to inclusion are summarized. Finally, educators' ideas about parents of students with ASD are delineated, including parents' perceived reactions to a diagnosis of autism for their child, advocacy efforts within the school system, and reasons for seeking or resisting inclusion for their individual child.

#### *Benefits of Inclusion*

Throughout interview and focus group discussions, educators spoke in mostly positive terms about inclusive education. As previously discussed, participants were careful to describe inclusion as a practice that is defined and developed on a case-by-case basis; however, participants were generally of the belief that inclusion was a valuable practice that could yield positive outcomes not only for students with ASD, but for their GE peers and the teachers around them. The most commonly noted benefits were as follows: (a) inclusion can "force" students with ASD to develop new skills through engagement in challenging academic tasks and new social situations; (b) through classroom exposure, teacher modeling, and direct training, GE peers can learn increased sensitivity and appreciation for individual differences; and (c) class-wide implementation of behavior supports and teaching of social skills can benefit entire classes of students.

*Inclusion can "force" development.* Although the LRE mandate of federal special education legislation serves as a compelling impetus for educating students with disabilities alongside their GE peers, educator participants articulated a belief that, due to the nature of their disorder, students with ASD are especially likely to need and

benefit from access to typically developing peers who model age-appropriate language, social skills, and behavior. Several participants spoke of inclusion “forcing” children with ASD to develop new skills because of the high expectations placed upon them by both peers and adults. Communication and social skills were most often cited as skills that increase dramatically in inclusive environments. For example, Darla noted that she has seen the “will for communication” increase when students with ASD find themselves surrounded by more receptive communication partners (Interview, Lines 586-589). Similarly, Melody came to this realization after observing her included student in a self-contained context (a summer program only for students with disabilities) and noting that the student had regressed in some of his social skills without the opportunities for peer interaction afforded in his inclusive classroom the year prior. She asserted that this observation would be her single biggest reason for supporting inclusive education (Interview, Lines 1068-1077).

In fact, comments from educator participants suggested they attribute much of inclusion’s positive impact on students with ASD to peer modeling. Educators from both GE and SE settings believed that children with autism have a propensity to imitate behaviors (both appropriate and inappropriate) of others in their environments. Inclusive placements offer students with ASD the opportunity to imitate desirable behaviors such as sitting quietly during classroom instruction, making conversation or participating in reciprocal activities, completing classroom routines, and working independently. In addition to promoting task-related and social behaviors, peer models in the GE setting were also credited with helping to extinguish undesirable behaviors in some cases.

I think some part of their day should be in inclusion. Because, especially with these kids with autism, I think if they’re only around other kids with autism, all the time, especially ones who imitate behaviors, they’re going to imitate behaviors of other kids with autism around them. If they’re around Basic Ed kids, they may eventually start to pick up on some of those behaviors, even if it is only sitting on the floor at circle time with all of the rest of the kids. But there are kids, this one boy that we have, he comes in to a classroom just for circle time, he comes in the morning, he sits on the floor with the other kids and he just watches. Again, he’s one of those you don’t know what he’s getting out of it, but he sits there. I’ve never seen him sit on the floor in his self-contained class. Ever. He’s a different kid in there. And it’s just so funny that he just walks right in and sits down and,

it's just like he knows what to do when he's in there, and he knows that there's a different expectation when he's in his other classroom. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 783-701)

Many participants discussing this belief also linked these changes in behaviors to a student's increased understanding of the overall behavioral expectations in the GE setting (e.g., "We don't do that in here") or to additional interventions and supports that may have helped students with ASD decrease inappropriate behaviors (e.g., visual supports, prompting/cueing). Nevertheless, educators firmly attributed much of the positive behavior change to the impact of peer role models.

Melody: ...so many of those behaviors just disappeared.

Jenine: Why do you think that is?

Melody: Because they had all of those role models in there.

Jenine: Oh, okay.

Melody: They had all of those role models of, if everyone else was sitting and working and he would start to make noise, we would use pictures to get him to stop making the noise and then eventually the noises disappeared. And he, by the end of the year, he's be looking at everybody else. He'd be looking at them to see what they are doing. (Melody, Focus Group, 514-527)

Only two participants (Lauren and Rhiannon) indicated that imitating others' behavior is a skill that may or may not be present in students with autism. Rhiannon asserted that when present, imitation is an asset in the inclusion setting; however, when absent, imitation can and should be taught directly as a part of social skills instruction. Teaching a boy with ASD in her self-contained classroom to look to peers when he was unsure about how to behave was believed to have facilitated his eventual inclusion in GE settings.

*GE peers can become sensitive to differences.* Educator participants felt strongly that inclusive education had the power to positively impact GE students as well, by helping them learn to understand and support their peers with learning and/or behavioral differences. In some cases, educators felt that students naturally learned to accept and support their peers with ASD through exposure to the students and teacher modeling. GE students took on caretaking and encouraging roles toward their peers with ASD, without being asked or prompted, and became natural teachers in classroom and social settings. In other cases, educators felt that direct training about disabilities

and differences was helpful in creating awareness and understanding. Educators often made comments like that of Tracey, a behavior specialist at School D, who lamented, “I think kids are really mean nowadays and, you know, they think nothing of making fun or saying that a kid’s retarded, and I don’t think they think anything of it because, you know, they just think the kid doesn’t understand when really he does” (Interview, Lines 218-221). Educators indicated that explaining the behavior of students with ASD to their GE peers as it was happening, as well as giving ideas and encouragement for interacting with or assisting that student, helped create teachable moments that promoted understanding in inclusive classrooms. By helping GE peers better understand the reasons why students with ASD may have tantrums, flap their hands, use pictures to communicate, or have difficulty playing with friends, educators believed that they helped alleviate fears and make students with ASD more approachable. Additionally, classroom lessons from guidance counselors emphasizing character traits relative to their peers with disabilities were used at each of the schools as a part of a larger district character development program, while at School B an additional buddy program was created for students with and without disabilities to participate together in activities during an after-school club.

Despite these efforts, many educators asserted that much more peer training for understanding and interacting with students with disabilities was needed. Tracey indicated that although some degree of classroom training was done, School D struggled its first year as a new school because students were not used to having so many peers with so many disabilities (ASD, SLD, Hearing Impairment, and Varying Exceptionalities). She pointed to both training and opportunities for interaction with peers with disabilities as equally essential ingredients to helping GE students fully accept their peers with ASD.

I think when I look at how come it wasn’t really successful this year and how come our kids were so mean this year, part of me wants to say it’s because it’s new to them, and a lot of things that are new, kids reject. And so I think that next year if we do a better job of going to each classroom and doing some type of disability awareness, the newness, hopefully these kids will learn that this is a part of their community, this is a part of their school, and you know, if they have the time or the exposure to maybe work with [the self-contained classes]... Because I think that a lot of it is fear of the unknown. And it’s easier to joke about the unknown, but if you understand it, then a lot of times kids will get

interested or kids won't make fun of it or won't do anything because they know. So I think that educating everyone as a whole, first-off, education being the first thing, but maybe creating a situation where they might interact, that might be the next level. But I think if kids are immersed in it and are around differences, then they are more accepting of it. But you know, that's the only thing I can pin on as to why our kids are so mean here! (Tracey, Interview, Lines 356-364)

Finally, several educators pointed out that by educating typically developing peers about disabilities and helping them become comfortable in interacting with their classmates with ASD, they were opening the door for a lifelong acceptance of individuals with disabilities that could be continued into adulthood and passed on to others (e.g., friends, parents, children, etc).

*Class-wide strategies can benefit all.* Educators consistently stated a belief that the strategies often used for included students with ASD can be useful for GE students with similar difficulties; in many cases, they noted, these strategies are best implemented class-wide. Class-wide strategies can assist in integrating the student with ASD into the GE environment by ensuring he/she doesn't "stick out" unnecessarily from their GE peers. In addition, class-wide picture schedules, First/Then boards, and other environmental or behavioral supports not only establish a comprehensible and motivating environment for the student with ASD but help the entire group of students know what to expect. The latter view was emphasized in both focus group sessions as participants developed an instructional program for a hypothetical student in response to the vignette, and was particularly well-represented in the second focus group.

Helen: Also, he has a hard time with routine.

Jenine: Okay, how do we work with that?

Beatrice: You have to directly teach Kindergarten routine.

Melody: But Kindergarten should be so structured anyway that—

Beatrice: (overlapping) It should be what you normally do.

Melody: Yes.

Joanne: But he sounds like he would need a picture schedule, he needs a little extra. So what's gonna happen next, he just needs to have that out for him so he knows what's going to happen all day.

Natalie: That's something that can be enlarged for the whole class, too, because you get a bunch of 5-year-olds in the room they're just a mess.

Beatrice: Yeah, good point.

Darla: (overlapping) That's what I was going to say, I think that every inclusion room should have a picture schedule.

Natalie: (overlapping) Yeah, especially in Kindergarten.

Beatrice: (overlapping) Yeah, it is a good idea.

Joanne: (overlapping) Yeah, I use one, I look at the kids' schedule throughout the day, the picture schedules, like, "What are we doing next? OK!" (laughter)

(Focus Group 2, Lines 1938-1967)

Additionally, for students in primary grades, many of the deficient skills requiring instruction or intervention for students with ASD (e.g., social interaction skills, mastery of classroom routines, independent work behaviors) are also just emerging in typically-developing students; class-wide programs can promote skill growth in an entire cohort of students and can be easier to implement in a large-group setting than one-on-one.

It was one of those things where our ESE teacher, you know, she would say to me, "You need to do this Skillstreaming everyday." And I'd be like, "(sigh) Everyday?" It was like, "First of all there's no time for that, with all of this other stuff that I have to do, and, well, they should know that anyway, and I think the other kids should know that anyway." But I've since found that in primary, that no, none of them really know that anyway and it's good for everybody. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 254-259)

#### *Sources of Teachers' Resistance to Inclusion*

Although the educators who participated in this study saw inclusion as flexible and individualized, felt that inclusion almost "forces" development in children with ASD, and recognized that instructional and behavioral supports used for students with ASD could benefit many or all students in a class, these same participants voiced doubts that all teachers felt as positively about inclusion. Educator participants expressed a variety of beliefs about teachers (both GE and SE) who may be reluctant to include students with ASD in their classrooms. Teachers' background knowledge and expectations regarding both inclusive education in general, and students with ASD in particular, were believed to play a significant role in teachers' willingness to have students with ASD in their class. Furthermore, they suggested that their colleagues' limited understanding of autism and inclusion can breed fears that they may be ill-equipped to handle a student with ASD (discussed in greater detail under Research Question 3 – Emotional

Reactions). In turn, inexperience or limited understanding, coupled with fear of failure or poor outcomes, can lead resistant teachers to either reject students with ASD outright or to approach them as a distraction to be minimized.

*Typical teaching versus inclusion.* Consistent with participants' definition of inclusion as looking fundamentally different than typical classroom instruction, participants also indicated that when teachers initially experience inclusion their assumptions and expectations about instruction and classroom management are challenged. For example, a teacher may be used to delivering large-group instruction by standing stationary at a chalkboard or overhead projector while students follow along quietly from their seats; modifying this lesson plan for a student with ASD who has weak receptive language skills and learns best by interacting with objects could be significantly challenging for the teacher. Relatedly, educators may have general behavioral expectations for students such as remaining seated and quiet, asking permission to be out of seat, and raising hands to ask questions or make comments. Students with ASD who have difficulty inhibiting off-topic comments or remaining seated for long periods will have greater difficulty adhering to these class-wide expectations. For teachers unaccustomed to inclusion, these differences can make the adjustment a difficult one. When teachers *are* familiar with inclusion through prior experiences with students with SLD, they may have unrealistic or inappropriate expectations for students with ASD and can become frustrated when these students need greater support than they are used to providing. Brandy described teachers at School B as resistant to inclusion because they expected students with ASD to be highly independent, nearly age-appropriate in their language and behavior, and ready for grade-level (or just below) instruction; many of these teachers had some experience with inclusion for students with SLD at previous schools but were teaching students with ASD in the GE setting for the first time.

Beyond learning *how* to accommodate students with ASD, several parents also suggested that some teachers may find it unfair to do so. Some GE teachers believe that providing accommodations or modifications to help the student with ASD meet those general expectations or having a completely different set of expectations for just one student constitutes "preferential treatment." Kim (Alex's mother) reported overhearing teachers stating that it was unfair that her son was receiving rewards for behavior generally expected of all students in his classroom. Marjorie (Chris and Abby's mother) reiterated this observation on several occasions in her interview, indicating that ideas for



both minor accommodations (e.g., having a water bottle on Chris's desk instead of using the fountain) and assessment/assignment modifications (e.g., giving a book report orally instead of in writing) were consistently rejected as being "unfair" because they did not match the expectations applied to the rest of the class.

Working in an inclusive model requires that teachers collaborate and consult with each other. A prevailing expectation voiced by educator participants was that struggling classroom teachers can and should independently seek support when they are unable to resolve a problem with a student with ASD on their own. In addition, the Autism Inclusion Pod structure, as well as the IEP process in general, facilitates a team approach to instruction where many people have input on how a student with ASD is instructed or supported. Educator participants perceived that some teachers who are resistant to inclusion, particularly those with considerable teaching experience, were "territorial" and did not welcome the input or opportunity to collaborate with their peers. Brandy indicated that some of the teachers she worked with at both School A and School B thought they could "handle it on their own" and resisted her attempts to provide support because they did not feel they needed help with teaching students with ASD, nor wanted any resources she had to offer (Brandy, Interview, Lines 111-116). Similarly, Darla, also from School B, indicated that teachers may be reluctant to ask for that help when it is needed because they are concerned it will make them look ineffective. She concluded that teachers in this situation may just opt to keep students with ASD out of their classroom entirely to avoid the additional stress and responsibilities that they can bring.

...if a teacher reaches out for support, like the one circumstance that I was talking about that the teacher worked with the inclusion teacher and the behavior specialist? That teacher was willing to come and say, "I'm having this problem, what do I do?" Because of her willingness to do that, she got a lot of support. But then some other teachers may sit in their classroom with a problem and not reach out and say, "This is the specific problem, I need a specific answer." And (...) so I think a lot of it comes from willingness to ask for the support... I think that we all have a little (...) thinking that we (...) are less of a person if we have to ask for help, and I think that (...) I think more teachers would ask for help if they had children with autism in their classroom, but I think (...) they see it as so much work that they're just trying to keep them out! (Darla, Interview, 706-709)

Notably, however, Melody indicated an alternative perspective on the issue of territoriality, suggesting that at times she was being told to use strategies (e.g., time-out) with which she personally disagreed; her refusal to use these supports was more of a philosophical protest to the strategy itself rather than a rejection of the person making the recommendation (Interview, Lines 785-801).

Concerns about the additional responsibilities of having a student with ASD in their classroom can be a major source of resistance for many GE teachers, according to educators in this study. With regard to one teacher in her building, Maggie stated succinctly, "It would be hard work and I don't know that she wants to work that hard" (Interview, Lines 1033-1034). Educators generally perceived that inclusion was more-time consuming than "typical teaching" and indicated that some teachers may be unwilling to accept these additional responsibilities. Modifying the curriculum for students below grade-level, implementing and collecting data on behavior plans, responding to frequent parent contacts, using picture-based communication, social stories, or other specific supports, providing constant prompting and monitoring, implementing classroom and testing accommodations, having to stick to a tight schedule to maintain a predictable environment, and participating in numerous meetings were all recognized as new or intensified expectations for teachers taking on inclusion for the first time.

*Limited understanding of ASD.* Although some teachers may be unfamiliar with or resistant to the idea of inclusive education in general, more often it is their limited understanding of students with ASD that creates the most significant barrier to successful inclusion. In general, participants felt that teachers receive little training about ASD; specials teachers (e.g., P.E., music, art) were mentioned by participants as a subgroup of teachers that are particularly unlikely to have knowledge of ASD or realistic expectations of students on the autism spectrum because they have minimal or no training or exposure to it. Among teachers who may be somewhat aware of ASD, more than half of educator participants ( $N=8$ ) and two parent participants felt that their images and definitions of the disorder tend to be stereotypical or significantly limited in breadth. These participants suggested that GE teachers faced with the prospect of having a student with ASD in their classroom for the first time may rely on media portrayals of individuals with autism such as *Rain Man*, which depicts an adult man with autism. As a result, these teachers may expect their prospective student to have similar

communication, behavior, and splinter skills as this iconic film character, without fully understanding the significant range of ability and disability that characterizes the autism spectrum.

In addition, participants believed that teachers unfamiliar with ASD tend to associate the diagnosis of “autism” with characteristics of the lowest functioning individuals on the spectrum, including severe tantrums, nonverbal forms of communication, and delayed cognitive ability. Several participants hypothesized that GE teachers working in schools that house self-contained classes for students with ASD may be more susceptible to these expectations, as they may have observed students from these classrooms having “meltdowns” in the cafeteria or running away from staff members in the hallway. Natalie, a GE teacher in an inclusion pod who also has a teenage brother with Asperger’s Disorder, described how teachers with these stereotypical or limited expectations may be less willing to include a student with ASD in their classroom.

Natalie: I think that unfortunately people get an idea of what to expect in their head and they picture the kids that are in self-contained who are nonverbal or you know, having... (trails off) They’ll see them in the hallways making noises or screaming, or whatever, and think, “How am I supposed to get my job done?” So, you know, I don’t know if it’s just not wanting to deal with it or if they are genuinely thinking about the other students in the classroom. (long pause)

Jenine: So it sounds like there’s a lot of things that might be going through teacher’s minds.

Natalie: (overlapping) Yeah, when I, when my brother was younger and I would talk to people about him, being autistic, if they had heard of that, they would be like, “Oh, like *Rain Man*? What can he do?” I’m like, “What can he do?” And I’d just be like, “Well, yesss, that can happen sometimes.” (laughs)

Jenine: (laughing) Like, “What’s his special skill, can he count cards?”

Natalie: I’m just like, “He doesn’t need to, he’s not a circus poodle, he’s not going to jump through flaming hoops!” You know, just like, and having to not look at people like, “Are you kidding me?” when you hear stuff like that! (laughs) But just, people have these ideas! I mean it’s funny, looking back on it, but at the time it was like, “People, are you kidding me?”

Jenine: Do you think teachers have a lot of those same expectations when they hear about kids with autism spectrum disorders?

Natalie: I wouldn't be surprised. Um, and even talking to other teachers that have been in my school in the past about inclusion and what-not, "Oh, well, I don't want to teach inclusion, I'm going to have a baby next year and I don't want them kicking me or hurting me, if they're going to have a tantrum, I don't want to have to wrestle some kid." ...I'm like, "Well, I've never had to wrestle anybody," you know?" But they get that, that image of like the low-functioning, possibly violent tantrums, they get that in their head and they don't want to deal with it. (Natalie, Interview, Lines 681-717)

*Striving to maintain status quo.* Participants believed that when teachers lack a complete understanding of the needs of their students with ASD, they are less likely to be open to having these students in their classroom or to work with students with ASD in effective ways. In some cases, teachers were described as actively trying to prevent the GE placement of students with ASD or rejecting them shortly after their arrival because "they don't belong here." Teachers may feel overwhelmed by the degree of support the student requires, uncomfortable with the possibility that the student with ASD will add distractions and disruptions to their classroom, or (as in Natalie's above example) concerned about the possibility of physical behaviors. Participants suggested that those teachers who do take the student with ASD into their class but remain unfamiliar with autism or inclusion in general may take something of a "status quo" approach, striving to keep their classroom as normal as possible and minimizing the degree of change created by the student with ASD. Often, participants saw this manifest in the form of removing students from the GE setting when they were disruptive or engaged in any kind of physical behavior. Many participants commented that teachers (and sometimes even behavior specialists) did not understand the reasons behind students' behavior and thus tended to react to it by removing the student, rather than prevent it or teach a new skill.

During her individual interview, Frances provided an illustration of the "status quo" mindset when she described a novice inclusion resource teacher whose primary motivation was to prevent the student from "going off" (e.g., offering random breaks when they were not clearly needed) rather than systematically teaching replacement behaviors that would make "going off" an irrelevant behavior for the student (e.g.,

teaching a student to recognize his own need for a break and request it using a break card). Later in her interview, she lamented that she was “blown away” by the autism knowledge and ideas of the Inclusion Resource from other schools she had met during the focus group session; this helped crystallize her frustration with the way the inclusion resource teacher in her own building approached students with ASD in GE settings.

I’m not trying to put down our teacher or anything, but I think our teacher is just inexperienced in autism, I think is where it comes from. She’s a new teacher, she’s only been teaching for a couple of years and so her experience (...) her only teaching experience is as an inclusion teacher. You know what I mean? So she hasn’t had the experience as an autistic teacher first and then inclusion, and I think that has a lot to do with it. So when you’re, “Boom! Here’s inclusion,” you’re gonna lean more (...) I just tend to think, you’re going to lean more towards inclusion, “What can I do to make your life easier?” I mean (...) You know? Anything that helps (...) And I think that’s why it’s (imitates voice, very abrupt), “Do you need a break?” Do you know what I mean? Because if you don’t go off, I don’t look bad, then it doesn’t throw these other kids off, and it’s all keeping it even. And where I understand where that comes from, that’s not teaching that child anything. And ultimately, when that kid’s 15, do you want to get in that kid’s face and ask him if he wants a break? No, you want him to be able to maintain himself and come to you and say (whispering), “I need a break.” That’s what we’re here for! So I think that’s (...) I think it’s the inexperience is where it’s coming from. And um, you know, just listening to [the Resource teachers at the focus group], I was like, “THAT’S what we need to do!!”  
(Frances, Interview, Lines 745-762)

Notably, several of the SE participants and one administrator indicated that SE teachers can also be resistant to including students with ASD in less restrictive SE settings. In particular, they indicated that SE teachers of self-contained Varying Exceptionalities (VE) classrooms can also have rigid expectations about who does and does not “belong” in their classrooms or about the type of behaviors they find unacceptable. Participants described circumstances in which students with ASD were recommended for placement in a VE classroom because their skill levels were higher than that of the self-contained autism classroom, but the placement was either challenged by the VE teacher or was unsuccessful because the VE teacher had

unrealistic expectations of the student. Julie, an SE teacher of a self-contained classroom for preschool students with ASD, indicated that in the district's recent history, nearly all preschool-aged students with ASD were placed in self-contained autism classrooms. However, with the rapid increases in identification and preschool SE services for students with ASD, the self-contained autism classrooms presently are reserved for preschool students with the most severe language or behavior delays, while students with less intensive support needs are recommended for placement in a VE classroom where more academic instruction and greater opportunities for socialization are available. Nevertheless, many VE teachers continue to believe that students with ASD are not appropriate for their classrooms; when these students are sent to their home school's VE classroom, they are sometimes "kicked back" to the nearest school with autism classrooms as soon as the child's autism diagnosis is discovered.

I know I've had a tough time this year, not with Basic Ed but with getting my higher functioning kids into Pre-K VE, not at my school but at other schools that don't have experience with autism. Those Pre-K VE teachers elsewhere, they say, "Oh, they're autistic, they need to go to a self-contained class," not realizing that Pre-K is a big important time to get those social skills. You play a lot, you do a lot of your stuff through play, you really need to try to get them out as much as possible. I have one little girl now that we are still looking for a placement for the fall because she's copying a lot of my kids' behaviors but she has play skills. She doesn't have a lot of language, she has some, but you know, she's copying the bad stuff, so she needs that social interaction, but she is kind-of a tough kid, I don't deny that. So, but the Pre-K VE where she needs to go is not real open because she's a very hands-on kid, and it can be very difficult. I've been very blessed this year that my Pre-K VE teacher at my school will take my kids very openly. She knows that when I say they're ready, they're ready. (Julie, Focus Group 1, Lines 713-724)

In addition, VE teachers may not have received direct training on the specific needs of students with ASD (e.g., using more visuals and shorter verbal prompts), which may interfere with their ability to provide adequate supports and can also lead to increased resistance.

### *Overcoming Resistance to Inclusion*

Educator participants often referred to lack of training or experience as the root of teachers' resistance and posited that providing both professional development and positive experiences in inclusion were the best remedies. Teachers initially reluctant to engage in inclusion often became its biggest advocates once they had an opportunity to experience it themselves, understand that they would receive support from colleagues when times were difficult, and recognize the growth potential for both the student with ASD and the GE peers. Brandy described how a teacher with a child "low in social skills, low in verbal, but smart in a lot of other areas" was "freaked out" in the beginning of the year, feeling that she was ill-equipped to help the student and that he did not "belong" in her classroom. As the student gained verbal and social skills in the GE setting, however, she was "mesmerized and amazed at what this child could do" and by the end of the year, she not only "just absolutely loves working with children with autism" but chose to move grade levels the following year to continue working this particular student. For teachers not directly participating in inclusion, the experiences of their colleagues were seen as an alternative, vicarious form of positive exposure to ASD that could influence teachers' attitudes and beliefs. In schools where including students with ASD was a new and unfamiliar enterprise for many (e.g., Schools B and D), GE teachers with included students were seen as torchbearers who had the power to demonstrate successful inclusion to their more resistant colleagues. For example, Melody, who had just completed her first year as a GE teacher of a student with ASD, observed her formerly reluctant colleagues becoming intrigued by the idea of inclusion.

Melody: I was kind-of surprised at that meeting because the people that I thought, 'They're not really open to this,' they were willing to say, "They're welcome to come to my room at 1:30 and..." So it kind-of surprised me, because the same people that were saying, "He doesn't belong in there..."

Jenine: ...Were now the people saying--

Melody: (overlapping) --"Sure, come to my classroom."

Jenine: What do you think led to that willingness?

Melody: Probably because it wasn't just pushed on them. Or they saw that I wasn't giving up either, I wasn't saying, "No, he doesn't" [belong here]. It's almost like you kind-of... the curiosity was sparked, like now they wanted to try that so they could get it to work. (Melody, Interview, Lines 1234-1247)

In light of the fact that individuals on the autism spectrum can vary considerably in their skills, weaknesses, and preferences, educators felt that positive exposure to students with ASD was necessary but not sufficient to prepare them for their own experiences in inclusion. In addition, ongoing professional development was seen as essential for equipping teachers to meet the ever-changing needs of students with ASD. As discussed later under Research Question 6 (Sources of Information for Decision-Making), educator participants continually emphasized that trainings specifically on ASD and its related supports were most helpful in creating their own knowledge base for meeting the needs of children on the spectrum. As such, they felt that teachers lacking in such knowledge would benefit immensely from similar professional development opportunities. Educators believed that training on autism and autism supports would not only increase teachers' skills and knowledge about ASD but would also increase their confidence, acceptance of individual differences, and likelihood of welcoming a child with ASD in their classroom. In addition, educators saw a need for training not only those teachers working directly with students with autism, but for raising awareness of all staff in the school building who may encounter these students in a variety of capacities: while passing them in the hallway (as previously described by Natalie), while serving their food in the cafeteria, while driving them home on the bus, or while talking with their parents in the front office. SE teachers saw themselves as natural providers of these trainings, due to their own experiences and knowledge base, but recommended that other district personnel (e.g., district autism consultant, inclusion facilitators, behavior specialists, CORE team, etc.) and outside trainers with expertise in ASD (e.g., university faculty, curricula developers, etc.) serve as trainers as well.

Interestingly, while educators in this study consistently cited the necessity of in-service training for increasing awareness and skills of teachers serving students with ASD, they also recognized several limitations about in-service as a medium for professional development. Such trainings were seen as offering the same information over and over again, without differentiation for teachers who already have knowledge of ASD and are seeking advanced information. Also, several participants noted that teachers are rarely required to attend trainings on ASD and those who choose to attend are often the very teachers who already know the most about it; teachers with limited experience or closed minds with regard to ASD were perceived as being less likely to voluntarily participate. Participants in the first focus group discussed this issue at length



and offered suggestions for improving in-service professional development in their district by (a) making autism trainings mandatory for GE and specials teachers, (b) providing professional development pay for after-hours participation, (c) offering trainings during the work day with sub coverage, and/or (d) surveying teachers with an interest/knowledge inventory to develop different levels of training. Again, just as positive exposure was not seen as sufficient to increase knowledge and acceptance of students with ASD, nor was training seen as being the exclusive means for promoting openness to including these students. Brandy noted that without concomitant positive exposure to ASD, teachers may attend “with closed ears” and remain resistant (Interview, Lines 924-928). Finally, two participants (Brandy and Julie) noted that teachers may need ongoing consultative support following in-service training, to ensure that they apply strategies appropriately to the needs of individual students. For example, teachers may take a “one-size-fits-all” approach to developing supports, assuming that each student with ASD needs a “First/Then” board or a visual schedule; educators with experience in ASD can help novice teachers identify the best intervention strategy that matches the specific needs of each student.

#### *Beliefs about Parents of Students with ASD*

In examining how students with ASD come to be placed in GE settings, participants were asked to consider why parents of these children may or may not desire such a placement. These questions yielded a wealth of beliefs regarding parents of students with ASD, including perceived reactions to and feelings about a diagnosis of autism for their child, and beliefs about the role of parental advocacy in obtaining a GE placement, observations of parents’ inclinations toward GE placements (both positive and negative), and perceptions of how parental advocacy can impact the IEP team. Where relevant, the experiences and beliefs of parent participants are also described to indicate the extent to which teacher perceptions of teachers are accurate.

*Parents are in grief over the autism diagnosis.* Nearly all educator participants recognized that parents whose children are diagnosed with ASD likely experience some degree of grief; those most severely impacted may experience an extended grieving process much like the bereavement cycle often observed in those who have lost a loved one. Educators were cognizant of the fact that a diagnosis of autism can be an especially devastating diagnosis for parents, in part of because when parents learn their child has autism, they may feel they must give up the expectations many parents have

for their typically developing children. Others may experience denial and a belief that their child can eventually overcome the diagnosis, given the right treatment or therapy.

I don't know how to explain this. The child they expected is like dead, and now they have this different kid. And, this isn't the kid they were expecting, and probably not the kid they wanted... they really have to grieve in what I see as being much the same way a parent who lost a child would grieve. You know, the denial, the anger, and some parents, in my experience, get stuck in like a phase where it's like they don't... I had one parent, who I swear, and she had, he was a good kid. I mean, he had his moments, but he was definitely a very lovable kid, but it was like she never, she never accepted him for who he was as a person with autism. You know, she always wanted... And it's good to want your child to grow and learn new skills, but, you know, he was a child with autism, and he was going to have problems forever. I mean, it's not like he is going to wake up one day and be cured and that's what she was really expecting. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 627-629; 631-640)

Because parent interviews focused mostly on their experiences within the school system, most parent participants did not often speak specifically of their response to the diagnosis or any grief that may have accompanied it. Kim and Rick, parents to Alex, were one notable exception. For them, the process of obtaining a diagnosis was a long and exhausting one that spanned both community mental health and school-based systems of care. When Alex was finally diagnosed with Asperger's Disorder, they were disappointed when they found no relief in finally putting a label on the problems with which they had been struggling.

Kim: ...[Rick] also went through a big mourning period, we both did, we just felt that, you know, the idea of having... just even though Alex wasn't quote "normally developing" and everything, he was just hoping that Alex would catch up and be one of the guys and I think that's when the dream of being one of the guys was just... definitely... I wouldn't say dying but it was like going through a big metamorphosis.

Jenine: Really.

Kim: Yeah.

Jenine: How about for you, what was that experience like for you as a mother?

Kim: For a mom, definitely there was, you know, and I still go through grief periods, even now. (Kim & Rick, Interview, Lines 739-752)

Although the classic bereavement models suggest that grief encompasses such phases as denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance, educator participants spoke most often of parents being in denial of their child's diagnosis or unwilling to accept a poor prognosis. Most educators spoke understandingly of the frustration and disbelief parents may experience that leads them to deny the reality of autism for their child. From the perspective of a fellow parent, Maggie sympathized, "When your child does not function as other kids do, you want it to go away, and so you do everything you can to make it go away" (Interview, Lines 312-313).

In many cases, this "denial" manifests itself as a drastic difference in expectations between parents of children with ASD and their teachers. Participants described children with significant cognitive delays or severe challenging behavior whose parents envisioned going to college someday or even attaining "recovery" from autism completely (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 681-685). This propensity for false hope was attributed, in part, to the significant degree of variability observed in individuals on the autism spectrum and the wealth of information on numerous treatment possibilities. Tracey noted that in contrast to a more straight-forward diagnosis such as Down Syndrome, where a parent can learn what to expect for their child from a single book, parents of children with autism are less able to predict their child's outcomes and are bombarded with information on possible cures or radical therapies. Thus, parents are able to remain hopeful and aggressively pursue potentially beneficial treatments, but also may be unable to accept the current extent of their child's disability.

I think that's one of the things that sucks with autism is that a lot of people search for a cure, and we've even had parents say, "When is he going to snap out of this?" and it's kind-of like, "Well, I can't work with you if you are living in this false reality because you are born and you live your life with autism. It's how you live your life is what we can do, not basically how are we going to get rid of it."

(Tracey, Interview, Lines 614-618).

Many participants felt that discrepancies in parent and teacher expectations are greatest in the earliest years of the child's educational career, as parents are just coming to terms with the diagnosis; as their children become older and parents grow in their experiences with ASD, parents are believed to become more accurate in their perceptions of their

child's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Denial was also seen as one of the biggest motivators for parents seeking inclusive placements for their children with ASD; this issue is explored in greater detail in the next section.

A portion of the educator participants felt that they could play a part in helping parents of students with ASD work through the grieving process and develop more appropriate expectations for their child's progress. Consistent with the observation that grieving and differences in expectations were most likely to be a source of conflict in the earliest years of education, the preschool teachers of children with ASD (Simone, Julie, Rhiannon, and Frances) all described having a role that included supporting parents through this process.

I'm not a trained counselor, but some parents, they just need someone to talk to and somebody who (...) knows about their child, sees the good in their child because I think that, you know, they take their kid into public or family gatherings and stuff and it's a difficult situation. So, someone besides them who really sees their child as being a good, lovable person, you know, and then talking to them and just giving them an opportunity to, to talk about how wonderful their kid is or the accomplishments their child's made. And, for some parents, they just need somebody to talk to and that's (...) And, I fulfill that role too, which annoys the bejesus out of my aides because some days that takes like a twenty minute phone conversation. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 723-731).

Additionally, parents themselves described sources of comfort in these difficult times. For Marjorie, having the opportunity to attend an event with Temple Grandin (a well-known adult with autism who gives many lectures on her own experiences with the disorder) just after her son Chris was diagnosed helped her understand how he viewed the world and that "this is not necessarily a bad thing" (Marjorie, Lines 63-67). Two other parents (Beth and Martin) spoke repeatedly of the role that their spirituality and faith played in helping them come to accept the diagnosis and the difficulties it posed at various points in their lives.

*Why parents may want inclusion.* More often than not, parents were perceived as wanting their child to be included in the GE setting as much as possible. Educator participants generated many ideas about why parents of students with ASD might want inclusion for their child. Chief among these perceived motivations was the desire for the child to be "as normal as possible." Although teachers' perceptions of parents' desired

outcomes are explored in greater depth under Research Question 9 (Parents Desired Outcomes), parental goals of increased independence and typical functioning were seen as being strongly related to their motivations for inclusive placements. Even when their children with ASD are relatively young and just beginning their educational careers, parents are already thinking about their children's prospects for functioning as an independent adult with a job, home or apartment, and social network around them. Starting the child in an inclusive setting as early as possible is perceived as an avenue for increasing independence and developing skills that are needed to attain these long-term goals.

I think it's a natural phenomenon that a mom and dad want their child to function normally, as other kids do. It's tough, Jenine, it's tough when you... I mean, a child is an extension of the person, the mom, the dad. And I think you know especially today, parents want their kids to be accepted, they want their children to be happy, they want them to be progressive. I had a mom say to me... it was at a staffing at another school, at [non-participating school] and they were trying to determine if this child would come to Kindergarten at [school D] or at [non-participating school]. And the parents were very demanding, but the mother said something that really caught my attention, she said, "I want this child to leave home one day! I do not want to take care of him the rest of my life!" (Maggie, Interview, Lines 840-850)

Beyond wanting their *children* to be "as normal as possible," several participants indicated that parents of children with ASD may also wish their children to have an *educational experience* that is as typical as possible. Parents recognize that the GE environment offers the greatest degree of social and communication interaction and can increase the likelihood that their child with ASD will develop age-appropriate skills in these areas. As Beatrice noted, parents "probably see those two areas as 'this is what's going to make or break my child as an adult.' And if there are no models, how can they learn it?" (Interview, Lines 360-361). Beyond improving skills, parents want their children to make friends and have schooling experiences that look somewhat similar to what they experienced in their own childhood.

I think that makes parents happy a lot of the time, when they go, especially when it comes to school, and if the parents did not have special needs as children, I think that they want their child's school experience to be similar to theirs... They

think, “Oh, when I was a kid, I had my friends and I did this,” and I think that’s what they imagine for their own children. Lauren, 896-903

Relatedly, educator participants suggested that parents may advocate for inclusive placements because they are uncomfortable with the self-contained setting. Parents may see a classroom full of children with more significant behavior and language difficulties as a scary place where they don’t believe their child belongs. Educator participants noted that the terminology of “self-contained” alone can conjure frightening images. Natalie declared in the second focus group, “...it sounds like a cell block. And I know better, as a teacher, and my family knows better, but I imagine that there are plenty that don’t. And so of course you wouldn’t want your kid to be [there]” (Focus Group 2, Lines 998-1000). Furthermore, educators and parents alike perceived that inclusive settings are more authentic and a better match to “real life” social expectations, while self-contained settings by definition are comprised entirely of children with the same basic difficulties. Martin, a parent participant, illustrated this concern about a self-contained setting for his son Luke. “To put him in a classroom full of Lukes would teach him only how to cope and, uh, and thrive in a (...) a setting that he will not face in real life. It will teach him how to get along with other Lukes but that’s only 5-10% of the population!” (Martin, Interview, 745-747)

As mentioned previously, denial was a frequent answer to questions about parents’ motivations for seeking inclusive placements. Four of the 15 educator participants cited “denial” as their first hypothesized reason that parents want their child with ASD included in the GE setting. Three of these four respondents (Joanne, Julie, and Tracey) were special educators who were currently or had previously taught in self-contained settings with students with severe cognitive, behavioral, and/or social skills deficits. Ironically, however, one respondent (Melody) was the GE teacher who had just completed her first year teaching a student with ASD and had come to realize “they do belong there” (Interview, Lines 1343-1344). Among participants initially describing other motivations than denial, two-thirds of participants ( $N=10$ ) still came around to it as a contributing factor to placement decisions at some point in the interview. Educators felt that some parents might see an inclusive placement as proof that their child is not as severely impacted by ASD as other children with the disorder; Natalie suggested these parents may tell themselves, “OK, they’re in class with regular students, see, so they’re doing fine” (Interview, Lines 549-550). Others indicated that parents (particularly those

of only one child) may not be accurate at assessing their children's skills relative to those of typically developing students in the GE setting. As a result, these parents may not be aware of the differences between their child with ASD and GE peers that could make inclusion challenging. Finally, parents may hope that inclusion will "magically cure" their child (Julie, Interview, Lines 445-446).

Comments from parents supported educator beliefs that inclusion was vastly preferred, although not necessarily for the reasons outlined above. In fact, parents' reasons for desiring inclusive placements clearly matched the benefits of inclusion articulated by educators. Several parents articulated concerns that exposing their children to the maladaptive behaviors of students in the self-contained setting would lead to regression or imitation of inappropriate behaviors. Carol, Luke's mother, emphasized, "I think inclusion for my son is the only answer. I think the alternative (self-contained programs) would be a complete and utter disaster for my little boy. He is very upset by the misbehavior of others" (Written Input, Lines 1186-1188). Similarly, Kim had received advice from her son Alex's developmental pediatrician that a self-contained placement could increase self-injurious behaviors and might provide opportunities for him to imitate inappropriate language because of his echolalia (Kim, Lines 1621-1636). Marjorie also reiterated that inclusion could benefit all students in the GE setting by promoting increased tolerance among GE peers (Lines 162-166).

*Why parents may reject inclusion.* When asked directly why parents might not want their child included in a GE classroom, most teachers responded that this is rarely the case. Rhiannon asserted, "I would say that that attitude is way less (...) likely than desperately, desperately wanting their child included" (Interview, Lines 882-883). Nevertheless, 13 of 15 educator participants (87%) had experience with at least one parent raising concerns about a GE placement for their child with ASD. The single biggest parent concern reported by educators was the possibility that the child with ASD would receive less attention (due to larger class sizes), fewer services, and/or less individualized supports in an inclusive setting than in a self-contained classroom. In most cases, participants indicated that teachers and IEP teams were able to assure the parents that services would continue to meet the child's needs and an inclusive placement was obtained. In one case, however, Simone reported that the parent's objections led to her child remaining entirely out of the GE setting (Interview, Lines 827-849). Additionally, one-third of educator participants ( $N=5$ ) hypothesized that parents

might have fears that their child will be made fun of, though only one participant reported that this was the parent's actual reason for feeling reluctant about inclusion.

Maggie: I'll give you an example. Mommy has taken both of her children, one is severe SLD, although that child is in resource, and the other child is autistic. And he was in the Primary VE classroom, self-contained, but remember I told you they went to inclusion for part of the day. And—I had forgotten this—there were some children in that classroom, it was a Primary [GE] classroom, who made fun of him. They were not kind. And mother said after... I don't think mother gave it enough time and mother was a great advocate. Mother was reasonable, mother was sane. (laughs) But, mom said, "I don't want my child with those other children. They are cruel. They make fun of him."

Jenine: Do you know what, specifically, the peers were having a problem with, what was going on?

Maggie: I'm not sure, Jenine, I don't know whether it was his speech, his... If I remember correctly, they were calling him "stupid." I'm going to make an assumption, he was having difficulty with academics or with asking or answering questions. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 1086-1101)

Some educators suggested that parents may have concerns about the safety of their own children, due to decreased supervision and increased possibility for self-injurious behavior, as well as the safety of GE peers. Several participants acknowledged that students with ASD face a greater likelihood of receiving disciplinary referrals in response to inappropriate behaviors (e.g., detention, suspension); parents of children with severe problem behavior may see self-contained classrooms as a safer, less threatening environment because students do not receive discipline referrals in those settings. Finally, several participants acknowledged that inclusive placements can be more challenging for children with ASD due to higher academic expectations, greater potential for conflicts with peers, increased homework demands, etc. and some parents may find it difficult to place their child in a setting they know will be more challenging for them on a daily basis.

*Parent advocacy affects home-school collaboration.* Parents of children with ASD were characterized by educator participants as fierce advocates for their children. In particular, educators perceived that these parents are especially savvy about special education law, potentially beneficial treatments and therapies, and other disability issues



as compared to parents of children with other developmental disabilities. Parents from high socioeconomic backgrounds were described by a minority of educators (Tracey, Helen, and Maggie) as particularly likely to be strong advocates for their children with ASD. Because they are often more educated, they may have greater access to parent advocacy groups, attorneys, research conferences, and publications, and may be accustomed to being able to pay for the services they desire in the private sector.

Helen: ... We've had parents go and quote, "School shop," you know, but it happens. We all know that.

Beatrice: The strong advocate group.

Helen: Yup!

Beatrice: Parents are probably better informed than we are.

Helen: Or if someone says, "This child is going there, my child isn't"—

Simone: They talk to each other. They have a very saavy, smart network.

Helen: It is, they have the strongest advocate group in [district].

Darla: I had a family moving into the state from another state and the first thing they did was call [superintendent].

Jenine: Wow.

Darla: That's the first call they made. And they said, "We're coming, we're moving, um, our child has autism and we want to know exactly where we're going and what we're doing and we want to come see schools and we'll be here on this date and this date, please make appointments for us." And I had a lot of people calling me that day!

Jenine: (laughter) I bet you did!

Helen: We had the same email from Lisa (Autism Supervisor). (laughter) "They will be visiting!" (Focus Group 2, Lines 611-639)

Educators stated that parents of students with ASD "all talk to each other," either in support groups provided by community agencies or informally with the parents of their child's peers, and often compare services and supports provided in various buildings across the district (Focus Group 1, Lines 1121-2234). The manner in which educators made comments about parent networks suggested they not necessarily see them as a positive phenomenon.

Relatedly, educator participants also discussed the parental phenomenon of "school shopping," or visiting various schools and/or districts to better advocate for a

desired placement for their child. Although Lisa (Autism Supervisor) described this in her context interview as a “big problem” for the district because it creates an overabundance of students at schools with the strongest autism services (see Chapter III under “Research Context”), Helen acknowledged that the participating district encouraged “school shopping” to some degree by encouraging parents to visit their home (zoned) school and see what supports are available for students with ASD prior to participating in placement decisions. However, parent participants who touched on this issue did so only in reference to the differences in services between school districts (e.g., participating district and its neighboring counties), as opposed to the within-district “shopping” described by educators. From her own personal history with a brother with Asperger’s Disorder, Natalie suggested that some families have had significantly negative experiences in neighboring districts. As such, when these conflicts are severe enough to prompt the family to change school buildings or districts, they may come in predisposed to advocate strongly for their child again if necessary.

Natalie: I think some parents come in a little confrontational, just because of some of the experiences they’ve had in other places. My brother goes to school in [neighboring] County, and I have to say, it has not been pretty. Um, we’ve had some absolutely disgusting things happen to my brother and his friends in school... he’s had teachers where when he’s said, “Oh, can you repeat what you just said, I don’t understand,” [the teacher] goes, “This isn’t special ed!” Things like that... he’s had teachers absolutely refuse, and say this in meetings, “I will not accommodate, he will do it the ‘normal’ way or he will fail.” And so, I think some parents have just gotten to a point where they don’t know what else to do except be a pit bull. And you know, lucky for my brother, my mom can do that quite well. (laughter) Um, you know, God forbid they ever meet my father. (laughter) My mom’s like this big (gestures to indicate small) and she goes in there and they’re like, “Oh, [Natalie’s mother]’s here!” So if Dad ever storms down there, I pray for them. But yeah, there’s just so many things that have been absolutely sickening. And I think that’s why, especially coming into [district] from another county, we’ve had a lot of parents who were very frustrated at their former school. And I think that would explain a lot of that. (Focus Group 2, Lines 700-703, 708-710, 714-724)

One educator (Simone) asserted a belief that strong advocacy can earn parents of students with ASD a negative reputation within the school system; “When they do know about their rights, I think a lot of times we think that they’re the “bad” parent or they’re the “pushy” parent and they’re just advocating for their child!” (Interview, Lines 579-581). Although this belief was not stated directly by any other educator participant, the issue of negative parent-school interactions is explored in greater detail through analysis of experiential examples in Research Question 4. Educators’ comments did, however, suggest a tension between accepting parents’ advocacy as a legally-protected right and dealing with sometimes hostile approaches to advocacy can impede the IEP team’s efforts on behalf the child with ASD.

Rhiannon: I told Caryn this in the hallway, if this were my kid, I would be... There would be hell, too. You know, because you want what’s best for your kid. And when I look at parents, I try to remember that because sometimes it can be hard to remember that they are doing what they think is best for their kid, even if we know professionally that it may not be what’s best for their kid, they’re really trying to do what they think is best.

Tracey: And I think there’s a nice way—

Rhiannon: (overlapping) Oh, I agree!

Tracey: There is a nice way, and there is a not nice way of... And you know, once you’ve reached that point where you’ve fought so hard, it’s only human for you to breakdown that relationship, and it’s almost like, “I don’t know if it’s the best place for your kid to be in this classroom because you have emotionally drained me so much that it’s hard to, you know, separate...” (Focus Group 1, Lines 2656-2671)

In an extreme example from School D shared by both Maggie (administrator) and Caryn (GE teacher), one parent’s consistent and intense advocacy for her son with ASD led to bi-weekly IEP reviews that removed the teachers from the classroom setting on a frequent basis and eventually led the Autism Inclusion teacher to quit at the end of the year. This is discussed in greater detail under Research Question 4 (Experiences in Inclusion).

The degree and approach a parent takes when advocating for their child with ASD also impacts more minor aspects of the IEP team, such as membership of the team and who takes the dominant decision-making role. Maggie indicated that “when the

parent is malleable, the teacher or teachers in the inclusion setting may be the ones who... lead the conversation (Interview, Lines 1236-1238). In more “complicated cases,” both administrators (Helen and Maggie) indicated that they are likely to participate most actively in “complicated cases” where a parent is disputing the school’s placement or service recommendations, as are district-level administrators, behavior specialists, and parent advocates. In between meeting times, these parents were seen as often taking their complaints or requests directly to the district supervisors without first attempting to work with school-level personnel. Brandy hypothesized that parents who have dealt with district personnel in past placement decisions may feel more comfortable approaching them again when new situations arise (Interview, Lines 651-661).

Some degree of conflict also appears to exist between parents and schools with regard to consultation from outside personnel. Parents who bring in outside advocates are especially likely to be perceived as “difficult” parents; in some cases, school personnel were described as suspicious of outside advocates because they cannot be sure if that individual sufficiently knows the student’s needs or the school system’s requirements to be a valid advocate. Conversely, Maggie suggested that parents place greater value on the opinions and services of providers outside the school system and “look at public schools and educators and therapists as being less knowledgeable and less authentic... parents are less trusting of their findings and recommendations” (Interview, Lines 1264-1266). For example, a parent advocating for increased speech/language services for her son with ASD repeatedly referred to information from a prior private speech therapist in Oklahoma and used his information to refute more current findings of the local school-based therapist. Maggie highlighted conflicts over the role and validity of outside consultants as another barrier to home-school collaboration for students with ASD.

In their own interviews parent participants provided numerous instances of advocating for their child’s best interests; situations in which they contacted district personnel were consistently described as occurring only after they had approached the school team with their request or concern and had been denied. For example, Linda (Miguel’s mother) described approaching the administrator of a non-participating school in the district to request that her son be placed in a GE classroom. When that administrator refused, Linda contacted Lisa (Autism Supervisor) for help and Lisa facilitated a part-time placement in a GE classroom. Similarly, when Shannon (Ryan’s

mother) had been told that he would be in an inclusive Kindergarten setting and then he was subsequently placed in School B's primary self-contained autism classroom, she attempted to first go through the school-based team and several meetings were held to discuss placement. However, when the team recommended a self-contained VE placement instead of the inclusive one she felt she had been promised, she contacted Lisa for assistance.

I sent her an email and I said, "Look, you and I spoke about this before, this is what I was told, this is what I'm getting, this is what I want, you need to let me know what's going on because I don't feel like Ryan's rights are being protected here," and, um, you know, I'm his advocate, so... um, you know. And she was very nice and she did look into it and she, she got back... that is when (assistant principal, School B) got involved, and that's when (principal, School B) got involved. (Shannon, Interview, Lines 456-461)

However, two parent-sets provided contradictory viewpoints suggesting that not all parents were comfortable with taking on this role. Nick and Irene, Mark's parents, indicated that although they wished to be intimately involved in the development of their son's IEP, they also suggested that they were a minority of parents who either were willing to speak up and advocate or were sufficiently educated in the special education laws and procedures to know how to do so.

...I realize there's so many parents who don't give a flip. They're perfectly happy to drop their kids off and the system will take care of them. The system will take care of them. But that, that's kind-of, they kind-of feed off each other. From the teacher's perspective, if so many parents say, "Oh, well the system will take care of them," then if we're the system, then we must be doing the right thing. But it, it's hard, because that (trails off). And that's why IEPs are so important, it's really important to know what you want out of the IEP! (Nick, Interview, Lines 1662-1687)

To wit, Carol, Luke's mother, asked in her written input to this study for recommendations on a school-based person who could be "someone to talk to" and who could assist her in advocating for her son: "I need someone with a good working knowledge of Asperger Syndrome [sic] who can listen to my concerns and convey them in a professional manner to the teachers there" (Carol, Written Input, Lines 1213-1216).

*Question 3: What Are Educators' Emotional Reactions to Inclusion of Students With ASD?*

*Emotional Reactions of Participants*

Throughout both focus groups and interviews, educators expressed not only their cognitive understanding of and beliefs about inclusion for students with ASD but also their emotional responses to it. In particular, educators tended to describe emotional reactions when providing experiential examples; influential experiences in inclusion are described in greater detail under Research Question #4. At times, emotions were not explicitly stated by the participant but were suggested by the nature of their story (high degree of personal involvement, significant positive or negative outcome for one or more people involved) or their manner of speech (increased volume, tone of voice, emphatic words). On these occasions, the researcher queried as to their emotional response in that situation (e.g., "How did that make you feel?"). As mentioned in Chapter 3, participants often provided cognitive responses to emotional queries. For example, when Lauren described a situation in which students with ASD were banned from participating in GE physical education classes and she advocated strongly on behalf of those students, she described feeling "like the bad guy a lot of the time" (Interview, Line 370). Although prompts and queries were modified to better elicit emotional responses, participants provided explicit emotional responses infrequently without such a prompt. When emotional reactions were provided, negative emotions outweighed positive ones nearly two to one, although this may be due to the nature of research questions emphasizing reasons for teachers' resistance to inclusion and difficult decision-making about who is and is not included. As might be expected, discussion of emotional reactions was far more likely to occur in individual interviews but did surface to some degree in each of the focus group sessions.

*Positive emotional reactions.* Educators frequently characterized inclusive education for students with ASD as "rewarding" or a "good learning experience," in spite the many challenges that may arise. Comments about the rewarding nature of inclusion were almost always intertwined with observations like that of Tracey who suggested it might be "one of the hardest jobs you'll ever have" (Interview, Line 1085). Several participants indicated that their development of positive feelings about inclusion occurred slowly with increased exposure. More often, teachers described the immediate thrill of observing new achievements in students with ASD in inclusive settings, particularly

when students achieve a developmental milestone. Several of the educator participants shared humorous situations with students and teachers, such as when a student with ASD made a leap of progress by using words for the first time and used those words to say “Go away.” Lauren laughed as she described feeling “excited” about such a situation even though “it sounds terrible,” in recognition of the progress those words represented (Interview, Lines 752-758).

The tone and language used to discuss specific students with ASD or the educators’ role in general suggested that some participants had developed positive emotional attachments with the students themselves. Lauren suggested that this was especially likely for teachers in Continuous Progress pods where they worked with a student for three to four years in a row. Maggie told a story of a student in the intermediate self-contained classroom that she found “entertaining” and “adorable.” Tracey, the behavior specialist in Maggie’s building, bought her a picture frame that contains not only a picture of the student but also plays back an audio-recording of the student’s unique way of saying Hello - “O-lo!” (Focus Group 2, Lines 2466-2477). By way of “words of wisdom” for other educators working with students with ASD, Julie suggested, “Just love your kids. I mean, really, if you’re having fun, they can tell that and they will have fun... They need to know that they are loved in school as much as they are at home...” (Interview, Lines 1130-1131, 1141-1143).

Educator participants (particularly in Focus Group 2) also spoke very positively of situations when other, previously uninvolved school personnel developed an enthusiasm for working with students with ASD.

Maggie: One of our P.E. teachers, brand new to teaching and from out of state, um, we have 3 P.E. teachers... Fell in *love* with the autistic population. I have never seen anything like it. He went to Special Olympics, he embraced these kids. And that was an A-Ha for me. Oh man, that was powerful.

Beatrice: Because sometimes it *doesn't* happen. (laughter)

Maggie: Sooo powerful, the way he embraced, especially the self-contained kiddos, but in addition to the inclusion kiddos.

Beatrice: Don’t you find that it’s a little contagious?

Simone: Oh yeah, definitely.

Beatrice: Now that you’ve opened a new school? I mean, [School A] seems like it was there forever, but it is, it’s contagious! Once you realize that you can have

that impact, it's like, "Whoa!" And let's try this, and let's try this, and let's try something else.

Simone: You get addicted to it!

Beatrice: You get addicted, it's very addictive. For a lot of people!

Melody: I find you have to keep at it, and then all of a sudden, they start feeling a little guilty, like people... You know, we were new and I was hearing, you know, "He doesn't belong there, he doesn't belong there!" And I kept at it, and I kept at it, and now they're coming around, like, "Let me try to talk to him!" (Focus Group 2, Lines 2547-2573)

Maggie shared her appreciation for all of the teachers working with students with ASD both in School D and at other sites: "I applaud teachers who teach children on the autistic spectrum because you're amazing in that you give, and you give, and you give, and you give, and I've never seen such teachers give like you do professionally, and it wears you out" (Focus Group 2, Lines 772-775).

*Negative emotional reactions.* In light of the many difficulties involved in inclusion, educator participants also described feelings of fear/worry, frustration, guilt, obligation, and even anger. Although educators tended to share more negative emotional reactions than positive ones, these responses did not suggest that they felt negatively about inclusion as a whole. Rather, educators often described experiencing feelings such as anxiety or worry that they would not be up to the task of inclusion, or disappointment, sadness, and even guilt in association with specific situations where student outcomes were poor. In particular, the inclusion resource teachers (Brandy and Lauren) and behavior specialist (Tracey) appeared to be the most personally invested in the success of the included students with ASD and felt that it was disappointing and even "heartbreaking" to see a student have to return to a self-contained setting after having been included. Lauren described this type of response when a student from the primary (K-2) Autism Inclusion Pod (in which she was housed) met with failure at the intermediate Autism Inclusion Pod because of differences in expectations, ultimately concluding "I have to realize that I can't stay over there with this child throughout his entire schooling... You know, I do what I can do for the time that I have this child. And it's so hard, because you *do* get so attached" (Lauren, Interview, Lines 1586-1589). Even when inclusion is successful, educators can still find themselves feeling burdened by a sense of personal responsibility for ensuring the included student's success, finding



a balance between the needs of the child with ASD and the class as a whole, or meeting the support needs of teachers as a specialist or consultant. Tracey, behavior specialist and ESE Team Leader at School D, articulated the latter of these personal responsibilities of inclusion.

Tracey: I feel like I have a lot of weight on my shoulders as to trying to make it perfect. Um, I feel that there needs to be a perfection-type situation, and then when, you know, things aren't going according to plan or when, you know, teachers get upset or there's something going on, I'll take it really personally that I made the wrong decision...

Jenine: That's a lot to deal with.

Tracey: (laughs) Yeah.

Jenine: How *do* you deal with that?

Tracey: Um, I guess I try to make it right and make everyone feel happy and supported. I try to let everyone know that even though I am running around and I'm amok, if you grab me and say "I need to talk to you," I will help you. Even if I can't be there for you at every point of the day, if you say "I need you," I will be there for you. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 62-76)

Preschool self-contained teachers also voiced the pressure and responsibility of having a significant role in the earliest years of a child's educational career. In line with participants' belief that inclusion is easiest in the primary years, they also felt that early placement decisions affected a child's future probability of being included; thus, "you're making a placement decision that might affect the rest of their life" (Rhiannon, Focus Group 1, Line 528). Generally, strong feelings of individual responsibility were *not* expressed by GE teachers. The single exception was Caryn, who emphasized her role the sole advocate for her GE students who were being negatively impacted by her frequent absences to bi-weekly IEP meetings (Interview, Lines 821-828).

In conflict-laden inclusion situations, particularly those involving strong parent advocacy, educators noted that "emotions ran really high" (Caryn, Focus Group 1, Line 490). When describing these scenarios, educators used words and phrases like "nightmare" and "pulling my hair out" to convey feelings of frustration and anger. As mentioned above, the negativity tended to be directed not at the general idea of inclusion or the individual student with ASD, but rather various members of the IEP team who either did not carry their respective weight or created opposition. In some

circumstances, educator participants were frustrated by the lack of knowledge or resistance observed in their colleagues. For example, Brandy was aggravated to find that teachers in School B were resistant to learning strategies for helping students ASD or applied them incorrectly (Interview, Lines 129-149). At times, conflicts related to inclusion were internal ones, such as when educators felt caught between potentially conflicting interests. Melody described feeling “caught” between her co-teachers in the pod (who felt her student with ASD interfered with instruction of GE peers) and the student himself (with whom she had developed a close bond). She and Caryn both voiced frustration with attempting to balance the needs of the GE peers with those of the included student (Melody, Interview, Line 777-78; Caryn, Interview, 821-828). Interestingly, two teachers of self-contained classrooms (Joanne and Frances) spoke about their emotional responses to conflicts that arose when students with ASD were placed in the GE classrooms of their own children. Joanne discussed her fears for her son’s educational progress after he complained that the student with ASD was “distracting” him in his GE class.

That was scary to me and it was very conflicting to me, because being a teacher of autistic children, I consider myself to be an advocate of autistic children. Um, but when I heard that, um, it was scary to me. I couldn’t help but think, ‘There needs to be more support in that classroom so the children are not distracted.’ And *then* I’ve heard some talk that they’re contemplating the idea of putting autistic kids in the gifted program. And that’s just outrageous to me, because... the gifted pod has to be an enriching place for the kids in there because that’s what they are seeking, you know, and I want the highest enrichment for my child, and I would think any children in there, and the least amount of distractions for that enrichment. (Joanne, Interview, Lines 443-439, 446-449).

Finally, as suggested by the information reported for Research Question #2, educators experienced frustration and anger toward parents whom they deemed “strong advocates” that impeded the progress of the IEP team. Educator participants who described frustration with parents often did so by referencing heated IEP meetings in which parents and school personnel found themselves on opposing sides of a programming issue.

When a parent sits in an IEP revision with the assistance of a psychologist, a staff member from ESE, the supervisor or supervisors, speech therapists, Basic

teachers, and casts aspersions and says, “I don’t trust any of you,” that’s an emotional piece... [This] mom would go into the classroom in the mornings and pit the ESE teacher, or try to, but the ESE teacher and the Basic teacher were very close, very much team members, and mom would say things and demand that the ESE teacher was not meeting this child’s needs, she would even go to the IA, the instructional assistants, and it became very tumultuous. So I said, “OK. We will have monthly meetings, information meetings, for an hour.” Well, Jenine, those became intensive battles with the mother, making demands, they turned into IEP revision meetings without the IEP process! And so I had to include assistance from the district. The district took a stance of “This is what we will do, this is what we cannot offer to you.” Mom tried to talk about other children in inclusion and what they were receiving and the ESE director said to mom, “You know we cannot discuss other children, we need to talk about your child.” Mother became very hostile. She was in the community denigrating the teachers, the school. It became (...) that’s painful! ...It becomes a burden that stymies the movement forward of the whole school, for me. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 402-404, 425-445)

Given the high degree of personal responsibility assumed by many of the educator participants and the potential for frustration, conflict, or anger, it follows that many voiced feelings that inclusion can be “exhausting,” “emotionally draining,” and “really, really hard.” In addition to the specific challenges of inclusive education, Rhiannon asserted that teaching children with ASD in general is a difficult endeavor that requires teachers to persevere and “want [a child to do something] more than they want *not* to do it, you know... when they dig in their heels, I dig in mine too and say, ‘No, you’re gonna do it, and you’re gonna do it now’” (Interview, Lines 1382-1385).

#### *Perceived Emotional Reactions of Other Teachers*

As discussed under Research Question 2 (Beliefs about Inclusion), educator participants believe that many teachers lack an understanding of supports available in inclusion and may have stereotypical or limited understandings of ASD. Accordingly, educator participants believed that teachers are likely to experience worries and fears at the prospect of taking on a student with ASD. Nearly all educator participants ( $N=11$ ) cited “fear of the unknown” as a chief source of resistance for classroom teachers faced with including a student with ASD. Teachers who see including students with ASD as an

unknown and unfamiliar endeavor may be afraid that they will be unsupported when difficulties arise and will be ill-equipped to handle the challenges on their own. Maggie, an administrator at School D who described herself as new to autism, illustrated her own fears and those of some of her staff in this regard.

Jenine: What are some reasons why teachers might not want to include students with autism spectrum disorders in general education classrooms?

Maggie: Fear! Absolute fear, and I can see the faces of two teachers. Both of them Basic Ed teachers, bright, bright, bright, very successful teachers. But I've heard them make comments like, "I don't want that child in my classroom." I've heard one of them say, "I'm not working with those kids!" Jenine, when I first realized that I would be the principal of a school with a high autism, a high number of autistic kids, I thought, 'I know nothing about autism! I have no idea what my role is here!' And I felt that pang of concern and fear. That's because of the unknown, and that's why I take my cues from others, from the behavior specialist, but for a teacher to say, "I don't want that kid in my room" breaks my heart. And I think again, they don't have the strategies, the knowledge of, number one, you know, autism is this huge spectrum! You can't pinpoint a handful of behaviors and say "This is autism." Can't do it! And so, um, I would question... (trails off) it's fear and is it the lack of knowing how to work with them, knowing how to address their needs. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 1011-1132)

In addition, educator participants suggested that teachers unfamiliar or inexperienced in inclusion or ASD may have specific fears with regard to one or more of the following negative outcomes:

1. "Students with ASD will detract from my ability to meet the needs of the class."
2. "Students with ASD will perform poorly on the FCAT and may also cause the rest of the class to do so."
3. "If I am unable to control the behavior of a student with ASD or they don't pass the FCAT, I will look like a bad teacher."

Notably, only one parent-set (Martin and Carol, Luke's parents) acknowledged the potential for fears on the part of the classroom teacher. Martin spoke repeatedly of the third fear ("I could look bad"), suggesting that GE teachers are judged by the FCAT performance of their class and they choose to invest their efforts in the students most

likely to perform well and thus make them look good (i.e., typically developing, high-achieving students).

*Question 4: What Types of Past Experiences Have Influenced Teachers' Current Understandings of Inclusion and Their Feelings Toward It?*

To elucidate the sources of educators' attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about inclusion for students with ASD, it is useful to examine the real-life situations they use to illustrate their experiences and support beliefs. When defining inclusion or articulating their beliefs about it, educator participants referred frequently to their own experiences in inclusion and working with students with ASD. Experiences were coded with respect to their emotional/situational valence (positive or negative) and then by their general subject (e.g., breakthrough with student, positive collaboration with parent, etc.).

*Positive Experiences*

Experiences characterized as "positive" were overwhelmingly associated with students. Every educator participant had an example of a student's response to inclusion that helped validate their belief in it or helped clarify what "successful inclusion" looked like. In addition, some educators spoke positively about their experiences collaborating with their colleagues in various situations; notably, positive experiences in collaborating with parents of children with ASD were few and represented the minority of overall positive experiences shared by educators. Experiences were coded as "positive" when they were linked with positive emotional reactions described under the previous research question or when they indicated clear benefits or positive outcomes for either the educator or the subject of their example.

*Inclusion exceeded my expectations.* Given the powerful impact of inclusion in shaping educators' beliefs about inclusion, it follows that noteworthy experiences were those that exceeded expectations. Educators described many situations in which students' response to inclusion or progress was significantly more than they had anticipated. Teachers new to working with nonverbal students with ASD may have had low expectations for their academic achievement and were pleasantly surprised when those students demonstrated significant growth. Similarly, educators described having students with low cognitive ability who were expected to meet with minimal success in inclusion; as Natalie put it, "at first it was like we got this kid and we were like, 'Good heavens, what are we supposed to do with him?'" (Interview, Lines 461-462). Thus, seeing that same student participating with his peers, making progress in reading, and

improving in his ability to deal with frustration led Natalie to conclude about students with low cognitive ability in general, “I can’t really think of too many instances where we haven’t found a way to make it at least doable. It may not be easy, but...” (Interview, Lines 508-509). Melody found that overcoming her own doubts about a student’s appropriateness for inclusion helped not only understand the concerns of her colleagues in the Autism Inclusion Pod at School B, but also made her a better advocate for that student (Focus Group 2, Lines 211-227).

Natalie suggested that students with ASD who perform exceptionally well, obtaining IQ scores in the gifted range or demonstrating academic skills well above their grade-level peers, can provide positive examples to more resistant teachers and can help people redefine their notions of disability.

I had two little boys this year that were on the spectrum and they were both quite a bit ahead and that was interesting too, because you know that there’s the range in their abilities and stuff, but just to see... It was kind-of neat, just to see what they could do and really get to see the full range of... And you know, I had one of them make Gifted this year, and one of them almost did. Um, but, I think that that’s really cool too because I think that’s also an example to people, and the other kids too, that kids with disabilities can be really smart, there’s just sometimes things they need help with. (Natalie, Interview, Lines 181-188).

*“A-ha” moments: Breakthroughs and insights.* A powerful source of experiential knowledge for educators came in the form of “A-ha” moments. For teachers working directly with students with ASD, it was often the case that these occasions represented a solution found in an almost serendipitous way after weeks or months of trying to improve a behavior or skill. Beatrice, School A’s school psychologist and one of the most experienced educators in inclusion for kids with ASD, summarized this phenomenon as when “you just do those things, off the top of your head, you’re like, “It’s here, it’s available, the kid’s doing this, let’s try it!” (Focus Group 2, Lines 2506-2507). For example, Maggie laughingly described the first time she saw a teacher put shaving cream on a student’s palms to prevent him from engaging in pica (eating nonnutritional substances; Focus Group 2, Lines 2489-2509). Natalie described being unable to read a student’s handwriting nearly all year long, until she asked him to try writing with a pen with just nine weeks left in the year. “Well,” she reasoned, “pretty much any teacher could come up with a story of how at the last minute, you’re like, ‘Ah! Found it!’”

(Interview, Lines 1064-1065). In other cases, “A-ha” moments were realized when a student who did not appear to be connecting with instruction suddenly demonstrated they had in fact been paying attention in their own way.

I always used counting rods with the calendar and we would count by 5s and by 10s, and this one student that I had would never face the calendar. He would come and sit on the floor but he would always turn around and face the back of the room, and his mom just gave me this look. And then when we were getting on the bus, she said, “That’s where he learned how to do that.” I said, “Learned how to do what?” She said, “He counts by 5s and 10s all the time at home,” and here I thought he was not getting it at all and he’s looking the other way and he goes home every night and counts by 5s and 10s. She said she’d give him crackers or something, and he sorts them and counts them, and she said, “I had no idea where he learned how to do that!” (Lauren, Interview, Lines 220-229)

*Observing student progress.* Consistent with educators’ belief that inclusion exerted a powerful force on students’ development, they provided examples of experiences where they saw students make leaps in progress. Typically, this type of growth was demonstrated by the emergence of a new and highly desired behavior that represented a new developmental level, such as a verbal request for a toy instead of a gesture or grunt. As previously described, participants sometimes attributed this growth to the influence of the social or language modeling from peers or even adults. Beatrice described how students with limited social skills came into the Primary Autism Inclusion Pod as Kindergarteners and were “mothered” by the oldest students in the group; by the time they had reached 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, however, those same students with autism had taken on caregiver roles to the youngest, most delayed students in the group (Interview, Lines 222-227). Natalie also suggested that it was a sign of success when she saw her included student with autism modeling her own behavior, encouraging his classmates to try challenging tasks that the student himself had previously rejected:

...To see that kind-of growth when before he’d been like, “Oh! Nope, not talking about this with you,” and then to see him like coaching other kids... Just little things like that. And those times where you just hear them doing things when you’re like, “That’s IT!” You know what I mean? That’s what you want them to do, and to fit in like that...(Natalie, Interview, Lines 202-222)

In other cases, participants described the months or years of consistent teaching that it took to achieve that desired response. As Lauren reasoned with a laugh, “OK, it may take two years for this child to be able to walk in in the morning and as soon as I say his name, he says hello back to me, but it’s kind-of a nice thing, it keeps you going” (Interview, Lines 272-274).

Similarly, Lauren further emphasized in the focus group session that “you don’t get the instant gratification that you want. You know, if you want instant gratification, you’re in the wrong area;” immediate skill mastery is not a realistic expectation for educators working with students with ASD (Focus Group, Lines 2363-2364). However, she and several other participants (most often self-contained teachers with more years of experience in autism) had encounters with students up to several years after participation in their classroom which demonstrated that they had made considerable progress. As a 6-year veteran of placement decision-making, Rhiannon described having had enough students with ASD experience success in inclusion that she was able to use those past “success stories” as a standard against which she could compare current students she thought might be ready for inclusion.

It’s amazing to see sometimes where kids come from and then to know where they go. That’s part of the job that I find really rewarding because, uh, some kids you’re just like, “Oh my god, we’re never going to get anywhere.” And, then you have the kid who, they remind you. And, now, as, you know, teaching younger, you know, Pre-K students and I know [a student who went on to be fully included], I go, “OK, that one is kind of like he was, so maybe,” you know, “OK, he’s got similar skills in different areas, maybe we’ll end up in a similar place in five, six, seven years. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 378-384)

*Seeing peers include their classmate with ASD.* In line with participants’ distinctions between “inclusion” and “mainstreaming” by degrees of classroom membership, educators felt that it was only when GE students recognized the child with ASD as their classmate and peer that they were “truly included.” As such, noteworthy inclusion experiences for some educators were those in which they observed GE peers change their disposition toward their classmate with ASD from disinterest to curiosity or from avoidance to encouragement. For example, Natalie described how GE peers would ask the student with ASD to announce their reading groups each day because they liked the formal, announcer-style voice he used; this eventually led to further peer



initiation and social interaction (Interview, Lines 103-118). When focus group participants were asked to share what about inclusion made them the most proud, Melody described how her GE students recognized when the classmate with ASD was having difficulty and voluntarily offered him his visual supports (e.g., task board with pictures for sitting quietly in circle time) in a caring and supportive manner.

Participants working in Schools B and D, which had just completed their first year as a new school, found they had an opportunity to observe changes in peers' behavior towards students with ASD on a building-wide level. Many students in these schools were exposed to children with ASD for the first time in their educational careers and, as Darla stated, "as a new school, you start an autism unit and you see a lot of... difference. You see a lot of children with their mouths hanging open thinking, 'Why is that child trying to fly away? Or clapping his hands, or clicking, or having a tantrum on the ground?'" (Interview, Lines 343-346). Consequently, School B found it useful to create an after-school Buddy Program to pair GE students *not* in Autism Inclusion classrooms with peers with ASD. Darla reported that, in just one year, this had served as an excellent mechanism for further promoting tolerance and acceptance for students not directly participating in inclusive education. From her experience in a non-participating school that had had an Autism Inclusion Pod for several years, Tracey described how GE peers responded to their schoolmates with ASD after a long period of exposure. Typically developing children became accustomed to the differences of their peer(s) with autism and were even accepting of significantly unusual behavior.

I had a higher-functioning student who had a meltdown and I went to talk to the class about it and, thinking that the class was going to utterly reject him and be like, 'I don't want anything to do with him,' and they were like, 'It's not a big deal! He had a problem and this is why he had it, and now he's gotten through it so what's the big deal?' And it's like, 'well, OK, you're not going to outcast him because he screamed and yelled on the floor?' And they're like, 'No because we understand why he did it and now let's get him over it.' And it's kind-of like, well, they accept it. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 327-333)

Tracey further asserted that these students had developed such inclusive attitudes toward their peer with ASD because he had been a full member of their school environment since Kindergarten, as opposed to an occasional participant in one content area lesson a day.

*Positive collaboration with IEP team members.* Educators often expressed feeling fortunate to have positive relationships with their colleagues throughout the inclusion process. Professional support was found in many forms and in a variety of contexts. For Caryn, support from fellow educators was seen as a critical lifeline in situations of conflict and disagreement among IEP team members, particularly with parents: “If you didn’t have that support, it would be impossible. It would! It would just, you would be out there on a boat all by yourself!” (Caryn, Interview, Lines 909-910). In some educators’ views, collaboration and support was seen as the key to success for serving students with ASD in GE settings. Julie professed her gratitude for a VE teacher who consistently and unconditionally accepted any preschooler with ASD that she recommended for less restrictive placement (Focus Group 2, Lines 724-725). As one of her own professional achievements, Brandy described the experience of growing a team of brand new GE teachers in an Autism Inclusion Pod at School A into knowledgeable, patient, and enthusiastic group that fully embraced inclusion (Interview, Lines 71-81). Similarly, Maggie also shared how one of her GE teachers took initiative in consulting behavior specialists and other support personnel in the building to develop appropriate environments for students with ASD, to which she attributed the students’ ultimate success in inclusion (Interview, Lines 264-281). Lauren described the powerful impact of working with a GE teacher to help her understand the value of visual supports for students with ASD, something the teacher had initially rejected. As she and the teacher worked together to devise a visual schedule for a student with ASD, the teacher not only came to accept that strategy for the child in question, but also came to recognize its value for other students without disabilities (Interview, Lines 542-567).

Notably, educators’ positive collaborations with parent members of IEP teams were rarely represented in focus groups or interviews. In some cases, this positive collaboration with the parent was not without disagreement. Maggie described how a parent had raised a concern that the frequent absences of her son’s Instructional Assistant were negatively affecting his behavior. Maggie ultimately agreed with this parent’s concern and worked with the IA to impress upon her the importance of consistent supports for the child (Interview, Lines 471-492). Several participants described how helpful parental input can be in creating the right supports for students with ASD. Caryn found that Mark’s parents, Nick and Irene (parent participants from School D), had excellent insights on how help him with a recurring problem involving a

Nintendo Game Boy with which he played at recess (Interview, Lines 183-192). Maggie described a parent whom she felt “didn’t engage enough” and did not let the team know when her son, who strongly disliked writing activities, had become so unhappy in his classroom that he did not want to come to school. When this finally came to light, Maggie not only encouraged the parent to bring her concerns to the team more quickly, but also advocated with the parent (and against a GE teacher) for the student to receive Occupational Therapy and assistive technology supports for his writing difficulties (Interview, Lines 356-393). Unfortunately, this type of positive parent-school collaboration was not echoed by many educator participants.

### *Negative Experiences*

Much like negative emotional reactions, described previously, educator participants’ negative experiences tend to be examples of ways in which inclusion did not adequately meet the needs of a child, or in which a team did not work together successfully. Often, these examples were used to underscore how inclusion could be improved for specific students, buildings, or the district as a whole, rather than condemnations of inclusion as a general practice. One exception was noted with regard to parents; educators described *many* instances of conflict with parents, particularly those deemed “strong advocates.” These negative experiences were not typically paired with suggestions for improvement, but were rather used to support negative beliefs or emotional reactions to parents.

*Non-examples of inclusion.* In the interest of better understanding their definitions of inclusion, participants were asked to provide experiences in which they had thought or felt, “This is *not* inclusion.” Educators’ non-examples not only helped to clarify what they determine to be “inclusive” and “non-inclusive,” but also illuminated their beliefs about who should be included in the GE setting and how to best facilitate that placement and helped to define the most essential components of inclusive education. Furthermore, non-examples demonstrated the potential for negative outcomes when necessary supports are absent or implemented with inadequate fidelity; it is for this reason that non-examples are classified as “negative experiences” in inclusion. Specific issues and beliefs with respect to participants’ instructional placement decision rules are discussed in greater detail under Research Question 5. What follows is a summary of non-inclusive examples that support those decision rules.

Educator participants provided non-examples of inclusion that mostly emphasized problems with the instructional program or behavior supports. In other words, poor attempts at inclusion were typically attributed to school personnel, rather than to child-specific issues. In a minority of cases, however, participants described situations where, despite the team's best efforts on a child's behalf, the severity of a student's problem behavior or the marked discrepancy between their needs and those of their peers made them a poor match for the GE setting. For example, Caryn and Maggie both described a student with ASD, Tiffany (pseudonym), in primary Autism Inclusion Pod at School D. Thought age-appropriate for second grade, Tiffany was characterized as having low cognitive ability and performing on developmental levels approximately two years below grade level. In addition, she was frequently removed from the classroom due to tantrums involving throwing, kicking, and screaming. She tended to regress behaviorally following breaks (e.g., Winter Break, Spring Break) and, according to Maggie, data throughout the year indicated that she had not made gains in any of her goal areas. Although Tiffany's classmates developed caretaker roles to support her as much as possible, Caryn suggested that with abilities so far below her peers, she was uninterested in the GE curriculum and activities because they were so far beyond her capabilities. Caryn and Maggie both concluded that full-time inclusion in the GE setting was inappropriate for Tiffany and Maggie indicated that the entire IEP team had agreed that she would be placed in a self-contained classroom for students with autism the following year (Caryn, Interview, Lines 542-565; Maggie, Interview, Lines 635-661). For Natalie, however, placement decisions for a student in her Autism Inclusion Pod (Alex) were more challenging. Although Alex's academic skills were strong and she thought inclusion was necessary for him in that regard, he demonstrated severe challenging behaviors (e.g., throwing scissors when angry) that caused Natalie to worry for the children around him.

He's um, just gone punching people and sitting there threatening to kill the teacher and things like that, and I just, to have that in a climate like that, it really... Because there's other kids sitting there at recess and they really want to be nice to him but then they're scared of him too. Like his pencil lead breaks and they're like (imitating voice), "Here, you can have mine" and they've got like the big doe eyes because they're scared. You know, and that's really hard because I

do believe he academically belongs there, it's just... not necessarily, I don't know what kind of setting would be good for him. (Natalie, Interview, Lines 366-372)

In many cases, educators' non-examples of inclusion were situations where the instructional environment was not conducive to truly including the student with ASD into the classroom setting. As previously mentioned in Research Question 1, a primary example of a "non-inclusive" environment was one where the child with ASD was assigned to a full-time, dedicated "one-on-one" adult assistant (IA). Participants so often referred to dependence on an IA as indicative of what inclusion should *not* look like that it became part of these educators' definition of inclusive education as a whole. To that end, many educators depicted experiences in which a student's reliance on an IA either precluded social interaction with peers or interfered with potential "teachable" moments that could have promoted the student's development. However, IAs were not the only example of a non-inclusive instructional format. Educators also spoke of experiences in which both SE and GE teachers had not provided the necessary supports for services the student with ASD needed to be successful. Simone articulated an experience with a student from a self-contained autism classroom who was moved to a less restrictive VE setting, only to be placed in the back of the room without the supports he was accustomed to in his previous setting. As a result, the student's challenging behavior escalated to a significant degree and he was eventually returned back to the self-contained autism classroom (Interview, Lines 889-920). She also provided another experience where an included student with ASD was not given work on his instructional level (even though he was being instructed on regular, not special, standards), nor was he given any behavioral supports for participating in academic activities (e.g., behavioral expectations, First/Then board, etc.). These circumstances "caused the student to have a lot of anxiety about school" (Interview, Line 322-323). Simone further suggested that these supports might have been deliberately withheld from the student, perhaps because the GE teachers were resistant to the student's inclusion in the first place.

Several educators pointed out that their colleagues' tendency to remove students with ASD from their GE classroom when they were disruptive or inappropriate also ran contrary to the overall goals of inclusion. At School D, Maggie shared the experience of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student who she felt had been unsuccessful in his inclusive placement primarily because the resource teacher in the intermediate Autism Inclusion Pod was unable to adequately manage his behavior. When the student was given a non-

preferred task demand, he would hit, kick, or throw things at the inclusion resource teacher, which Maggie indicated was upsetting to the GE peers and caused the student to be disliked. As a result, the resource teacher preferred to pull the student out for instruction, rather than incite these behaviors in the GE setting, which further interfered with the student's inclusion into his GE classroom environment (Interview, Lines 666-690). Several other educators (Lauren, Frances) discussed how problems with behavior were especially evident in the less structured P.E. setting and caused students to be put into a more restrictive configuration.

Lauren: ...The first time [he hit someone], I guess I could say in P.E., the coaches were like, "That's it, he's out of here, he cannot come to P.E. anymore." And I'm like, "OK, no, everybody settle down," and we had a lot of talks with administration. That was an instance where I had to explain to them what inclusion is, because when they decided, OK well, first we had to explain to them he can't not come to P.E. Number one, it's on his IEP, which is a legal document, and he has to go to P.E. So we're gonna have to work something out here, and then it was, "OK, our instructional assistant goes to specials with all of the kids and she's there kind-of to assist if needed," but her role quickly changed into P.E. coach.

Jenine: (overlapping) Oh my.

Lauren: (overlapping) –Yeah, what they decided was, "oh well, he can come out to P.E. but the instructional assistant is going to take him by himself and do the hoola hoop or do the Koosh ball or whatever." And I had to fight very hard and say, "No, that's not inclusion." (Lauren, Interview, Lines 305-319)

Finally, four educator participants provided examples of situations in which they perceived that the needs of the student with ASD superseded the needs of the other students in the GE classroom. The behaviors of students with ASD were sometimes a source of distraction, which if not adequately managed (as described by Joanne with reference to her own son's classroom) could be detrimental to the success of the typically developing students in the classroom. Melody described how when she first began working with her student with ASD, she felt that "the other kids were losing out" because she lacked the strategy knowledge to support the student quickly and effectively; she indicated that in the coming year, however, that she was more confident that this would not be a problem because she now had a "bigger bag of tricks"

(Interview, Lines 775-785). At times, educators found that the balance between the SE and GE students can be disrupted by parent advocacy. Caryn was involved in a protracted struggle between the IEP team and a parent that eventually led to hour long meetings held every other week during instructional time. She relayed that her continued absences had an observable effect on her class, to the point where one student was “literally making herself sick, because if she knew I was going to be out of the classroom, she would make herself sick to go home. So that was affecting the rest of my classroom, and that’s when it became too much” (Caryn, Interview, Lines 286-292).

*Conflicts with parents.* As stated previously, educators tended to offer more negative emotional reactions to and experiences with parents than they did positive ones. Educator participants provided examples of situations in which the parent and school-based personnel were in conflict over the least restrictive environment for a student with ASD, as well as experiences where parents were opposed to an inclusive placement that the rest of the IEP team supported. In some of these situations, participants indicated that the parents’ wishes ultimately were accepted, even when they were contrary to the rest of the team and the data at hand.

Helen: Circle time, with a Kindergartener, got nothing out of it all year. Just rolled around on the rug, fingers in his ears. This went on *all year*. But that was the parental insistence on (...) inclusionary time...

Jenine: A one-on-one right there? (Participant nods) How’d you feel about that situation?

Helen: It was kind-of a waste of everybody’s time, including the child’s, but... (trails off) (Helen, Interview, Lines 506-512)

In several situations, it was not the LRE of the student’s education but the details of his/her educational plan that created conflict between educators and parents. In particular, educator participants indicated that parents who are strong advocates for their children with ASD can exert undue influence on the classroom environment and instructional delivery. This was a notable source of conflict and disagreement in Schools B and D. Participants from both schools described situations in which parents of included students with ASD insisted on spending large amounts of time in the classroom. At School B, Melody stated that a parent was supposedly in a classroom where her son with ASD had been placed on a part-time basis to serve as a parent volunteer, but was actually there to “nit-pick” and observe the teacher’s approach toward

her son to better advocate for his full inclusion (Interview, Lines 519-524). Similarly, Caryn described how a parent insisted that she collect data on the number of times she redirected a student with ASD during a typical classroom lesson; the parent herself then came in to observe and conduct a reliability check with the teacher's data. A new conflict arose when the parent and teacher found they had different definitions of what constituted a developmentally appropriate amount of "redirection" for a 1<sup>st</sup> grade student and Caryn objected to the idea that a parent would be permitted to dictate expectations and standards to that degree: "Then it's not an inclusion setting" (Interview, Lines 254-255).

One parent conflict was repeatedly referred to by three participants from School D (Tracey, Maggie, and Caryn), all of whom had been significantly involved in and impacted by heated, bi-weekly meetings dealing with this ongoing disagreement. The central issue had been the number of minutes of Speech/Language related services the child received. While the school's speech therapist indicated that he needed minimal supports in this area, the parent had provided a report from a private speech therapist indicating that he had much more intensive support needs. After nearly a year of conflict, observation, data collection, and discussion, the school-based members of the team ultimately capitulated to the parent's wishes and allocated the degree of services the parent had requested; soon thereafter, they learned the child was leaving School D for a private school. According to Maggie, the team then realized that the parent had fiercely advocated for a more intense level of services because she was trying to obtain a higher service rating on Florida's ESE Matrix of Service (indicating a high level of special education service needs), which would then qualify her son for more private tuition dollars under the McKay Scholarship Program. (The McKay Scholarships for Students with Disabilities Program provides tuition for Florida students with disabilities to attend a participating private school.)

Educators' experiences not only provided examples of instances in which the IEP team was at odds with a parent's wishes, but elucidated the long-term effect that repeated conflicts can have on both the team's relationship with the parent and their disposition towards children with ASD in general. With respect to the above-described conflict, Tracey, Caryn, and Maggie each reported experiencing a significant degree of professional and personal upset over the matter. The inclusion resource teacher who was also involved in that situation ended up quitting her job because, according to



Maggie, the parent had “absolutely undermined her” with her “insatiable” needs (Focus Group 2, Lines 775-777). As Maggie related in her personal interview,

...It's not just [this parent's] demands, it's the way she goes about it. It's not healthy. (long pause) You know, it's a sad commentary when you, you *dread* having that person come on campus. I watch my staff members dread... when the district staff dreads hearing that person's name. That's sad. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 462-465)

Tracey also provided an interesting perspective on the cumulative effect for administrators who experience repeated negative interactions with parents. She indicated that one of her former administrators (at a non-participating school that had previously provided an Autism Inclusion Pod) was planning to return to the classroom as a teacher; Tracey suggested, however, that it was unlikely that this administrator-turned-teacher would ever willingly take a child with ASD in her class because of her many negative experiences with the parents of such students in her administrative capacity.

...[It's] like, you have the bad taste in your mouth from being at the administrator level, you know, the battles, versus, when you have the kid on a day-to-day, you can love the kid and hate the parent. And hating the parent is more like an administrator relationship, but when you don't have the contact with that kid [as a teacher does], you don't realize that this can be a joyous process. (Tracey, Focus Group 1, 2483-2487)

*Conflicts with colleagues.* A final form of conflict discussed by educator participants encompassed negative experiences with fellow teachers, administrators, and even district office supervisors over issues of inclusion and service delivery for students with ASD. Participants from both of the new school buildings (Schools B and D) described how conflicts about who should and should not be included arose as teachers acclimated to having students with ASD in the GE setting for the first time in their careers. Melody's own experience with an ongoing conflict of this nature is particularly illustrative: the other teachers in her pod insisted for many months that her student with ASD did not “belong” there because of his sometimes disruptive behavior and moderately intense service needs. Melody suggested that her fellow teachers were very “academically-minded” and were extremely concerned about the impact of the student's disruptive behavior on the rest of the classroom: “I always hear, 'It's not fair to the other kids,' you know... 'he's a disruption, he shouldn't be in there...' I would get it at

lunch time, you know, ‘Why did you let him scream for an hour?’” (Interview, Lines 421-425). As previously described, however, Melody felt that over time her colleagues in the pod became more accepting of both the student with ASD and inclusion in general as they saw him making gains in her classroom. By the end of the year, several of those teachers had volunteered to have students from the self-contained setting be “mainstreamed” into their classrooms for portions of the day.

In general, however, educators’ conflicts with colleagues tended to be over specific details of a student’s daily supports or responses to problem behavior, rather than broader disagreements about the appropriateness of inclusion for one or more students. For example, both inclusion resource teachers (Brandy and Lauren) described numerous situations where teachers had been resistant to implementing visual supports or other strategies they had recommended for the included students with ASD. In some cases, the source of resistance was a difference in expectations about how much support inclusion students should need. Brandy and Lauren both described experiences with classroom or specials teachers who expected that students with ASD in the GE setting should be able to work independently or remain on-task with minimal supports. In other instances, teachers lacked sufficient background knowledge and experience in strategy use to trust that these strategies would be useful or effective. Lauren described a resistant GE teacher simply could not believe that a visual schedule of the morning routine would be sufficient to improve the student’s behavior, asking “OK, you’re telling me if I put this on his desk, that he’s gonna come in and do what he’s supposed to do in the morning?” (Interview, Lines 553-554). Yet, when the visual schedule was indeed effective in improving the student’s behavior, the teacher laughingly admitted to Lauren she had been convinced it would never work but she was now a believer. In examples of this type, educator participants suggested that teachers were most likely to overcome their resistance to strategies when they observed them having a meaningful impact on the student’s participation in classroom routines and activities, though this was not always the case.

Finally, as previously mentioned, conflict with colleagues stemmed from disagreements about how the behavior of students with ASD should be handled. Participants who voiced these experiences typically described others taking a more rigid or punitive approach to dealing with behavior (e.g., yelling, writing discipline referrals, removing the child from the room), while the participants themselves advocated for more

positive approaches (e.g., attempting to understand the behavior, provide short verbal prompts rather than yelling, using reinforcement to increase desired behaviors). In a somewhat different vein, Tracey illustrated her experiences with a GE teacher who she felt was encouraging inappropriate behavior in her 2<sup>nd</sup> grade student with ASD by allowing her to constantly play with the Kindergarteners in the pod, leave the classroom whenever she wanted, and speaking to her in a developmentally inappropriate way (as if she were much younger than seven). In most of these cases, conflicts over approaches to managing behavior were not clearly resolved. Participants such as Melody described trying the suggested strategies but ultimately doing what she thought was right and worked best for the student; in Tracey's case, she felt that she could not get through to the teacher in question and brought her concerns to the administrator.

Occasionally, disagreements erupted between teachers and their building-level or district-level administrators. Compared to conflicts within the teacher ranks, which tended to focus on specific service delivery issues for individual students, arguments with administrators tended to be over the larger issues of inclusion, such as LRE, a building-wide philosophy for inclusion, or willingness to stand up to the demands of "strong advocate" parents. Helen (Assistant Principal, School C) described a heated dispute between herself and the Principal that developed when he pulled students with Emotional Handicaps (EH) and autism out of mainstream P.E. classes after several parents had called to complain about their behavior.

Helen: So... they took LRE away. That was the principal's decision.

Jenine: What was that like for you, as a co-administrator, in terms of dealing with that conflict?

Helen: I was gonna... I didn't sign any of the IEPs. I argued with him. I... *discussed* it with him, let me change my terminology. Um, they still had... (sigh) they still had recess and lunch... The very best of the best, there were 15 of them, got to go to specials. But then we had the problem of who watched them, so their teachers had breaks. So, if I was there, I watched them 3 days, the behavior specialist watched them one day, some days... it was a nightmare!

(Helen, Interview, 1137-1143)

Tracey also shared experiences in her prior (non-participating) building where the administrator avoided conflict by going along with parent or district decisions that ran counter to the building's wishes. "Even if causing problems meant standing behind a

teacher,” Tracey related, “if it was going to cause problems then we were going to ask the teacher to kind-of be quiet and see if they can live with whatever decision was made” (Interview, Lines 167-169). Tracey used this experience to provide a contrast with her current building principal (Maggie), with whom she had developed a close relationship and whom she felt would back her up if she felt strongly on a particular issue.

With respect to School D’s year-long conflict with a parent over speech/language services, all three participants from that building reported experiences throughout that struggle in which they felt unsupported by the district office supervisors. Caryn suggested that the district’s “fear of litigation” was a major motivating factor in the supervisors’ approach to dealing with the parent. When the school members of the child’s IEP team denied the parent’s requests, the parent was able to call the district ESE supervisors or Director of ESE and get what she wanted (Caryn, Interview, Lines 360-354). As this happened repeatedly throughout the year, it had a demoralizing effect on the child’s IEP team and Caryn suggested that the lack of the support from ESE supervisors at the district level was probably the most influential factor in the resignation of the inclusion resource teacher. Of the three School D participants involved in this conflict, Maggie (administrator) was the most objective about the district’s stance, recognizing that the district did eventually support the school’s position. However, Tracey suggested that the support that School D did finally receive only came after the parent had “disrespected” the district supervisor: “...It didn’t matter how much we complained... it took *that person* having to deal with it, that there is an action... It’s like, “It took *you* getting disrespected to realize that we went through a year of disrespect” (Focus Group 1, Lines 2697-2700). Relatedly, Maggie suggested that there was a conflict of interest in having Connie serve as both District ESE Supervisor of Due Process/Legal Issues *and* Parent/Family Services.

[Connie, the supervisor] advocates for these, specifically for these autistic parents, and then she has to come to the school level and be the keeper of the laws and rules. How do you do that? And this particular mom sees this woman as her dear friend and that this woman can do anything for her. And so she relies on this supervisor to, to direct everything. And that’s not the way it happens. And so she gets gratification from this person because she advocates, she teaches her how to advocate. They held those meetings at my school at night, those parent groups! But then when you come to the table, [the parent]

called my teacher's work 'stupid.' She used that term, "this is stupid," when we were talking about the IEP... But the supervisor did not intervene, and I said to the supervisor, "She thinks you are her best friend. Please talk to her about the way she presents herself in these conferences. It is wrong, she intimidates, she denigrates my staff, the nastiness." (Maggie, Interview, Lines 900-915, 923-925)

Although the majority of negative experiences with district personnel came from participants at School D and were directly related to their protracted engagement with Connie in a specific parent conflict, Beatrice and Tracey also supported these views from their experiences from their long histories of autism inclusion involvement. Again, instances of conflict often involved the district overturning the decisions of the school-based team, oftentimes at the request of a parent. Tracey stated that, from her experiences over the years, she has come to think of the district as a "push-over" district and that parents were also coming to regard the district as a place where they can easily get what they want (Interview, Lines 920-927). Beatrice reported that as often as several times a year, she has observed the placement and programming decisions of building administrators being "superseded" or "undermined" by individuals from the district office. For example, an IEP team (including a building administrator) may sit in a conference room for up to 5 hours to work out the details of a plan, only to find later that someone "higher up" has reversed their decision. "And it could be for whatever legal reason or other issue or expertise," Beatrice explained, "you know, they just sometimes feel they put in a lot of effort and work and then have that...*undermined*" (Interview, Lines 1039-1042). Tracey provided an example where two parents had insisted on a one-on-one IA for their child while simultaneously reminding the team that they were attorneys by trade, thus hinting at the possibility of lawsuit if their needs were not met. When the building team denied the parents' request, a district supervisor overturned this decision and granted the child a full-time aide because, in Tracey's opinion, even though "it wasn't the best thing for the child, it was the best thing for the district" (Interview, Lines 506-511). Finally, although the district office has indicated that every school building should be able to take on the highest functioning students with ASD and should not automatically send them to an "autism school" (see Lisa's comments in the Research Context portion of Chapter 3), Beatrice reported that the district office still allows non-autism buildings to reject these students, in effect saying to the buildings with Autism

Inclusion programs, “Well, you can deal with it, but the other school can’t, so we’re going to send you this kid” (Interview, Lines 1029-1030).

*Question 5: How Do Educators Make Decisions about Instructional Placements?*

Most educator participants emphasized that, despite the benefits of inclusion for students with ASD described in Research Question 2, inclusion is not necessarily the right choice for all students with ASD. Just as inclusion was consistently described as a something defined and implemented on a “case by case basis,” so too were decisions about the appropriateness of inclusion made on an individual basis. Throughout both focus groups and individual interviews, educators’ decision rules for instructional placements were stated directly and also implied through their articulation of beliefs and experiences related to inclusion. The following sections examine participants’ decision-making considerations with respect to (a) student characteristics, (b) issues related to LRE as dictated by the circuit courts (Thomas & Rapport, 1998), (c) formal and informal decision-making processes, including additional data collection as-needed, and (d) circumstances in which inclusion is *not* recommended. The reporting of results related to this research question ends with a discussion of other decision-making issues that arose in the vignette portion of the focus group, when participants were asked to create an educational program for two hypothetical students with ASD.

*Consider Student Characteristics to Identify Candidates for Inclusion*

Most educators believed that there were significant benefits for students with ASD who participate in inclusive education, in part because of the potential for creating relationships with their typically developing peers, and in part because repeated communicative or social interactions with peers can promote skill development or mastery. Nevertheless, educator participants acknowledged that certain academic, behavioral, communicative, cognitive, and adaptive characteristics made some students with ASD better “candidates for inclusion” than others; students without these characteristics may be less likely to reap the benefits of inclusion. These characteristics and attributes, ranging from specific to general, are summarized under five key domains of functioning: (a) social/emotional/behavioral functioning, (b) academic skills, (c) communication skills, (d) cognitive ability, and (e) self-care skills. These domains are listed and described in order of their perceived importance among educator participants, based on frequency of these themes in focus group and interview transcripts. Finally, it should also be noted that no definition of “inclusion” was provided when participants

described characteristics of “good candidates for inclusion.” Some participants distinguished between children who would be good for “full inclusion” versus “mainstreaming” (Brandy, Rhiannon, Darla), while others answered the question more generally and in ways that tended to match their own personal definition of inclusion.

*Behavioral/social-emotional functioning.* When attempting to describe “good inclusion candidates,” educators consistently came back to behavioral functioning, including emotional control, independence in classroom activities, and social skills, as “driving the success of inclusion” (Brandy, Focus Group 1, Line 596). When asked to describe an ideal inclusion candidate in their individual interviews, the first response of over half of the educator participants ( $N=8$ ) was related to the child’s behavioral or social functioning. Focus group sessions also included a question about the issues and factors that influence placement decisions; educators in both focus groups spoke at length about the impact that a child’s behavioral functioning can have on placement decisions. According to Brandy, this immediate emphasis on behavior is also evident in “real-life” multi-disciplinary teams in the school setting.

Jenine: When you’re having those kinds of meetings to talk about all of those issues, what are the main things that the team focuses on?

Brandy: For children with autism? It’s their behaviors. Well, they look at behavior, academics, social skills, they look at all of that, but the first thing they want to know is how are they going to act? What are they like, what’s their behavior like? (Brandy, Interview, Lines 796-801)

As participants illustrated the varying behavior of students with ASD, three categories of behavior/social focus emerged: desired behaviors seen as necessary for success in the GE setting, tolerated behaviors that were distracting or disruptive but could be managed in GE, and unacceptable behaviors that, if chronic, could suggest the need for a more restrictive placement.

Educator participants identified behaviors they wished to see in a student with ASD coming into the GE environment; these desired behaviors were viewed as prerequisite skills that were necessary for the student to experience the benefits of inclusion or to be at least minimally comfortable in that setting. For example, educators felt that students in GE settings must be able to work independently for at least a portion of classroom activities, in comparison to students in self-contained classrooms who, “if I get up to do something else, they’re up and they’re gone” (Julie, Interview, Lines 320-

321). Some degree of flexibility or adaptability was also seen as crucial, although participants acknowledged that the absence of this trait is a hallmark of Autism Spectrum Disorder. Beatrice noted that students with ASD will do “just fine” in inclusion “...if they have a level of independence and problem-solving ability. If something doesn’t go their way, that they can kind-of overcome it. That rigidity factor” (Beatrice, interview, Lines 310-311). Students’ ability to meet basic classroom behavior expectations was also a consideration and a characteristic self-contained teachers looked for in their own students when recommending a student for inclusion; children with ASD who could consistently walk in line, stay in a group or in an assigned area, and make transitions to new activities (even with some degree of support) were perceived as being a good match for the GE setting.

Although social skills are a common area of difficulty for children with ASD, some educators felt that a capacity for socialization on some level was necessary for success in GE. In Frances’s view, this was defined as the ability to tolerate being in a group; “You don’t want an ASD student that doesn’t like to be touched, or you know, can’t function in crowds, or something like that, because that’s what’s gonna happen in Basic Ed” (Frances, Interview, Lines 368-370). For others (e.g., Beatrice, Caryn, Maggie, Rhiannon), the ideal inclusion candidate can engage in some degree of social interaction, ranging from demonstrating interest in peers to engaging reciprocal play or conversation. However, several participants felt that social prerequisites were not necessary for included students with ASD. “Children with autism always need social skills,” Brandy said, “so, no [that wouldn’t be a prerequisite]. I think that’s something they need to be taught and as teachers, we need to be responsible to do that” (Interview, 445-446).

Educators acknowledged that even the most high-functioning students with ASD can demonstrate a mild degree of disruptive or problematic behaviors, yet still be successful in the GE classroom. Minor behavior problems (e.g., off-task behavior, noisemaking, task refusal, etc.) were seen as tolerable and were not perceived to be a barrier to inclusion for children with ASD. As previously suggested in Research Question 2, some participants felt that children’s minor problem behaviors would decrease with access to peer modeling of appropriate behaviors. Melody declared in her focus group, “I think if you say, ‘You can’t put them in there because of behaviors,’ I think you’re doing a disservice because I think being in inclusion, most of the behaviors



will disappear” (Focus Group 2, Lines 527-529). For many participants, however, a major challenge of inclusion lies in walking the “fine line” between behaviors that can be adequately supported or managed in GE versus behaviors that were significantly unsafe or disruptive to the classroom environment. For Melody and her included Kindergartener with ASD, that “fine line” emerged when his behavior was so disruptive that the other children “were on hold and they were losing time because there were things that we had to deal with. So I think... and it’s like, where’s the fine line?” (Melody, Interview, Lines 536-538). Ultimately, Melody found that the team was able to support the student to a degree that these disruptions were minimized.

However, when students’ problem behavior includes self-injury/headbanging, severe tantrums (extended screaming, property destruction), and physical aggression toward peers, the “line” between tolerable behaviors and unacceptable behaviors becomes clearer. A theme emerged among many participants that severely maladaptive behaviors are unacceptable in the GE setting; students who demonstrate ongoing difficulties with behaviors of this nature are considered less ideal candidates for full inclusion. For example, Darla related that the physically aggressive behavior of one of her self-contained students was keeping him out of the GE classroom, even though he demonstrated academic skills appropriate for inclusion.

The problem we’re having for him with that right now is that he is so behaviorally (...) um, aggressive, that we’re (...) at this time, cannot put him in the general (...) so we’re working on that behavior so we can put him in for those times. Right now, he’s going in for center times just to build up to that. I would *love* to see him in an inclusion setting, I think he could go into an inclusion setting, but his behaviors are just not to where we can allow him to be there right now. It’s holding him back. (Darla, Interview, Lines 222-227)

Nevertheless, not all participants felt that physically aggressive or other maladaptive behaviors should preclude an inclusive placement for a student with ASD. While Lauren and Natalie both described a student at School A with physically aggressive behavior whose frequent and severe problem behavior was significantly hindering his progress in the GE setting, they also acknowledged his need to receive academic instruction that matched his high intelligence and skills (Lauren, Focus Group 1, Lines 666-673; Natalie, Interview, 362-373). Similarly, Joanne felt that even severely maladaptive behaviors

could be improved in the GE setting; she concluded that academic skills were more of a consideration than behavioral functioning (Interview, Lines 541-547).

*Academic skills.* Participants consistently suggested that the GE setting offered the most rigorous academic curriculum and opportunity for grade-level instruction. As such, academic skills were an important consideration for the potentially-included child with ASD. Interestingly, while behavior was many educators' first consideration when asked to generically consider characteristics of a good inclusion candidate, academic skills emerged as the first-mentioned reason for recommending inclusion for both of the vignette students in the first focus group session. Lauren affirmed this phenomenon in actual placement decision-making, suggesting that excellent academic skills were often the reason teachers of self-contained classrooms cited when recommending a child for an inclusive classroom (Interview, Lines 701-706). Similarly, Rhiannon and Julie both described their efforts to convince their colleagues that one of their preschool students was academically ready for placement in a less restrictive setting.

...it was funny because my other student that I was telling you is going to the Primary VE class, when I sent the email out, it was "He can do this, this, this." I listed it off. "He can read basic sight words, he knows all his colors, he knows all his numbers 1-100! He can read the words one through twenty!" And I listed all of those skills so there wasn't a question that academics was the issue... (Julie, Interview, Lines 115-120)

While Brandy and several others allowed that students with ASD do not need to "understand *everything* to come into inclusion" (Interview, Line 459), a minimum level of academic skills was seen as necessary for participating in classroom activities (even when modified). In general, reading (or early literacy, for younger students) skills were most often mentioned as most essential to a child's success when participating in the GE setting. Teachers of classes for preschoolers with ASD (Rhiannon, Julie, Frances), suggested that students under consideration for inclusion in a GE Kindergarten classroom need to have most of the pre-academic skills expected of a typically developing Kindergartener (e.g., rote counting, 1-to-1 correspondence, sequencing, color/shape/size awareness, letter recognition, emerging phonemic awareness, ability to write, trace, follow a line, etc.).

Educators were considerably variable in their expectations for how far below average a student with ASD could afford to be in inclusion. For example, some SE

teachers (e.g., Brandy, Joanne) expected that a good inclusion candidate would have “at least Kindergarten-level skills” (Brandy, Interview, Line 418) to be included anywhere in the Primary pod (grades K-2), while Caryn (GE teacher) and Lauren (SE-Inclusion Resource) suggested that they should be on grade-level or close to it and able to keep up with the class. Notably, while Caryn had previously defined inclusion as being “just another form of differentiated instruction” (Interview, Line 10), she later identified children whose “educational level is far below, [so] that your instruction is affected” as less than ideal candidates for inclusion (Interview, Line 468). However, she did also suggest that it may be appropriate to move such a child to another classroom within their pod if their instructional levels were more consistent with the curriculum in those settings (e.g., move a second grader to a first grade classroom for reading instruction). Darla also observed that when classroom instruction is significantly above the level of the student with ASD, the potential for frustration and possibly challenging behavior increases (Interview, Lines 619-621). For this and other reasons, educators consistently stated that inclusion is generally easier to begin in the primary grades, while the skill gap between the student with ASD and his/her GE peers is likely to be smaller.

When developing instructional placements and programs for intermediate students with ASD (grades 3 through 5), academic considerations often include their ability to pass the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT); these concerns are amplified by the state’s policy requiring retention of all students who fail to demonstrate proficiency (Level 3 or better) on the FCAT in their third grade year. In Focus Group 1, “Josh’s” significantly low reading skills did not cause teachers to suggest that he be placed in a self-contained classroom, but did raise concerns about his risk for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade retention and how his team could provide adequate support for a child four reading levels below the majority of his GE class. In Focus Group 2, Maggie indicated that when children are at high-risk for retention due to low reading achievement, it may be necessary to replace “specials” such as P.E., art, and music with additional intensive instruction (Lines 1337-1340). Some fellow focus group participants expressed surprise that this was allowable and concern that parents of kids with ASD might strongly object to their removal from grade-level activities in favor of additional reading instruction.

*Communication skills.* When it came to identifying characteristics of good inclusion candidates, communication skills were discussed less frequently than behavioral functioning and academic skills. Nevertheless, 75% of educator participants

(N=12) cited communication as an important ingredient in the success of an included child with ASD, particularly if the child is to be a full member of a GE classroom.

On the whole, participants gave more consideration to a child's expressive skills (e.g., communicating a message) than to receptive skills (i.e., understanding a message) in making placement decisions; only one participant (Joanne) made a vague reference to receptive communication skills. Educators were flexible in their expectations for a student's mode of expressive communication, recognizing that students with ASD who are not verbally proficient can use picture-based strategies or assistive technology to communicate their needs and wants. According to Frances and several others, "a good candidate is, um, I think one that can communicate in some form or fashion. It doesn't necessarily have to be verbally, but as long as they can communicate in some style, whether it be pictures or verbally or however" (Frances, Interview, Lines 364-367). In fact, several participants noted that verbal language is *not* necessary for participation in the GE setting because it may develop along the way.

I would say, this has been different for me this year, too, verbal skills are not necessarily, for me, um, I would say, necessary, because I find that they usually come along eventually. I have had kids that are barely speaking at all when they come in, and that's okay. You can have some that may be hard for teachers, "Well, how do you teach a kid who's not going to talk to you?" ...Well, it's possible, it may be different, but it's possible... [The teachers would] say, "Well, this kid doesn't talk, so how can we have him come in?" Well, so what he doesn't talk? He will, eventually, you just have to be patient. Or, maybe he won't! But that doesn't mean that he's not learning (Lauren, Interview, Lines 719-728, 749-751)

Finally, as a behavior specialist, Tracey was uniquely attuned to the negative impact that poor communication skills can have on behavior.

Tracey: I just think that if someone's going to be in a setting where education is being taught then they need to be able to communicate what's going on. If they can't tell you that this is good, this is bad, this is hard, they can't tell you those things, then they are putting you in a very stressful situation, so if they can't in some way let you know that they are having difficulties with it, other than screaming and throwing themselves on the floor, then I think it's unfair to them.

Jenine: What about children who are not able to communicate verbally but might be able to use—

Tracey: (overlapping) If they have PECS, if they have the ability to express themselves or to let you know how they are feeling in that situation, definitely. Even if it's communication on a DynaVox. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 750-761)

*Cognitive abilities*. Although the intellectual functioning of children diagnosed with ASD can vary from significant mental retardation to giftedness, educator participants in this study only infrequently considered a child's cognitive abilities in placement decisions. When asked, most participants suggested that children with significantly low cognitive ability would be likely to struggle in the GE setting.

Yeah, because if you know that cognitively that they're not, I hate to say it, on level, it's really kind-of, not hurting them but it's not benefiting them to sit in a classroom where they're not going to be taught the skills that they need to be successful. Because in that inclusion setting, it's a teacher teaching a lesson to the whole group, even though the group is on different levels, but if that child is so much lower than everyone else, they're not... they may grasp just 5%. (Julie, Interview, Lines 417-422)

In addition, some participants recognized that students with cognitive and adaptive abilities significantly below their same-age peers might not be best suited for full-time participation in the GE setting because they would miss out on necessary functional skills training provided in the self-contained curriculum.

A minority of participants (Rhiannon, Brandy, and Natalie) indicated that in their experiences, students' intellectual deficits need not prevent their participation in the GE setting as long as other aforementioned prerequisites were in place (e.g., minimally disruptive behavior, preacademic/academic skills, some mode of communication). Helen suggested that low cognitive ability is less of a barrier to inclusion in the primary grades, because children with ASD could still reap social benefits from participating with typical peers; in later years, however, she suggested that both peers and teachers are "not as tolerant" of lower ability levels and may become more resistant to their inclusion (Interview, Lines 207-218).

Interestingly, near one-third of all comments associated with the "cognitive abilities" theme came from Focus Group 2, which was the only one attended by a school psychologist (Beatrice). Beatrice explained the instructional implications of the

significant verbal-nonverbal split observed in “Josh’s” intellectual profile described in the first vignette to the group, which may have led others (Helen, Darla) to also offer comments relating to cognitive abilities during the problem-solving portion of the focus group. Cognitive abilities were not discussed at all during Focus Group 1, in either experiential examples or in discussing the hypothetical student cases.

*Self-care skills.* SE participants occasionally made mention of the need for students with ASD to have certain self-care skills such as toileting, feeding, and basic hygiene care, solidly in place before entering the GE environment. Toilet training emerged as the single biggest self-care concern among educator participants; of the seven educators who discussed this issue, five asserted that students in inclusive settings need to be able to be independent in the toileting routine. In fact, when asked about characteristics of good inclusion candidates, Lauren’s initial response was as follows.

Lauren: Um, I’m sorry if I start this out a little funny, but the first thing that comes to my mind is potty training.

Jenine: Ahh, no that is not—

Lauren: (overlapping) –OK, I was going to say, maybe that may be a weird way to start—

Jenine: (overlapping) No, no, I’ve heard that before.

Lauren: We’ve had a discussion about this. We have one student right now who is not potty trained. And it’s really hard for us, because that used to be our line. If they’re not potty trained, they can’t come over. Well, this student, I just felt so strongly that he should be with us for every other reason that I thought, ‘Well, we can get past the potty training thing. And maybe we could even have success with the potty training.’ But then I thought, ‘OK, but now are we opening ourselves up to other kids that are not potty trained?’ Because, I mean, as silly as it may sound, we don’t necessarily have the time to be taking these kids to the potty all the time. Whereas in self-contained, that’s kind-of a bigger part of their day and they have less children, too. So they’ve got that instructional assistant, or two sometimes, in those classrooms that somebody can be doing that for quite a bit of the time—

Jenine: (overlapping) –It can be built into the routine in that classroom.

Lauren: Right, whereas, if I'm in another room helping another student, and of course, with the pod we can see across and the Basic Ed teacher is in the room by herself, and she's pointing at this kid, and like, signaling to me that he needs to go to the bathroom, (laughing) then I have to stop what I am doing to do that, so (...) that's, as much as I hate to say, that's kind of a big qualification. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 634-674)

Joanne and Darla were in the minority of educators who felt that lack of toilet training should not keep a child from general education, although Darla did emphasize that it is "most beneficial if they are potty-trained" (Interview, Line 449). For Joanne, her past experiences as a one-on-one IA for students with significant physical disabilities (e.g., paraplegia) who needed toileting assistance were highly influential in her belief that lack of toilet training should not be a barrier to inclusion.

I have that experience of working with kids in wheelchairs, and everyone that I ever worked with had to have their diapers changed, had to have their pants changed by a nurse or whatever, so (...) So if that's happening and kids in wheelchairs are getting that kind of support, why not autistic kids? ...I had one girl I was working with who couldn't talk and she had an electrical device, you know, by tapping her finger, she could communicate! Um, she could laugh, she was a wonderful child, very bright! And I... no one ever suggested she couldn't be included because she couldn't go to the bathroom. (Joanne, Interview, Lines 570-573; 573-574; 580-583)

Finally, in reconciling the characteristics of students who make ideal or less-than-ideal inclusion candidates, several educators suggested that "some form of inclusion is for everyone" (Brandy, Interview, Line 265). While not all students with ASD might have skills or needs compatible with full-time placement in a GE setting, these educators felt that every child with ASD could benefit from participating with their typically developing peers in some fashion, even if on a limited basis.

Brandy: ...For really severe children with autism, nonverbal, tantrums all of the time, physical aggression towards others, I felt that to sit in a classroom, they would have a lot harder time, and I don't think that they should be in a classroom setting for long periods of time. However, I still think that they should be included in recess or lunchtime or (...) you know?

Jenine: So *classroom*-based inclusion is not necessarily for everyone—

Brandy: (overlapping) –And we’ve tried that, I’m taking it from experience, because we have tried it before with one child and it was very difficult. He’s nonverbal and he needed help, he needed someone there all day long with him. He was unable to do work, classwork, you know, he had to have everything modified. And (...) he, it was really difficult, but the parent insisted that the child remain. Finally at the end, she realized and understood that he really needs a smaller setting and (...) But he still was included in a recess or a lunchtime after that, so he did still have some inclusion but it wasn’t classroom-based. (Brandy, Interview, Lines 272-286)

Participants’ various strategies for “bringing inclusion to the student” when they are not a good match for full inclusion in the GE classroom are discussed in greater detail in the next section, under the “Participation with General Education peers” section.

#### *Consider Issues Related to LRE as Dictated by Circuit Court Decisions*

When deciding instructional placements for students with ASD, analysis of their personal characteristics and potential to benefit from the GE environment is a necessary but insufficient decision-making step. Educational environments are dynamic systems in which peers, teachers, physical environments, curricular demands, and building culture have an influence on the educational experiences of a child with ASD. In turn, the child with ASD exerts influence on these same factors. As such, educators are obliged to consider not only the unique needs of the prospective inclusion candidate, but how their participation in the GE setting might impact others within the school system. The decision rules and educational placement options described by educator participants in this study are described in the following sections, organized with reference to standards for determining LRE by the U.S. Supreme Court and federal circuit courts: (a) continuum of placement options, (b) portability of services and supports, (c) relative educational benefit of placement options, (d) impact on general education peers, (e) costs and resources, and (f) participation with general education peers to the greatest extent possible (Thomas & Rapport, 1998).

*Continuum of placement options.* Context interviews with district supervisors, focus groups, and individual interviews with educator participants helped to elucidate the continuum of placement options available in each of the participating schools. As clarified in *Rowley* (1982), schools must offer not only mainstream placements in the GE environment, but continue to make more intensive classroom environments available for



	SCHOOL A	SCHOOL B	SCHOOL C	SCHOOL D
195 Least Restrictive Environment Most Restrictive Environment	Full-time GE membership ("Inclusion") in <b>Autism Inclusion Pods</b> (Primary/Intermediate – 2 Resource teachers)	Full-time GE ("Inclusion") in <b>Autism Inclusion Pods</b> (Primary/Intermediate – 1 Resource teacher for both)	Full-time GE ("Inclusion") in <b>Autism Inclusion Pods</b> (Primary only– 1 Resource teacher). In Intermediate, must find willing GE teacher to take child w/ ASD.	Full-time GE membership ("Inclusion") in <b>Autism Inclusion Pods</b> (Primary/Intermediate – 2 Resource teachers)
	Part-time GE membership ("Inclusion") in <b>Language/Learning Disability Inclusion Pod*</b> (Intermediate only – 1 Resource teacher).  <b>Mainstreaming:</b> students from self-contained settings participate in GE classrooms for a few select activities or lessons	<b>Mainstreaming:</b> students from self-contained autism classes participate in GE classrooms (mostly in Autism Inclusion Pod) for a few select activities or lessons.  <b>Self-contained Varying Exceptionalities (VE) classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE.	<b>Mainstreaming:</b> students from self-contained settings participate in GE classrooms for a few select activities or lessons	<b>Mainstreaming:</b> students from self-contained settings participate in Autism Inclusion Pod for a few select activities or lessons  <b>Self-contained Varying Exceptionalities (VE) classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE.
	<b>Self-contained Autism classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE. Reverse inclusion ("peer buddies") available.  <b>Self-contained LLD classroom only</b> (Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE. No reverse inclusion.	<b>Self-contained Autism classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE. Reverse inclusion ("peer buddies") available.	<b>Self-contained Autism classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE. No reverse inclusion.	<b>Self-contained Autism classroom only</b> (Pre-K, Primary and Intermediate), physically separated from GE. Reverse inclusion ("peer buddies") available.

\* LLD is one of the classes w/in a GE pod and SE students mix in and out of pod to the greatest extent possible.

Figure 4. Continuum of possible instructional placements at each of the participating schools, from least restrictive (top) to most restrictive (bottom) options.

children who require a greater degree of support. Figure 4 depicts the continuum of placement options for SE students with ASD in each of the four participating buildings, while Appendix B depicts the continuum of SE service delivery throughout the entire district. It should be noted that while the service delivery options depicted in Appendix B were available for schools to implement at the time of data collection, they were not articulated in writing until March 2007 as a part of the district-wide BPIE process. As such, the specific terminology used by participants in these focus groups and interviews may not match what is presented in this service delivery model (e.g., what was described by participants as “mainstreaming” is now known as “consultation”). More specific information of the configuration of each of the placement options shown on the building continuum, as well as decision rules for placing students with ASD, is provided throughout the remainder of the LRE section.

*Portability of services and supports.* U.S. Supreme Court and federal circuit courts have suggested that whenever possible, services and supports typically provided in segregated settings should be “portable” and made available in general education contexts and neighborhood schools (*Roncker v. Walter*, 1983). Within the continuum of services both at the district and building levels, portability of services and supports is evident to some degree. At the district level, not every school building contains the most intensive SE placements (e.g., self-contained autism, self-contained LLD classrooms); the continuum of services for many of the non-participating elementary schools stops at the level of self-contained VE classrooms, with no autism-specific classrooms or personnel available. As such, when children with ASD zoned for those schools demonstrated a need for more intensive supports, they were referred to the nearest building with autism-specific services.

Unfortunately, the district’s decision to cluster intensive autism-specific services in a handful of elementary buildings led to unforeseen consequences. As described by Lisa (District Supervisor of Autism) in the Research Context portion of Chapter 3, elementary buildings without intensive autism-specific services (e.g., self-contained autism classrooms) often referred new students with ASD to one of the five “autism schools” (i.e., schools *with* self-contained autism classrooms and, in some cases, Autism Inclusion Pods), even when they did not require autism-specific services. Educator participants confirmed this phenomenon, suggesting that these “non-autism” buildings were unwilling to take responsibility for educating high-functioning children with ASD who did not demonstrate the need for autism-specific supports and could have been

successful in a GE or VE setting. In the opinion of some participants, this created an unfair burden on the resources of the buildings that did have autism-specific services available.

...Other schools will see the autism label on incoming paperwork and they will immediately ship the child off without giving them a chance, without even looking at them, without knowing anything about it! If it's got the A on it [for autism], they're coming to one of the A schools. So I think that schools that don't have autism programs could still benefit very much from having a tiny bit of autism support and some of those higher functioning children could make it fine in those schools! But I think that several schools are becoming hubs for autism because we don't have continuum of services in other schools... (Darla, Interview, Lines 1138-1145)

Although Lisa indicated in the context interview that the district expects "non-autism" schools to take increasing responsibility for educating high-functioning children with ASD, Julie suggested that personnel from "non-autism" schools do not share this vision.

I actually interviewed at a school and explained my background in autism and the administrator actually told me, "Well, don't worry, you won't have any children with autism in this school." And I was like, 'That you know of. For the moment!' So I was like, 'OK, I'm not going to accept a job here!' (Julie, Interview, Lines 563-570)

From the perspective of educator participants, then, portability of services appears to have been only somewhat achieved at the district level. While it may be unrealistic to expect neighborhood schools without autism-specific services to be able to accommodate all students with ASD in their boundary area (especially those students with intensive support needs), the goal of shared responsibility for educating students with ASD among all elementary buildings does not yet appear to be a reality.

Among the participating buildings, not only were self-contained settings with highly specialized teachers and specialists available for students with ASD, but also these buildings found ways to bring these same types of supports into the GE setting. The clearest example of this can be found in the development of Autism Inclusion Pods, which are GE settings designed to include an ESE teacher and Instructional Assistant trained in serving children with ASD. Figure 5 provides a rough overview the physical configuration and personnel make-up of a Primary Autism Inclusion Pod.

<b>Grade K-1 classroom</b>	<b>Supply Area or Sensory/Motor Room (OT)</b>	<b>Grade 1-2 classroom</b>
	<b>OPEN AREA</b> (Round table for small groups pull-out, restrooms, etc.)	
<b>Kindergarten classroom</b>	<b>Inclusion resource teacher's room</b>	<b>Grade 2 classroom</b>

*Figure 5.* Physical configurations for a Primary Autism Inclusion Pod. Personnel configurations are as follows: GE classroom teachers (4 FTE), ESE Autism inclusion resource teacher (.5-1 FTE depending on school), ESE Instructional Assistant (1-3 FTE depending on school/students). Classroom-based consultation/related services from behavior specialist, Speech/Language, Occupational Therapy, etc. are provided as needed.

While the physical and personnel configurations above provide a mechanism for introducing consistent access to SE instruction/strategies, behavior supports, language accommodations/modifications, and other needed supports into the GE setting, comments from educator participants suggest that there continues to be some degree of variability in how these supports are implemented. By design, Autism Inclusion Pods may include anywhere from one to three IAs to provide support to students with ASD, other disabilities, and even GE students with intensive intervention needs. The actual number allocated to the pod depends on the number and needs of the students in that setting. However, IAs also may be assigned exclusively to one child with ASD when they demonstrate the need for consistent, highly intensive support to be successful in the GE classroom. As previously discussed under Research Question 1, educators were strongly opposed to the idea of using IAs as a “one-on-one” support to facilitate a child’s inclusion.

Another source of difficulty with regard to portability of services lies in the role of the inclusion resource teacher within the Autism Inclusion Pod. Although participants consistently expressed a preference for having Inclusion Resource provide “push-in” (classroom-based) supports for children with ASD, as opposed to “pull-out” (small group instruction) to the greatest extent possible, it was clear that services were not always designed in this manner at each of the participating schools. For example, although Lauren and Brandy (both inclusion resource teachers) had previously worked together in the same service delivery model at School A, their respective roles at Schools A and B during the year of data collection suggested that they were functioning in different ways. Lauren described her role as primarily providing classroom-based support, scheduling herself to be available to help specific children at the times when they are most likely to struggle. A secondary role for Lauren involved small-group instruction for students with ASD whose academic skills required modified instruction or intervention. For Brandy, her role at her the newly-opened School B was configured differently, designed to emphasize “pulling groups most of the day with not only children with autism but also Basic Ed kids that needed help.” Her secondary role was as a resource or consultant for GE teachers in the Autism Inclusion Pods, working to get them strategies to overcome various challenges throughout the year (Focus Group 1, Lines 330-331). In addition, while Lauren was exclusively assigned to the Primary Autism Inclusion Pod at School A, Brandy was responsible for both Primary and Intermediate pods at School B. (School D also had two Inclusion Resource Teachers, one at each level). As such, Brandy was frustrated to find the configuration and reduced resources at School B prevented her from providing many classroom supports for students with ASD.

Brandy: It was, it was a very difficult time because they didn’t understand that (...) I wasn’t able to get the resources I really needed because I was (...) How it was different at [School B] was I was pulling groups all day long, because I was working with AIP children and doing my groups, doing Reading Mastery or math, and I was pulling groups from first thing in the morning till the end of the day and there was one half-hour maybe that I was in the classroom, able to help a child, so it was really difficult for the kids that really needed a lot of support.

Jenine: What other kinds of things would you have done with that time, had you not been pulling all of those groups?

Brandy: Well, I would have been able to better understand the work that they were required to do and make (...) adaptations to it, because I wasn’t able to do

that for them. Um, the instructional assistants were in there sometimes but they were majority on the primary side because the younger ones needed more support. But not only that, but social-wise, you have to kind-of be in the moment for socialization and I could be there to actually tell them the appropriate thing to do at that time. And also, to keep them focused, you know? So it was really hard to do a lot for the kids. And a lot of them were successful, but the ones that really struggled were the ones that really needed a lot more support and were mostly in there for social purposes. They were the ones that lost out, I think, because they didn't get as much support as they needed. (Brandy, Interview, Lines 194-214)

Brandy's frustration with her mostly pull-out role was shared by Melody, a GE teacher at School B engaging in inclusive education for a child with ASD for the first time. While both Brandy and Melody shared similar visions for responsive and proactive classroom-based supports from the inclusion resource teacher, Melody's comments in the individual interview suggested that she was confused about Brandy's role and felt that support from her had been lacking.

Melody: We weren't real sure what her job was in the beginning and we found there was a lot of wandering going on, so we didn't feel like we were getting the support we needed. And the Intermediate side decided they wanted groups to be pulled...

Jenine: Like academic kinds of groups?

Melody: Right. So then she started pulling groups, which then left her no free time for anything else. So if you were having a problem, then you were stuck because she had a group to pull!

Jenine: What kinds of things would you have wanted from her, had they been available to you?

Melody: I would have preferred her in my classroom, rather than... you know, it's great to pull him out for a 30-minute reading group, which... but that didn't help him within the classroom. Say that math time. You know, I would have preferred for her, for us to figure out when he needed the support and then to put her in the classroom instead. Because if you pull him and help him, that's fine, but he's still in there for those times that he's having trouble.

Jenine: And what are you going to do then.

Melody: Right, and what are you going to do then.

Jenine: And you said in the beginning, you weren't clear what her job was. Was that because it hadn't been defined, or...

Melody: I don't, I don't know what the deal was. I'm not really sure if she was kinda waiting around to see what kind of support we were going to need, but I don't know that the support we had was the right one.

Jenine: By the end of the year, was it better or worse than at the beginning of the year?

Melody: I think we just learned to... deal with it the way it was. Because when I look back on the way she would deal with the certain things, and the way it really worked out, the things that he needed, it was like, 'Well, that wasn't the right thing anyway.' Like if he was having a rough time, she would come in and yell at him from across the room. Well, you don't yell at him from across the room, you need to be right there with him, giving him a 2-word direction is all he can handle. So I don't know, I just don't think it was the right support.

Jenine: But it never really got resolved?

Melody: (overlapping) We tried to resolve it, we did the best we could and I think everybody just learned to live with it. So... it was tough. (Melody, Interview, Focus Group 673-716)

This conflict suggests that educators highly value "portable" SE services, including consultation with teachers, instructional SE support for students with ASD provided *in* the GE setting, and responsiveness to spontaneous problems. Despite the consistency of this shared belief, external forces on inclusion resource teachers such as limited resources (fewer SE allocations), larger caseloads, responsibilities for both at-risk GE and SE students, and expectations of building administrators might limit the extent to which their role can be fully implemented in the GE classroom. Notably, this preference for classroom-based SE supports was also articulated by two parent participants (Marjorie and Irene), both with similar perspectives on the negative impact that pull-out services can have for children with ASD.

My perspective on inclusion is that services need to be provided in the inclusion environment, in the general ed environment, not, "Well, I'm gonna take this child and I'm gonna pull them out for an hour or a half an hour of services." One, because it doesn't help with generalizability, and two, um, because it interrupts their flow, it doesn't allow for natural socialization. (Marjorie, Lines 657-661)

*Relative educational benefit of placement options.* When considering the most appropriate educational placement for a child with ASD, educational professionals are compelled to weigh the potential benefits of each relative to the child's personal support needs. Educators in this study recognized that the various placement options along the continuum of services differed significantly in terms of class size and structure, opportunity for direct adult assistance, academic curriculum, behavioral supports, social interactions, etc. For students with ASD who often demonstrate uneven skill profiles (e.g., very low language skills but very advanced math skills; extreme challenging behavior but highly intelligent), educators face the challenge of creating an instructional environment that maximizes their outcomes in all developmental areas. In general, two key considerations appeared to most significantly influence educators' recommendations for a particular instructional placement: access to intensive academic curriculum (perceived as more available in *less* restrictive placements such as VE or GE) and access to intensive behavioral supports (perceived as more available in *more* restrictive placements such as self-contained autism classrooms). Given that intensive academic curriculum and intensive behavior support were generally seen as being mutually exclusive, children demonstrating a need for both were perceived by educators as the most challenging to place appropriately because they felt like they had to sacrifice one area of need for another.

I've been having a hard time with this decision, this one child that I'm talking about gets very physically aggressive with others. He's very, very bright, and it's even more difficult to make that decision to move him back to self-contained when you know that academically, it's not going to be the best placement for him. So we're having a very hard time trying to decide where the best place is. Can we deal with that physical acting out all of the time? We tried to prevent it as much as we can, but then it gets better, it gets worse, and then part of me thinks if he were to go to self-contained it would become even more horrible because he would be bored, academically. (Lauren, Focus Group 1, 666-673).

In light of the safety concerns involved in having a student with ASD engage in frequent physical aggression toward his peers, one might be tempted to prioritize intensive behavior supports for this child over academic instruction and recommend a more restrictive placement until behaviors can be brought under control. Yet educator participants acknowledged that self-contained settings were a double-edged sword with regard to a child's behavioral functioning. Intensive behavior supports were indeed seen



as more available in self-contained settings due to low student-to-teacher ratio; however, educators also suggested that, because children with ASD may imitate their peers, their behaviors might actually get worse when placed in a classroom where other children also have significant problem behaviors. Although 60% of all educator participants voiced this concern at some point, an excellent discussion of this issue arose in Focus Group 1. Immediately after Lauren's comment, Tracey added that another potential outcome of placing the child in a self-contained setting is that he might "mirror those behaviors" of his peers (Focus Group 1, Line 675). Brandy elaborated,

Yes! That is a big decision. I think that is a problem situation for every IEP team looking at changing a child's, going backwards [to a more restrictive placement], and I know that's something that we discussed because children with autism mirror everything they see. You know, they need those positive role models in order to learn how to function correctly in a classroom and to send them back to self-contained, it just rips your heart out because you *know* the situation is just going to get worse for that child because they are going to see worse behaviors and they're going to go back to becoming even worse than they already are. So what do you do? But then, like you said, you have to take into account the safety of every child in the classroom and if it's that one child who has to be removed, then (...) But we deal with that, too, where you just struggle with going backwards. (Focus Group 1, Lines 679-688)

Concern about the potentially negative influence of children in self-contained settings may also be shared by some parents; while only one parent participant voiced that fear (Carol, Luke's mother), Simone also noted that parents have shared this fear with her. In emphasizing her belief that inclusion was "the only answer" for her son, she added, "I think the alternative (self-contained programs) would be a complete and utter disaster for my little boy. He is very upset by the misbehavior of others" (Carol, Written Input, Lines 1186-1188).

Beyond the academics versus behavior support debate described above, teams contemplating a placement for a child with ASD must also consider the teachers the child would have in each of the potential settings under consideration. Educator participants felt strongly that it was important to assign students with ASD to teachers who are open-minded and team players, particularly when in inclusion. Tracey suggested that it might actually be more detrimental to place a student with ASD with a weak teacher than to let them stagnate in the self-contained setting (Focus Group 1,

Lines 512-517). In addition, educators expressed concern about the readiness of both GE and SE (Inclusion Resource) teachers when contemplating a future inclusive placement or evaluating a child's previous experience. Maggie felt that the capabilities of the inclusion resource teacher were most critical to the success of an inclusive setting, suggesting that the best of these teachers "merges" effortlessly with the rest of the team to the point that "you cannot tell who that teacher is on that team because everybody is responsible" (Interview, Lines 599-601). By comparison, when a student with ASD with significant academic and behavior support needs was paired with a less capable inclusion resource teacher in the GE setting, Maggie attributed his lack of progress that year to the lacking support of that ESE teacher.

An Intermediate student, he was a whiz in math, he was an absolute whiz... On the other hand, his reading, specifically the comprehension, is a struggle for him. On top of that, his behaviors were a struggle for him. Unfortunately, his growth last year was not as, uh, dramatic as I would have expected, and you know, sometimes Jenine, you don't get that fit between the teacher and the student. It's not often, but I see that fit as not taking, um, taking formation last year. The Basic teacher could work with him and get him to do, get him to function and perform, however, she needed the assistance of the ESE teacher and I'm not sure that the ESE teacher totally understood how to deliver instruction or assistance to this particular child... I think she has finally realized that this might not be her calling, and she is not returning to us next year, which I see as very healthy because that ESE teacher as a support can either support the Basic teacher or frustrate, totally frustrate the Basic teacher. And stymie the child's growth. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 251-252, 255-263, 570-573)

For schools with Autism Inclusion Pods, the selection of specific teachers was limited to those working within that setting. This was both a positive and negative attribute for that setting. Although it eliminated the need to search the entire school for a "willing teacher" to take on a child with ASD, it also meant that if the teacher(s) in the Autism Inclusion Pod were not a good match for the student in question, there were no other options left. Tracey explained, "It can be heartbreaking when you know that child could move to another level and possibly excel but if you don't have the strength of a teacher or have a good assistant" (Focus Group 1, Lines 510-512). At School C, where an Autism Inclusion Pod set-up was only available at the primary level, Frances described how a colleague hand-picked a teacher who had a background with Emotionally Handicapped

students and was “very approachable” and personally asked if she would be willing to take on a 3<sup>rd</sup> grade student with Asperger’s Syndrome (Frances, Interview, Lines 873-880). Even in the best of circumstances, when each of the potential teachers is both willing and capable, educators still take into consideration how teachers’ instructional styles and personalities are likely mesh with the individual child with ASD. Natalie indicated that, at School A, the behavior specialist and inclusion resource teacher (Lauren) are mindful of her fast teaching pace and dry sense of humor when placing a student into a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom, and recommend specific children accordingly (Interview, Lines 963-973).

*Impact on GE peers.* While much of the consideration and deliberation about instructional placements revolves around the needs of the student with ASD, educators also underscored the need to assess the impact that child’s inclusion has on his/her GE peers and the classroom environment as a whole. Educator participants were clear that the inclusion of a student with ASD should not compromise the learning, safety, or overall well-being of GE peers. In large part, concerns about inclusion’s potentially negatively impact on GE peers were tied to the degree of problem behavior exhibited by the student with ASD. In fact, in Focus Group 1, when participants were asked to explain why the challenging behavior of students with ASD was a barrier to inclusion, educators responded with reference to its impact on GE peers.

As mentioned previously, the challenging behaviors of a student with ASD can be distracting or disruptive to the classroom environment. Concern about the potential for disruptions was heightened for intermediate students who are “training for the FCAT” (Tracey, Focus Groups 1, Lines 628-633). Behaviors such as screaming or tantrums on a frequent basis or for long periods of time might interfere with the GE peers’ performance on practice tests or content area instruction. While primary-level teachers may be able to weather long periods of difficulty while working slowly and gradually on improving disruptive behaviors, intermediate-level teachers may be less likely to endure behaviors on a long-term basis when the stakes are so much higher.

Especially like in the intermediate, like when you get in with FCAT. You know, you’re not going to have teachers say, “Oh so if I have this kid in my class and after 3 months, he may stop screaming?” They can’t get through that 3 months of it to have this child fully included. So that’s kind-of hard. And I think that’s what happens a lot of the time. (Lauren, Interview, 794-798)

Educators suggested that when students with ASD engage in significantly maladaptive behavior in the GE setting, a variety of negative side-effects may be observed in other classmates. Aside from the instructional and assessment implications imposed by frequent disruptions, behaviors such as physical aggression or tantrums may pose a safety risk to others in the setting. Lauren described her frustration at potentially having to abandon the inclusion of one student with Asperger's Disorder because he sometimes hits his peers.

...Sometimes I don't know what to do because he does, you know, hit other students, and then people will ask you, you know, "Well, what if your daughter was on the P.E. field and just got hit by some kid running around randomly?" I'm like, "Yes, I understand that, I do understand that feeling, but at the same time, that doesn't mean that he should be moved back to self-contained." For me... I just think that we have to be really patient and we have to work on it and try to keep him included. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 352-358).

Several educator participants also hypothesized that parents of children with ASD may resist including them in the GE setting if there is a possibility their child might hurt a peer.

Even when the behaviors of children with ASD do not pose a safety risk to others around them, educators acknowledged they can still be detrimental to GE peers. Several educators indicated they struggle with the message that problem behaviors can send to GE peers. In Focus Group 1, Tracey commented, "if you have a kid who is physically aggressive and is going to hurt another kid, I don't think it's appropriate at all because I don't think that's the correct, um, message you want to send to kids that it's okay" (Lines 620-622). Similarly, Frances described a situation in which her own daughter had said to her about a peer with ASD, "Mommy, so-and-so, he got to do this and he got to do that and he didn't have to do any of the work that we did." As Frances elaborated, "I would be like, 'Oh god, how do you explain that to them' because you want, you know, the expectations should be the same if they're functioning in Basic Ed..." (Focus Group 1, 699-702).

In the very worst situations where children with ASD demonstrate significantly maladaptive or aggressive behavior, typical peers may become afraid of that child or even afraid to come to school. Educators indicated that when GE students become fearful of an included child with ASD, they tend to share these concerns with their parents. Parents in turn voice their concern about the detrimental impact of the student with ASD to teachers and administrators. A conversation from Focus Group 1 provides

an excellent illustration of the need to have both GE peers and their parents “bought in” to the idea of having a child with ASD in their classroom and the ways that challenging behavior may impact that “buy-in.”

Caryn: I think a lot of it, in sending the right picture, to kind-of feed off what Tracey said, you have to have buy-in from the other kids in the classroom. But if you have a physical assault going on and this goes home to mom and dad, you’re not going to get that buy-in from the parents at home. And the attitudes of the parents at home come right back to school the next day—

Rhiannon: (overlapping) –Right, good point—

Caryn: (overlapping) –and that makes it a tough spot.

Brandy: Umm-hmmm, and that’s what we had with this child, constantly parents calling because their children were going home either scared to come to class or have been physically hurt by the child. And at that point, you’ve exhausted everything and there’s really not much else you can do to keep that child in an inclusion situation.

Rhiannon: Well, and you’ve gotta think about the other kids, too. If they’re scared to come to school—

Brandy: (overlapping) –Of course!—

Rhiannon: (overlapping) –And if they’re afraid for their safety, my opinion is, they aren’t going to be learning as much either.

Caryn: Exactly, right. I think that has to be first priority is safety for every child in the class, an inclusion child or a regular ed child. (Focus Group 1, Lines 637-661)

In some situations, the concerns of the GE parents can have a powerful impact on decision-making such that children were removed from inclusive settings when a large number of complaints are lodged or high-level district officials are notified of the problem.

*Costs and resources.* Compared to other considerations of LRE suggested by Thomas and Rapport (1998), costs and resources were cited less frequently by educator participants. Nevertheless, resource issues did arise in educators’ placement decisions. Brandy indicated that when resources are limited (e.g., having only one Inclusion Resource Teacher at School B, as opposed to Schools A and D who had two), it can be a challenge to meet the needs of included students with ASD. In addition, when considering inclusion for a child with more intensive support needs (e.g., toileting, feeding, significant behaviors), Brandy suggested that these students will take up the majority of the inclusion resource teacher’s time, leaving less supports for the higher-

functioning students in GE settings. Maggie confirmed that this phenomenon also occurs with related services personnel; in her setting, debates about the availability and intensity of Speech/Language and OT services were a frequent challenge (Interview, Lines 1210-1211). Alternatively, some participants suggested that when support services are available in a particular school building, the number of students with ASD that can be reasonably placed in the GE setting is reduced. This was most evident for students who need the full-time assistance of an IA to be successful in the GE setting.

You know, if a child needs a support, needs an assistant but we can't give an assistant, then that child's not going to be in there, whether or not it's the most appropriate thing for them. If we can't have an assistant and we can't find a way to co-teach or get someone in there, then they're not going to be in there. That might be like, "well, that sucks because that's not the best thing for them," however, you need to look at realistically how the setting goes. We can't have an a la carte where I can pick and choose people. It boils down to what we have and what we don't have. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 500-506)

Tracey did note that, as a new school building, School D may have had an advantage in obtaining resources for students with ASD: "We started a school empty-handed and we sort-of said, "If you want us to be successful, we need this." So they gave it to us, but that doesn't mean if you went to a school down the road and you said, "We need this" that they're going to give it to them" (Lines 576-579).

*Participation with GE peers to the maximum extent appropriate.* Given the above considerations and potential barriers to a child's inclusion, educator participants acknowledged that a full-time placement in the GE is not appropriate for all students. For students believed to be best educated in a self-contained setting for the majority of the day, alternative means for creating connections with GE peers were explored. At School A, Darla described meeting with a large group of GE teachers to find times where each of her self-contained students could participate with their typical peers and strengthen a particular skill or area of interest.

I had to call a lot of meetings and have a lot of the inclusion teachers come and sit in with us, and I would say, "OK, we have this child, and this child, and this child, and we need socialization for this child, we need academics for this child, we need some time in this type of a classroom or this grade of a classroom for this child," and we kind-of sat like a round table discussion and found the best placements for those children for certain times for the day... Like I had one child

that went into a general ed art class because his strength was in art and we wanted to expand on that ability of his and another one went for P.E. because he had some sensory issues, and another child went during center time in an inclusion pod, um, just to see if they could handle that type of environment. (Darla, Interview, Lines 23-28, 38-42)

For students who could not participate in inclusion for a meaningful amount of time, Schools A, B, and D found ways to bring inclusion to the self-contained setting. Several schools created programs to bring GE peers into self-contained classrooms as peer buddies; educators referred to these programs as “peer buddies” or “reverse inclusion.” Beatrice exclaimed, “I love the reverse inclusion! For those that can’t get out the door, it’s a two-way door, and there’s so many mainstream kids, kids and adults, going into the autism classes” (Focus Group 2, Lines 2538-2540). In addition to giving children with ASD the opportunity to interact with typical peers, these programs were also seen as a mechanism for increasing GE peers’ tolerance of disability and difference at a building level.

We have a peer buddy program, also, for our team where some of our 2<sup>nd</sup> grade Basic Ed kids will, they actually leave for, oh it’s about 20 minutes or so, and go to the playground with some of the kids from self-contained autistic. And that’s really good too because then the kids see each other around school and those kids will say hi to the [kids with autism], and they know, but they don’t always say hi back. You know, when we see them walking through the butterfly garden and they say hello... (Lauren, Interview, Lines 1695-1700)

In a similar vein, Special Olympics’ unified teams (GE and SE students on a single team) were mentioned several times as a way to bring students together in a positive way.

#### *Use Informal and Formal Decision-Making Mechanisms*

To give due consideration to the various factors that affect LRE decisions, educators described using both informal and formal means to consult with colleagues and decide on educational placements. Formal decision-making mechanisms include convening specific teams of educators (and sometimes parents) to discuss and document placement decisions. Prior to convening formal teams, however, educators often conversed with relevant stakeholders informally to “test the waters” and obtain the opinions of colleagues who either know the child in question or would be the receiving teacher in the GE setting. Although each educator who described such informal

conversations did so in unique ways, Rhiannon provided an overview that was representative of most strategies shared by other educator participants.

I think I start out by testing the waters. And you bring it up, and what I did here, which I didn't do at my old school because I was the team leader, but I brought it up to the team leader that I had a student who I think might be appropriate, will you come by and see them. Because I want to get people on my side. And she was familiar with the student, so then I tested the waters: "I have a couple of kids we should talk about, Mrs. [Primary Inclusion Resource], you know, if you have some time to come by and talk to me about them." So then we'd talk about it a little bit, we set up an observation (...) "Come over and see him," and then (imitating voice), "Oh it's so different, there's only 5 kids in here." "OK, why don't we visit a Kindergarten class for a couple of days, when would be a good time to do that?" And so, by the time you come to the formal meeting, you've kind-of given everybody a chance to be prepared for it, so when you hand them the articulation papers they're not shocked. Now, you don't have to do all of that, but I have found that if you want people to, um, to really (long pause) get on-board, sometimes they need a little coaxing. And not that they don't want the child in their group, but, every kid is one more kid. You know? And it's not that you don't want the kid to be successful but there's one more kid, one more IEP, one more everything. So sometimes you have to kind-of coax them to get on-board with you so that when you come to the official meeting, they're not blasted with something out of left field, they're kind-of prepared for it and they're not going to say, "NO!" just on the principle of saying no, they're going to be ready to accept a little more. I mean, that's just good people skills. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 1189-1208)

When educators need to discuss a change in the educational program for a student on an IEP, several team processes can be utilized. Trans-D (see Chapter 3 for a description of this team) was described by participants as a more informal mechanism for brainstorming solutions that may arise for individual students, rather than a formal decision-making process. When included students with ASD encounter difficulty, teachers may ask their colleagues on the Trans-D team for assistance in making modifications to the environment or schedule.

Jenine: Once a child has been placed in general education, how do you, or how does the team, determine that "OK, this is a general ed placement that is



successful, let's keep going," or "Hmmm, this is not successful, we need to do something different?" How is that determination made?

Beatrice: Oh! Sometimes because adjustment is so hard, we tend to work on modifying the environment.

Jenine: Rather than discontinuing?

Beatrice: Rather than moving the child, when it's not successful we really try to work on what's the problem and what's the best way to solve it. And they do those (...) Trans (...) support meetings.

Jenine: Trans-D?

Beatrice: Yeah. Which has been pretty helpful.

Jenine: And is that main purpose of Trans-D, to work on--

Beatrice: No, not just... with any problem. But the Trans-D has worked well with students who are out in the mainstream for part of the day. We may decide that a different time of the day is better, a different subject is better, um, these are the reinforcers, we might want to increase the positive reinforcement support, um, but really try to figure out what's (...) Because if you know the child has the skills to successful and they're not, you really want to find out *why* they're not successful, and then, you know, *change*, work toward that deficiency, whether it's environmental, whether it's a skill that the child hasn't learned or is not wanting to use! But just, once you figure that out, most have been successful, but you've gotta give it time. And by time, we're talking quarters, not days or weeks.

Jenine: So there's a lot of patience involved in inclusion!

Beatrice: An awful lot! (Beatrice, Interview, Lines 759-791)

In addition to Trans-D, all district schools have school-wide problem-solving groups known as In-School Staffing (ISS) teams, in which the needs of both GE and SE students can be discussed within a multidisciplinary group of educators. These teams meet on a weekly basis and were comprised of both permanent and adjunct team members. Permanent members always participating in weekly ISS meetings include the school psychologist, guidance counselor, school social worker, school nurse, and administrator (typically the Assistant Principal). Adjunct members include GE teachers, SE teachers, reading specialists, behavior specialists, and speech/language pathologists. Although GE, SE, and related services personnel are always included in the ISS team, the specific educators from each of these roles participated on an as-needed basis, depending on the student being discussed. ISS teams are used as a

forum for proposing and discussing major changes to a student's educational program, including developing an individualized intervention plan, initiating an evaluation or reevaluation, adding or removing related services, or changing educational placement. Unlike the more informal Trans-D meetings, ISS meetings are also formally documented with specific forms that are placed in a student's cumulative folder, leaving a paper trail that shows the team's discussion and recommendations. Given the district-wide prominence of ISS as a decision-making mechanism, it is not surprising that many educator participants discussed referring children with ASD to the ISS team when a change in educational placement was under consideration.

Rhiannon: I've used the staffing process in my classroom for kids that we were looking at other placements as well. A lot of placement decisions, I think, you go through the In-School Staffing process, just because it's good to get other people's opinion. Because I've have fallen into the trap where I think my little kids with autism, when they're high functioning, are geniuses. And when you look at normal, we are way, way, far away from normal. And because I've been (...) this little world of autism is kind-of insulated away from being around typical kids, so I don't know what a typical third grader can do. So even if I think they're really great, they may be not-so-great. So the In-School Staffing process helps clean those issues up a little bit.

Jenine: That's good, so it gives you exposure to other people with other perspectives.

Rhiannon: Right, very much so. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 1035-1047)

The final formal decision-making mechanism for discussing changes to instructional placements was an individual student's IEP team. ISS and IEP teams differ in several ways. First, whereas ISS teams are consistently comprised of school-based consultants and rotate in specific teachers or related services personnel on an as-needed basis, IEP teams are comprised of a consistent set of educators who work directly with the student with ASD (e.g., GE teacher, SE teacher, speech-language pathologists, OT), while other related services personnel such as school psychologists, behavior specialists, etc. are brought in on an as-needed basis to share their insights or expertise. Second, while ISS teams serve as an opportunity for discussing major changes to a student's program from a building perspective, IEP teams are tasked with developing a highly specific, individualized plan for the student with ASD. As such, the IEP team may certify and finalize the recommendations of the ISS team for a particular

student (e.g., recommendation that a student move from a self-contained classroom to a GE classroom on a full-time basis), review a child's progress within a current placement, modify the placement in response to individual data (e.g., decide that a partial placement in GE is more appropriate), or discuss specific supports needed for a student to be successful in a specific instructional placement (e.g., IA, visual supports, etc.). Lauren suggested that when gradually moving a student from self-contained to GE classroom, an IEP meeting may be a final step used to formalize a child's placement.

It usually starts with, "Well, OK, let's try this child for this period of time during the day" and somebody brings him over and we bring him back, and we kind-of set all of that. And then if that really seems to be working... Now with some kids, that's where it stops. And you know, and that's OK. And it's always kind-of just left informally. And then it may, there may eventually be an IEP change just showing that they have that portion of the day. Then, for the kids where it looks like, 'OK, this is really working, we need to look at this full time,' we get the parents more involved, um, of course, because then if we are moving the kid in full-time, the IEP would be completely revised. And we just do that through a lot of in-school meetings between myself, the self-contained teachers, the parents, to make the switch. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 1650-1659)

*Parent involvement in decision-making.* Of the aforementioned groups and strategies utilized in placement decisions, it would appear that parent involvement is limited to only IEP teams. IDEA 2004 (and previous authorizations) stipulate that parents are mandatory participants in IEP teams; however, in the other decision-making groups, parent participation is notably absent. Because Trans-D was developed to function as both a forum for problem-solving and a vehicle for professional development, these team meetings do not involve parents. With regard to ISS teams, parents were generally not included by virtue of district policy. A set of ISS referral guidelines found on the Teacher Information page of the district's website suggests that teachers make contact with a child's parents before and after they are discussed at an ISS team to obtain their input and perspectives but discourages inviting parents to participate in this meeting: "Though parents may be invited to In-School Staffing, this is not typically recommended."

Nevertheless, educators saw parents as important and influential participants in the placement decision-making process, although attitudes about parents' roles in this process varied among educator participants. Some educators (e.g., Maggie, Darla,

Rhiannon, Julie) specifically described *soliciting* parent input in both placement decisions and in situations where the child might be experiencing difficulty the parent could explain or help solve. Maggie emphasized, “I think it’s critical, Jenine, that (...) as hard as this may be, input from parents. We *have* to listen to parents” (Focus Group 2, Lines 384-385). Other educators (e.g., Caryn) described *notifying* parents of actions in the school, as opposed to actively encouraging their involvement in decision-making.

During this time, you always want to be communicating with the parent so that if it comes down the road that this child is not appropriately placed, that parent isn’t shocked that you’re telling them this. They need to be aware of the interventions that you and your team and your support staff are taking. After that, if all of these things have not worked, or you do not see improvement, then the parent needs to be contacted and (...) spoken with. (Caryn, Interview, Lines 805-809)

#### *Deal Breakers: When Inclusion is Not Recommended*

In describing the characteristics of children who are ideal and less-than-ideal candidates for inclusion, numerous participants spoke of trying to find “the fine line” that guides when inclusion is and is not the best placement for a child with ASD. When weighing the numerous considerations that factor into the educational placement of an individual with ASD (e.g., portability of services, impact on peers, costs and resources, etc.), that “line” for decision-making began to emerge.

Educators consistently came back to four circumstances in which they believed that inclusion of a student with ASD was *not* recommended or, if already underway, should be discontinued. First, when students with ASD engage in seriously disruptive behavior that significantly interrupts the GE learning environment on a frequent basis, 60% of educators ( $N=9$ ) felt that continuing inclusion would be inappropriate. Natalie noted that, in addition to these behaviors interfering with the learning of GE peers, chronic disruptive behavior may also be a signal that “something is frustrating [the student] to that point, so I question how successful it is if they are doing that all of the time (Interview, Lines 424-430). Second, 8 of 15 educator participants reported that when students with ASD frequently engage in behavior that is unsafe to him/herself and/or others, it is inadvisable to keep that child in the GE setting. As previously discussed, challenging behaviors that pose a safety risk or could cause GE peers to be frightened are significant red flags in making placement decisions for students with ASD. Both of these “deal breaker” circumstances align closely with the *Impact on GE Peers* considerations described in the above section and suggest that when the educational

experience or the physical/emotional well-being of peers are likely to be threatened by the presence of a particular child with ASD, inclusion is contraindicated.

Rhiannon: I think that it's important and this (...) ohh, how can ya (...)? This is hard because it's important to remember that (...) I don't believe that every child belongs in Basic Ed and that least restrictive environment means that every child should be included, and there are some people who do. But, I really believe that there are kids who most definitely should, you know, be completely included in Basic Ed for support, kids that can go over for periods of time and do more of a mainstreaming type thing, and then there are kids that really don't belong and for a variety of reasons. I have had a little guy who put his head through a glass window banging his head. You know. He was disruptive in my classroom with other children with autism. I *cannot imagine* what he, how disruptive he would have been to a Basic Ed class. Umm. And, sometimes, you know, parents really want that for their child, and I think if it were my child I really want that too, but you have to remember that your child's needs are different than the needs of the Basic Ed kids and they have a right not to see kids put their heads through glass windows.

Jenine: Definitely. That'd be scary—

Rhiannon: (overlapping): Yeah, it was scary for me too. He had stitches and bleeding all over the place, it was a pretty freaky thing, but, you know, there, we, sometimes, people are like inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, inclusion, and that's, we have to remember that's not where all kids are at and that's not where all kids belong. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 286-395)

In addition to peer-referenced reasons for discouraging the inclusion of some children with ASD, educators also cited two reasons that referred directly to the child in question. The third inclusion “deal breaker” was invoked by a minority of educators ( $N=3$ ) in situations when the child's cognitive or academic levels are so far below that of their GE peers that they do not benefit from being in the environment or they are missing opportunities for learning the self-help skills taught in a GE setting. For example, Brandy described her experience working with a 7- or 8-year-old student with ASD who was on a developmental level equivalent to that of a 2-year-old child, had no verbal language, needed significantly modified work, and had considerable challenging behaviors. The student was placed in a Kindergarten classroom for a year at a parent's request, but by the end of the year, the IEP team (including the parent) concurred that moving the child

to a 1<sup>st</sup> grade classroom would not be appropriate because he was getting so little out of the environment. The child was placed in a self-contained setting the following year but continued to participate with his GE peers at lunchtime (Brandy, Interview, Lines 280-297). Finally, even when a child is not significantly below his/her peers in cognitive ability, 60% of educator participants ( $N=9$ ) suggested that an inclusive placement should be discontinued when data show that the student with ASD is not making expected progress or is losing ground academically or behaviorally (unless modifications can be made to change the trajectory of a student's progress). Joanne suggested that such a move back to a self-contained classroom might benefit a child making limited progress in the GE setting, due to the availability of alternative instructional methods and curricula.

If they are unable to work, if the work system that's being used, if the learning system that's being used in the classroom is not helping the child, then the child needs to be in a classroom where the learning system does help them and that's when I think they should come back to my class, because I use different types of learning systems, different types of strategies to teach... (Joanne, Interview, Lines 1202-1207)

#### *Focus Group Decision-Making*

Most of the above decision-making considerations were gleaned from educators' descriptions of their own experiences in inclusion, provided in both focus groups and individual interviews. In addition to these personal examples, two hypothetical cases were examined in each of the focus group sessions, to provide a shared focal point for conversation and a basis for comparing participants' decision-making within and across focus groups. Complete vignettes describing the needs of each of two hypothetical students (Josh and Nathan) can be found in Appendix H. In general, these two hypothetical cases were developed to reflect two very different types of students with ASD. Josh was an example of a student with cognitive delays and intensive academic support needs but mostly appropriate behavioral functioning, while Nathan was representative of a cognitively bright, academically capable child who has significant behavior support needs. In addition, Josh's status as a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader stood in contrast to Nathan's status as a Kindergartener; this was done intentionally, to bring out any issues that may arise with including students with ASD at either primary or intermediate levels within an elementary building.

The responses and ideas of participants in each of the focus groups are summarized in Tables 7 and 8 with respect to the following questions: (a) on what issue

participants *immediately* focus, (b) what other considerations were discussed, (c) what type of instructional program did the group recommend, (d) what did participants see as the biggest priority, (e) what other concerns did participants have, and (f) who were the dominant speakers within the focus group?

Table 7

Focus group considerations for “Josh” vignette

	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	<b>Focus Group 2</b>
<i>Immediate Focus</i>	<i>Placement in continuum of services</i> (relative to Josh’s personal characteristics)	<i>Student characteristics</i> (relative to Josh’s ASD diagnosis at 9 years old, cognitive profile, and support needs)
<i>Other LRE Considerations</i>	<p><i>Student characteristics</i>: support needs</p> <p><i>Resources</i> (availability of personnel, “ideal world” versus reality)</p> <p><i>Portability of services</i> (ESE teacher could come in GE setting to give intensive academic instruction)</p>	<p><i>Placement in continuum of services</i></p> <p><i>Relative educational benefit of placement options</i> (weighing differences between self-contained Autism and VE and between VE and inclusion)</p>
<i>Recommended Classroom Placement</i>	<p>Two options were proposed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Full inclusion with resource teacher pulling him for small-group Language Arts instruction (5 participants)</li> <li>▪ VE with “mainstreaming” in math, science, social studies, specials (2 participants)</li> </ul>	<p>Two options debated extensively:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Full inclusion with IA lending academic/behavior support and resource teacher pulling him for small-group Reading instruction (4 participants)</li> <li>▪ Self-contained VE with “inclusion for certain things” (4 participants)</li> </ul>



Table 7 (Continued)

Focus group considerations for “Josh” vignette

	<b>Focus Group 1</b>	<b>Focus Group 2</b>
<i>Supports</i>	Small-group reading/writing instruction, social skills instruction, social stories, peer buddy, visual supports (e.g., First/then board), classroom accommodations, assistive technology, OT, Sp/L	Small-group reading/writing instruction, social skills instruction and supports, visual supports, assistive technology, OT, Sp/L
<i>Biggest Priorities</i>	Intensive reading instruction (due to significant deficits) , social skills instruction	Intensive academic instruction, social skills instruction, assistive technology, accommodations for visual processing difficulties
<i>Other Concerns</i>	Potential for poor FCAT score, potential for 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade retention, need to function in society	Cognitive abilities, low reading/writing skills, potential for 3 <sup>rd</sup> grade retention, training of specials teachers
<i>Dominant Speakers</i>	Tracey (behavior specialist), Rhiannon (self-contained teacher), Brandy (Inclusion Resource Teacher)	Beatrice (school psychologist), Simone (self-contained teacher), Helen and Maggie (administrators)

Table 8

Focus group considerations for “Nathan” vignette

	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
<i>Immediate Focus</i>	<i>Placement in continuum of services: “Inclusion!!”</i>	<i>Placement in continuum of services</i>
<i>Other LRE Considerations</i>	<p><i>Portability: ESE services provided on consult basis</i></p> <p><i>Student characteristics: support needs</i></p> <p><i>Resources: would benefit from “additional adult supervision” (i.e., IA support) but might not “qualify” or this suggestion might cause administrator to suggest self-contained.</i></p>	<p><i>Portability: need for IA support, at least initially</i></p> <p><i>Student characteristics: support needs</i></p>
<i>Recommended Classroom Placement</i>	Full inclusion in Kindergarten classroom (all participants in agreement)	Full inclusion in Kindergarten classroom with IA support (all participants in agreement, three suggested “Melody’s classroom”)

Table 8 (Continued)

Focus group considerations for “Nathan” vignette

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	Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2
<i>Recommended Supports</i>	Classroom instruction in understanding differences (from guidance counselors), social skills instruction, visual supports, classroom accommodations for slow processing speed, behavior plan, IA if possible.	Behavior plan, prompting/cueing, use dinosaurs as rewards in First/Then, visual supports, classroom accommodations for slow processing speed, peer buddy, social skills instruction
<i>Biggest Priorities</i>	Social skill development, encouraging other interests besides dinosaurs, creating a structured, predictable environment, gathering data to better understand behavior, making sure GE/specials teachers fully understand Nathan because less ESE support will be provided,	Direct instruction in classroom routines, social skills, peer buddy/role modeling, and working with student’s mother (who they perceived very negatively).
<i>Other Concerns</i>	History of attending multiple Pre-Kindergarten programs seen as a “red flag” (Group suggested Nathan may have even more serious behavior problems that mom has not yet disclosed)	History of attending multiple Pre-Kindergarten programs seen as a “red light” (Group perceived mother somewhat negatively and suggested she might have been “shopping” for a program.)
<i>Dominant Speakers</i>	Tracey (behavior specialist), Rhiannon (self-contained teacher), Caryn (GE teacher)	Melody (GE teacher), Beatrice (school psychologist)

Examination of the preceding tables indicates that participants in both focus groups generally developed highly similar instructional programs and placements for each of the hypothetical students. One notable characteristic of participants' responses to the vignettes was their immediate focus on the most desirable educational placement, rather than first commenting on student characteristics (e.g., low academic skills, challenging behavior etc.) and associated supports. This may be due to the wording of the question, which implied that participants should delineate placement as well as supports:

*If Josh/Nathan came to your school today, and you had no other information to go on but this vignette, what kind of instructional plan, including appropriate context or environment, would best meet his needs?*

In Focus Group 1, immediately after the presentation of this question, Brandy asked, "When you say instructional plan, are you talking placement as well as... (trails off)" and the focus group facilitator responded, "The whole deal! What does this kid need?" Nonetheless, participants' responses to this question in three of the four vignettes (across both focus groups) followed the same pattern: suggest an instructional placement, indicate agreement or offer alternative ideas for placement, and then discuss the child's characteristics and necessary supports to make that placement work. Marjorie, a parent participant, suggested that this is a typical pattern in placement decision-making *in vivo*, as well as within the research context.

Marjorie: ... And placement always needs to be the last thing that you consider, and not the first thing. And we're still running into, "Well, here's what we're willing to offer you, here are the two teachers that have said they'll take them." And, um... (trails off, laughs)

Jenine: So is that how it works, in your experience, is that placement is the first thing kind-of put out there, "We've gotta figure out the placement?"

Marjorie: Yeah.

Jenine: And then, and then what would you say comes after that?

Marjorie: And then it's, "Well, because we've established that this is where we're going to put them, what can we do in that context?" So it's totally backwards, it's not about what does a child need, it's about "Well, since we're going to put them here, what can we offer? (Marjorie, Interview, Lines 399-413)

When considering the best placement for both Josh, two potential placements were suggested by participants in both focus groups: (a) GE classroom (“Inclusion”) with support from an ESE teacher and/or IA who is there on a full-time basis, or (b) a self-contained VE classroom with opportunity to “mainstream” out for math, science, social studies, and specials. Across both focus groups, there was some degree of debate about these two placements. In Focus Group 1, the debate was over the availability of resources (i.e., ESE teacher or IA to support Josh in GE), while in Focus Group 2, the debate was over which option would provide him the most intensive instructional environment, given his significant academic delays and unique learning profile. These issues were compounded by Josh’s older age/grade and the possibility of being retained if he should be unable to pass the FCAT by the end of the school year. In Nathan’s case, placement was easily decided and participants universally agreed that the GE classroom was the best setting for him. Interestingly, participants did not explicitly mention impact on peers or safety considerations, although both of these were relevant in Nathan’s case (due to hitting and scratching behaviors) and had featured prominently in educators’ personal histories. The only peer consideration for Nathan involved how to make the peers more accepting of Nathan, in light of his differences. His behaviors were perceived as “typical” and were believed to be manageable through peer modeling and behavior supports.

In Nathan’s vignette, several intentionally vague pieces of information sparked controversy in both of the focus groups. Participants keyed in on the following:

*Nathan’s mother, Mrs. Valparaiso, brought him to your school in the fall of the current year, but decided not to enroll him at the time because (a) he had a late birthday (was “young for grade”), and (b) she had concerns about “his ability to handle the Kindergarten environment.” Nathan attended 3 Pre-Kindergarten programs over the course of the last two years.*

Each of the focus groups saw the note about Nathan’s history at three Pre-Kindergarten programs as potential “red flag”, but developed different hypotheses about why these events might have unfolded in this way. In Focus Group 1, Rhiannon suggested that “sometimes kids get kicked out of the Pre-Kindergarten programs and the parents don’t necessarily give you a good reason why and it turns out that they had more behavior than the parent is owning up to” (Lines 930-932). Participants in this group felt that the true extent of Nathan’s behavior would become clear when he enrolled and that his

needs could most likely be managed through a behavior plan and peer modeling. In Focus Group 2, however, participants interpreted the information in reference to Nathan's mother differently, and their conversation suggested that they had more concerns about the behavior of Nathan's mother than they did about Nathan himself (see Focus Group 2, Lines 1827-1871 for the complete discussion). As educator participants discussed their interpretation of the above information, they offered hypotheses regarding the hypothetical parent in question (e.g., "sounds like the mother is a little neurotic," "it could be mom is scared," "she's enabling the kid *not* to be successful"), rather than focusing on the nature of Nathan's possible behavioral difficulties. Notably, one participant linked her hypothesis about the parent's influence on Nathan's behavioral difficulties to her own experiences in inclusion: "She's enabling the kid *not* to be successful. And we saw that this year!"

As previously discussed in Research Question 4, this conversation suggests that educators who have histories of conflicts with parents of students with ASD may be somewhat predisposed to view them negatively. As this conversation evolved, participants became increasingly speculative and negative in their perceptions of Nathan's mother. Interpretations of the vignette text moved from suggesting that Nathan may have severe behaviors (consistent with Focus Group 1), to implying that Nathan was not bad at all but that his mother was being overprotective or enabling, to indicating that she needs parent training. By the end of this conversation, educators were concerned that district personnel would need to be on-hand when they met with this mother, ostensibly because they perceived she might be difficult to work with. When this same group of educators was asked to state individually what they thought was the single most important part of Nathan's instructional plan, Helen emphasized working with the parent over working with the child and commented, "That'll be a battle for years to come" (Focus Group 2, Lines 2236-2237).

Finally, it is worth noting that in each of the vignette discussions, a small group of participants tended to be the most active in proposing ideas or commenting on the student's characteristics. Across both focus groups, participants in specialist or consultant roles (Tracey – behavior specialist – in Focus Group 1; Beatrice – school psychologist – in Focus Group) were consistently the most vocal and offered the most substantive comments that tended to be echoed or commented on by their colleagues. In addition, it was observed that SE teachers were more actively involved in discussing

Josh's case, while GE teachers were more likely to speak up during Nathan's case. Two possible reasons for this pattern exist: (a) GE teachers were more comfortable in speaking up in the second vignette (Nathan) after they had had a chance to listen to Josh's case, or (b) GE teachers were better able to speak to Nathan's needs because he was closer to grade-level academically and was a close fit with actual students with whom they had worked. Examination of GE teachers' comments suggests the latter might be the case. In Focus Group 2, Nathan was similar to a student of Melody's (who had already been discussed at length during previous questions) so much that participants suggested that Nathan be placed "in Melody's classroom." Melody took a strong role in developing Nathan's plan, describing what she had done for her included student with ASD, and providing observations about how his behaviors would be managed in the context of typical 5-year-old developmental expectations.

*Question 6: What Information Sources Influence Educators When Making These Decisions?*

When educator participants were asked in focus group sessions to generate instructional placements and programs for two hypothetical students, a follow-up question asked, *What kind of information, experience, etc. do you have that tells you that these are good ideas for students with ASD?* The resulting discussion in both focus groups centered around how educator participants came to have their existing knowledge base about SE and ASD in general, as well as specific intervention or instructional strategies for these students. In individual interviews, further student-specific information sources (e.g., student observation or evaluation data) were identified as educators described the processes for making placement decisions in their own school building. These participants also often referred to their own experiences with students when discussing how they go about making decisions; however, experiential influences can be found under Research Question 4.

*Sources of Background Knowledge*

*In-service trainings.* Educator participants indicated that in-service trainings were a major source of information about service delivery for students with ASD. It was noted in the first focus group session that there had been an increase in autism-related trainings offered in the last few years, provided by trainers both within and outside the district. In-service providers included an Assistant Professor in Communication Sciences and Disorders at the local university, the district's own half-time autism

consultant (Sergio), the districts two full-time inclusion facilitators (Merri and Rhonda), and members of the CORE Team. In addition to periodic offerings throughout the school year, ESE teachers were invited to attend the annual three-day Autism Institute Summer Training Series jointly sponsored by 5 regional school districts, Florida Department of Education, Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD), Partnership for Effective Programs for Students with Autism (PEPSA), and the Florida Inclusion Network (FIN). In addition, participants mentioned receiving informal in-service trainings from their colleagues on specific strategies ideas in conjunction with Trans-D teams, as described in Chapter 3 (Research Context). As previously mentioned, participants were careful to note that while in-service trainings were a beneficial and useful mechanism for professional development, they also were not the only answer to increasing the knowledge base of those serving students with ASD. A more comprehensive discussion of these limitations and recommendations for improving in-service can be found in the “Overcoming Resistance to Inclusion” section under Research Question 2 (Beliefs Regarding Inclusion).

*Pre-service and graduate training.* For special educators and the school psychologist, an introduction to meeting the needs to students with disabilities (and sometimes ASD in particular) was provided in their pre-service training at the Bachelor’s level. Once again, participants in the first focus group engaged in a lively discussion of the limitations of pre-service training, including (a) the inadequacy of a single “Introduction to Exceptionalities” class for GE teachers; (b) stilted, unrealistic activities with limited utility such as writing two-page lesson plans or extensive “reflection” papers; and (c) SE and GE programs that train these future teachers separately without preparing them for their eventual collaborative relationships. Educators from both GE and SE backgrounds felt that future teachers in any role would benefit from participation in pre-service courses in both general curriculum development/implementation and strategies for accommodating/modifying curriculum for students with special needs. Lauren, whose background was in Elementary Education, stated with regard to her single class on students with special needs, “There was no way I was equipped to deal with what I was dealing with [as a GE teacher in Autism Inclusion], based on just my education alone. No way” (Focus Group 1, Lines 274-2275). As such, she sought out more advanced training with a Master’s Degree in Special Education, which led to her current role as an inclusion resource teacher. In total, one-third of educator participants



(N=5) reported having attained a Master's Degree in Special Education to further their understanding of students with disabilities and their knowledge base for supporting them. Nevertheless, participants from the first focus group emphatically agreed that their experiences "in the trenches" had taught them far more than their undergraduate or graduate coursework (Focus Group 1, Line 2283).

*Specialized workshops.* A minority of educators (Joanne and Rhiannon) indicated that they had participated in advanced autism-specific workshops or trainings. Joanne indicated having participated in a training series on the *Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communications-Handicapped Children* program (TEACCH; Mesibov, Shea, & Schopler, 2005) while working in another Florida school district. At the time of the focus groups, Rhiannon was the sole educator participant who indicated she was working on courses to fulfill the Florida Autism Endorsement requirement. Beginning July 1, 2011, K-12 teachers with more than 50% of their students who are identified with ASD must be (a) certified in an ESE area, and (b) have an endorsement in autism or an endorsement in severe or profound disabilities (Florida Administrative Code, 2002). In stark contrast to the negative view espoused with regard to undergraduate and Master's level course work in Colleges of Education, Rhiannon found she was really enjoying the Autism Endorsement courses because they were so highly specialized and advanced that they provided her with new and valuable knowledge (Focus Group 1, Lines 2301-2308). Although the district had recently offered an intensive two-day series on Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and several SE participants described using it in their instruction, none of the educator participants indicated that they had attended this workshop.

Interestingly, one parent participant also spoke about the benefits of attending specialized workshops and the difficulties educators faced in trying to find time for those multi-day professional development activities. Throughout the 2005-2006 school year, just prior to data collection, the ESE and Student Services departments had offered a year-long training series for those interested in becoming Board Certified Applied Behavior Analysts (BCABAs). None of the educator participants in this study reported having participated in that training series. One parent participant (Kim, Alex's mother), however, chose to attend a similar BCABA series in another Florida city to learn strategies for better supporting her son's challenging behavior. She described her disappointment that personnel at School A had not enrolled in the local BCABA class,

but reported that the behavior specialist from School A had explained he could not be off-campus for the 21 days throughout the school year that the series required of its participants. Kim said, “I was like, ‘Well, in one way that’s great because you have job security, but in another way, if you’re not going to be able to go, you’re not gonna provide the services that you want to provide.’” (Lines 1512-1514).

*Consultation with colleagues and supervisors.* While educators often sought out the expertise of researchers and scholars by participating in in-service professional development and specialized workshops, they also recognized the wisdom and competencies of their fellow educators and supervisors from within the school district. The majority of educator participants suggested that getting ideas from other educators had contributed to their current knowledge base for supporting students with ASD. Specific instances of consulting with colleagues were typically associated with situations in which educators were either (a) facing inclusion for the first time (Brandy, Lauren, Maggie), (b) struggling to solve a specific problem with a student (Natalie, Caryn, Julie), or (c) were recommending a previously self-contained student for a less restrictive placement (Rhiannon). Participating educators indicated that they had consulted with a variety of professionals from within the school system, including Instructional Assistants (IAs), fellow teachers in autism, inclusion resource teachers, behavior specialists, school psychologists, guidance counselors, members of the CORE team, and district-level supervisors (e.g., ESE Supervisor of Autism, ESE Director). Although Maggie was the only participant to directly refer to district supervisors as a collegial source of information on ASD service delivery, she was extremely positive in her description of their advisory role.

Supervisors of the different programs are a tremendous resource in defining what the district’s vision is and how they want that vision imparted and in place in schools, and they are the givers of information. They do a beautiful job of clarifying what um, characteristics may and may not be considered in a child’s placement. The director of ESE, is very knowledgeable, very clear, and very accommodating, when talking, when there’s a difficult case or a difficult situation. I look to those support folks to give me information, clarify my misunderstandings, and add to my knowledge. (Maggie, Interview, Lines 182-188).

It may be that, as the sole Principal participant, Maggie had greater access to district-level supervisors than the participants in lower-ranking positions (e.g., behavior specialist, teachers, etc.).

In addition to individual consultation with their colleagues and supervisors, special education participants indicated that participating in Trans-D teams was a valuable way to gain autism-specific strategy or instructional knowledge. Julie provided an excellent overview of the consultative function of Trans-D teams during her individual interview.

Jenine: What would you say is the main purpose of the Trans-D team, then?

Julie: Just basically to brainstorm ideas. I think we did it, actually very similar to when we discussed those two [hypothetical] students [in the focus group]. The teacher would bring up the student and in advance she'd kind-of write down a little synopsis of what the kid was like, what they did, behaviorally what it was, what they think happened before the behavior to cause it and then everybody would just kind-of throw out ideas to improve it. Like if the child was picking up everything on the floor and eating it, then they would say, you know, did you think of some kind of sensory thing for their mouth, did you think of behaviorally how to correct it? You know, time out, or giving them rewards every 5 minutes when they haven't picked up something, and it's just a big brainstorm. It's really good... We had the CORE team come out and explain the assistive technology and all of the different communication things we could use. Some of them, we ended up pulling out our digital camera, because some of those things you never think of, you know, like there was a home note done in a folder with picture cards and so the child could put "I enjoyed this today, I enjoyed that today." (Julie, Interview, Lines 899-909, 934-938).

Julie went on to elaborate that, true to their name, Trans-D meetings were "transdisciplinary" in nature and often included not only teachers and instructional assistants, but also P.E. coaches, speech/language pathologists, behavior specialists, Occupational Therapists, and (less frequently) school psychologists or the district's autism consultant. At the inception of Trans-D, School A had originally formed one team for the whole building, but quickly found that self-contained students were the primary topic of conversation because they often presented the highest priority behaviors for the team to problem-solve. Julie indicated that over time the inclusion and self-contained

teachers at School A formed their own separate Trans-D teams to ensure that everyone had time to get the support they needed.

*Printed materials.* Finally, a handful of participants (all special education affiliated) referred to the Internet, books on ASD, or the empirical literature as sources of knowledge and information. When Lauren found out that her first teaching experience would involve a GE class with up to half the class on IEPs, she investigated autism using the internet and gave herself a “15-minute education on autism” (Interview, Lines 1368-1370). Other participants made vague references to “reading” or “research” as places they had helped shape their current knowledge base on ASD. Joanne specifically highlighted a book she had found particularly useful in developing supports for students in her classroom, citing it as “not just her opinion, it’s all based on research” (Janzen, 1998; Focus Group 2, Line 2384).

#### *Sources of Student Information*

When discussing the process by which educators make instructional placement decisions for students with ASD, participants referenced various sources for obtaining information on individual students’ characteristics, aptitudes, and needs. Because of the rapidly growing population in the participating district, educators frequently referred to reviewing and gathering information specifically for *new* students with ASD.

*“Placing from paper.”* Very often, written pieces of information (e.g., IEPs, psychoeducational evaluations, and other data sources) were especially critical when making placement decisions for students who had just moved into the district. Educator participants used the term “placing students from paper” on several occasions in both focus groups and individual interviews to refer to situations where they made a placement decision not by seeing or knowing a student personally, but rather by reading a new student’s IEP from their previous district and making their best guess about the most appropriate instructional environment. Unfortunately, educators acknowledged that “placing from paper” was extremely challenging and often resulted in incorrect placements.

Beatrice: Well, I think it’s really hard to figure out where to place them from paper.

Multiple people: (overlapping) Umm-hmmm, yeah.

Beatrice: And I know the behavior specialist will call and talk to a person and say, “Tell me about this kid,” when we’re trying to figure out where to place. You

know, is it self-contained? And I would say maybe 50% of the time, we get it right. We always say, “Whoops, this one needs to go to inclusion, whoops, pull this one out of inclusion, he needs to go self-contained.” You know, when they first come in, you guys get a lot of temporary placements.

Simone: I think that, um, a lot of times when you get them, they will underestimate their abilities sometimes. And you have to do your own informal assessments and see how they interact with the kids. Because a lot of times, that does happen. (Focus Group 2, Lines 369-382).

Participants also noted that adopting the IEPs of students from other states often presented considerable challenges, particularly when those IEPs included services not available in the participating district (e.g., art therapy, music therapy, etc.). Additionally, educators had learned that in some states with much smaller school districts (e.g., New York, Ohio), even the most significantly disabled children might have been placed in what the district termed “inclusion” (GE placement with a full-time aide and modified curriculum) because these districts had so few children with disabilities that offering self-contained classrooms was not feasible. As a result, parents moving to Florida from these states were sometimes frustrated to find that their child would not receive comparable services in their new school system (Focus Group 1, Lines 1052-1075).

*Trial placements.* To combat difficulties in gauging the most appropriate placements for these children, the district has several policies for trying out and refining placement decisions. New students from out of state are “temporarily placed” into a diagnostic category and/or classroom based on paperwork available at the time of enrollment. The team then gathers additional data necessary to determine if the placement is appropriate. Although these placements take up to 6 months to be certified, educators reported that it was very helpful to have personal experience with the student before recommending a placement for them (Focus Group 2, Lines 403-411). Similarly, when educators wished to explore a change of placement for a current student in the district, they utilized “diagnostic teaching,” or a two-week trial placement where data were gathered to determine if the placement was indeed appropriate for the student. In other circumstances, the IEP team might use “partial placements” to slowly move a child up the continuum of services. For example, a child being recommended for a move to a less restrictive setting might start with only a brief visit there each day

(e.g., one 20-minute lesson) and gradually increase as the student acclimates to the GE environment.

Like this past year, I have a student who turned 5 in January, academically right on the money. Um, the only thing she lacks, she had the self-help skills, um, she had the communication skills, um, it was amazing how her communication skills developed over the year. The only thing she lacked were the social skills... And she was the highest functioning in my classroom. So I had her going to the VE Pre-K for an hour, hour and a half doing social skills, um, we're looking at possibly putting her in the Kindergarten class in the Fall. (Frances, Interview, Lines 34-40)

On a related note, Rhiannon suggested that “partial placements” are beneficial not only to see how the child responds to the GE setting and confirm their ability to be successful there, but are also an effective means of obtaining “buy-in” from the GE teacher.

Teachers “need to see that he’s not going to run out the door, he’s not going to throw himself to the ground and tantrum regularly... you know, you just have to convince them that this is a good candidate for a basic ed class” (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 61-64).

*Data collection.* To further sort out placements, participants indicated that additional data may be gathered in a variety of ways. For new students to the district, this data may come in the form of anecdotal observations or historical records from the child’s previous teachers or schools, as suggested in the quote from Beatrice in the previous section. In many cases, however, observations and classroom assessments were conducted in conjunction with temporary placements or diagnostic teaching, to describe the child’s functioning in that setting. As a last resort, a formal reevaluation of a child’s cognitive, academic, and behavioral functioning may be conducted.

The comments of many educators suggested that, when observing a child with ASD in a particular classroom environment, a key focal point is *goodness of fit* with the other children and curriculum in a given setting. Educators described experiences of observing new students who clearly did not “fit” in that setting, as evidenced by language or social skills that were significantly above those of the children in that classroom. Participants invoked the concept of “goodness of fit” with regard to children in *self-contained* settings only, suggesting that when a student with ASD demonstrated skills were developmentally higher than those of their classroom peers, it served as a signal that a child would benefit from a less restrictive environment.

Darla: Then there's the exception, the little boy scheduled to be in my class who walked in and said, "Hello, how are you?" (laughter) And I was like, "I'm great, how are *you*?" And he said, "I'm wonderful and I'm going into the 4<sup>th</sup> grade" and I mean, he had all kinds of things to tell me, so I immediately called another teacher.

Beatrice: We had a little guy walk in [to a self-contained classroom] and about an hour into the class, he looked around after circle time and said, "What's wrong with these kids?"

Multiple people (overlapping, laughter): Wow, oh my!

Beatrice: (imitating teacher's surprised voice) "OH! Well, let's find out." (Focus Group 2, Lines 440-450)

When students changed placements within the district, various educational professionals (particularly inclusion resource teachers and behavior specialists) were often asked to observe the student in their original setting and determine if they would be a good "candidate for inclusion" (Brandy, Interview, Lines 220-222, 782-785; Lauren, Interview, Lines 1629-1631). Interestingly, despite the exhaustive list of characteristics educators generated to describe their "ideal inclusion candidate" (see Research Question 5), participants who regularly observe children with ASD and make recommendations on their appropriateness for inclusion had difficulty articulating what characteristics they seek in these observations. Lauren indicated that her recommendation may come down to professional judgment or an instinctual feeling about a child's likelihood for success in inclusion: "...It's like a feeling, too, sometimes you can just look at these kids and you just get a feeling, like 'Uhhh, I don't know.' Or if I even have that 'I don't know,' it's like, 'Well, maybe it's not such a good idea.'" (Interview, Lines 831-834). Natalie stated that although she was aware that the inclusion resource teacher and behavior specialist in her building often observed students with ASD prior to recommending them for her classroom Autism Inclusion Pod, she did not know what specific characteristics they looked for (Interview, Lines 932-938). Darla similarly suggested that criteria are not clear when observing many of these children. She further indicated that, as a self-contained teacher, she often felt that her perceptions of a child's readiness for inclusion or success in GE after a period of time there did not match those of her GE colleagues. Throughout her individual interview, Darla jokingly suggested that there should be a "magic checklist" for inclusion that serves multiple functions in the

placement decision-making process: specifying the characteristics a child should have when going into an inclusive setting, indicating the steps in the process of recommending a child for a less restrictive placement, and stating the standard by which the success of that placement can be judged (Interview, Lines 1112-1134).

In addition to classroom observations, educators indicated that they may use informal assessments to determine the child's skill levels relative to those of their classroom peers. Again, gathering this type of data was most often described in situations where a student with ASD was new to the school or district and these data were unavailable from the student's prior teacher. However, as described in Research Question 5, teachers of self-contained for preschoolers with ASD were particularly likely to have curriculum-based or criterion-referenced data of preacademic/academic skills on hand when recommending a child for the GE environment.

I always start by highlighting to a potential teacher or inclusion teacher what great skills they have. He knows every letter of the alphabet, upper case and lower case, and he can write them! (laughter) He can identify all kinds of crazy shapes and a hexagon too. I mean, come on. I mean, how many five year olds do you know who can know a hexagon? (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 445-449)

On rare occasions, educators may also look to a more formal psychoeducational evaluation/reevaluation (using standardized, norm-referenced assessments) for assistance in making placement decisions. Typically, these data are solicited when a child is not making expected progress in a particular environment or a move to a less restrictive environment is under consideration (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 953-961; Maggie, Interview, Lines 385-387). In both focus groups, educators cited data from the children's psychoeducational evaluations to support their recommendations for a child's overall placement (e.g., "you've got the high verbal skills, you've got average memory, you've got a profile that looks a lot like your self-contained SLD kids..." – Beatrice, Focus Group 2, Lines 1094-1096) and for specific aspects of a child's IEP (e.g., "in his psychological it said that he does have the ability to learn and if that's the case then he does need to get that reading up" – Brandy, Focus Group 1, Lines 1597-1599).



*Question 7: What Outcomes Do Educators Wish To See As a Result of Students with ASD Participating in General Education and Do Educators Think Students Are Achieving These Outcomes?*

Throughout their examples, stories, statements of personal belief, educators described outcomes they wish to see in included students with ASD. Given the wide range of strengths, weaknesses, and support needs of students across the autism spectrum, it logically follows that much of the growth educators sought in GE placements was individually referenced. Nevertheless, focus group and interview data suggested that many educators had similar goals in mind (both broad and specific) when recommending inclusive placements for children with ASD.

*Broad Domains of Desired Skill Growth*

As previously discussed, educators' operational definitions of "inclusion" incorporated a belief that reliance on a one-on-one IA is incompatible with the goals of inclusion because it creates dependency and unnatural interactions. Furthermore, educator participants reiterated time and again their belief that placing students with ASD in GE settings can force them to develop new skills, particularly in the areas of communication and socialization. These observations, combined with additional comments and descriptions of desired outcomes, suggest that *increased independence and initiation* is an overarching goal for included students with ASD at all levels of functioning.

Tracey: ...We want to try to build independence for all our kids that have IEPs as much as possible, and I think independence comes more with maturity, but I think they need to know that there's not going to be a shadow in the background that's going to come pat their back and say, "Come check your bookbag, did you do this?" You know, that's just not how it works in the real world.

Jenine: So avoiding that whole dependency thing.

Tracey: Umm-hmm. And then also, I hate that, "Well, I'm special." Well, I don't care if you're special, that's not going to fly when you're in the workforce, you know? It just doesn't. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 263-272)

Teacher participants from both self-contained and GE settings shared the belief that increased independence and initiation were important achievements for students with ASD. In fact, Rhiannon described how she prepared several self-contained students for their upcoming participation in a GE classroom by directly teaching them how to actively

participate in large-group instruction. Although her students' were technically in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, she was able to arrange their participation in a 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classroom where the expectations best matched their present skill levels and gave them the best chance of improving these skills.

I think in third, fourth, and fifth grade the kids are expected to do more independent stuff, so it was still primarily teacher led in the second grade group. They weren't like so big they looked weird in the class, and that's about where their skill levels [fell]. They were both fourth graders and their skill levels were about second grade. So, it was a good (...) now I don't know if it was perfect inclusion, but it still, it worked really well for those two kids. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 546-551)

#### *Specific Domains of Desired Skill Growth*

To help them generate ideas about areas where they expect to see growth in included students with ASD, educators were shown a list of several important domains of functioning during their individual interview session: academic/vocational, communication, behavioral/social-emotional, recreational/leisure, and community integration. Parents were also shown the same list, in order to draw comparisons between these two groups of participants. Participants used the list as a starting point for brainstorming or discussing desired outcomes; their observations and comments in each of these domains are provided below. It should be noted that for sections summarized desired and observed outcomes for both educators and parents, responses under these domains of functioning are presented in order from most-discussed to least-discussed (e.g., social/behavioral is listed first because it had the most text segments coded as such).

*Behavioral/social-emotional functioning.* As described in Research Question 5, a consensus emerged among educator participants indicating that a child's social and behavioral functioning was a key predictor of their success in a GE setting. For the most part, educators thought that students with ASD did not have to demonstrate age-typical social/behavioral skills to be a good candidate for inclusion; they merely stipulated that their behavior should not be a significant impediment to their own learning or safety, nor that of their peers. Consistent with these views, goals for improved behavioral/social-emotional functioning dominated educators' discussions of desired outcomes. Six educators (Julie, Natalie, Melody, Rhiannon, Tracey, Maggie) believed that students with

ASD tend to make more progress in the realm of social/behavioral functioning as a result of GE participation than in all other domains of functioning.

Educators generally described desired social/behavior outcomes in positive terms, indicating that they were seeking the presence of certain prosocial skills rather than the absence of inappropriate behaviors. Socially, educators wished to see students with ASD engaging in “real” conversations and interactions with peers, characterized by spontaneous initiation, reciprocal exchanges between each participant, topic maintenance, and consideration of others’ interests. Educator participants often contrasted these authentic interactions with the more artificial ones they often had to prompt or orchestrate for the child with ASD to obtain practice in developing these skills. For example, Brandy stated that she wanted to see students with ASD “*really* having conversations and *interacting* with students, with their peers, instead of just learning to say hello to someone (...) they’re actually having conversations with their friends” (Interview, Lines 572-574). In addition to conversational skills, educator participants described other social goals such as actively participating in academic or social groups (e.g., joining in activities already underway), sharing items and taking turns during play or games, demonstrating empathy and understanding of others, and expanding their range of interests and topics of conversation.

Educators’ stories and examples suggested that they often observe students with ASD attaining many of these socialization goals in the GE classroom. Beatrice shared her observations of a child with ASD who initially refused to interact with peers, but eventually increased engagement with peers and was able to remain engaged in play for longer periods of time (Interview, Lines 220-221). Similarly, Lauren was delighted by

... having kids come in in Kindergarten that will barely speak at all, and then by the time they leave, or even now, I see them, they’re in 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> grade, to have a little conversation with them, or some of them just won’t stop talking. (laughter)

And that’s a good thing too. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 259-263)

Even more challenging goals such as developing empathy were seen as attainable in the GE setting. Natalie shared the experience of a child who entered School A’s Autism Inclusion Pod with significant behavioral difficulty (e.g., tantrums, flipping over desks) and “pretty much wanted nothing to do with the other children unless they wanted to do the same thing he wanted to do and talk about the same things he wanted to talk about”

(Interview, Lines 203-205). Over the course of three years in that setting, however, he had grown to the point where he became a helper for other students in the classroom.

He would be a trusty assistant or whatever if I were doing groups or something. And it was just cool, too, instead of him being like, (using brisk voice) “No, the answer to that is 6,” he’d just be like, it’s funny, I would hear him using wording that I use, so he’d be like, “It’s OK, you can do it, take a look at the problem,” more like coaching... (Natalie, Interview, Lines 211-218)

In line with their beliefs about inclusion, participants frequently attributed the social growth demonstrated by students with ASD to the influence of typically-developing peer models and increased opportunities for interactions in the GE setting. Melody provided a particularly powerful statement of this belief, contrasting the degree of social interaction she observed in her own included student with ASD in her GE classroom and later in a self-contained summer program.

Jenine: In terms of the areas that you saw him grow in, in the last year, which would you say is the biggest?

Melody: This one. (points on sheet with list of domains of functioning)

Jenine: The social, behavioral? Okay.

Melody: That would have to be my argument for inclusion. Because I don’t think you’d see that if he’d stayed in self-contained. And you know why I can say that? Because I did Pre-K VE and I had him in there with me, and I didn’t see a lot of that.

Jenine: Oh that’s right, in the summer.

Melody: And I don’t think you have those other kids around him to *force* it. You know, like if he got in line at the water fountain and he just pushed his way in there, the other kids told him, “No, get in line!” You know? If you’re in a classroom of 3 kids, there is no line, there is no waiting.

Jenine: So inclusion forced him to (...) in a way that self-contained did not.

Melody: Yes, right. (Melody, Interview, Lines 1061-1077)

Educators also cited behavioral skills that they wish to see increase when students with ASD participate in GE settings. Behavioral skills are differentiated from social skills because they do not facilitate the student’s interaction with peers or adults; rather, they tend to increase the child’s capacity for independent functioning in the inclusive classroom. Several educators (Maggie, Rhiannon, Beatrice) cited the need for

children with ASD to make some gains in areas of functioning most classically associated with a diagnosis of autism, including tolerance for unpredictability, transitions, and sensory stimulation, in order to achieve optimal success in GE. The high priority placed on improving these behavioral skills was particularly evident during the “Nathan” vignette of the focus groups, where educators focused on the hypothetical preschooler’s difficulty dealing with changes to typical routines or with not getting what he wants. Much of educators’ programmatic ideas tended to focus on helping Nathan overcome these difficulties, which they saw as his biggest barrier to successful inclusion. Although educator participants consistently cited chronic disruptive or maladaptive behaviors as major considerations when recommending a student with ASD for inclusion, there was relatively little discussion of reducing problem behaviors as a goal for included students. Melody was one notable exception, indicating that she initially had to prioritize the minimization of behaviors such as screaming in order for him to remain in the GE setting. Once she had reduced some of these significant behaviors, she was then able to work on increasing the task-related behaviors that would contribute to his academic success.

I felt like if he belonged to me, for him to function out in the world, there were certain things, certain behaviors that he couldn’t be doing. He couldn’t be screaming (...) like if you’re gonna take him through Publix (supermarket), I don’t want him screaming through Publix, so getting rid of some of that noise-making was a big deal. And then, um, we would choose little behaviors because all of them, it wasn’t gonna work if we did them all at the same time ...So we would pick and choose. The one we were working on when the school year ended was just (...) can he function in a large group? Because he couldn’t. So we waited until the end of the year for that one, and we would do things like he sat in a chair and he held on to something, we used a picture board. Earlier in the year, he just wasn’t ready to function with the rest of the kids. (Melody, Interview, Lines 592-605)

As previously suggested, educators saw that students with ASD can make considerable gains in behavioral functioning through their participation in a GE classroom and adequate intervention supports. In addition to decreases in inappropriate behavior, many educators described the emergence of a class of behaviors that could be called *school survival skills*, including basic behavioral expectations such as waiting

in line, completing common routines (e.g., buying lunch, packing up to go home), asking for help, and following directions. Again, participants attributed growth in this area to the positive influence of typically developing peers in the GE setting.

Darla: An example of what I really do like about inclusion time was a little boy who was in a self-contained classroom and we put him in an inclusion pod and a lot of the behaviors that we had been seeing in the classroom dropped off as he started modeling the inclusion children, and although he did need a little extra support, um, he's making it and he's making it great in the inclusion pod full-time, and we see him going further ahead rather than staying the same or regressing, like we've seen from some of the other children in the same classroom.

Jenine: And you said he was modeling some of the positive, kind-of socially appropriate behaviors?

Darla: Yes, absolutely.

Jenine: What kinds of things was he doing?

Darla: He was walking in line, he was not having to be first, he was, um, getting his own pencil out, he was... you know, following the routines of the classroom whereas before he had needed a lot of help with that. And he still did rely on his schedules, um, but a teacher could put up a whole schedule for the whole class and he could follow that rather than needing his own.

Jenine: Oh, that's great!

Darla: Um, and... which inevitably, helped the whole classroom, I'm sure! Um, but he still had little reminders and little pictures and that type of thing, but his behaviors, his aggressive behaviors completely went away, a lot of his running, fleeing behaviors disappeared. And some of his socialization behaviors of addressing peers, we saw for the first time. (Darla, Interview, 289-316)

Of course, gains in these areas were not observed in all students with ASD.

Participants' negative experiences in inclusion (Research Question 4) and beliefs about the characteristics of ideal inclusion candidates (Research Question 5) indicate that there are occasions in which a student's challenging behavior cannot be adequately managed in the GE setting and a change to a more restrictive placement is necessary. Several participants (Tracey, Darla) noted that a student's challenging behaviors may be indicative of a broader problem in the GE setting, such as weak communication skills or frustration with an overly challenging academic curriculum. While not the only indication

of a child's performance in GE, a student's behavior may function as an "educational barometer" of sorts, alerting educators to the presence of pressures the student may be experiencing in the inclusive setting.

I've seen one child who was included all day in a VE setting where maybe that wasn't his best setting and he started demonstrated aggressive behaviors and um, stopped the academic progress. And then he was taken back down to a self-contained classroom and the behaviors dropped away and the academics started going back up, due to his lack of frustration. I've also seen it the other way before, like I said, where the behaviors such as fleeing or some aggressions have gone down probably due to the role-modeling. [But] ... sometimes the frustration level goes up and being in inclusion isn't always right in all circumstances. (Darla, Interview, Lines 591-597, 618-619)

*Communication skills.* As suggested under Research Question 2, educators believed that the communicative functioning of students with ASD is likely to improve considerably in the GE setting. In fact, several educators (Lauren, Natalie, Brandy, Rhiannon, Maggie) suggested that communication is one of the areas in which students with ASD demonstrate the most significant growth because children are "forced" to communicate by frequent interactions with their typical peers in the GE setting.

I do think that they could learn a lot of communication skills by the other students' modeling, being in the environment, having the models there, taking the initiative to talk them, whereas in the self-contained setting a lot of times, they're not going to initiate conversation with their peers. Um, in the Basic Ed classroom, a typical peer could initiate with a student with autism. (Simone, Interview, Lines 667-671)

Communication was seen as a foundational skill necessary for students to progress in other areas such as academics and socialization. Maggie represented this belief with her comment, "Communication and the behavior, social/emotional functioning (...) I think they go hand in hand, because you have to have the receptive and expressive communication in order to be able to socially and behaviorally interact with other kids" (Interview, Lines 969-971).

Consistent with educators' desired characteristics in an ideal inclusion candidate, educators tended to emphasize *expressive* forms of communication when articulating their desired outcomes in this domain. Participants suggested that when children with ASD are placed in GE settings, the "will" to express their wants and needs increases

considerably. Darla noted, “I’ve seen the children want to communicate more because there are more receptive partners to communicate with” (Interview, Lines 587-589). In addition to the naturalistic conditions that increase the likelihood of communication, Brandy and Lauren both indicated that they purposefully use visual supports, social stories, and other strategies to encourage increased expressive communication in the included students with ASD.

...That is something that we work on quite a bit in inclusion, especially expressing needs and wants. Um, you know, I kind-of tend to work from picture-based... And then eventually to spoken. With some kids. We don’t really have a whole lot of written [prompting] going on, because that doesn’t work! But yeah, I would start with picture communication and then eventually try to wean them off of that, and sometimes the kids do it themselves. Before you know it, they’re ready, they’re not using pictures anymore and they will just verbally ask for things. (Lauren, Interview, 1031-1037)

Darla further acknowledged that participation in general education was unlikely to completely remediate the communicative difficulties of students with ASD. Again, desired and perceived outcomes tended to center around increased independence and initiation in communication, as demonstrated by decreased need for teacher prompting and greater instances of spontaneous communication. Melody indicated that for her included student with ASD, this was still an area of need. Although the student became increasingly verbal over the course of one year in general education, “the one thing I didn’t see happen was the spontaneous communication ...Somebody would come in and say, “Hell-ooooo!” and he still wouldn’t respond back unless you said to him, “Say hello” and then he would say it back” (Interview, Lines 1029-1033).

Educator participants were far less likely to mention goals for improved receptive communication and pragmatic skills (e.g., tone of voice, eye contact, etc.). Notably, those participants attending to these communicative needs were all GE teachers. Melody briefly mentioned observing increases in receptive communication in her student with ASD, indicating that he moved from needing picture-based prompts to understanding two- to three-word verbal prompts to complete basic activities (Interview, Lines 968-977). Caryn also described her efforts to increase the eye contact of her student with ASD using physical prompts (moving their head) during one-on-one communicative interactions or gestures (e.g., getting into their line of sight and tapping



next to her eyes) during large-group instruction (Interview, Lines 701-722). Natalie described a child with ASD in her class who “almost sounded like a little puppet, like ‘la, la, la, la’ (imitating high pitch voice)” but improved pragmatic aspects of his speech (e.g., tone and pitch) by imitating Natalie’s own style of announcing small group assignments during reading centers (Interview, Lines 103-118).

*Academic skills.* Educators clearly believed that improvement in academic skills was a significant benefit of GE participation. In large part, this was attributed to differences in instruction between GE and self-contained classrooms. As Brandy summarized, students with ASD in self-contained settings “would have been focused on just functional skills for everyday living and how to function in society. [In inclusion,] they’re actually getting academically higher and progressing higher academically” (Interview, Lines 554-556). In addition to goals of general proficiency in each of the major academic content areas (i.e., reading, math, writing), participants described specific academic goals that are particularly salient for students with ASD. Several educators (e.g., Lauren, Natalie) suggested that although students with ASD often acquire basic skills in reading (i.e., decoding) or math (i.e., computation), they are more likely to struggle with applying those skills on tasks such as reading comprehension, math word problems, and written expression because of their difficulties with language, abstract reasoning, or fine motor skills. Lauren emphasized that difficulties with written expression were extremely common for children with ASD and a particularly challenging area for educators to improve.

Lauren: Writing is another one that’s tough. They don’t like it. One of the ones I have this year, that’s what most of his, actually a lot of his aggression in the beginning of the year was focused around writing. He just hates to write, will not write. Um, yeah, writing is very, very tough.

Jenine: Why do you think that is?

Lauren: I think, with this one child in particular, some of it had to do with his motor skills. Um, he knows in his mind what he wants to get on the paper and just can’t physically get it on the paper. And I’ve realized that because a lot of the time, um, we did put it into his IEP that we will transcribe his response and I, I do that sometimes. If he’s getting really frustrated, he’ll say, “I want to write the story but I can’t write the story.” I’ll say, “Well, let me help you write the story. You tell me the story and I’ll write it for you, or you write a sentence and I’ll write

a sentence.” And he’ll start talking, and what he’s spouting out, I can barely keep up with him, especially if it’s something creative, he just, he knows what he wants to say and it’s just very frustrating thing for him that he can’t get it down onto paper that quickly. And so, I think that’s a lot of the reason that he hates to write, but, yeah a lot of them (... , sigh) Yeah, the writing is hard... and some of them, I know even just space on the page. I have kids that are writing their letters that are just huge! They’ll have like two words on a page (laughing), and they think they’re done.

Jenine: “Full page!”

Lauren: Yeah, “full page, that’s it, I’m done!” “Nope, you need to get a little more on there.” But um, yeah, writing is tough one. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 999-1016, 1020-1027)

Interestingly, in the “Josh” vignette portion of both of the focus group sessions, participants asked whether which version of the Sunshine State Standards he was working toward - “regular” or “special.” The special diploma option is available for students with disabilities “who are not able to meet the requirements for a standard diploma or require coursework to support the development of functional life skill” (Pinellas County Schools, 2007). Simone indicated in Focus Group 2 that increasing Josh’s weak reading skills would be even more of a priority to her if she knew that his IEP team had decided to keep him on a “regular” standards track, meaning that Josh would be expected to develop academic skills generally commensurate with his typically developing peers and demonstrate proficiency on the FCAT (Focus Group 2, Lines 1665-1675). Similarly, participants in Focus Group 1 questioned Josh’s status with regard to Sunshine State Standards and concluded that he was likely going to be pursuing regular standards, based on the skill levels described in his vignette. They similarly prioritized academic growth for him, in light of the urgent need to pass the FCAT in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade or face grade-level retention. Although participants recognized Josh’s need for social/behavioral and communication growth, increasing his academic proficiency (particularly in reading) was the primary goal for at least half of the participants in each of the focus group sessions (Focus Group 1, Lines 1588-1673). Beatrice suggested that, for the most part, included students with ASD tend to pursue the “regular” standards track. Of all of the included students with ASD in the 10 years of the Autism Inclusion Pod at School A, Beatrice recalled that only two were on “special”

standards and were placed in the GE classroom at a parent's request; they were also paired with an IA due to their need for a significantly modified curriculum (Interview, Lines 165-180).

*Community integration and normalization.* Helping students with ASD become integrated into their local neighborhood community is less of a focus for students in GE settings. When presented with the same list of potential areas for skill growth that parent participants received, several educators (Julie, Natalie, and Joanne) perceived that this area is the least directly impacted by a child's participation in a GE classroom. In fact, inclusive placements may actually interfere with a school's direct efforts to improve students' functioning in this regard, as most community-based instruction (CBI) occurs as a part of the functional academic/vocational curriculum of self-contained classrooms. CBI field trips are typically not available for students with ASD once they are placed in GE classrooms; as such, educator participants consistently indicated that promoting community integration and normalization of higher functioning students with ASD is primarily the parents' responsibility.

Julie: [In the self-contained Preschool classroom for students with autism] We're able to go on Community-Based Instruction trips to teach the kids how to interact appropriately in the grocery store and how to appropriately go shopping with mom and dad...

Jenine: And so in inclusion, then (trails off)

Julie: It's not addressed enough. I think it's expensive to pay for those busses.

Jenine: Does it then fall more on the parents of kids who are included to meet—

Julie: (overlapping) Meet the community? Yeah, and getting them in outside activities, just taking them out, not being embarrassed. Because it's hard.

People stare. (Julie, Interview, Lines 607-609, 622-629)

Furthermore, students in inclusive placement were perceived as more likely than their self-contained peers to already be integrated in their neighborhood by virtue of their inclusive placement, as well as their potential for accessing the local YMCA, the district's before/after-school child care program, or other activities (Beatrice, Interview, Lines 525-541).

Despite responding in this manner with regard to integration into the *neighborhood*-community, educator participants suggested that inclusion can be a valuable mechanism for promoting the integration of a student with ASD into the *school-*

community and helping them have as normal of an educational experience as possible. In this regard, educators consistently expressed a desire for the child with ASD to be “just another kid in the class.”

I would say for the most part, our students would not be able to always tell you that there is necessarily anything different about one of the students with autism. They may know those certain things, like typical traits, like flapping, but they get so past that, but they, in every other aspect, they’re just another kid in the class. And I think if the *kids* feel that way, then you’re doing something right. Because you don’t want that child to stick out so that the other kids in the class know, you know they always have that one kid’s name in mind, you know, “oh well, *he* gets to do this, or *he* (...)” everybody should be as equal as possible. It’s not necessarily always *ideal* to have everybody that equal, but in the kid’s eyes, anyway. I like it that way. (Lauren, Interview, Line 130-138)

Lauren (and others) did acknowledge that it is easier to create an egalitarian environment of this nature in the primary grades (K-2), when children are less aware of individual differences, than it is in intermediate, middle, or high school.

Educators suggested that the educator’s and school’s approach to including a child with ASD into the GE setting can determine the extent to which the child is truly integrated with typical peers. From a service delivery perspective, Rhiannon and Tracey both suggested that when children are “mainstreamed” into a setting for a small portion of the day, they are less likely to be seen by peers as a full member of the GE environment than are children who are “fully included.” Tracey illustrated this belief with experiences where, after years of exposure and familiarity, typical peers were almost indifferent to the behaviors or unique characteristics of their classmate with ASD.

It wasn’t that someone came in here for 4<sup>th</sup> period and they were only exposed to that kid during 4<sup>th</sup> period, it was like this kid was in their community and he was there since Kindergarten and they grew up knowing who he was and then also, being educated. And then when you have new kids come in and, you know, you don’t say anything about this kid who might be making noise, and he looks at him and the peer goes, “Oh, that’s just Ray-Ray” (pseudonym). And the new kid’s like, “Oh, OK,” because he sees that those Basic Ed kids aren’t making a big deal about him, so he doesn’t make a big deal about it and he’s just another member of the classroom. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 335-342)

Students with ASD were integrated into the classroom community in both instructional and social ways, such as creating heterogeneous (GE/ESE) reading and math groups, using fluid co-teaching with both GE and ESE teachers, ensuring that students with ASD have roles in the classroom (e.g., class jobs), and providing supports and accommodations in ways that are as naturalistic and unobtrusive as possible. Lauren suggested that to truly integrate a child with ASD, GE teachers must adopt a new mindset to incorporate these children into the classroom in meaningful ways.

...A lot of people that I have encountered sometimes think inclusion is putting that child in the room, (imitating another's voice) "OK, he's included!" Or she's included, that's inclusion. And I think that's one of the toughest things I've had to deal with is sometimes changing people's minds about that. You know, this child is capable of doing things that the other children in the classroom can do, it may just be in a different way. And (...) that's one of the reasons I went back to school, and even now, as I'm teaching, sometimes it's hard to change your whole way of thinking, I think, for teachers. I know, like for example, my first year, I didn't really know what to do with a lot of these students. So I think, in a way, that was my room. Inclusion, in a way, was that these kids were *in* there, but they weren't necessarily getting everything that they needed. I would use our para a lot and you know, she'd be in a group with *them*. And you know, I quickly changed my mind about that, you know, that's not the way. Let's have all of the kids with autism at one table in the back of the room with the Instructional Assistant (...) No, they can be mixed in with the groups, with Basic Ed kids. Um, so, inclusion is fully including them. I mean, I don't know, it's kind-of hard to explain because you just have to make sure that they are included in every way, not they are just *there*, taking up the space. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 92-111)

*Recreational/leisure skills.* Much like neighborhood-community integration, many participants suggested that parents were expected to take responsibility for developing the recreational/leisure skills of their children with ASD. Educator participants independently offered very few goals in this area, but when shown the list of potential outcomes, they did acknowledge that recreational/leisure skills of students with ASD did improve somewhat through participation in special classes such as P.E., art, and music and in classroom games or activities (e.g., Fun Friday). Opportunities for participation in competitive sports or games were seen as opportunities for children with ASD to learn

valuable skills such as sportsmanship or turn-taking, as well as to refine their athletic skills (Caryn, Interview, Lines 679-697). In general, though, educators suggested that these skills could be most improved by participation in extracurricular/after-school activities that could be best arranged by the child's parents. However, Lauren recognized that, for children with challenging behavior, it may be difficult for parents to arrange these opportunities.

I think if there is an area of recreational kind of skill that the child is strong in, or even just likes, they don't have to be strong in it, get them involved in some kind of community... That's a good way to start it, for example, if they like basketball, well, put them on a basketball team at the YMCA. But then again, I don't know how other organizations, I don't know how accepting other organizations are about that. So (sigh), I could put my advocate hat on and go out to the YMCA or whatever and say, "Well, you have to let this kid on your team!" (laughs) So I think that's something, that may be... See, here I am, maybe that is why the one parent that I'm thinking of, maybe that's why they haven't done anything like that! I don't know what their experience is, maybe they haven't been able to find someone who will accept their child outside of school, I don't know. (Lauren, Interview, Lines 1222-1231)

Finally, when defining, discussing, and illustrating inclusion, as well as setting goals for success, several participants suggested that the purpose or reason for deciding to include an individual student would likely impact both the implementation and outcomes of inclusion.

What is the purpose of that child being in your class and then how can you make it so that it is as natural as possible? You know, if it's going to be for academic reasons or if it's gonna be for social reasons, or even if it's going to be for Regular Ed kids to learn acceptance and tolerance and that these kids are different but they are the same... An SLD child, you would want them to be in there for academic purposes because in all reality, they are being held to the same standards as the other kids, so you want them in there for academic purposes, but if you had a child with autism that's lower-functioning, um, you know that when they go into an academic setting, it's not going to be purely for academics, it might be for the fact that they need to learn that when they don't

get their way that you don't lay on the floor and scream and have a hissy fit, that's not what you do. (Tracey, Interview, Lines 213-217, 243-248)

#### *Perceived Attainment of Desired Outcomes*

Educators' experiential examples, summarized under Research Question 4 and throughout the above sections, suggest that they often observe students with ASD making gains in many of these broad (independence, initiation) and specific (academic, behavioral, communicative) skills in the GE setting. In some instances, evidence of students' progress was dramatic, such as when a child's skills increased to the point where they were functioning on a new and higher developmental level. Other examples highlighted the smaller gains that might even go unnoticed to the untrained eye (e.g., changes in pragmatic skills). In many cases, however, participants' success stories of students with ASD in GE settings were indicative of growth across numerous areas of functioning, rather than in just one isolated area. For example, Brandy shared her experience in observing the pervasive growth of two students who initially came into the GE classroom with far fewer academic, communicative, and social skills than their same-age peers.

I had two children at [School A] and I had them for years. We started out in Kindergarten for both of them. And both were practically nonverbal, they really didn't speak much at all, they were very shy, um, would run and hide under tables. So started with them in Kindergarten. And that was pretty close to when I had just started teaching as well, so I just thought to myself, 'Wow, how far can these kids really go?' You know, as far as reading and stuff, I just really thought that they weren't going to get anywhere when I had first started teaching. And that's how I... As the years went on, I had them for 3 or 4 years and as the years went on, they were just learning and progressing every single year and my attitude changed to, 'Wow, every child can learn and succeed,' because they exceeded all of my expectations and I had very high expectations for all of my kids, all of the time. And they met my expectations most of the time by the end, and they were talking fluently, socializing with others which they did not do at all, and academically in reading, their levels were just climbing and climbing, continuing to climb, and math-wise, I mean, they were, they were great! (Brandy, Interview, Lines 381-394)

Several educator participants suggested that it is important to assess a student's skill growth in any of these areas in reference to their own baseline levels of functioning (i.e., pre-post) rather than normatively (i.e., compared to typical peers' levels of functioning). Unfortunately, comments from some educators suggested that not everyone defines "success" in inclusion using the same standards. Darla spoke candidly of the resistance in School A's Autism Inclusion Pod to Melody's student with ASD and indicated that the fellow teacher's attitudes towards the child's participation in their pod affected what they considered to be "successful" inclusion.

Darla: Some of the other general ed teachers in the pod... are not totally in agreement that that is the best placement for the child because he can still be disruptive at times. He may... be, you know, yelling very loudly and disrupting their class next door, because it's an open pod setting. He... still has his autistic quirks and his academics aren't quite where the rest of class is. So what makes him successful I think is that he is doing *better*... you know, if you were to make a checklist on 10 categories, 8 of them he would be doing better on them than he was before. So it's successful for *him*. And being that the [GE] teacher (Melody) is in agreeance (*sic*), I think it's successful for the class, being that the students in the classroom (...) you know, are good with him and good with it. I think that that helps to make him successful. But I think that anybody's terminology of "successful" is very subjective... If [the GE teachers] were to claim him "successful," then the expectation would be set that that is successful, and then you are going to get more kids like that.

Jenine: Ahhhh.

Darla: That's my feeling... in saying that that child is successful, they maybe setting themselves up for (...) having another child like that in their classroom... I know that the [GE] teacher has looped with him, so he will have the same teacher next year and he will still be in the inclusive setting.

Jenine: So at this point, there's not any changes--

Darla: (overlapping) Right. And hopefully as much progress as he made in the first year, in the second year he will make just as much and then he will be considered more "successful" by the general population of the school personnel (laughs). We're rooting for him, because he needs it! (laughs) He's got the torch! (Darla, Interview, Lines 849-859, 885-895, 907-915)



*Question 8: What Are Educators' Perceptions of the Overall Effectiveness of Their Schools' Inclusion Efforts?*

To determine the perceived the efficacy of participating schools' and district's inclusion efforts, it is necessary to consider what "effective inclusion" means for the participating district. Although educator participants were not asked directly to provide such a definition, examination of their beliefs about inclusion, expected and perceived outcomes for individual students, and personal experiences with inclusion can be used to crystallize what "effective inclusion" is for these educator participants. Educators believed that including students with ASD helps to promote the child's development, particularly with regard to communication and social/behavioral functioning. Much of inclusion's impact on a child's development was attributed to the opportunities for students with ASD to observe and interact with typically developing children. Educators indicated that they expect to see included students with ASD demonstrate progress in specific ways. Not only will these students exhibit increased independence and initiation across a variety of skills, but they should make gains in academic functioning, expressive communication, social/school survival skills compared to their own baseline levels of functioning and should become fully integrated members of the classroom/school community. Beyond the potential for growth in the student with ASD, educators felt that inclusion is an effective service delivery model for the entire classroom or pod because it (a) creates an atmosphere where individual differences are accepted and supported, (b) offers additional resources and interventions that can benefit GE students as well as students on IEPs, and (c) encourages differentiated instruction and collaboration among educators.

Educators offered many personal experiences in inclusive education (described in detail under Research Question 4 and 7) and suggested that they frequently observed these outcomes for included students with ASD. When educators shared examples where one or more of these features of effective inclusion were not in place, these experiences were characterized as *non-examples* of inclusion and were used to demonstrate the effects of poorly designed inclusion. Consistent with these beliefs and observations, educators' summative evaluations of inclusion in their building and district can be summarized as being either *positive* (e.g., "inclusion is effective") or *conditionally positive* (e.g., "inclusion is effective *when*" or "inclusion is effective *if*").

### *Positive Evaluations of Inclusion*

The majority of participants gave an overall positive evaluation of inclusion in the district as a whole ( $N=8$ ), but often referenced the degree of their own effort in making that evaluation. Their comments suggested that constant reworking and persistence are defining characteristics of effective inclusion on both an individual and systems level. Participants used phrases such as “making it work,” “trial and error,” or “go back to the drawing board” to convey the ongoing efforts to create effective inclusion. Lauren suggested that her school does “whatever it takes for them to be in inclusion... in most cases, there may be some extreme situations, but... I think most of them can be very successful” (Interview, Lines 214-215).

As the most experienced participant in inclusive education, Beatrice was even more optimistic about the overall efficacy of inclusion:

I've seen it work, so I'm very positive... I would tell them, 'It works!' Or, 'try it, you'll like it!' ... there may be a student or two over the years that you won't have success with. But most of them, you'll see success. I think people are amazed at how little you have to do to make the kids successful, how minor the changes need to be. (Beatrice, Interview, Lines 1072-1076)

From her seasoned perspective, Beatrice stated that the effectiveness of inclusion for any given child may fluctuate in response to changes in life circumstances, new triggers, and overall development. She suggested that responsiveness to student needs is generally an important characteristic of effective inclusion; her own building's overall success in including students with ASD emerged as they gained experience in recognizing and responding to these changes.

We usually find that [success for included students with ASD is] cyclical for whatever reason. And um, the first year's tough (laughs), but it happens again, you know, the kid gets better and they're doing great and then all of the sudden they go through that cycle again, it's like, 'What's going on?' you know, even at home, at school, you don't always know, you have to find that out! ...Then you get it back under control. So usually the main emphasis is to get it under control and then life goes on until your next crisis, and then you get that under control, and you go on. (Beatrice, Interview, Lines 814-818, 820-822)

### *Conditionally Positive Evaluations of Inclusion*

Just under half of all educator participants ( $N=7$ ) provided conditionally positive evaluations of the district's inclusion efforts. Some individuals referenced student characteristics as predictors of successful inclusion and suggested that inclusion *can be* effective for a student with ASD, when the student him/herself is right for inclusion and when the necessary supports for that student are in place.

I think that inclusion is *good*, when it's the right placement for the student and when there's enough support in place to meet the student's needs. Well, I guess we could change "good" to "great" (laughs). You just have to make sure that we're not including a student that's not appropriate for inclusion or based on the parent's desire. We're saying that in order for it to work, this has to be a student that this is right placement for them. And each child is different, and we have to look at their individual needs. (Rhiannon, Interview, Lines 1454-1459)

Notably, this perspective was shared by three self-contained teachers (Rhiannon, Joanne, and Frances). It may be that, because their role in Preschool or Primary self-contained classrooms so heavily emphasizes identifying those students who would most benefit from a full-time placement in a GE classroom, they are particularly attuned to the student-centered factors that contribute to the success or failure of an inclusive placement. Helen shared a unique evaluation of the district's efforts to include students with ASD, indicating although inclusion may not be appropriate for all students, she sees that the district continues to revise, respond, and attempt to provide inclusive education even when it may *not* be the most appropriate option (Interview, Lines 1198-1202).

It should be noted that educator participants' generally positive attitudes, beliefs, and experiences about inclusion as a practice are likely to contribute to their willingness to define it as "successful," much as Darla suggested that educators with negative attitudes observing the same set of students may be less willing to define it as such. Because the district does not have a specific metric against which the "success" or "effectiveness" of inclusion can be assessed, educators' evaluations of inclusion are likely to be subjective and may reflect their own personal philosophies about and individual experiences with inclusion, rather than an objective assessment of inclusion's efficacy against an agreed-upon standard.

### *Recommendations for Improving Inclusion as a District*

While none of the participating educators offered evaluations of the district's inclusion efforts that were completely negative in nature (e.g., "inclusion is not effective"), many participants offered recommendations for improving inclusion at the building or district level. For the most part, these suggestions were not geared toward improving individual student outcomes, but rather reflected a refinement of district policies and practices to ensure parity across the district. First, although participants were consistently in agreement that instructional placement and programming decisions should be made on a "case-by-case basis," several participants also suggested that there should be a consistent way of "doing inclusion" at the school and district levels. Brandy and Darla both suggested that each school varied significantly in their approach to serving students with ASD; for Brandy, this was a source of significant conflict when she moved from School A to School B the year before.

I think that's one thing that [District] County needs overall, what is the straight answer from every single person? Every single person should know the answer and it should be the *same* answer... I felt very inadequate when I went to [School B] and that's one of the reasons I say this, because we thought we were doing everything we were supposed to be doing and I've been doing it for 6, 7 years and it was all the same way. And I go to this new school, and all of a sudden (imitating angry voice), "You're not doing it right! It's supposed to be done this way!" "Well, I've never done it that way, who says that?" And it's like, well, who's right? *WHAT WAY* is it supposed to be done? You know? (Brandy, Focus Group 1, Lines 2579-2581, 2591-2596)

Brandy did elaborate in her individual interview that once a district-wide policy for inclusion was in place, then individual school buildings could "tweak things" to personalize the approach at the local level (Interview, Lines 980-981). Similarly, Tracey described an experience where the district's expectations for inclusion practices and data collection changed abruptly and without communication to staff at the building level.

And then we're in tears because I thought all along I was keeping the best data and they're like, "No, this is gonna get picked apart," then it's like, "Well, why didn't you come in and tell me what to do if you're looking for something specific?" And they're like, "Well, we didn't know what we needed until we talked

to our lawyers!” And it’s just sort-of like, “Well, why didn’t you talk to the lawyers before?” (laughter) (Tracey, Focus Group 1, Lines 2585-2589)

Related to this issue, several educators emphasized a consistent district policy regarding ASD service delivery and inclusion would help to support the “shared responsibility” for educating students with ASD that Lisa and others envisioned across all district schools, rather than just in the schools where there are autism-specific programs. As previously discussed, Darla jokingly wished for “magic checklists” that would provide structure throughout the placement decision-making process. She went on to explain that because there is no such “magic checklist” at a district level requiring that home schools (i.e., non-autism school buildings) take responsibility for serving the needs of high-functioning children with ASD, and because teachers in non-autism buildings lack the awareness of what characteristics predict the success of a child with ASD in the GE setting, non-autism schools frequently refer children with ASD to “autism schools” when they could easily be accommodated in the grade-level classroom of their home building (Interview, Lines 1112-1145). Rhiannon confirmed this observation, stating that in many of these cases, students with ASD from other buildings are ultimately placed in a GE or VE setting that was also available in the child’s home school (Interview, Lines 1218-1225).

To further promote consistency in decision-making, educators suggested that the district needed to take a firmer approach to parent advocacy and “put their foot down” when parents of students with ASD made what the school deemed as unrealistic or inappropriate demands. As previously discussed, educator participants felt that parents have undue influence in the decision-making process. Some participants further elaborated that they felt much of district decision-making in contentious cases was motivated by attempts to avoid a due process lawsuit and its associated negative publicity. The following conversation from Focus Group 1 is particularly illustrative of this sentiment and the participants’ desire to see more occasions where district personnel side with the school team in these difficult cases.

Tracey: You know, there’s people who will say “Enough” after the first try, and there’s people who say “Enough” after the 200<sup>th</sup> try. And if *those* people say, “Enough is enough, this is not right,” then [the district supervisors] need to say, “You’re right, you’ve exhausted every cause and we’re going to take this another step” versus just you know, the kid’s now in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and it’s the same saga.

You know, we come to the Core Team and we're like, "S-a-a-ame deal," and it's sorta like, "It's been like this for 5 years, you know, what are you going to do about it?" So I think in that aspect, that needs to be worked on. But at the same time, I don't know if it's ever gonna go anywhere. I really honestly don't.

Rhiannon: You're so optimistic.

Tracey: Well, because, it boils down to money. And somebody told me that it's \$100,000 to begin to go due process. I don't know if that's right, but that's what I was told. So I would think that—

Julie: (overlapping) It's cheaper to settle out and hire a one-on-one para for 5 years than it is to go to court for 1 year.

Tracey: Exactly.

Jenine: So the fear of the costs associated with going due process—

Tracey: (overlapping) Or the fear of your name in the paper.

Brandy: Umm-hmmm.

Jenine: The negative publicity.

Brandy: Yeah, I think that drives it even more.

Rhiannon: But eventually, though, it's gonna, you're gonna reach a critical level where if you keep giving in, you keep giving in, the cost equation is going to shift. Because you're going to have 50 kids running around with one-on-one aides... (Focus Group 1, Lines 2601-2634).

Caryn and Maggie both discussed how a valued member of School D's Autism Inclusion team (the inclusion resource teacher) quit her position because she felt that she was not supported by district personnel (Caryn, Interview, Lines 380-410; Maggie, Interview, Lines 906-934). Similarly, Tracey suggested that the district is likely to have greater difficulty maintaining personnel in these positions unless they become more willing to support the building team and side against the parents in extreme cases (Focus Group 1, Lines 2600-2601).

*Question 9: What are the Specific Outcomes That Parents Wish to See In Their Children As a Result of Inclusion, and Do Parents Perceive These Outcomes as Being Attained?*

To help guide discussions of desired outcomes for their children with ASD, parent participants were given a list of five major domains of functioning that may be addressed during a child's schooling: (a) academic/vocational skills, (b) communication, (c) behavioral/social-emotional functioning, (d) community integration and normalization,

and (e) recreation/leisure skills. In addressing each of these areas, parents seemed to struggle in describing the progress their children had made, tending to focus primarily on areas that remained weak or where they wished to see their child make even more growth. With prompting and questioning, parents briefly touched on the progress they perceived their children had made as a result of being included. Finally, parents' global assessments of their children's experiences in inclusive education are provided to summarize their overall satisfaction with the support their children received in the GE setting. It should be noted that, among children discussed by parent participants, there was a significant degree of variability in terms of academic, behavioral, and social-emotional functioning (refer to Table 6 for a summary of the children's educational characteristics). As such, parents' desired outcomes were highly specific to their children's individual strengths, weaknesses, and educational needs.

#### *Observations of Growth To-Date*

Parents tended to be somewhat mixed in their perceptions of their children's progress as a result of being included. Additionally, parents tended to speak of progress their children had made in general, rather than specifically as a result of their participation in an inclusive setting. For three children (Mark, Chris, and Abigail), parents also emphasized that their current high level of functioning might also be attributed to their participation in early and intensive intervention (Part C services or private) prior to enrolling in Kindergarten. Furthermore, their comments demonstrated that many parents seek additional therapies outside of school (e.g., Occupational/Speech Therapy, social skills groups, academic tutoring, etc.) and work rigorously with their children at home. As such, these gains may not necessarily be attributed exclusively to the child's participation in general education settings.

*Behavioral/social-emotional functioning.* Parents' comments suggested that they observed their children with ASD making the most significant growth in this domain, particularly with regard to social functioning. They indicated that they saw their children more likely to initiate with same-age peers in social situations and, in some cases, wanting to "fit in" or develop friendships. Rick and Kim, Alex's parents, suggested that although he struggled for several years with significant physical aggression and anger, increased social initiation was one of very few points of progress he had made while included. Alex started his own club ("Club Alex") and invited a group of girls to a "non-birthday party party" after seeing something similar on a favorite TV show. Although

Alex ultimately ignored the peers he invited to the party and played only with his dad, his mother related that afterwards he spoke happily about his newly formed club and often talked about how he'd had "the best time" at that party (Kim, Interview, Lines 2051-2064).

Two parent participants (Beth and Nick/Irene) described being pleasantly described by the increased ability to take others' perspectives (also known as *theory of mind*; Baron-Cohen, 1995), caring, and empathy they had observed in their sons with High-Functioning Autism. In fact, in this regard, Nick and Irene suggested that their son had made such dramatic progress that his classroom teacher stated that she didn't believe he had autism.

Irene: [The teacher] didn't give a lot of examples, she just felt like in her experience with kids who had autism, they didn't have the social skills he did, they didn't want to participate in a group. I mean, Mark shows empathy. A lot of that is learned, but now, he's just starting to do some of that on his own.

Nick: But I think what they don't realize is how much, how much has gone into the making of him so far.

Jenine: Right.

Irene: They're like, "He looks okay."

Jenine: But he's come a long way, like you said.

Irene: Yeah, I mean, completely nonverbal! (Nick & Irene, Interview, Lines 1124-1138)

Conversely, Nick and Irene described how they saw the first time Mark told a lie as a major achievement in his social development, as he had previously been what his parents called "brutally honest" and could not understand why a person might tell a lie (Lines 575-598).

Finally, several parents (Marjorie, Rick/Kim, and Nick/Irene) also suggested that their children with ASD had improved in school survival skills such as following directions (compliance), making transitions, waiting turns, and waiting in line.

*Academic/vocational skills.* Parents' comments about the academic growth of their children with ASD demonstrate the variability of children on the autism spectrum. While most parents were able to point to some areas of growth during their children's time in inclusion, the specific areas of growth varied from child to child. While Alex and Luke's parents indicated they were on grade-level in mathematics, they struggled



significantly in reading and reading comprehension. Conversely, Linda stated that Miguel was a very strong reader who struggled significantly in math. Beth indicated that although she knew her son Trevor was not on-grade level, she believed “there is an awful lot of information in that head of his that he has not told us about” (Line 578-579) and was grateful for the accelerated learning opportunities that the general education setting afforded him.

I think with the academics, if he were in a self-contained classroom, the pace would be not that of the expectations of grade-level. By him being in inclusion, at least he’s exposed to the grade-level expectations. We shoot for them, we find out where he is stressed to the point of learning but not stressed to the point of frustration. So it’s a good indicator of where he is in that. So if he were in a self-contained, he would academically not be as far as he is. (Beth, Interview, Lines 573-577)

By contrast, Mark’s parents (Nick and Irene) believed that his academic skills were solid in all areas. Ryan’s mother spoke little of his academic skills, as he had just completed Kindergarten and she was most interested in his speech development.

Several parents suggested that the greatest academic gains were observed in areas that were already strengths for their children; academic skill areas that were initially weak tended to continue to be areas of difficulty for their children. For example, Kim (Alex’s mother) indicated that Alex was “obsessed with numbers” and, as such, had made good progress in developing awareness of money and other math concepts (Lines 1716-1719). Nevertheless, other parents suggested that their children had in fact shown growth in areas that had previously been challenging for them.

Linda: Sometimes when Miguel was more younger [*sic*], when the teacher read a story, Miguel talk about the other things [*sic*]. Now...

Jenine: Did he not understand it?

Linda: Uh-huh. Now... I don’t know, he has something in his memory, he talk about the other things [*sic*]. But now Miguel is making very good progress.

Jenine: Good!

Linda: Yeah, so in comprehension, and in FCAT, he take a 4, almost 5! [*sic*]  
(Linda, Interview, Lines 522-528)

The parents of two children (Mark and Ryan) indicated that their children had made academic gains, in part, due to their own efforts on their child’s behalf. Shannon

indicated that she worked hard with Ryan on improving his handwriting skills, while Nick and Irene stated that they support Mark's development of functional academic skills by helping him apply academic concepts to real-life situations.

*Communication.* Several parents indicated that their children had made notable communication skills gains as a result of their inclusion in the GE setting. Beth emphasized that being in the GE classroom "forced" Trevor to slow down and use his words rather than scream when frustrated because, unlike in self-contained, screaming is not considered an appropriate or acceptable behavior in that environment (Lines 85-590). Nick and Irene were similarly positive about Mark's growth since his initial evaluation and diagnosis of autism as a toddler; despite previously having a significant delay in receptive communication, they stated that he now "understands everything you say to him" but still needs extra time to process auditory information (Lines 1919-1935). Mark's parents also indicated that learning to state when he *did not* understand was a significant achievement for him, after years of working on saying "I don't know" or to ask to see a picture cue (Lines 1902-1922). Kim, however, indicated that Alex's communication skills were variable; she characterized his receptive understanding as "surface-y" and his expressive skills as dependent on his level of comfort in any given setting (Lines 1731-1733).

*Recreational/leisure skills.* Like educators, parents perceived that recreational growth was an area in which the school had minimal impact for their children with ASD. Beth felt that exposure to specials classes (e.g., art, music, P.E.) had been helpful in expanding Trevor's interests and had helped promote increases in sportsmanship skills (Lines 600-603). Similarly, Nick and Irene described that Mark was becoming increasingly able to tolerate losing in board games, although they did not attribute this skill increase to efforts from the school or the impact of inclusion. Rather, they indicated that their family played games often and had worked hard to help Mark improve in this regard (Lines 1229-1271). Marjorie indicated seeing growth in recreational/leisure skills in her daughter Abby, although she described this growth in terms of initiation and interaction with peers and may have been more indicative of social skills growth. She suggested that her older son Chris, also diagnosed with ASD, had made far less progress in this area and preferred to watch others engage in activities rather than participate in them himself (Lines 896-910).

As described in Research Question 7, educator participants believed that parents could help promote growth of recreational/leisure skills by getting their children with ASD involved in community organizations and activities. Unfortunately, Alex's parents saw that getting him involved in after-school karate had triggered an increase in Alex's aggressive behaviors.

Kim: Well, we tried to do karate, and karate was actually going very well, until the instructor changed and Alex got moved up, he was getting ready to be moved up to orange belt, which was sparring, and Alex already has an issue with hands and feet to self, that's one of his escape, kind-of flight/flight? And I had it already worked out with the other instructor that we would work more on exercises and kind-of staying in yellow belt, I don't know if that got lost along the way, but the sparring, we weren't able to go to that next step. Alex was, he was getting some mixed messages about "You have to defend yourself, you have to hit," and he actually started using some of his karate moves on [behavior specialist at School A].

Jenine: Oh no, oh no.

Kim: So we had to take karate away for a while.

Jenine: That's hard too, because it sounds like a lot of that has to do with his understanding of what is appropriate and what is not.

Kim: Right, right, right, and I had already had it worked out that we would stay at yellow belt and we would actually do one-on-one lessons so he wouldn't know he was missing out on graduating up, and it... was, and maybe it was, "Well, we'll try it, let's just try it," you know? (Kim, Interview, Lines 1795-1813)

*Community integration.* Parent participants described minimal growth in terms of their children's integration into their local community. Linda was the only parent who suggested that school activities had produced any meaningful outcomes in this regard; she felt that Miguel had benefited from the opportunity to take field trips with his peers to various places in the community. In addition, Miguel's class created an arts and crafts store where they made and sold products; Linda felt that his experiences in applying and interviewing for his "job" in this project had been good for him and noted that this was a departure from his previous experiences in the self-contained setting (Lines 658-665). Although Nick and Irene felt that Mark had made good progress in behaving

appropriately in public places, they again emphasized that it had been their own efforts as parents that led to that growth.

Irene: There was a time when Nick and I would be like (sigh), “OK, we know our kids need to go out and eat at places so they learn how to behave, but with Mark, it’s so hard.” If they don’t have what he likes, or if he’s, if he can’t sit still, he’d climb under the table. I mean, when he was a baby, he’d just cry sometimes, and you’d be like “What is it?” You didn’t know, you just... it was too much for us, but we made ourselves do it. We made ourselves take him to the library, he has to learn to be quiet in some places, to sit still in some places, so that, community integration and normalization, we worked a lot on that. And sometimes I think that—

Nick: (overlapping) Because it scares us sometimes that he won’t be able to assimilate. (Nick & Irene, Interview, Lines 2113-2122)

Finally, one parent (Marjorie, Chris and Abigail’s mother) indicated that she had seen Chris make growth in an area unrepresented by the above categories – self-care skills. When asked about the growth she perceived her children had as a result of being included, Marjorie immediately described the impact that peer modeling and influence on Chris’s desire to become independent in his self-care.

Toileting was the big thing... [he] was starting to notice, you know, (imitating Chris) “My friend at school that I sit next to, you know, he doesn’t wear a Pull-Up, he wears underwear and so I want to wear underwear.” “Okay, then you need to go in the toilet.” (imitating Chris) “Okay!” And those kinds of things. But again, that depends on functional level. Um, but for us, that’s been the big one. (Marjorie, Interview, Lines 837-842)

Although most parents were able to point to progress in at least one area of functioning, not all parents agreed that inclusion had been fruitful for their children. In a written response to interview questions, Rick provided a summary of his son Alex’s limited progress across all areas of functioning in his two years at School A; he noted that “the areas he was good in – math, for instance – were not developed, and the areas he’s bad in – reading, for instance – were not really helped at all” (Lines 2151-2152). Rick attributed his son’s poor outcomes to his significant behavioral difficulties (e.g., physical aggression, property destruction) and perceived that the school “really didn’t want him in school, and were merely tolerating him because they couldn’t think of

anything else to do with him” (Lines 2153-2155). Similarly, Martin spoke at length of his goals for his son Luke, but despite repeated prompting, was unable to name any specific areas of growth. His summary of his son’s skills throughout the entire interview was similar to Rick’s and suggested that, after four years in inclusion, Luke demonstrated the strongest skills in the areas for which he demonstrated a natural proclivity (e.g., science, math) but had made minimal gains in his areas of personal weakness (e.g., reading, social skills). Like Alex, Luke also had significant behavioral difficulty throughout the 2005-2006 school year (e.g., yelling, naming calling, biting), as described by not only Luke’s parents but Maggie and Tracey as well.

#### *Desired Areas of Future Growth*

Parents’ comments reflected desired outcomes in areas that were generally consistent with those described by educator participants. As with educators, several parent participants emphasized a desire to see their children develop skills necessary for independent functioning. Some parents voiced aspirations for their children with ASD that were consistent with educators’ desired outcomes of *independence and initiation*, although at a lesser frequency than educator participants did. A comment from Nick (Mark’s father) was particularly representative of this sentiment: “For me, him being successful would be him being able to go about his tasks without being constantly nudged along and being more self-reliant and self-motivated...” (Lines 1550-1552). One participant, however, viewed her son’s need for increased independence from the perspective of her own mortality; Beth sought to ensure that her son Trevor could take care of himself when she no longer could.

And there’s no reason why he cannot be trained for a job, taught to live on his own, I don’t know... That may take until he’s 25. He may not be able to do that when he’s 20. So what? But if he’s able to do that, and balance a checkbook and... He’s going to do it. Because I’m not going to be here forever. (Beth, Interview, Lines 298-201)

*Behavioral/social-emotional functioning.* Each of the parent participants emphasized a strong desire to see their child make progress in behavioral/social-emotional functioning; goals for improved skills in this particular domain far outnumbered those in other domains. Within this domain, the majority of parents’ goals for their children with ASD were social in nature. Parents were significantly concerned with their children’s present and future ability to interact with peers, friends, and adults in age-

appropriate and socially acceptable ways. It is noteworthy that all of the parent participants expressed a desire to see their child's social skills improve, in light of the significant variability in strengths, weaknesses, and support needs among the children these participants discussed. Parents' goals for behavioral/social-emotional improvement focused on appropriate behavior in social situations, conversational skills, developing relationships, and learning to see the world from perspectives other than their own.

Parent participants sometimes discussed their children's problem behavior as it related to interacting with others to highlight areas needing improvement. For example, Linda described how Miguel used "bad manners" with others when he is frustrated or not interested in interacting with them (Lines). For example, on the day of the interview he had thrown a bean bag chair and yelled in a child care setting when he did not get a turn at a computer game (Lines 13-16, 589-631). Similarly, Kim (Alex's mother) and Martin (Luke's father) both described how their sons had responded aggressively to their peers in situations where they felt threatened.

Martin: ...there was a circumstance where he bit a young boy, but it was instinctive, it was innate, it was not deliberate.

Jenine: Do you know what had been going on at the time when that happened?

Martin: Yeah, the (...) it was during recess. There was an issue about a ball. I think the ball rolled over toward Luke and he thought they were rolling it to him, and when they demanded it back, he didn't understand and the bigger boy came and tried to man-handle him and Luke just, without thinking, I mean, I can see him doing this, just reached out and bit him in the chest. Yes, we got called.

(chuckles) (Martin, Interview, Lines 895-904)

Negative situations such as these were used to highlight areas where parents wished to see their children improve. Although Linda did not directly state what she would like to see Miguel to do instead of throwing or yelling, Rick and Kim (Alex's parents) and Martin (Luke's father) both clearly indicated that they wished to see their sons increase their ability to regulate their emotions, express what they are feeling, and ask for help. Because these goals are also strongly tied to communication skills, they are described in greater detail in the next section.

Also related to communication were parents' goals for improved conversation skills in their children with ASD. Both Marjorie (Chris/Abigail's mother) and Nick/Irene

(Mark's parents) indicated that they wished to see their children increase their abilities to initiate conversations with others, take turns and demonstrate reciprocity in conversations, and talk about others' interests. These parents stressed that these skills were definitely teachable in the school setting.

Nick: ...They've had conversation about whatever, a Game Boy game, or whatever, well, the neurotypical kids move on, and Mark has a real hard time moving on. He might come back to that, he might sit there with that kid and continue to talk about that Game Boy game, and he considers that kid a real good friend but it's because it's associated with something he's really into and unfortunately, what I've seen is that the kids can get really tired of him, because it's like, "Oh my God, can't you...? We're onto something else now, please, give me my space now!" Because they like being friends with him, but he just can't move onto some new interest as quickly. And have it be meaningful.

Irene: (overlapping) And that can be taught. You know what, part of social/emotional communication is you tell what you're interested in, then you stop and you ask the question, "What are you into? How did you spend your summer?"

Jenine: Right, just like you said with eye contact, explaining how important that is.

Nick: Because it's really difficult for him to express or show that he's genuinely interested in someone else's... because he just, it's gonna be hard for him! Because he's into... I don't know whether it's a self-centeredness or what, he's into what he's into! (Nick and Irene, Interview, Lines 2432-2449)

Relatedly, several parents indicated that they wanted to see their children with ASD connect to their peers in meaningful ways and develop relationships with others. Beth echoed Nick and Irene when voicing her concern that her son (Trevor) had "no innate interest in what other people are doing" and suggested that to successfully develop relationships, he may have to learn to "force himself to pretend" that he is interested in others. In fact, Beth stressed that this development of this skill would be particularly crucial for Trevor to be able to have a relationship with a significant other in the future (Lines 728-747). Nick (Mark's father) also expressed his concern that Mark may have difficulty developing relationships as an adult, particularly if he finds himself in a job that allows him to work without interacting with others (e.g., computing).

My biggest fear is that he'll be in some room somewhere, computer programming, and never want to go outside... [not] having lunch sitting outside with whoever, because of that tendency, that, that, to, uh, to enclose, to encapsulate, it's just little things to think about (Nick & Irene, Interview, Lines 2243-45, 2249-2250).

In more proximal terms, several parents stressed a desire to see their children develop real friendships with their same-age peers. Both Shannon and Beth perceived that their children were less likely to be invited to the birthday parties of their classmates and suggested that their children were less connected to their peer group than their same-age peers (Shannon, Lines 778-781; Beth, Lines 720-725). Shannon stated that she felt that her son's classroom teacher bore at least some of the responsibility for ensuring that her son was included in these events.

Shannon: I kind-of got upset with his teacher because there were birthday parties that I heard about that Ryan was not invited to, and you have to invite the whole class! And I would say to her, "Well, why wasn't Ryan invited?" (imitating teacher) "Oh, I don't know." And it was, that was one thing that we had in the meeting that I was kind-of upset about, because there's no excuse for that! You know what I mean? It was hurtful.

Jenine: And was that the parents doing that?

Shannon: I'm not really sure. If she has 20 kids in her classroom, if somebody invites a kid to a party, you give 20 invitations. Her excuse was, "I put them in their cubby holes." And I said, "Well, did you notice that you had 19 instead of 20?" I mean, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure that out. And she was like, "I don't know." (Shannon, Interview, Lines 633-644)

To help their children better connect with others, three parents (Marjorie, Nick/Irene, and Martin) indicated that they wished to see their children improve in their ability to take the perspective of others, a skill known in the autism literature as *theory of mind* (ToM, Baron-Cohen, 1995). Nick and Irene described wanting Mark to learn how to understand the intentions of others, particularly when they do things he does not like (e.g., "This person said they would do this and did not, maybe because..."; Lines 2462-2471). Irene stressed that she did not feel confident in her own ability to teach Mark this important skill. As both a parent and educator knowledgeable in interventions for children with ASD, Marjorie also suggested that ToM is extremely important but may be



particularly challenging for educators to tackle. She stated that, to help a student with ASD understand how another person might be thinking and feeling and to make those feelings relevant and important to the child, “it requires really knowing the child and what the child likes and dislikes and how to compare it and what’s gonna provide a meaningful example” (Marjorie, Lines 956-957). Finally, Martin spoke of his extreme frustration with Luke’s lack of empathy and “capacity to see past his own nose and concern himself with the welfare of others” (Lines 716-717), particularly in light of his own role as a pastoral counselor and active member of church ministry for the majority of his adult life. Martin emphasized that his desire to see Luke progress in this area had strongly influenced his decision to keep him in his current school setting, despite his many misgivings about the school’s approach to Luke’s difficulties.

What concerns me more than anything is it’s not something you can teach in a structured environment, but it’s rather something that you learn in a social setting. And, you know, I think after that infamous IEP [meeting] that I referred to numerous, numerous times today, you know, my knee-jerk reaction was to take him out of school and home-school him. But that lasted about 2 seconds when I considered the social implications. You know, think of how much you learned in grade school before you learned that you were learning it. About how you interact with your peers... To take him out of school would be to take that off the table. And it would be very selfish and thoughtless on the part of his parents. (Martin, Interview, Lines 719-730)

*Communication.* Communication emerged as the second-most discussed domain in which parents wished to see improvement. As with educators, parents tended to emphasize a desire to see growth in expressive communication skills, as opposed to receptive skills. Expressive communication in academic situations were only discussed by Nick and Irene, who emphasized that the ability to indicate his understanding was a primary goal for Mark in his earliest years of education (Lines 1897-1901). Rather, parents’ communication goals tended to correlate with their concerns about social/emotional development. In addition to improvements in conversational skills discussed above, several parents indicated that learning to verbally express emotions and feelings of frustration were of the utmost importance for their children. Kim (Alex’s mother) and Martin (Luke’s father) both suggested that their son’s physically aggressive

behaviors would decrease if they had the ability to verbalize their feelings or to ask for help when in crisis.

Kim: Gosh, I would really like to see him, to be trustful enough and to have the cognizance to say, you know, "I'm having a tough time, can you just back off?" before something turns into a meltdown situation.

Jenine: So asking for help or letting somebody know...

Kim: (Overlapping) "I can't do this right this second, can we just get back to it a little later," or... trying to figure out a way to... um, not get into a crisis situation, I think that might be the way to term it.

Jenine: Would you say that's your primary goal for him?

Kim: I think that's a very big one, that's a very big one, because him looking very dysregulated and uncomfortable and just progressively going and going and going, yeah. It makes him vulnerable and it makes other people vulnerable, too. (Kim, Interview, Lines 1904-1918)

Additional areas of communication seen as needing improvement included pragmatic aspects of language (e.g., tone/volume of voice, eye contact, personal space, gestures) and speech articulation; these concerns were identified by Marjorie and Shannon, respectively.

*Recreational/leisure skills.* Several parents shared recreational/leisure skills goals for their children with ASD, although these parents were mixed in their beliefs about who bears primary responsibility for promoting growth in this area. For example, Nick and Irene indicated that they want to see Mark become involved in a club or other type of group activity (e.g., soccer, chess club, Boy Scouts, etc.) and felt that school could help facilitate that goal. They saw classroom activities focusing on teamwork and cooperation as valuable ways to help Mark begin to value this type of interaction (Lines 2292-2243). Kim also felt it would be appropriate for Alex's school to provide ways for him to gain recreational/leisure skills, particularly in ways that are mindful of his own difficulties with competitive activities and physical aggression (Lines 1852-1858). By contrast, Martin felt that it was primarily his own responsibility as a parent to further Luke's recreational/leisure development, although he also recognized additional ways in which school-based recreational activities could be very beneficial his son.

Jenine: Now, you had mentioned also... some of the things that have been helpful to you were your interest and ability in sports and things like that. Is that

a goal that you see for Luke, relative to school, to gain some of those things? Do you look to school to provide those kinds of skills?

Martin: Yeah, but more as a, as a supplement, as opposed to the main diet. In my estimation, and I am just thinking out loud Jenine, in my estimation that the primary input should come from his dad, or his siblings, were there siblings.

Jenine: So you see that as more of a parental role to provide that?

Martin: Yeah, anything in addition to what is provided in the family of origin and the... how should I say, the social arena that the child functions in, apart from school... anything additional to that is pudding, is icing on the cake, so to speak.

Jenine: Okay.

Martin: We're not looking to, uh, recess at school to teach him to play ball. We're not looking for recess at school to teach him anything other than how to get along well with others while you're playing ball. Do you see the distinction?

Jenine: Absolutely. So you see those recreational activities more as social opportunities than as learning the rules of the sport and things like that?

Martin: Bingo. Exactly. (Martin, Interview, Lines 953-977)

*Academic/vocational skills.* Compared to behavioral and communicative functioning, parents mentioned considerably fewer academic goals for their children with ASD and tended to emphasize those areas in which their children were most significantly below the level of the same-age peers. For example, Linda stressed that although Miguel was an accelerated reader, she felt that it was extremely important for him to improve his weak math skills. Rather than discussing what she wished to see the school doing in this regard, Linda described her own efforts to help her son progress in this area, including buying "rap music" that would help him memorize his multiplication facts and sending him to Sylvan Learning Center for three consecutive years (Lines 474-495). Beth saw improvements in reading comprehension as essential for Trevor and suggested that this area served as a foundation for learning in all other areas; she similarly indicated that she had paid out of pocket for summer school to help reinforce his learning in this area (Lines 337-346, 718-720). Comments from two parents (Beth and Martin) illustrated the considerable variability that may exist in parents' academic expectations for their children with ASD. Beth was emphatic that she wanted Trevor to continue pursuing a regular diploma (general education academic standards) "until *everything* screams at me otherwise." With accommodations, modifications, and extra

time, she felt there was no reason he could not learn those same skills as his same-age peers (Line 295-298). Martin, however, had a very different perspective.

Martin: the least of my worries, Miss Jenine, are academic and vocational skills.

That will take care of itself. (long pause) I mean, privately, I wouldn't share this in an open forum, but my goal for him in school is not to learn subtraction and multiplication tables, my goal for him in school is to learn to function amongst his peers in a way that's healthy. Do you understand?

Jenine: Do you mean to prepare him for the world and living in it?

Martin: Exactly. If I am... in the least bit accurate of my assessment of him being like me, he'll learn what he needs to learn. He'll come to it, but you know... how to navigate polite society is the, uh, huge, huge variable in the equation. (Martin, Interview, Lines 941-951)

Similarly, Carol (Luke's mother) indicated that she did not see the point of his participation in the FCAT or in retaining him for performing poorly, particularly in light of the fact that he was "taught on his developmental level... I just don't get it. To me, it is pointless" (Carol, Written Input, Lines 1224-1225).

*Community Integration.* Parents provided few comments that were consistent with the community integration domain. Although educators had discussed integration as potentially applying to both the neighborhood-community and the school-community, parents tended to respond to this question exclusively in reference to the neighborhood-community. Of all the parent participants, Martin was the only to discuss this issue at greatest length. He stated that he presently viewed Luke's integration into the neighborhood and family as an extension of his issues in behavior/social-emotional functioning and communication; to the extent that Luke continues to struggle in these areas, he will continue to have difficulty fitting into a variety of situations. Martin also described his own conflicting feelings about being potentially embarrassed by Luke's inappropriate behaviors in public.

I have reservations about taking Luke to (...) certain things, certain functions, certain events because I know that he is not going to fit in. And, you know, we could debate the matter concerning why I'm (...) you know, I could say I'm reluctant, but I think the more accurate term is fear. I'm afraid, primarily I'm afraid, you know, my kid's gonna make me look bad. And again, I'm not proud of that, I'm just... I'm just always concerned about how he's going to be perceived,

at what part in the movie is he going to show his butt, um, when is he going to do something so grossly inappropriate that the cat's going to be out of the bag and everyone's going to know that he's crazier than a bedbug? Um (...) (long pause) Yeah, I have reservations about those things, but those are my issues, not Luke's. I'm not proud of that. (Martin, Interview, Lines 1013-1017, 1042-1046)

Marjorie briefly stated that community integration was a goal for both Chris and Abigail, but she was pessimistic about her children's prospects in this area because of people's limited understandings of and expectations for children with ASD. "You have to fundamentally *get* that you can't put individuals in boxes. That, um, all children with autism don't grow up to want to wash windows. Um, that you have to look at what is the child good at, what do they like to do?" (Marjorie, Interview, Lines 911-913)

#### *Parents' Global Assessments of Inclusion*

In addition to specific observations of their children's progress in inclusion, parents were also asked to summarize their "overall feelings about the success, or lack thereof, for [their child's] education as it currently stands" at the end of their individual interview. In some cases, parents quantified their satisfaction in terms of a percentage (e.g., "50% satisfied"); in most cases, parents' satisfaction was summarized on the basis of their comments both throughout the interview and in response to this specific question. Table 9 provides an overview of each parent/parent-set's satisfaction with their child's inclusive education, as well as quotes that represent their assessment of inclusion for their son or daughter. Overall, parents' global assessments of their children's success in inclusion tended to be mostly positive; only one parent-set (Kim and Rick) were completely negative in their assessment of inclusion for their son, Alex. Notably, Martin's comments suggested that, despite having had numerous conflicts with Luke's GE teacher and the building administrator, he was generally satisfied with inclusion for his son and chose not to focus exclusively on the negative aspects.

Throughout their interviews, parents also shared their own beliefs about what "successful inclusion" should look like and offered recommendations for maximizing the educational experiences of included students with ASD. Parents tended to heavily emphasize what they wished to see *others* (e.g., teachers, peers, and the school as a whole) doing to support their children with ASD; secondarily, parents described what they what they wished to see *their children* doing in the GE setting. This positive vision of inclusion from parents' perspective is summarized in Table 10.

Table 9

*Parents' overall satisfaction with their children's experience in inclusion*

Parent(s) (Child/ren)	Satisfaction with Inclusion	Representative Quotes	
Beth (Trevor)	"75-80%" satisfied	<p>"I think it's been very successful, I really do, and that's why I keep pushing for it... I would devastated, I would be sitting here devastated right now if there was not the option of inclusion for him." (Lines 981, 992-993)</p> <p>75-80% satisfied with school's approach to reading, which is Trevor's weakness. Less satisfied with school's approach to social/behavioral supports; would like to see more intensive interventions.</p>	
271	Kim & Rick (Alex)	Very dissatisfied	<p>"I felt like, um, they wanted me to be just fine with whatever they did to Alex and I've come to the point where I'm not, I'm just not anymore... I felt that the IEP was very ineffective." (Kim, Lines 1093-1094, 1102)</p> <p>"We've come out of school with nothing to show for it at all, other than a lot of stress and strain and a kind of Pavlovian aversion to school in general by our son. It was pretty much a complete failure." (Rick, Lines 2259-2261)</p>
	Linda (Miguel)	Very satisfied	<p>"In school this year, Miguel was very good, a very good year because he was in [School B], it's a good school. I like it so much. They really helped Miguel." (Lines 13-16)</p> <p>"[Miguel] say... he like it so much, the classroom, the teacher is great and nice, he loved the school." (Line 367)</p>

Continued on next page

Table 9 (Continued)

*Parents' overall satisfaction with their children's experience in inclusion*

Parent(s)	Satisfaction with Inclusion	Representative Quotes
Shannon (Ryan)	Mostly satisfied	<p>"I think that [inclusion has] been a positive thing for him. I think just being part of a larger classroom with a routine and a schedule and things like that has been really positive for him." (Lines 755-756)</p> <p>"Inclusion right now is more a name than it is anything else, and I'd like to see that changed. I know it's a new school, but now that they have a year under their belt and they kind-of see what they need to strengthen, I hope that they follow through with it." (Lines 848-851)</p>
Marjorie (Chris & Abigail)	"50%" satisfied	<p>"[I'm] not very [satisfied]. And I hesitate to say that because I know they've really tried... we still are considering taking him out, but we're not sure." (Lines 978, 1039)</p>
Martin & Carol (Luke)	Mostly satisfied	<p>"My instinctive response ...is that he's right where he's supposed to be. Um, and he's had (...) you know, the right people intersect with him in his life at the right times. You know, some I've appreciated more than others, but I can't cherry-pick." (Martin, Lines 1076-1078).</p>
Nick & Irene (Mark)	Satisfied	<p>"I just feel that he's successful because he's able to participate and to be enriched by that experience. So it's not so much what they are giving him, but what he's contributing to that group." (Irene, Line 1554-1556).</p>

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Table 10

*Characteristics of “successful inclusion” for students with ASD: Parents’ perspective*

<b>What <u>Teachers/Peers/the School</u> Would Be Doing</b>	<b>What <u>My Child</u> Would Be Doing</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Collaborating with parents: viewing parents as mutual problem-solvers, accepting parents’ input</li> <li>▪ Understanding and accepting children with ASD (general)</li> <li>▪ Understanding principles of behavior management and the specific problem behaviors of children with ASD (general)               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Utilizing positive behavior supports, rather than being punitive</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Offering a <u>school-based</u> ESE advocate</li> <li>▪ Understanding <u>my</u> child with ASD and his/her individual needs</li> <li>▪ Offering high-intensity supports for students with ASD (e.g., related services such as OT, Speech) and interventions or curricula (e.g., video-modeling, social skills, etc.)</li> <li>▪ Using peer buddies to support my child with ASD</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Fitting in with peers, finding a comfortable peer group</li> <li>▪ Participating in grade-level instruction</li> <li>▪ <u>Learning</u> in GE because behaviors, sensory issues, etc. have been managed</li> <li>▪ Feeling like teachers believe in him/her</li> <li>▪ Spending majority of time in GE</li> </ul>

*Super-Themes across Parents and Educators*

Parent and educator participants both shared many examples of children’s experiences in inclusive education, articulated their beliefs about how and why inclusion should be implemented, and described their desired and perceived outcomes for children with ASD as a result of their inclusion. Although only one of the nine research questions was devoted to addressing the opinions and observations of parents, their stories and comments throughout their interviews suggested that they shared opinions similar to educators in many regards. These areas of overlap were considered “super-themes” because they indicated areas of consensus between two very different participant groups. Because comparing educator and parent perspectives on these



issues is beyond the scope of this study, “super-themes” are briefly outlined below as a means of introducing potential avenues for future research exploration (discussed in greater detail Chapter 5).

#### *Inclusion Benefits Students with ASD and Their GE Peers*

GE placements were highly valued by both educator and parent participants, and often for very similar reasons. Parent participants also conveyed the notion that inclusion promotes skill development in ways that self-contained settings do not. Beth suggested that, in the GE setting, Trevor was “forced” to participate or communicate in new ways he would not if he had not been included. Several parents (particularly Nick and Irene) also recognized that inclusion is beneficial for GE students as well as students with ASD; they spoke on several occasions about wanting Mark not only benefit from his GE peers, but also to be able to “give back” and “enrich” his classroom environment in turn.

#### *Decisions/Supports Should Be Made on a “Case-By-Case” or Individual Basis*

As discussed throughout this chapter, educators were clear that inclusion was an enterprise best defined, decided, and implemented on a “case-by-case” basis. In part, this belief was rooted in the recognition that children with ASD demonstrate a variety of needs and characteristics; to make generalizations or assumptions about their supports would be to miss the individual differences that lead to unique educational programs for each child. As parents could typically only speak about inclusion from the perspective of their own child or children, their version of “case-by-case basis” decision-making was not discussed from a school perspective. Instead, parents emphasized that they wanted educators to recognize and understand their children with ASD as individuals and wanted their instructional programs to accurately reflect their own unique profile of strengths and weaknesses. Part of parents’ description of “successful inclusion” included the mandate: Understand my child and how he/she perceives things.

#### *“Papers” Do Not Communicate the Whole Child*

In discussing decision-making strategies that can lead a child to be placed in a GE setting, educators lamented the difficulty they faced when having to “place a child from paper” (i.e., recommend an educational placement based only on the child’s IEP and without knowing them personally). While school reflected the challenge of “placing from paper” at the system level (e.g., the need for flexibility in placement procedures, use of TPs, other procedural structures) and the child level, parents reiterated the latter

view. Specifically they emphasized that “papers do not communicate the whole child.” Further, they perceived that overly detailed records and assessments may be overwhelming to teachers just getting to know their children for the first time and they suggested that teachers would do well to just get to know the child as a person.

#### *Limited Knowledge/Experiences in Inclusion and ASD Are Barriers for Many Teachers*

Educator participants suggested that a major source of resistance to including students with ASD lies in teachers' limited expectations/knowledge of and experiences with both inclusion in general and ASD in particular. Furthermore, educators suggested that a teacher's expectation, knowledge, and experiences can significantly impact how they go about implementing it and may cause them to take a “status quo” approach. Despite the many professional development activities discussed under Research Question 6, both parents and educators perceived that many educators still lack essential understanding and skills necessary to adequately support students with ASD. Parents were most critical of educators in the area of behavior supports. Kim spoke about this at length, due to her own experiences in becoming certified as a Board Certified Applied Behavior Analyst and coming to find that she was more knowledgeable about behavior management than her son's teachers and support staff. All but one parent (Beth) expressed their frustration with educators' limited knowledge about ASD as a disorder and how to accommodate the communication, sensory issues, and other related autism-specific difficulties that can impact a child's behavior. Parents often spoke of “lack of training” or, when training was available through the district or other resources (e.g, CARD), suggested that educators were resistant to attaining additional training in autism-related supports.

#### *Conflict is Common*

Somewhat contradictorily, parent and educator participants were in agreement that they frequently disagree about various aspects of inclusion for children with ASD. In general, both parents and educators described a high number of situations involving conflict, although these conflicts did not exclusively pit parents and educators against each other. For example, educators indicated they also found themselves at odds with fellow teachers, administrators, and district supervisors, while parents described conflicts within their own families and with their places of work. For the most part, however, educators and parents described conflict situations in which they each saw situations very differently or found they had different beliefs, priorities, or goals for inclusion. Five

of the seven parent participants alluded to the need to “advocate” or even “fight” for their child’s inclusion, suggesting that they perceived that continued assertiveness was essential in maintaining their child’s current placement.

Interestingly, both parents and educators perceived that the other side did not value or respect their input when making programming decisions for children with ASD. Educators indicated that when parents disagreed with building personnel, they took their case to district-level personnel. In subsequent situations, educators perceived that these parents tended to go straight to district personnel in future conflicts, rather than first consult with the school team. Parents also provided examples of situations in which they had taken their concerns to district personnel, although they emphasized that they did so in situations where they thought that their input had not been recognized or valued by the school-level team. Despite these frequent conflicts, parents also spoke of the need to maintain viable working relationships with all members of the IEP team for the good of the child. At least half of parent participants described parent-educator conflict situations in which they chose to “let it go,” because they perceived that their continued advocacy on that particular issue would likely do more harm than good.

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION

The implications of the data, relative to the research questions of the study are discussed in this chapter. First, the participating district's overall disposition toward inclusion for students with ASD is summarized by outlining both the "meaning of inclusion" for students with ASD in the participating district (i.e., beliefs about what inclusion is and why it is important) and the "means of inclusion" (i.e., strategies for achieving inclusion as it is defined). Educators' considerations in making instructional placement decisions, relative to their definitions of inclusion, previous lived experiences, and procedural norms in the overall district, are discussed. The value of knowledge and positive experience with either inclusive service delivery or students with ASD also is explored as it pertains to the development of attitudes regarding inclusion for students with ASD. Next, using the attitude systems model described by Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) in Chapter 2, conceptual models are used to describe the development of (a) "pro-inclusion" attitudes held by educator participants in this study, and (b) "status quo" attitudes of educators who may be resistant to the idea of inclusion. The implications of educators' thoughts about, emotional responses to, and past experiences with parents of students with ASD are also discussed as they relate to parent participants' own beliefs and goals for inclusion and the climate for home-school partnerships in the participating district. After considering the limitations of the current research, this chapter ends with recommendations for practice and future research.

#### The Meaning of Inclusion: Definitions, Beliefs, and Experiences

As Fuchs and Fuchs noted in 1994, "inclusion means different things to people who wish different things from it. For the group that wants the least...maintain the status quo. To those who want more, it means...a fundamental reorganization of the teaching and learning process" (p. 299). As such, the way educators define "inclusion" from an educational perspective and interpret the LRE mandate from a legal perspective will significantly impact the way they approach its implementation. Consistent with the wording of the LRE mandate in various reauthorizations of IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004),

educators suggested that their basic definition of inclusion was “to take the kids with special needs and include them in with the Basic Ed kids for as much of the time as you possibly can” (Melody, Interview Lines 247-248). Educators were in agreement that students with ASD should have as much opportunity to interact with GE peers and participate in “typical” educational environments as their individual support needs would allow. Beyond that overarching definition, however, educator participants described inclusion as a highly individualized endeavor that is designed and implemented on a “case-by-case basis;” as such, a universal definition of the supports, activities, personnel, and other characteristics of inclusion could not accurately capture its many possibilities.

A major goal of this study was to examine how educators’ understandings and practical applications of inclusion compared to the conceptualizations of “full inclusion,” “reintegration/transenvironmental programming,” and “mainstreaming.” Examination of participants’ use of specific terminology found in the special education literature is one useful way to understand how they make meaning of the LRE mandate and translate it into practice. Throughout focus groups and individual interviews, educator participants strongly favored use of the term “inclusion” (rather than “mainstreaming”) to describe their efforts to educate students with ASD alongside their typically developing peers. The word “inclusion” was most often invoked to describe a configuration where a student with ASD was placed in a GE classroom on a full-time basis with special education and related services provided as necessary. However, some participants also used the word “inclusion” to describe the practice of allowing student with ASD in a self-contained classroom to participate in GE classrooms on a part-time, as-needed basis. For example, Darla used the phrase “inclusion time” to describe this configuration. Similarly, when participants did employ the word “mainstreaming,” they did so in one of three significantly different ways, suggesting a considerable degree of confusion regarding these practices. Some participants used the term “mainstreaming” as a synonym for “inclusion” and did not see any difference in the implementation of either practice. Those participants who did distinguish between these two terms and practices did so in two opposing ways. Several participants described the practice of “mainstreaming” as allowing students with ASD to participate in the GE classroom on a part-time basis in order to access opportunities not available in a self-contained setting (much like what Darla termed “inclusion time”). These “mainstreamed” students maintain their overall SE

status and are not perceived as full members of the GE setting, while “included” students are considered to be full-time participants and members of their GE classroom. By contrast, another group of participants saw “mainstreaming” from a readiness perspective described by Taylor (1988). Students who were “mainstreamed” were those who had demonstrated a readiness to function independently in typical classroom settings with very little instructional, behavioral, or personnel support, while “included” students were those who were in the GE setting with whatever supports necessary to maximize their learning in that environment.

Despite the confusion in terminology, participants shared a common vision for what inclusion should generally look like for students with ASD with respect to the both child’s membership and the degree of support they receive in the GE classroom. A major goal for many educators was to see the included child with ASD treated by their GE peers as “just another kid in the class.” This goal was particularly apparent when examining patterns of educator experiences in inclusion; among the most powerful for educators were those where they observed GE peers change their disposition toward their classmate with ASD from disinterest to curiosity or from avoidance to encouragement. Educators suggested that when students with ASD are officially “placed” in GE classrooms and participate there on a full-time basis, they are more likely to be seen as members of that classroom environment. When they come from a self-contained classroom and join in for only selected activities, they may be seen more as a visitor or guest.

Although some educator (and parent) participants conceptualized the practice of “mainstreaming” as integrating students with ASD into the GE setting with minimal supports when they had demonstrated readiness for individual participation (consistent with Taylor, 1988), this configuration was not observed in participants’ descriptions of their schools’ service delivery model. Rather, their comments and examples suggested their conceptualization of inclusion/mainstreaming included providing necessary supports for students with ASD in the GE setting whenever possible, as well as making modifications to the environment to accommodate the sensory or behavioral needs of students with ASD. The district’s development of Autism Inclusion Pods with GE and SE instructors available in a multi-age group of classrooms suggests that the district is committed to making specialized instruction and related services portable and available in the GE setting to the greatest extent possible. Furthermore, educator participants

recognized that instructional and behavioral supports for students with ASD were best implemented class-wide; they suggested that class-wide supports could benefit GE students with learning/behavior support needs and facilitate the integration of the student with ASD because their supports became a natural part of the overall classroom environment.

Because participants tended to emphasize the term “inclusion,” demonstrated concern about the degree of integration and membership experienced by students with ASD in GE classrooms, and emphasized bringing supports for students with GE into the SE setting, it may be tempting to conclude that their service delivery model best aligns with that of the “full inclusion” movement articulated by Lipsky and Gartner (1997). However, closer inspection of participants’ definitions and descriptions of inclusion as a “case-by-case” enterprise suggests that the district does not subscribe to this philosophy. The “full inclusion” movement suggests that *all* students with disabilities should be placed the GE setting with supports as needed, which is in direct contrast with the views of educators in the participating district. While only a handful of educator participants directly stated a belief that participation in the GE classroom may not be the best choice for every student with ASD, *all* participants were able to identify common characteristics of “ideal inclusion candidates” and describe circumstances they saw as inclusion “deal-breakers” (i.e., situations in which they believed that inclusion should be discontinued or significantly modified). By articulating specific characteristics they associated with an increased likelihood for successful GE participation (e.g., limited behavioral support needs, academic skills near grade-level, and some form of communication), educators suggested that students who lack these assets may not be best suited for placement in a GE classroom. Furthermore, although educators endorsed a variety of classroom-based interventions, differentiated instruction, and environmental modification for included students with ASD, they consistently indicated that the long-term presence of a one-on-one Instructional Assistant was not an appropriate form of educational support because it would interfere with the child’s integration and peer interaction in the GE setting. These views are highly consistent with those of Crockett and Kauffman (1999), who suggested that for students with intensive support needs, the GE classroom may actually be a *more* restrictive environment because it limits their ability to access needed supports or services or restricts their ability to participate in the environment to the fullest extent possible.

### *The District's Operational Definition of the LRE Mandate*

In summary, the participating district's operational definition of the LRE mandate does not fit cleanly with any one specific approach defined in the educational literature. Rather, educators shy away from a one-size-fits-all approach to inclusive education, in favor of a flexibly-defined model that encompasses the following critical tenets:

1. Students with ASD should participate with their GE peers or in GE settings as much as appropriate, based on their individual support needs.
2. Students with ASD may be placed in the GE classroom on a full-time basis *if* they demonstrate readiness to function semi-independently in that environment with the portable supports available there (Inclusion Resource, related services, consultation from behavior specialists, school psychologists, differentiated instruction, visual supports). A full-time placement offers the best opportunity for the student to become fully integrated into the GE classroom community, but is not the right choice for all students.
3. If full-time GE placement is not an appropriate choice because of more intensive support needs, alternatives should be available to ensure that students with ASD can participate with their GE peers or GE environments in some fashion (e.g., part-time placements in GE, reverse inclusion, peer buddy/extracurricular programs). In these cases, the student with ASD may not be fully integrated into the GE environment but can still derive some of the developmental and social benefits of GE participation.
4. All students must be safe and making progress in their curriculum. If these conditions are not met for either the student with ASD or the GE peers (i.e., a "deal-breaker" condition exists), then a student's inclusion may need to be discontinued or significantly modified.

Due to the district's flexible definition of the LRE mandate and extensive use of the continuum of service options, it is understandable that they demonstrate some confusion regarding relevant terminology. Inclusion in the participating district may look like "full inclusion," "reintegration/transenvironmental programming," or "mainstreaming," depending on the child in question and the individualized program they receive. For the sake of clarity, the term "inclusive education" will be used broadly throughout the rest of this chapter to refer to the district's overall approach to fulfilling the LRE mandate.



“Inclusion” will be used to refer to the placement of a student with ASD in GE on a full-time basis (described as #2 in above list), while “mainstreaming” or “reverse inclusion” will be used to describe the alternative approaches to GE participation described in #3 (described as #3 in above list).

#### *Beliefs that Support Inclusion*

Educators’ definitions of what inclusive education is and should be in the participating district are strongly associated with their beliefs about why it is a valuable practice. Participants shared decidedly positive ideas about the value of inclusion for both students with ASD and their GE peers. Educators unequivocally agreed that inclusive education was necessary and beneficial for students with ASD who, due to the nature of their disorder, are especially likely to need and benefit from access to typically developing peers who model age-appropriate language, social skills, and behavior. Several participants suggested that GE participation can “force” children with ASD to develop new skills because of (a) the high expectations placed upon them by both peers and adults, (b) clear expectations about appropriate/inappropriate behavior in the GE classroom (e.g., “we don’t do that here”) and (c) the availability of positive peer models.

In addition to the perceived benefits inclusive education offered students with ASD, educators believed strongly that inclusion could be beneficial for GE students by (a) infusing additional curricular, environmental, or behavioral supports into the classroom that could provide support for struggling GE students; and (b) helping them learn to understand and support their peers with learning and/or behavioral differences. In fact, several educators (e.g., Maggie, Beatrice) suggested that inclusive models of service delivery had had an impact on the social and professional climate of the entire school building by creating students and staff who were comfortable with seeing individuals with autism and other disabilities and recognizing them as an important part of the school community. Most educators acknowledged that mere exposure to students with disabilities was not sufficient to promote acceptance; additional training and guided support for interaction were also necessary to ensure that GE students and their peers with ASD developed meaningful relationships.

#### *The Role of Experiences and Emotional Reactions*

The comments of educator participants suggested that they held a common understanding of inclusion as a practice (particularly as it had evolved in their own district), as well as beliefs about the potentially positive impact that inclusive education

could afford both GE and SE students alike. To develop an understanding of educators' attitudes toward inclusive education, examination of their background knowledge and beliefs about inclusion and students with ASD is a necessary first step but is insufficient to comprehensively define their overall disposition toward the practice. There is general agreement that three interrelated concepts work simultaneously to form what we have come to regard as an "attitude": (a) the cognitive aspect, concerning the beliefs or thoughts one may have about the issue/object; (b) the affective aspect, concerning the emotional response or feelings one may have regarding the issue/object; and (c) the behavioral aspect, concerning an individual's previous actions or experiences with regard to the issue/object (Katz & Stotland, 1959; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). As such, it is imperative to consider the experiential and emotional histories of educators with regard to inclusive education to fully capture their attitude toward this model of service delivery. Furthermore, in keeping with the phenomenological aims of this study, educators' experiences in working with students with ASD and in providing individualized supports in the GE setting served as an important window into the daily realities of inclusive education in the participating district. Morse and Richards (2003) affirm that human experience is a meaningful and relevant object of study because people are always engaged in the act of consciousness and making meaning.

In general, educators shared a wealth of experiences that could be characterized as both positive and negative in nature. Notably, educators often supported their generalized definitions and beliefs about inclusive education by citing relevant personal experiences as evidence for those beliefs. For example, when Frances stated that she did not equate the assistance of a full-time adult aide in GE as a "normal education," she supported this belief with an example of a student with a hearing impairment who she thought was never fully integrated into the classroom setting because she only communicated with her personal assistant (Frances, Interview, Lines 296-323). The frequency with which educators offered personal experiences suggests that they serve as an essential point of reference as they make meaning of the practice.

By coding personal experiences in inclusion with respect to their emotional/situational valence (positive or negative) and then by their general subject (e.g., breakthrough with student, positive collaboration with parent, etc.), experiential examples also provided insight into the sources of the emotional reactions that educators conveyed. For example, experiences characterized as "positive" were

overwhelmingly associated with students. Every educator participant had an example of a student's response to inclusion that helped validate their belief in it or helped clarify what "successful inclusion" looked like. Educators further described positive situations in which they (a) recognized that inclusion had exceeded their own expectations for the child in particular or inclusion in general, (b) experienced "A-ha" moments of breakthrough with a student or insight about the practice, and (c) observed GE students change their behavior toward their peers with ASD toward increased acceptance and support. Additionally, educators spoke positively about the opportunity to work collaboratively with their fellow educators. Although educator participants did not spontaneously reveal many emotional reactions to their experiences (either positive or negative), additional questioning and querying suggested that they felt that these experiences were ranged from "entertaining" to "powerful." Other comments suggesting the presence of positive emotional reactions included: "WOW, this is why I come to work," "My first year, I loved it... I wouldn't want to do anything else," "You get addicted to it!" and "He fell in love with the autistic population." Taken together, experiential and emotional data suggest that educators can find many reasons in their personal histories to value inclusive education and believe in its efficacy.

Similarly, examination of the experiences described in negative terms or in association with negative emotional reactions indicates the extent to which they are dissatisfied with inclusive education. Although negative emotional reactions and experiences outweighed positive ones in overall quantity, their responses did not suggest that they felt negatively about inclusive education as a whole. Rather, they conveyed the impression that inclusive education is an endeavor fraught with uncertainty, struggle, and conflict. As such, common emotional responses included feelings of fear/worry, frustration, guilt, obligation, and even anger. Educators often described experiencing feelings such as anxiety or worry that they would not be up to the task of inclusion, or disappointment, sadness, and even guilt in association with specific situations where student outcomes were poor. Again, analysis of experiential examples by emotional/situational valence and subject matter helped pinpoint the specific aspects of inclusion that they found uncomfortable or unacceptable. The vast majority of negative experiences centered on disagreements or conflicts with fellow educators about the best educational placement or instructional program for a student with ASD. As with educators' pro-inclusion beliefs (e.g., inclusion forces development,

GE peers become sensitive and supportive), participants also cited their more negative experiences to help support their more negative beliefs about inclusion, including the sources of resistance to inclusion observed in their colleagues (e.g., teachers have limited knowledge of autism, educators strive to maintain status quo in their classrooms). Interestingly, the experiences of educator participants were illustrative in two important ways. Educators' own experiences in inclusive education shed light on their own attitudes toward inclusion for students with ASD and were strongly linked to their desired outcomes and behavioral intentions. In addition, educators' descriptions about conflict with fellow teachers were also useful in developing an alternative attitude system model that examines the development and perpetuation of resistant attitudes toward inclusion. This alternative attitude model is explored in greater detail in the "Attitude Systems" section of this chapter and represented visually in Figure 7.

Conflicts with and negative emotional responses to parents also comprised a considerable portion of educators' experiences in inclusion for students with ASD. Examples of interactions with parents were predominantly negative in nature and reflected a significant tension between educator and parent stakeholders in inclusive education. Furthermore, these examples were used to develop and support belief systems regarding parents of children with ASD and their participation in the educational decision-making process. The beliefs, desired outcomes, and behavior of parents and educators of students with ASD are explored in depth in the "Home-School Partnerships" section later in this chapter.

#### *Educator Participants' Overall Attitude toward Inclusion*

Based on Zimbardo and Leippe's three-part attitude theory (1991), a central thesis of this study was that educators' experiences with and emotions about inclusive education for students with ASD, framed by a particular definition of the practice and its perceived educational value, would coalesce into an overarching attitude toward inclusive education. The preceding information does in fact suggest that educator participants have an overall positive disposition toward inclusive education for students with ASD. Educators see inclusive education as an instructional model that (when broadly defined) is available and beneficial to *all* students with ASD, regardless of their cognitive, behavioral, or academic functioning, and should be pursued to the greatest extent possible. Among the options on the continuum of placements full-time, "inclusion" in the GE setting is seen as the most likely to promote the integration and membership

of the student with ASD and is also likely to promote social/behavioral growth, as well. However, educators assert that for students with intensive behavior or academic support needs, full inclusion is not the most beneficial service delivery model. In these cases, educators are open-minded and flexible when approaching the LRE mandate and recognize that there are many ways in which students with ASD can participate meaningfully with their GE peers. Educator participants perceive inclusive models as being mostly effective for students with ASD, although it is important to remember that “success” in inclusion is individually defined and often takes several years (and considerable persistence) to become evident.

#### The Means of Inclusion: Desired Outcomes and Behavioral Intentions

In recent years, researchers and scholars have come to conceptualize attitudes in increasingly broad and complex ways. While attitudes have previously been defined as simply as “an evaluation of someone or something along a continuum of like-to-dislike or favorable-to-unfavorable” (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991, p. 31), the current literature suggests that attitudes are better defined as systems that are complex in their composition (consisting of beliefs, experiences, and emotional reactions) and in their influence (impacting cognitions, affective responses, and future intentions and behavior; Zanna & Rempel, 1988). As such, the collective attitude of educator participants as defined above represents only a starting point from which one can begin to understand the broad experience of inclusive education as it is lived in the participating district. If knowledge, beliefs, and personal experiences reveal how educators make meaning of inclusion, then their desired outcomes and behavioral intentions (particularly decision-making strategies) demonstrate their means for transforming their ideas of inclusion into an educational reality.

#### *Desired Outcomes*

Although there is agreement in the literature that attitudes are predictors of behavior (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991), mere knowledge of an individual's attitude or disposition toward a particular subject is unlikely to accurately predict their precise response. In addition, it is important to consider the desired outcomes that educators bring to the table when they decide upon and develop inclusive education. Desired outcomes represent an area of relatively little exploration with regard to attitude systems; however, given the goal-directed nature of special education service delivery, it seemed prudent to examine the goals that educators hold for students with ASD in GE settings.

### *Student Development and Independence*

Among educators' many desired outcomes for students with ASD in GE settings, *increased independence and initiation* emerged as an overarching goal for included students with ASD at all levels of functioning. Educator participants repeatedly emphasized their wish to see students with ASD taking initiative to seek out their own supports in the GE setting by asking for help or looking to their typical peers as a more natural form of assistance. To reach this goal of increased independence and initiation, educators further delineated the specific areas of growth they saw as particularly important for students with ASD. As maladaptive behavior emerged as the factor most likely to disrupt a student's progress in the GE setting and make inclusion more difficult, educators saw growth in social/emotional/behavioral functioning as a primary need for students with ASD. Desired behaviors included prosocial skills (e.g., conversational skills, reciprocity) and school survival skills (basic behavioral expectations such as waiting in line, completing common routines such as buying lunch, asking for help, and following directions). Educator participants also sought increases in communication skills, particularly with regard to expressing wants and needs in the classroom setting. Communication deficits are central to the overall difficulties of individuals with ASD and are unlikely to be completely remediated through participation in the GE setting. Thus, educators were realistic in their expectations for growth in this regard. With appropriate supports and instruction in the GE setting, students with ASD were expected to grow in their ability to initiate communication in some manner, as well as to respond to communication without prompting. Just as participants tailored their goals for behavioral/social/emotional and communicative functioning to the realities of ASD (recognizing that age-typical functioning may not be possible), they tended to share academic goals that matched the difficulties characteristic of this disorder. For example, several educators suggested that although students with ASD often acquire basic skills in reading (i.e., decoding) or math (i.e., computation), they are more likely to struggle with applying those skills on tasks such as reading comprehension, math word problems, and written expression because of their difficulties with language, abstract reasoning, or fine motor skills. Educators generally expected students with ASD participating in inclusion to meet the same academic content standards as their same-age peers, via any instructional supports or accommodations necessary. When students experienced

significant cognitive and academic difficulties such that mastery of the general education curriculum was likely to be out of reach (i.e., “special diploma track”), educators suggested that a full-time placement in the GE classroom was probably not the best option and they would be better served by a functional/life skills curriculum available in the self-contained setting.

Educator participants indicated that integrating students with ASD into their neighborhood communities via community-based instruction or other activities was not a primary goal of inclusion. However, when students with ASD participated in the GE settings, educators perceived them as being significantly more integrated into the school or classroom community than when they are placed in self-contained classroom. Educators described many meaningful experiences suggesting that students were integrated when they were seen by their peers as “just another kid in the class.” Stories and examples such as these confirm that local community integration is an important and valued outcome of inclusion. When IEP teams deemed that full-time inclusion was incompatible with the educational goals of students with intensive support needs, they explored alternative means of GE participation (e.g., mainstreaming, reverse inclusion) but acknowledged that they were less likely to be fully integrated in the school or classroom. School personnel suggested that they rarely address recreational or leisure skills when supporting students with ASD in inclusive placements. Rather, they see this as being a domain in which parents have a more significant role. Finally, educator participants indicated that they sought changes in same-age peers as a result of inclusion, in addition to their goals for students with ASD. In particular, educators suggested that they valued changes in peers’ sensitivity to and support of their classmate with ASD.

Taken together, educators’ descriptions of desired outcomes suggest that they see change and development as the benchmarks of successful inclusion. Educators’ experiential examples reveal that they often observe students with ASD making gains in many of these broad (independence, initiation) and specific (academic, behavioral, communicative) skills in the GE setting. In some instances, evidence of students’ progress was dramatic, such as when a child’s skills increased to the point where they were functioning on a new and higher developmental level. Other examples highlighted the smaller gains that might even go unnoticed to the untrained eye (e.g., changes in pragmatic skills). In many cases, however, participants’ success stories of students with

ASD in GE settings were indicative of growth across numerous areas of functioning, rather than in just one isolated area.

#### *Individualization and Flexibility in Implementation*

As previously noted, educators suggested that a global definition of inclusion is elusive because it is so highly individualized and specific to the child in question. In fact, individualization was so commonly discussed by educator participants that it emerged as a defining characteristic of inclusive education in and of itself. Educators consistently emphasized that differentiated instruction, individualized supports tailored to specific needs, and overall flexibility were essential components of inclusive education. Although special education law requires that students with disabilities receive IEPs that specify the supports the individual child needs to be successful, participating educators indicated that students with ASD were exceptionally variable in their needs and the supports developed for one student with ASD may need to look completely different than those for another student with ASD in the same classroom or school building. An often-quoted remark from Brenda Smith Myles (2000), a noted researcher in ASD, suggests this sentiment is shared by many professionals working with students on the autism spectrum: "If you've seen one child with Asperger's Syndrome or autism, you have seen one child with Asperger's Syndrome or autism." While general recommendations can be made regarding the types of supports from which students with ASD are most likely to benefit (e.g., core elements of effective education for students with ASD articulated by Iovannone et al, 2003), educator participants recognized that the selection of specific supports and configuration of services needed to be derived from the needs of each individual student. Relatedly, in assessing the effectiveness of their district's inclusion efforts, educators suggested they find perseverance and continual adjustments to individual student supports to be critical ingredients for successful inclusion. For example, Beatrice suggested that School A's ability to respond quickly to students with ASD as they experience new life circumstances, develop new behavioral triggers, or reach new developmental levels was what made them effective in including students with ASD.

Although many educators were clear that full-time participation in inclusion "is not for everybody," they also suggested that some form of access to the educational mainstream can almost always be identified. Educators such as Darla, Lauren, Brandy (who had experience working with some of the most challenging students with ASD at



Schools A and B) felt that “some form of inclusion is for everyone” (Brandy, Interview, Line 265). When severe challenging behavior or significantly below average academic/cognitive abilities precluded full-time placement in a GE setting (i.e., “inclusion”), educators indicated that these children should still be able to participate in the educational mainstream by eating lunch, attending recess, or participating in “specials” (e.g., P.E., art, music) with their typically-developing peers (i.e., “mainstreaming”). If those options were not a good fit for the student with ASD, educators found other creative ways to ensure that the LRE mandate was met, such as creating “reverse inclusion” or “peer buddy” programs where GE students came to self-contained programs to learn about and work with their schoolmates with ASD. In addition, School B created an after-school program where students with ASD were paired with GE peers to participate in extracurricular activities and clubs for the purposes of building friendships and increasing awareness of autism. The district’s eclectic approach to meeting the LRE mandate is one that is supported in the educational literature. The TEACCH program at the University of North Carolina, which conducts research in and provides trainings on structured teaching and physical environments for students with ASD, offered the following on their website:

Oftentimes, placement for children with autism involves a combination of educational settings. Individualization, when properly carried out, leads to optimal, unique solutions for each student, based on his/her needs rather than ideology. The heterogeneity one sees in autism requires many options and possibilities, not one solution for all. (TEACCH, 2006)

#### *Consistency and Clarity of Expectations*

Somewhat contradictorily, educator participants also wished to see greater consistency in the implementation of inclusive education across the entire district. Specifically, although educators consistently affirmed that instructional placement and programming decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis, several participants also suggested that there should be a consistent way of “doing inclusion” at the school and district levels. Participants described situations where expectations for instructional practices (e.g., pull-out versus push-in approaches), placement decisions, or data collection strategies varied from building to building, or from school-level to district-level. These participants suggested that it would be helpful if the district had an overall set of policies and procedures for inclusive education, with each school building allowed to

further individualize their approach to inclusion in a way that matches the needs of their individual school system. Comments such as these reflect a tension between the flexibility of a “case-by-case approach” and the predictability of a more top-down, district-controlled approach. For the most part, educators’ comments suggested that they did not in fact wish for district-level supervisors to dictate a required procedure for determining and developing educational placements. Educators typically described their experiences and ideas in ways that suggested they felt confident and competent with their roles in these processes. Rather, participants made these comments in situations where they thought that their own best efforts had been contradicted or overturned by the district in a way they did not agree with or understand. For example, Brandy found it frustrating to be considered successful in inclusion in her previous position at School A, only to be told she was “not doing it right” at School B. Tracey thought that she had made good decisions in data collection and was supported at the building level, only to find that district personnel thought her efforts were insufficient. The conflict between case-by-case versus top-down decision-making approaches is an area that personnel in the participating district may wish to explore in greater depth, as it may underlie the need for greater communication of the district’s priorities and “bottom line” for making placement and instructional decisions that all parties can support.

#### *Ecobehavioral Decision-Making*

When placing a student with ASD within a broad continuum of service delivery options, educators took an *ecobehavioral* approach that considers environment-behavior interactions as well as the ecological contexts in which student behavior and/or learning occurs (Greenwood, Carta, Kamps, & Arreaga-Mayer, 1990). A primary assumption of the ecobehavioral perspective is that a student's performance is at least partially determined by the nature and type of interactions the student has with the environment and people in the environment (Carta, Atwater, Schwartz, & Miller, 1990). For example, educators spoke of needing to find the “right” teacher who is open-minded, willing to embrace inclusion, and a good match for the support needs of the student with ASD. In the case of students with significant problem behaviors for whom self-contained classrooms were a consideration, educators were concerned about the potential impact of the other students in that setting. Educator personnel suggested that placing a student with ASD in a classroom where challenging behavior is prevalent may actually

increase his/her own rate of problem behavior, even when intensive behavior supports are present.

In fact, across all educator participants, the presence of chronic and severe problem behaviors in students with ASD emerged as the single biggest consideration and potential barrier to their successful inclusion in the GE environment. As such, it was among students with challenging behavior where the multitude of placement and support considerations were the most evident. In light of educators' stated goal of having students with ASD seen as full members of their GE classrooms, maladaptive behaviors such as physical aggression, self-injury, or screaming may pose a challenge to inclusion because they interfere with the child's integration into the GE setting. As noted by both parent and educator participants, schools most often respond to severely disruptive or aggressive behavior by removing the student with ASD from the classroom. If occurring on a frequent basis, this pattern is likely to disrupt the student's academic progress. From an educational perspective, then, the GE classroom may *not* be the LRE for students with maladaptive behavior because it interferes with the student's ability to actively engage in instruction (Cooper, 2003).

Chronic challenging behavior is also problematic in an inclusion setting because it can have a significant impact on others in the environment besides the student with ASD—namely, GE peers, teachers, and support personnel. Educators' descriptions of their own personal experiences with children with challenging behavior illuminated their constant efforts to balance the behavior support needs of students with ASD in the GE setting with the safety and learning needs of GE peers. Thomas and Rapport (1998) cite *impact on GE peers* as one of several key issues emerging from LRE disputes in circuit and federal courts; this concern was most likely to be discussed by educator participants in cases where the included student with ASD demonstrated either significantly disruptive or unsafe behavior on a frequent basis. Another LRE consideration, *relative benefit of placement options*, was also discussed in association with students with challenging behavior. In particular, for high-functioning students with ASD with challenging behavior, the choice between inclusion and self-contained settings involved a trade-off: while self-contained environments offered the potential benefit of intensive behavior supports and structured environments, they rarely offered high-quality grade-level academic instruction typically found in the GE setting.

To better understand how the district makes decisions on a case-by-case basis, research questions were developed to examine the information sources that influenced educators' placement decisions. Participants were not directly questioned about their use of data or other information sources in the individual interview sessions, but rather were probed for this information as they discussed their school's overall decision-making process. Educators primarily described using existing sources of information on the child (e.g., IEP, previous evaluations) or trial placements in prospective settings as the primary tools used to help the IEP team determine the best placement for a child with ASD. When participants did mention using data to help them in this process, they typically described using mostly informal means of assessment (such as observations and classroom assessments) to describe the student's functioning and "goodness of fit" in a particular environment.

Despite the exhaustive of characteristics educators generated to describe their "ideal inclusion candidate" (see Research Question 5), participants who regularly observe children with ASD and make recommendations on their appropriateness for inclusion had difficulty articulating what characteristics they seek in these observations. Lauren described exercising professional judgment by having "a feeling" about a student's prospects for success in the GE environment, while Darla wished aloud for "magic checklists" to guide this process. These comments suggest that the use of data-based decision-making represents an area of need for the participating district, particularly with regard to moving students from self-contained placements to less restrictive environments consistent with models of reintegration or transenvironmental programming (Fuchs et al., 1991; Powell-Smith & Ball, 2008). Proponents of these models stress the necessity of using decision rules and assessment of students' skills in reference to general education expectations to determine which current special education students would be most likely to benefit from a general education placement. Given that educators in this district approach educational decision-making in an ecobehavioral fashion and look for "goodness of fit" in their observations of inclusion candidates, ecobehavioral methods of assessment might be useful ways to quantify a student's impact on and response to their educational environment. The interested reader is referred to the work of Greenwood et al. (1990) for more information on this type of assessment.

## Attitude Systems for Inclusion of Students with ASD

Psychologists have defined the term *attitude* as a mental representation of cognitions, affective responses, and behaviors regarding a particular subject matter; the specific attitude toward an issue is an overall summary of that mental representation (e.g., “I like it” or “I am against it”). Because attitudes are conceptualized as dynamic interactions among thoughts, emotional reactions, and actions, the term *attitude system* may provide a more comprehensive description of the attitude construct and all of its constituent parts (Zimbardo & Leippe, 1991). Beyond the complex composition of attitude systems, it is important to consider that individuals’ attitudes can also influence cognitions, affective responses, and behavioral intentions (Zanna & Rempel, 1988).

### *Observed Attitude System Model in Participating District*

With regard to inclusion, understanding the interconnected nature of educators’ attitudes, thoughts, emotional responses, past experiences, and behavioral intentions provides a rich insight into their subjective realities—the lived experience of inclusion as an educational professional from a cognitive, emotional, and behavioral perspective. The primary goal of this study was to examine the inclusion-related knowledge, beliefs, emotions, and experiences of educators in the participating district (i.e., the “meaning” of inclusion), to better understand their behavioral intentions (i.e., the “means of inclusion,” particularly with regard to placement decision-making). Information presented in the previous sections of this chapter on both the “meaning” and “means” of inclusion can be summarized in Figure 6, which visually represents the district’s attitude system as it emerged from interview and focus group data.

Educator participants shared their beliefs about what inclusive education is and why it is a valuable practice, as well as both positive and negative experiences that have helped create and confirm those beliefs. Emotional reactions to inclusive education for students with ASD varied in association with specific examples to which they were tied (e.g., positive reactions to examples of growth and development; negative reactions to situations of conflict or failure). Positive and negative beliefs, experiences, and emotional reactions are depicted in Figure 6 as a series of items on a balance scale, with positive components (those likely to lead to a welcome outcome) on the left and negative ones (those likely to lead to a unwelcome outcome) on the right. Because attitudes are comprised of dynamic interactions between several factors, a linear model (e.g., experiences + knowledge + emotional reactions = attitude) does not appear to

adequately describe the process of attitude development. A scale was chosen to represent the mental “weighing” that educators so often described in their interviews and focus groups. However, no precise “weight” or relative value can be definitively assigned to the cognitions, emotions, and experiential histories depicted on this scale. Educators suggested in individual interviews that beliefs and knowledge were necessary but insufficient to lead to pro-inclusion attitudes; in addition, they indicated that a history of personal or vicarious experiences is also important for encouraging the prospective inclusion teacher to take on a student with ASD. What is not clear is whether one of these components (beliefs, knowledge, past experiences, or emotional reaction) is more influential than another.

Although educators shared many negative beliefs, experiences, and emotional reactions to inclusive education, their overall evaluation of the practice was mostly positive and suggested that the “good outweighs the bad.” This suggests that when educators have experiences of inclusive education that are consistent with their overall beliefs and operational definitions, participating educators are generally supportive of the practice. Educators’ positive beliefs (e.g., inclusion “forces development,” GE peers become sensitive to difference, class-wide strategies benefit all) reinforce the value of the practice as a whole and, while negative beliefs are evident (e.g., parents are in denial, strong advocacy hurts home-school relationships), they do negate the inherent value of the practice. Negative experiences and emotional reactions tended to be less directed toward students or inclusive education as a whole, and more toward conflicts with parents and colleagues about the details and intricacies of implementing this practice. Furthermore, it should be noted that educator participants shared more negative emotional reactions than positive ones, yet this did not cause the overall attitude across all educators to be negative. Rather, for participating educators, the wealth of positive experiences and beliefs about the broad benefits of inclusive education (accompanied with some positive emotional reactions) seemed to counteract the impact of educators’ many negative emotional reactions to the difficult aspects they encountered from time to time.

While attitude development may not be a linear process, once an attitude does emerge, the relationship between an attitude and behavioral intention seems to be somewhat clearer. Taking attitude systems one step further, Zimbardo and Leippe (1991) indicate that attitudes predict future behavior. As such, it can be said that while

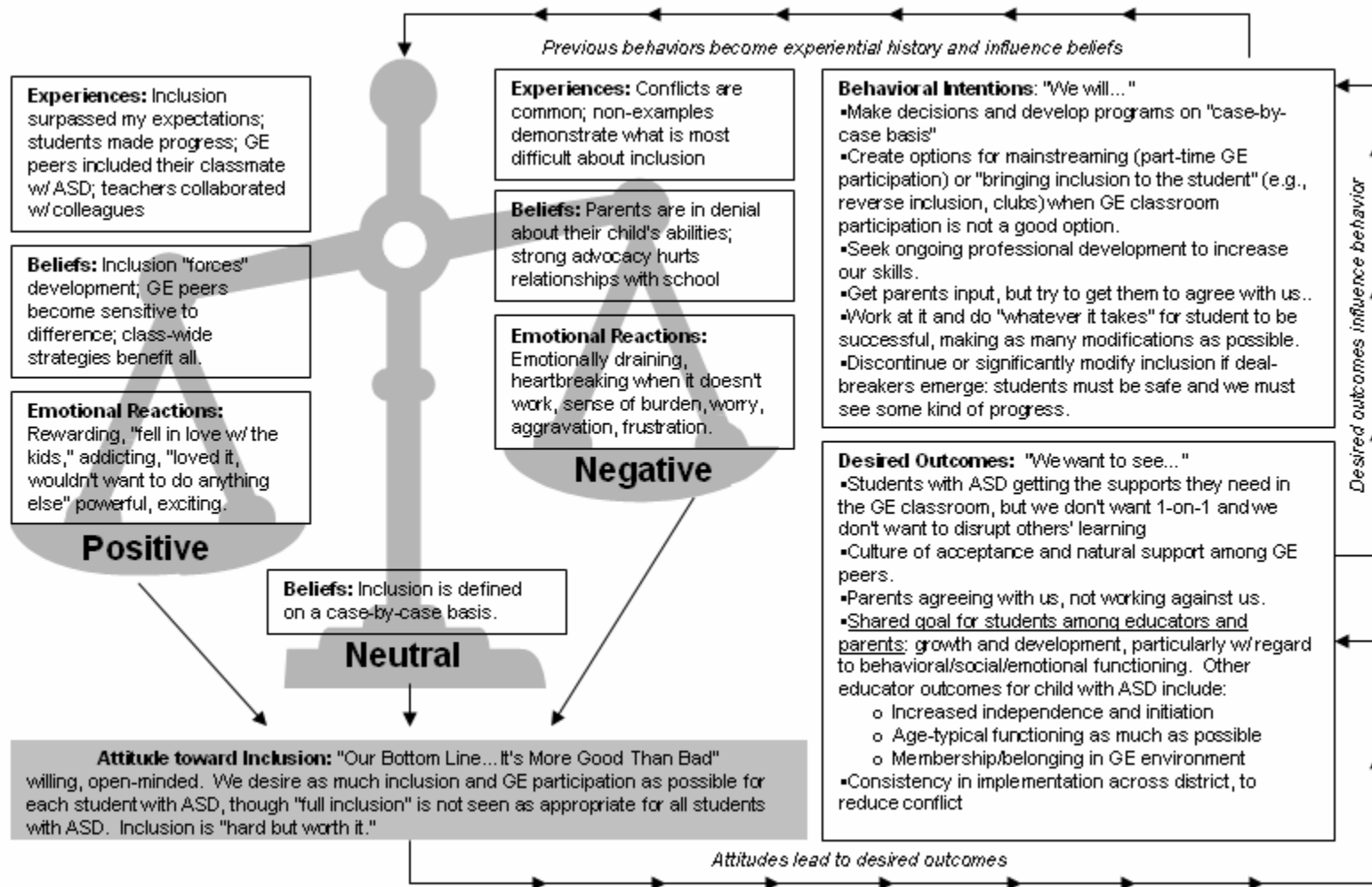


Figure 6. Observed "pro-inclusion" attitude system, based on comments, observations, and experiences of educator participants

thoughts, behaviors, and knowledge affect one's attitudes, the reverse is also true. Attitudes and expectations affect one's behavior. For this reason, the attitude system observed in the participating district (Figure 6) is conceptualized as a feedback loop, indicating that once cognitions, emotions, and experiences coalesce into an attitude, the attitude influences an individual's (or system's) desired outcomes and the behavior in which they intend to engage to make those desired outcomes become reality. In the participating district, educators shared goals that were mostly consistent with their generally positive disposition toward inclusive education. For example, educators were in agreement that inclusive placements could "force" students with ASD to develop new skills; their desired outcomes of increased independence and initiation stem from this belief and led to efforts to creatively develop options for inclusion/mainstreaming for all students. Finally, those behavioral intentions, when enacted, become a part of a person's (or system's) experiential history and ultimately serves as a source of future knowledge and belief. For example, when educators choose to discontinue an inclusive placement for a student with ASD who was dependent upon a full-time 1-on-1 assistant, this may reinforce their beliefs about what inclusive education should be and which students are best suited for a GE placement. These beliefs then return to the balance scale and are "weighed" against other considerations the next time a placement decision is made. The relationship between desired outcomes, behavioral intentions, and the attitude weighing process are depicted visually on the right side of Figure 6.

By way of an analogy, it should be stated that these data do not suggest a precise *recipe* for the creation of a desired attitude (e.g., "Because I believe X, have experienced Y, and have felt Z, I am pro-inclusion"). Rather, they merely represent the *ingredients* that assisted in the development of the current attitude system in the participating district. In keeping with this recipe analogy, it can be further suggested that without the precise amounts of the observed ingredients for inclusion (i.e., the recipe), one cannot reliably predict at the exact configuration of inclusive education that will emerge (i.e., the exact type of food being prepared). Instead, when knowing only the ingredients but not the precise amounts of each, one can only guess at the potential flavor and overall style of the meal in question (e.g., if it contains chocolate and sugar, it is likely to be sweet and is probably a dessert). Figuratively speaking, the data summarized on the right side of Figure 6 (attitude manifested through desired



outcomes and behavioral intentions) help to convey the “flavor and overall style” of inclusive education in the participating district.

*Hypothetical Attitude System Model: Development of Resistance to Inclusion*

Comments from educators not only illuminated their own pro-inclusion attitude system as it pertained to inclusion for students with ASD, but also suggested a potential model for the development of resistant attitudes toward inclusion. Specifically, educators’ stories of and beliefs about their colleagues who *did not* want students with ASD to be included reinforced the importance of knowledge/beliefs and experiences in the development of attitudes and served as powerful examples of how negative attitudes may develop when one or both of these critical ingredients are absent. It should be noted that, because the educators who participated in this study were generally positive in their beliefs, experiences, and evaluations pertaining to inclusion for students with ASD, the development of negative/resistant attitudes to inclusion was not directly documented in this research. Rather, the following section offers a hypothetical model that suggests avenues for further exploration by both district personnel and educational researchers. A visual schematic of this proposed model can be found in Figure 7.

In the development of research questions and interview protocols for this study, the exploration of educators’ knowledge and beliefs as a part of an attitude system was specifically directed toward their thoughts about *inclusive education for students with ASD*. However, examination of educators’ understandings of ASD as a disorder and its impact on children was not directly explored. Nonetheless, educator participants consistently suggested that teachers’ knowledge of and beliefs about ASD (independent of inclusive education) was highly likely to impact their willingness to accept a child with ASD in their classroom. For example, a number of participants (as well as several parents) suggested that many educators who lack experience with children with ASD may think of it in very stereotypical ways, equating it to the characteristics portrayed by Dustin Hoffman in the motion picture *Rain Man* (Levinson, Bass, & Morrow, 1988). Alternatively, educator participants indicated that although they considered ASD as a diagnosis to encompass a wide range of characteristics, strengths, and weaknesses, they believed that many of their colleagues have more limited views of ASD. Teachers unfamiliar with ASD may interpret “autism” in terms of the characteristics that define only the lowest functioning individuals on the spectrum, including severe tantrums, nonverbal forms of communication, and delayed cognitive ability. Several participants

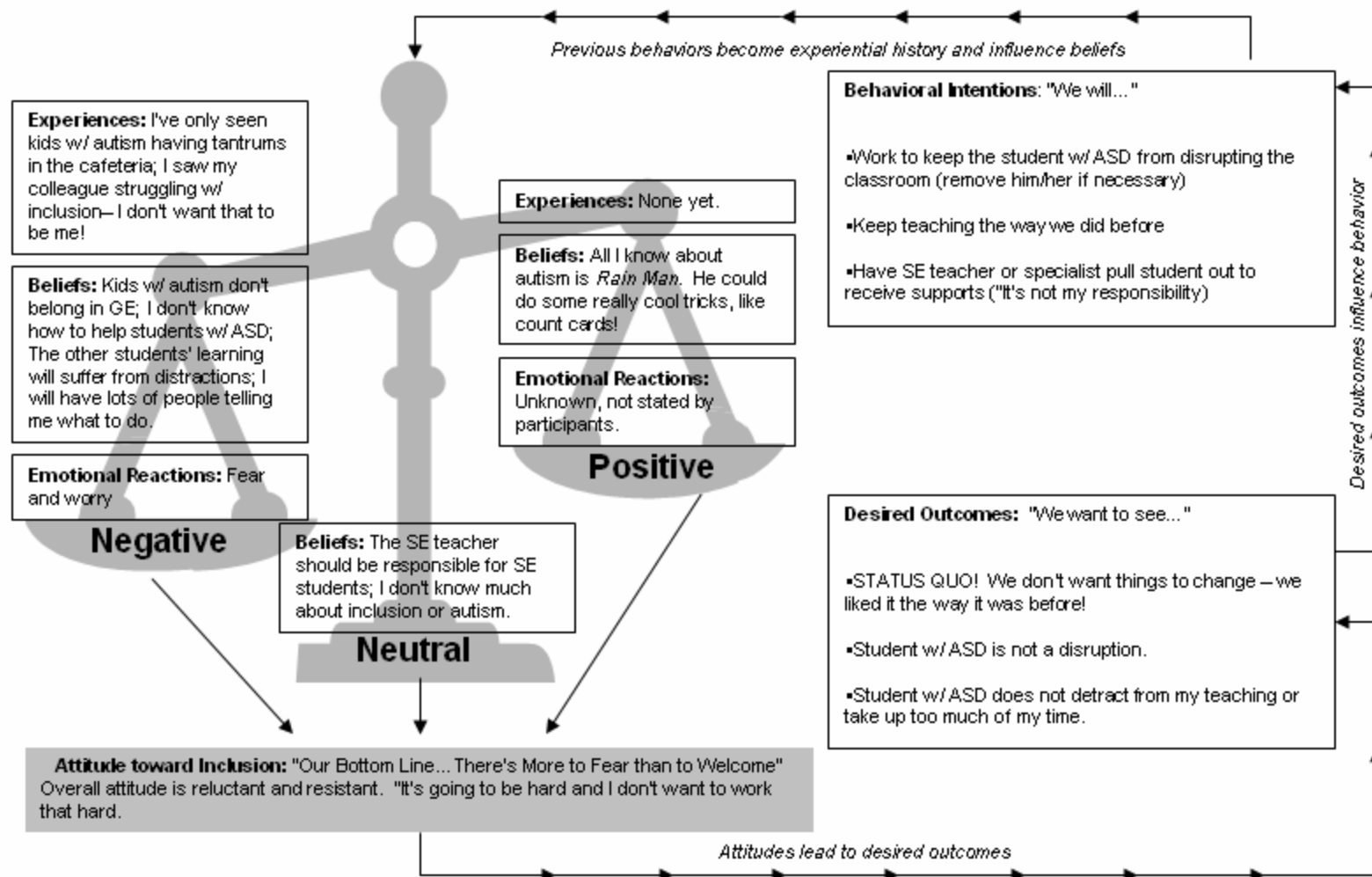


Figure 7. Hypothetical “status quo” attitude system, proposed by participants to describe educators who are resistant to inclusion

hypothesized that GE teachers working in schools with self-contained classes for students with ASD may be most susceptible to these expectations, as they may have observed students from these classrooms having “meltdowns” in the cafeteria or running away from staff members in the hallway. Such limited and negative perceptions of ASD were seen as factors that increase the likelihood that teachers will be resistant to inclusion. Finally, educators did also suggest that when their fellow teachers are reluctant to include a child with ASD, it may be because they lack a vision for what inclusive education is and what their role would be. However, educators appeared to believe that the “autism awareness” of a prospective inclusion teacher was more influential in their development of negative attitudes than their familiarity with inclusion.

Beyond lack of factual knowledge about autism and inclusion (i.e., what it is and why it is important), educators further suggested that a teacher’s exposure to inclusion for students with ASD were highly likely to contribute to their overall attitude.

Participants cited examples of colleagues who were initially reluctant to engage in inclusion but became its biggest advocates once they had an opportunity to experience it themselves, understand that they would receive support from colleagues when times were difficult, and recognize the growth potential for both the student with ASD and the GE peers. Educator participants suggested that experiences did not have to be personal, but could be vicarious ones as well (i.e., observing a fellow teacher in a pod experiencing success in inclusion could lead to another teacher’s increased willingness to participate). Similarly, when teachers lack positive experiences of their own that tell them inclusion is valuable, and they witness their colleagues encountering difficulties in inclusion, these negative vicarious experiences can be a sufficient foundation for building a resistant attitude toward inclusion. As such, educators believed that providing professional development to increase lacking knowledge/beliefs was necessary but not sufficient to improve educators’ willingness to accept a student with ASD in their classroom. In addition, positive exposure to students with autism and/or inclusive education was seen as another venue for decreasing educators’ resistance to this practice. It is important to note that Figure 7 does not clearly define the positive experiences and emotional reactions of educators who may resist inclusive placements for students with ASD, because educator participants did not provide such examples. This representation is not intended to suggest that these teachers totally lack any

positive history or emotional reactions to inclusive education, but rather that they are currently unknown.

Taken together, these premises suggest that negative attitudes can develop in the absence of firm knowledge of or experience with the subject matter. Educator participants indicated that teachers who have little understanding of inclusion or autism and who lack personal or vicarious experiences can and do develop negative attitudes toward inclusion for students with ASD, which then begs the question: what informs their negative evaluation of such an unfamiliar endeavor? Educator participants posit that when knowledge and experiences are lacking, emotional responses contribute the most to attitude development. Specifically, *fear of the unknown* was seen as a driving force in the development of negative attitudes toward inclusive education. Participants' comments and stories suggested that, in the minds of the first-time inclusion/ASD teacher, the question of "what if" looms large: "What if I can't help the student?" "What if someone gets hurt?" Many educator participants saw fear as the primary force behind their colleagues' resistant attitudes toward inclusion for students with ASD, particularly with regard to one or more of the following negative outcomes:

1. "Students with ASD will detract from my ability to meet the needs of the class."
2. "Students with ASD will perform poorly on the FCAT and may also cause the rest of the class to do so."
3. "If I am unable to control the behavior of a student with ASD or they don't pass the FCAT, I will look like a bad teacher."

The comments and examples of educator participants (as well as those of some parents) seemed to suggest that when teachers with limited knowledge of inclusion/ASD and limited or negative experiences with it (even if only vicarious) are faced with inclusion for the first time, they may be very likely to have an automatic fear-based reaction to this prospect. Pro-inclusion knowledge, beliefs, and personal/vicarious experience were believed to be essential in combating these natural fears, although once again no specific formula or recipe of these essential ingredients can guarantee the development of pro-inclusion attitude.

Even in situations where attitudes are initially developed with little or no basis in knowledge, the attitude may subsequently affect how an individual takes in new information and further develops the beliefs, emotional responses, and experiences in the attitude system (Pratkanis & Greenwald, 1989). As such, a model of negative

attitude development suggests that when teachers are predisposed to resist inclusion, it is likely to impact the way they approach inclusive education when it is thrust upon them.

Returning to the recipe analogy used above, the “negative” ingredients that lead to educators’ negative/resistant attitudes toward inclusion (i.e., lack of knowledge, lacking personal experience or negative vicarious experience, and fear of the unknown) are likely to create an approach to inclusion with an entirely different “flavor and overall style” than that of knowledgeable, experienced, and willing educators. To that end, several educators asserted that when educators are resistant to including students with ASD, they behave in ways that seek to sustain the “status quo” of their previous classroom and minimize the impact of the child with ASD on the environment. For example, rather than ignoring or redirecting the tantruming behaviors of a child with ASD to teach them more effective ways of getting their needs met (e.g., asking for help), resistant teachers may simply opt to have the behavior specialist remove the child with ASD from the setting because they perceive them as too great of a distraction. From an operant behavior perspective, this feedback loop of this hypothetical attitude systems model suggests that teachers with resistant attitudes and “status quo” goals may be negatively reinforced every time they have a disruptive student removed from the classroom (Cooper et al., 1987). This then adds to their experiential history, which could lend additional support to their resistant attitude.

#### Parents’ Perspectives on Inclusion

The primary goals of this study included examination of the knowledge, beliefs, and decision-making strategies of educators as they pertained to inclusion for students with ASD. However, parental involvement is an essential component in the development of successful educational programs for students with ASD (Iovannone et al., 2003) and is a legally protected right through IDEA (2004) and state special education regulations. As such, consideration of parents’ desired and perceived outcomes for their included children with ASD provides an opportunity for considering whether educators’ approaches to inclusion are consistent with parent expectations. In general, parents’ comments reflected desired outcomes in areas that were remarkably similar to those described by educator participants. As with educators, several parent participants emphasized goals consistent with *increased independence and initiation*, as well as improved social and communicative functioning.

Despite high degree of consistency between educator and parent goals for included students with ASD, several subtle differences can be identified. While educators tended to focus their goals on increases in behaviors that would improve the student's classroom functioning and educational achievement, parents goals tended to focus on behaviors that would generally improve a child's ability to get along with others in a broad context. For example, educators stressed the need for specific social or conversational skills such as turn-taking or initiating conversation with peers, while parents prioritized the development of friendships and learning to communicate or cope with their frustration in socially acceptable ways. Parents were actually more likely than educators to discuss specific maladaptive behaviors (e.g., biting, throwing objects, yelling) and, when doing so, tended to describe the appropriate behaviors they wished to see develop in their place. Notably, parents participants tended to be less concerned about the academic growth of their child with ASD than did the educator participants. While several were aware of their child's individual areas of academic weaknesses that required more intensive support (e.g., reading comprehension), parents shared relatively few academic goals for their included children with ASD. As stated by Martin, "my goal for [Luke] in school is not to learn subtraction and multiplication tables; my goal for him in school is to learn to function amongst his peers in a way that's healthy" (Lines 943-944).

#### *Home-School Partnerships: An Area for Growth*

Despite the fact that educators and parents were mostly in agreement with regard to the outcomes they desire for included students with ASD and were able to cite many improvements their children had made in their educational/developmental history, parent participants varied with regard to their overall satisfaction with their children's experience in inclusion. One parent-set (Kim and Rick) was "very dissatisfied" with their son Alex's experiences in general education, especially as it related to the school's inability to decrease significant problem behavior and increase reading skills. Chris and Abigail's mother, Marjorie, suggested she was only "50%" satisfied with the services her children had received and was considering enrolling her children in a private academy for students with ASD. Other parents indicate that, while mostly satisfied with their child's progress in inclusion, they saw that there was room for improvement. Parent comments culminated in a list of desired activities and observations that would be consistent with their vision of "successful inclusion," and chief among these expectations was that educators would collaborate with parents, view them as mutual problem-

solvers, and accept parents' input. Several parents described situations in which they perceived that the IEP team had already made decisions about the child in question and expected that the parents should not question or challenge those decisions. Conversely, educators expressed frustration with parents they considered to be "fierce advocates" who have a "smart, savvy network" and described situations in which parents had needs that were "insatiable." Relatedly, educators' experiences with parents were overwhelmingly negative and conflict-ridden. They offered few instances of situations in which they interacted with parents in positive and collaborative ways. With probing, educators offered several positive instances of home-school collaboration. Nevertheless, educators tended to volunteer predominantly negative perceptions and experiences relative to parents of students with ASD.

These comments, while not the central subject of this study, highlight an area of potential need in the participating district. Although educators could be considered fairly progressive in their commitment to fulfilling the LRE mandate and their flexible definitions of and approaches to inclusive education, many of their comments suggest a significant devaluing of parents in the decision-making process and little recognition of what parents can contribute to a child's educational success. Comments such as these suggest that there is a real disconnect between educators and parents. This finding is even more puzzling in light of educators' poignant insights about the grieving process that parents of children with ASD may experience as they come to terms with the diagnosis. One clue may lie in educators' persistent claim that parents were "in denial" about the extent of their child's disability; fully one-fourth of all educator participants cited "denial" as their immediate hypothesis as to why parents generally preferred inclusion for their children with ASD. Although some educators were able to generate other ideas that were more consistent with parents' actual hopes and aspirations for their children (e.g., more age-typical functioning or educational experiences), the majority of educators felt that parental denial played a role in their advocacy or decision-making to at least some degree. Such comments suggest that educators see parents as unrealistic in their expectations for either their children's growth or for services to be provided in the school setting. Because this issue was not specifically targeted for close examination, firm conclusions cannot be drawn about the precise nature of home-school partnerships. However, parents' frequently stated desire for improved collaboration with their

children's teachers and support personnel indicates that this is an area that merits further exploration.

#### Limitations

When comparing the relative strengths and weaknesses of the various research designs (both qualitative and quantitative) available to a given researcher, case study designs are often believed to be less desirable, weaker forms of research investigation. Chief among concerns about case studies are lack of rigor (e.g., unsystematic procedures, equivocal evidence, biased views), limited basis for generalization, and summaries of case study research that are lengthy and unreadable (Yin, 2003). These criticisms illustrate how difficult it is to conduct a high-quality case study. According to Yin, "Case study research is remarkably hard, even though case studies have traditionally been considered to be 'soft' research" (p.17). In addition to more general criteria for designing and conducting high-quality studies, qualitative case study researchers also have the task of ensuring that their data are credible (i.e., valid) and transferable (i.e., generalizable). In the following section, various methodological and contextual issues from the current study are examined with respect to their potential for impact on the credibility and transferability of these findings.

#### *Threats to Credibility*

Considerations of internal validity are most salient in research where a cause-and-effect relationship is asserted between independent and dependent variables. Although no such causal claims are offered in this study, it is important to critically examine the confidence one can have in the findings of this research. Qualitative research views the construct of internal validity as a matter of *credibility* (Trochim, 2006). Because qualitative researchers (and phenomenological researchers, in particular) are tasked with harnessing and summarizing subjective realities, perceptions, and interpretations, they do not claim that the data they collect contains the "truth." Rather, they claim that their findings can be deemed "plausible" or "credible" based on the data they have gathered (Bogden & Biklen, 1998). Trochim (2006) suggests that because the purpose of qualitative research is to describe or understand the phenomena of interest from the participant's eyes, the participants may ultimately be best qualified to judge a study's credibility. Nevertheless, several methodological issues that may have impacted the credibility of this study's findings are outlined below.



### *Simulated Decision-Making with Hypothetical Vignettes*

The use of two hypothetical student vignettes as stimuli for educators' decision – making and discussion in the focus group can be considered both a limitation and strength of this study. Although the vignettes were designed to offer a variety of needs, strengths, and considerations for each of the hypothetical students, limiting the number of student vignettes employed in the focus group necessarily reduced the representativeness of these scenarios. There may be other important issues relevant to educators' decision-making for students with ASD that were overlooked by the vignettes in the present study. However, both student vignettes were multifaceted and involved varying levels of cognitive functioning, verbal ability, social/behavioral skill, and other relevant issues (e.g., sensory needs, occupational/speech/language therapy, etc.). As described previously, these are some of the most salient needs and characteristics of students with ASD (Iovannone et al., 2003). Furthermore, specific questions were posed to educators in both the focus group and individual interviews with regard to decision-making processes at their school building to further address this issue.

With regard to the hypothetical nature of the student vignettes, they cannot be said to address educators' actual decision-making processes *in vivo*. In reality, educational planning and decision-making for students with ASD happens both at formal IEP meetings and in other situations, such as team planning meetings, consultative interactions with inclusion facilitators or supervisors, parent phone conferences, and even in hallway conversations among two or more educators. To capture the authentic decision-making process, it would be necessary to engage in a protracted observation of one or more of the team members, and even then, pieces of the decision-making process might be missed. Another potential method is *recollection*, asking participants to discuss their thought process on decisions about real student with whom students they are currently working or have taught in the past. This retrospective method can be highly unreliable, however, because it requires participants to remember all salient facts of the case and present them in an understandable fashion. Furthermore, due to high rates of teacher turnover, it may be difficult to assemble all individuals who were a part of a student's team when inclusion was first considered. Using standardized vignettes (rather than asking educators to describe their thinking on an actual case) greatly facilitates comparisons among participants' responses to the interview by eliminating numerous extraneous variables.

Recollection was employed to some degree in individual interviews to better understand the overarching process and mechanisms for decision-making in the participating district, but was not used to fully understand how individual students with ASD came to be placed in a GE classroom. Throughout individual interviews (and to some degree during focus groups), participants also discussed their personal experiences with a wide variety of students with ASD representing differing levels of cognitive, behavioral, social, and academic ability. Many participants referred to these students and their individual characteristics extensively in terms of their instructional decision-making, such that a detailed list of student-specific issues that specifically impact decision-making was developed as a part of the code definitions for Research Question 5. As such, both vignettes and individual interview questions about personal experiences work in combination to paint a comprehensive picture of educators' instructional decision-making considerations and their attitudes/beliefs regarding inclusive education for students with ASD.

Additionally, the focus group questions and prompts for particular responses might have elicited ideas or strategies that might not be suggested in "real life." Team members may have added components to the educational plan that they might not otherwise have considered, or they might have recommended a less restrictive placement in the focus group setting than they would suggest if it were a real student. Review of the vignette portion of focus group transcripts does in fact support this concern; words such as "ideally" were used on several occasions, suggesting that extra ideas were shared that may not all be available in "real-life" (e.g., one-on-one support from a guidance counselor, guidance groups, classwide supports designed with one student in mind). This may suggest educators' decision-making/brainstorming capacity at its best and least restrained, considering any and all possible supports that would benefit a child with ASD in the absence of the resource constraints typically in effect. It was hoped that the in-depth interviews conducted after the focus group session would help to determine individual team members' attitudes, beliefs, and prior experiences regarding inclusion and students with ASD in a way that clarifies their actual decision-making and behaviors in this arena, and in fact, the breadth and depth of responses in the individual interviews does in fact support this. Administrators, in particular, spoke often of the difficulty of balancing between ideal levels of support and the reality of what is feasible or available. Results from this study, therefore, should be interpreted as an

indication of what groups of educators *are likely capable of* with regard to inclusion planning and what teachers/administrators are *likely to do*, rather than what they *actually do*. An important follow-up to this study would be an examination of the actual classroom environments and educational plans of actual students with ASD who are included in general education settings, to determine the reality of inclusion for students at participating schools.

Also, a major finding of this study was the “case-by-case” nature of decision-making in the district. It bears noting that, although vignettes were anticipated to be a window into the decision-making of educational professionals, the “case-by-case” theme emerged not from focus group data but from individual interviews. The vignettes were useful tools for pinpointing the salient issues in decision-making (e.g., student characteristics, specific supports most likely to be offered), but did not capture the district’s overall approach to making these decisions. This is may be because there were only two case studies (i.e., “Josh” and “Nathan”) on which educators could focus; with such a small “sample,” the scope of educators’ decision-making was narrowed significantly. Allowing educators to describe more generally how they make decisions through individual questioning and personal examples resulted in more meaningful understanding of decision-making considerations across a wide range of students and circumstances. These findings suggest that when large-scale decision-making is under examination, vignettes may not be the best research tool. Rather, a better approach might have been to develop hypotheses about the critical factors and issues in decision-making in other ways (i.e., interviews, observation, etc) and then use vignettes as a way to test these hypotheses and search for additional considerations not initially revealed.

Finally, the potential impact of conducting the focus group interview prior to the individual interviews must be considered. As previously mentioned, the rationale for conducting the focus group first was two-fold: (a) the focus group served to “prime the pump,” getting educators to think about the issues of placement and services for students with ASD in a comfortable setting with familiar people; and (b) conducting the individual interview first might have created a social desirability effect in the focus group session, due to the interview’s heavy emphasis on issues related to inclusion. The goal of the focus group was to obtain a glimpse into educator decision-making that was as authentic as possible, reflecting the daily realities of the setting and the attitudes, beliefs, and emotional responses of the participants. If participants thought that placing the child

in inclusion was the desired response of the researcher (based on individual interview content), they might advocate for a different placement (i.e., a more inclusive placement) than they would typically recommend in “real-life.”

However, conducting the focus group prior to the interview also may have created some potential challenges to the credibility of the results. It is possible that the focus group session, with its dynamic interactions and discussions among a variety of educators, might somehow have altered the attitudes and beliefs of individual participants. As such, their position on inclusion might be different as assessed in a follow-up interview than if it had been obtained in an interview that preceded the focus group and functioned more as a baseline examination of attitudes. Accordingly, Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagum (1996) acknowledge that focus groups can have an impact on people’s thinking about a given topic by giving them an opportunity to reflect on it while hearing the views of others in similar situations. It is believed that the potential impact of the focus group on individual attitudes, beliefs, and emotional reactions to inclusion is no greater than that of any other meeting, training, or discussion on inclusion. Furthermore, it is expected that educators’ individual discussions of their attitudes and beliefs about inclusion was an accurate representation of their true position because it was discussed from a phenomenological perspective, in light of *personal experiences* in inclusion and the meaning made from those experiences. Attitude theory (Katz & Stotland, 1959; Zanna & Rempel, 1988) suggests that personal experiences and actions related to a given issue are an important part of any attitude. As such, it is expected that a person’s experiential history, emotional reactions, and beliefs about inclusion will contribute more to their present attitude than will the competing attitudes/beliefs of colleagues shared in the focus group meeting. In sum, the impact of the focus group on the credibility of educators’ comments stemming from subsequent interviews is believed to be minimal.

#### *Time Constraints in Data Collection*

A final methodological challenge of this study emerged in the process of conducting focus group and individual interviews. Originally, all interviews were to be transcribed immediately after each completing session. At that time, the researcher also intended to read and comment on transcripts concurrent with data collection as a way to begin developing a coding structure as themes began to emerge from the data. However, the researcher had only a short period during which she could collect data before moving out of the state and away from the participating district. All 22 focus

groups and interviews were completed over a 40-day period (June 16, 2006 through July 26, 2006), with as many as four individual interviews in a single day. Because transcription of individual interviews took up eight hours to complete, it was not possible to transcribe each focus group or interview immediately after its completion. As a result, the approach to “reading the database” was modified and mostly occurred after data collection. This change somewhat limited the researcher’s ability to adjust the interview tools to respond to emerging trends and patterns in data. For example, as described in Chapters 3 and 4, participants often provided cognitive responses to questions about their emotional reactions (e.g., feeling “like the bad guy a lot of the time”). This pattern was recognized somewhat late in the data collection process and prompts and queries were modified to better elicit emotional responses. It is possible that with immediate transcription as a source of feedback for the researcher, other questions could have been similarly modified throughout the interview process. As a result, the limited opportunity for modifying the interview protocol presented little threat to the credibility of the comments it elicited, but likely reduced the sensitivity and scope of this instrument for procuring the most salient information for each of the research questions.

#### *Researcher Involvement in the District*

As previously discussed, the researcher’s employment status in the district may have some bearing on participants’ responses to both focus group and interview sessions. First, it is possible that the researcher’s status as a district employee could have reduced the situations and experiences they chose to share as a part of both focus groups and individual interviews. In reviewing the comments of educator participants, little evidence suggests this was the case. Educators occasionally demonstrated a reluctance to discuss certain topics “on-record” more for reasons of confidentiality than due to the examiner’s role. For example, one participant provided a considerable amount of additional information after the audiorecorder had been turned off at the end of the interview; she expanded about frustrations in terms of climate and leadership for inclusion at her building, but indicated that she was reluctant to share these concerns in a more official way. Additionally, the researcher’s role as a district employee may have impacted parents’ willingness to openly disclose their expectations of and beliefs about inclusion. However, examination of the issues and examples provided by parent suggests this was not often the case. In addition to their description of desired/observed gains in development for their included children with ASD, parent participants also

shared very personal examples and information, indicated they were not fully satisfied with their child's inclusive experiences, and articulated concerns regarding educators' willingness to work with parents and their preparation for working with students with autism.

Finally, it should be noted that the researcher's professional experiences as a School Psychology Intern at two of the participating schools (B and D) may have impacted her objectivity when interviewing educator participants from those buildings, reviewing interview transcripts, and developing codes/themes from the data. As with any qualitative study, many efforts have been made to ensure that conclusions drawn from the study are credible, including a *researcher identity memo* to establish and bracket away the researchers' own values and experiences, *collaboration* with doctoral committee members outside of the district on development of codes, themes, and conclusions, *inter-observer reliability* as demonstrated by agreement with a second rater, and *thick detailed descriptions* using numerous quotes from interview transcripts to provide evidence for researcher's interpretations and conclusions.

Nevertheless, an unavoidable consequence of the researcher's professional involvement with two of the schools was that she was more aware of the details regarding service delivery, educators' roles, and students' circumstances in Schools B and D than she was at Schools A and C, with which she had little contact. In the qualitative paradigm, the researcher is viewed as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis. As such, one of the most frequently mentioned criticisms of qualitative research involves the potential for subjectivity or bias (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). With respect to the issues of credibility and/or internal validity, the researcher's involvement in the district may have caused some degree of bias in her probing and exploration of various situations described throughout focus groups or interviews. Having background knowledge about some of the situations at Schools B and D may have led to the researcher asking fewer questions, as she may have believed that she already had adequate information. In cases at Schools A and C, however, the researcher may have probed more often to expose the central issues at hand; this may lead to richer data and more contextual explanation from participants in these buildings. In situations where the participants from Schools B and D alluded to the researcher's background knowledge of an event or child (e.g., "You know what I'm talking about"), the researcher used probes such as "Tell me what it was

like from your perspective” or “Tell me what *you* saw happening in that situation.” To gather additional information about the procedures in Schools A and C, questions about service delivery and other details that arose during coding and manuscript preparation were directed to Lisa (district supervisor of Special Education – Autism) and Connie (district supervisor of Special Education – Due Process and Parent/Family Services), to ensure that her conclusions about various procedures and practices were correct.

#### *Threats to Transferability*

In addition to assuring the credibility of findings, qualitative case study researchers are also compelled to examine the *transferability* of their data. Case study research, and qualitative research in general, asks whether inferences and interpretations “ring true” with both participants themselves and others in similar circumstances. This transferability can be achieved by making explicit the specific research context and, in doing so, ensuring that the results may be transferred to situations with similar contextual features. The person who wishes to “transfer” the results to a different context is then responsible for making the judgment of how sensible the transfer is. In the case of the present study, several characteristics of both the district at large and the individual participants (particularly educators) may cause them to be less representative of the overall elementary personnel population, which may impact the extent to which these findings can be transferred to school personnel in other districts or states. These noteworthy district and participant characteristics are discussed in the sections that follow.

#### *District Characteristics*

While far from perfect, the participating district may be perceived by many in the local community as a leader in inclusive service delivery for students with ASD. Educator and parent participants alike suggested that the participating district has a reputation for being more likely than its neighbors to provide more comprehensive supports students with ASD or to place them in GE settings. Several factors may contribute to the district’s perceived knowledge and willingness with regard to ASD and inclusion in general.

First, the “Continuous Progress” (CP) model (described in greater detail in Chapter 3) may increase elementary teachers’ awareness of and capacities for the flexible, differentiated instruction that is essential to inclusive education. CP extends well beyond the schools and educators participating in this study; it is a core tenet of the overall

district philosophy. In fact, this model of instruction is so engrained in the district that it is listed as a “Guiding Principle” in the district’s comprehensive vision statement.

A continuous progress approach to school organization seeks to enable and encourage each student to progress at his or her own rate of development. This method offers flexible academic expectations and opportunities while valuing a commitment to educating each student. The continuous progress philosophy supports the belief that given the right conditions all children can learn. It provides opportunities for flexible organizational patterns and may include non-traditional teacher assignments to allow for optimal student growth and the expectation of success. (From participating district’s vision statement – no citation is provided for protection of district’s identity)

Such a philosophy and instructional paradigm is highly compatible with the inclusive education of students with all disabilities, but particularly that of ASD. Student with ASD manifest highly unusual and variable patterns of development, with low skills in some critical areas and high skills in others. An instructional context that is constantly attuned to individual needs and frequently reorganizes students according to current developmental level is an ideal platform for advancing the inclusion of students with a variety of disabilities. Yet the extent to which such a model is utilized beyond the boundaries of the participating district is unknown. A search of education databases (i.e., ERIC and EbscoHost) did not yield any citations for “continuous progress” that are consistent with the participating district’s model, but searching with a general internet search engine (i.e., Google) indicated that several districts in Minnesota, Indiana, and Alaska are utilizing such an approach in both elementary and secondary settings. To the extent that other districts are implementing a similar model of instructional delivery, educators comments centering on instructional flexibility may indeed be transferable. Furthermore, it should be noted that while the CP model is an important contextual element in the participating district, its effect on attitudes, experiences, or behavioral intentions with regard to inclusion were not assessed directly. Although it seems quite possible that the CP approach facilitates inclusive education, this relationship is primarily speculative at this point and more data are needed to evaluate this premise.

However, it is reasonable to suggest that the district’s utilization of Autism Inclusion Pods is highly likely to facilitate the inclusion of students with ASD. In addition to offering a multi-age, multi-grade set-up as dictated by CP, the configuration of the



Autism Inclusion Pod affords a degree of *portability of services* not available in other pods by making an inclusion resource teacher a permanent part of the classroom environment and providing space for a specialist (e.g., OT) to operate. The district also has created additional layers of support at the building and district level which are specifically designed to assist educators of children with ASD in all placements: the District CORE Team (a group of consulting educators from throughout the district who support educators of students with low-incidence disabilities), a District Autism Consultant (“Sergio,” a school psychologist who provided intensive consultative support and training on issues related to ASD), and the local Trans-D teams. Each of these factors represents an avenue of instructional support that may not be available in other settings, and that likely increase the district’s ability to create flexible and responsive programs for students with ASD.

Finally, the participating district had not only developed internal philosophies and teams supportive of inclusive education, but also had a history of developing collaborative partnerships with a nearby university and local agencies. As described in the Context Interview portion of Chapter 3, the participating district has undertaken significant efforts to increase capacity for inclusive education by entering into a partnership with the Florida Inclusion Network (FIN). The purpose of this partnership was to participate in ongoing professional development and systems change initiative with the goal of increasing inclusive educational practices at the district, school, and instructional team levels; its outcomes included the completion of a self-assessment tool (“BPIE”) and the creation of a district vision statement for inclusion (Appendix K). Furthermore, the district also had an ongoing collaborative partnership with the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) and the Positive Behavior Support (PBS) projects at the nearby university, participating in research studies and co-sponsoring a summer professional development series. While these relationships are not necessarily unique to the participating district, as other neighboring districts also had connections to FIN, CARD, and PBS, they do underscore the district’s commitment to advancing inclusive education and supporting students with a variety of disabilities. Educators in other districts without similar motivation to create internal supports and seek outside collaborators may find that inclusive education is more difficult to get off the ground, and they may need to develop additional levels of support in order to create the degree of willingness for inclusion seen in this study’s participants.

Although these district characteristics may limit the transferability of these findings to some degree, they do not impact the overall utility of this research. Rather, defining the noteworthy characteristics of the participating district may be instructive to others seeking to imitate or learn from their approach.

#### *Participant Characteristics*

A potential limitation of this study lies in the method of recruiting educator participants. Although the researcher made every effort to deemphasize the topic of inclusion in the printed materials and verbal explanations of the study, the fact remains that educator participants were purposively chosen from the district's four schools with Autism Inclusion Pods. Furthermore, inclusion criteria for the study narrowed potential participants to those individuals who were either directly responsible for the delivery of inclusive education for students with ASD (e.g., GE teachers, SE Inclusion Resource Teachers) or were involved with the instructional and placement decision-making for students with ASD (e.g., SE teachers of self-contained classrooms, administrators, and specialists). As a result, the participating group of educators reflects a group of professionals who are likely to be more knowledgeable about autism, inclusion, and alternative models of service delivery than their colleagues who are not involved in inclusion or who do not consistently work with children with ASD.

Data on participants' background knowledge, presented under the Research Question 6 (Information Sources that Influence Decision-Making) section of Chapter 4, suggest that educators had participated in extensive professional development including graduate coursework, district in-service training, and personal reading of books or journal articles from the autism and special education literature. Furthermore, examination of educators' emotional reactions to and definitive experiences in inclusive education for students with ASD indicates that they are very personally invested in the success of these efforts. Not surprisingly, then, these participants tended to be highly supportive of inclusion as a service delivery model, were flexible in their ideas about how to realize the LRE mandate for students with a variety of support needs, and had a wealth of positive examples on which to base their beliefs and expectations.

Clearly, the results of this study cannot be expected to generalize to a broad population of educators who have not had comparable training and experiences in inclusion or working with students with ASD. In fact, educator participants in this study were cognizant of the fact that their colleagues without these histories were less likely to

have such a positive disposition toward inclusion for students with ASD. Their ideas about the critical role of knowledge and positive experience in developing pro-inclusion attitudes led to the “status-quo” logic model proposed in Figure 7. It should be emphasized that this model is *only hypothetical* and deserves closer attention as part of a follow-up study that includes educators who are either unknowledgeable about inclusion/ASD or are negatively disposed toward it. Finally, educators who participated in the focus groups were those willing to attend several meetings during the summer time, which may indicate an investment and interest in the topic beyond that of their colleagues. The extent to which the participants’ reports are representative of all educators in this region and other locales is not known.

#### Implications for Educational Practice

This study endeavored to represent the realities of inclusion for students with ASD as it is lived by the teachers, administrators, and specialists who are most heavily involved in it. The rich contextual findings offer several implications for the refinement and improvement of inclusive education in the participating district, and also point to important considerations for other school districts turning their attention to inclusive education for the first time.

##### *Improving Attitudes and Implementation through Professional Development*

First, the complex challenges of educating students with ASD, who respond to language, social interactions, and physical environments in atypical ways, requires a significant degree of professional development for all educators and support staff. Mesibov and Shea (1996) note that students with ASD need to receive specialized instruction in ways that minimize their learning deficits and present information in ways that they can comprehend. Even when students with ASD are high functioning and do not require a separate, modified curriculum, GE teachers will still need to shift away from “tried and true” general education teaching practices such as giving verbal explanations of material (e.g., lengthy lectures or verbal explanations), encouraging students to refer to the behavior of their classmates when in doubt or on the wrong track, and relying on social forms of reward (e.g., praise, recognition). Given the linguistic, behavioral, and social challenges characteristic of ASD, such strategies are likely to be ineffective. Instead, educators will need to utilize specialized instructional techniques shown by research to be most effective with students with ASD. In fact, the potential success for an included student with ASD may be less a function of the student’s ability to adapt to

the strictures of the GE setting and more a function of the educator's (or environment's) ability to flex and accommodate the learning needs of the student with ASD while simultaneously moving them ever closer to the standards and expectations of their same-age peers. Furthermore, educator participants in this study acknowledged the highly variable nature of ASD and stressed time and again that instructional programs and placement decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis. Yet educators failed to describe systematic, data-based mechanisms for uncovering the specific needs of individual students (e.g., assessment or observation strategies). As such, the need for professional development emerges in three key areas: (a) general but thorough understanding of the instructional implications of ASD, (b) assessment strategies for analyzing the specific support needs of individual students with ASD, and (c) intensive instructional and behavioral techniques specifically known to be effective for students with ASD.

The importance of truly understanding the instructional implications of ASD cannot be emphasized enough. Comments from educator participants suggested that they viewed themselves as knowledgeable and experienced in working with children with autism, yet they also voiced beliefs about how children with ASD learn that are inconsistent with the empirical literature. Specifically, educators from both GE and SE settings believed that children with autism have a propensity to imitate behaviors (both appropriate and inappropriate) of others in their environments. As such, GE environments where there are ample role models demonstrating desirable, age-appropriate behaviors were seen as vastly preferable to self-contained settings where many students engage in maladaptive behaviors on a frequent basis. Interestingly, this widely-shared belief about the imitative tendencies of students with ASD is *not* supported by current theories and research. In fact, some scholars posit that imitative deficits lie at the heart of autism spectrum disorder and contribute significantly to difficulties in the development of pretend play, joint attention, empathy, emotional engagement, and Theory of Mind (Rogers & Pennington, 1991). As Hobson and Lee (1999) point out, individuals with ASD do not lack the ability to imitate; rather, they struggle to regulate their imitative skills by either using them upon request (e.g., "Do that like he did") or inhibiting more stereotyped forms of mimicry (e.g., echolalia). The discovery of "mirror neurons," their impact on the development of imitation in animals, and their potential impact for understanding autism has been widely lauded in both

empirical publications (e.g., Williams, Whiten, Suddendorf, & Perrett, 2001) and popular news media, including newspapers such as *The New York Times* (Blakeslee, 2006) and online news sources such as Salon.com (Slack, 2007). The fact that teachers and specialists in the participating district made important placement decisions that were predicated at least partly on the belief “children with autism mirror everything they see” (Brandy, Focus Group 1, Line 681) suggests that even among the most knowledgeable members of the participating district, ongoing in-service training may be needed to help educators better understand the role of imitation on the development of children with ASD.

Beyond meeting the specific needs of students with ASD, teachers in GE settings need to be prepared for the realities of inclusion and teaching students with special needs in general. General educator participants lamented that their pre-service training at the university level did not provide necessary information about differentiated instruction or strategies for increasing the achievement of students who learn in atypical ways. Furthermore, the separation of GE and SE training programs continues to reinforce the traditional view that these are two distinct and separate educational systems; such a belief serves as a major barrier to the implementation of inclusive education. Dybvik (2004) echoes the sentiments of educator participants who suggested that GE and SE teachers should be trained together from the earliest days of their professional preparation; “the university setting must mirror the classrooms the teachers will eventually lead” (p. 49).

The finding that educators want more professional development to prepare them for roles in inclusion is hardly a new one. As summarized in Chapter 2, a synthesis of inclusion research spanning from 1958 to 1995 suggests that educators’ attitudes toward inclusion have not significantly changed over a 40-year period even in the face of reduced societal prejudices towards and segregation of individuals with disabilities (Scruggs & Mastropieri, 1995). These authors suggested that teachers’ objections to inclusion are most likely due to the procedural and logistical challenges of inclusion which, unlike social prejudices, have only grown worse in the last half century. Specifically, they concluded,

the lack of improvement in perceptions of teacher preparedness for mainstreaming/inclusion over time suggests that teacher education programs

may be no more effective at preparing teachers for mainstreaming/inclusion now than they were two decades ago (p. 71).

More recently, in a survey of elementary teachers and administrators examining the conditions they perceived as necessary for promoting inclusion, the need for additional training and concern for lack of personal professional experience was a consistent theme (Rose, 2001). As with educators in the current study, teachers were concerned about their own lack of experience and of the skills they would need to accept students with disabilities into their classrooms.

In light of the comments of participating educators who suggested that lack of positive personal or vicarious experiences in inclusion can also contribute to resistant attitudes, school district personnel may wish to consider internal trainers (i.e., current teachers in the district working in inclusive settings), rather than bringing in outside consultants or professionals. A trainer-of-trainers model would be a particularly beneficial model of professional development for increasing a district's capacity for inclusive education. The train-the-trainer model is based on adult learning theory, which states that people who train others remember 90% of the information they teach (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005), as well as diffusion of innovation theory, which states that people adopt new information through their trusted social networks (Rogers, 2003). In addition to providing inclusion/ASD-specific information, such a model would provide teachers with the opportunity to hear their colleagues share their own experiences in inclusion (i.e., positive vicarious experiences). A coaching approach to professional development in inclusion could also be beneficial, given the specific fears and concerns of educators facing inclusive education for the first time. According to Speck (1996), adult learning involves overcoming individual's "egos" and fears of failure. As such, professional development activities must be structured in away that supports educators and reduces the fear of judgment during learning. Furthermore, opportunities to receive performance feedback must be built into professional development activities so the learner can practice the learning and receive structured, helpful feedback. In a coaching model, veteran teachers in inclusion could serve as building-level coaches for new teachers coming into inclusive models for the first time, providing opportunities for observation and instant feedback on performance, as well as ongoing consultation and collaboration.

### *Increasing Sustainability through Behavior Support*

When attempting to describe “good inclusion candidates,” educators consistently came back to behavioral functioning, including emotional control, independence in classroom activities, and social skills, as “driving the success of inclusion” (Brandy, Focus Group 1, Line 596). Furthermore, educator participants indicated that they would be most likely to discontinue or significantly alter an inclusive placement when (a) problem behavior consistently disrupts the learning environment to a considerable degree, or (b) students with ASD frequently engage in behavior that is unsafe to him/herself and/or others. In addition to professional development that assists educators in improving their behavioral management skills for students in general and in providing specialized social/behavioral supports for students with ASD, school buildings developing an inclusive service delivery model could benefit from the adoption of school-wide positive behavior supports (SWPBS) as a mechanism for promoting consistency in behavior management across the entire school setting (Weigle, 1997). School-wide positive behavior support is a systems approach to behavior change that encourages schools to provide a continuum of supports (school-wide, classroom, and individual) addressing the needs of all students including those with the most significant learning and/or behavior challenges, by matching the intensity of intervention to the child’s individual needs (Carr et al., 2002; Sugai & Horner, 1994). An impressive empirical base demonstrates that SWPBS can yield significant behavioral improvements at the building level, such as decreased office discipline referrals, suspensions/expulsions, and other units of analysis applied to building behavior trends (Carr et al., 2002).

More recently, researchers and practitioners have turned their attention to the potential benefits that SWPBS can have on the behavior of students with the most significant disabilities. Freeman et al. (2006) note that SWPBS offers several advantages that are consistent with the aims and effective practices of inclusive education. First, school personnel learn a common language that incorporates positive strategies from GE and SE, which can facilitate unity among all staff within the school. A set of basic behavior expectations are created for all students and all settings in the school (e.g., “Be Safe, Be Respectful, Be Your Personal Best”), such that all school staff communicate the same expectations to students at all times. Second, students with disabilities are involved in learning school-wide expectations along with all of their peers, through “primary prevention” (i.e., direct behavior instruction in classroom settings).

Regardless of placement, all students learn the same basic expectations for behavior and how to apply them in various settings and situations. Third, an additional level of support (“secondary prevention”) is made available for groups of students who “have learning, behavior, or life histories that put them at risk of engaging in more serious problem behavior” (Freeman et al., 2006, p. 4), with the goal of addressing the needs of students through small-group instruction (e.g., social skills training) before more intensive, individualized supports are needed.

For the participating district, the development of Autism Inclusion Pods created an environment where relatively large groups of students with ASD (e.g., 6-8) may be assigned to a particular primary or intermediate team. Secondary prevention groups for teaching specific social and communication skills could be a natural fit with this set-up. Finally, for a small group of students who engage in serious and/or chronic problem behavior, individualized functional behavioral assessment and comprehensive plans are used to provide a third level of intervention for the students with more intensive support needs.

The tiered approach to SWPBS suggests that not all students will need individualized behavioral supports. Offering a continuum of behavior supports creates a form of educational triage in which high-intensity, individualized supports are created only for students who have not shown adequate response to less intensive but high-fidelity supports also available for GE peers. As such, when the school-wide environment is one of prevention, behavioral education, and consistent expectations, the basic philosophical tenets of inclusive education are reinforced:

All students should have the same opportunities to learn and grow together within the school environment. SWPBS processes emphasize the importance of addressing all students’ needs within the school, thus including, by definition, students with and without disabilities (Freeman et al., 2006, p. 6).

#### *Increasing Collaboration through Home-School Partnerships*

A final implication for practice is the need for improving the collaborative partnerships between educators and parents, with regard to both placement decision-making and development of individualized supports for students with ASD. Although parents and educators demonstrate at least moderate agreement in their overall desire for inclusive placements and goals for students with ASD, both participant groups indicated that relations between these two parties are often strained and fraught with



conflict. Across GE and SE settings, families and educators often differ in their expectations, goals, and communication patterns, sometimes leading to frustration and misunderstanding among students, families and educators. In the present study, educators' comments suggested they believe that parents of students with ASD are likely advocate very strongly for their children, unrealistic in their expectations for either their children's growth or for services to be provided in the school setting, and (perhaps out of district fear of due process) have a disproportional influence in the IEP process. Parents, meanwhile, describe feeling that their expertise on their child with ASD is not recognized and educators do not welcome or value their input with respect to their child's educational plan. These findings are not unique. Tett (2001) found that schools may perceive parents as "problems" who need to change to the school's way of seeing things, while a qualitative study by Swick and Hooks (2005) suggested that parents may feel that they have to "fight" with the educational system over inclusive placements. When educators and parents are unable to successfully bridge these differences, "a lack of communication between home and school further divides and separates the two most vital support systems available to the student" (National Association of School Psychologists, 2005).

Consensus exists in both legal mandates (IDEA, 2004) and scholarly literature (e.g., Dunlap & Fox, 2002; Iovannone et al., 2003) that parent involvement is an essential element in supporting students with ASD and other disabilities, and there is a wealth of evidence from both GE and SE literature citing the academic and behavioral benefits of positive home-school relationships. To maximize these benefits, school districts must devote as much energy and creativity to making parents integrated members of the school community as they do for students with ASD themselves. First, educators and parents alike would benefit from participating in training on strategies for effective collaboration with parents. One particularly method of fostering effective collaboration in schools is to train parents and school personnel together (Espe-Sherwindt, 2001; Webster-Stratton et al., 2001). Such an approach not only leads to improvements in participants' ability to collaborate in planning individual student programs, but has also been associated with more positive attitudes and higher expectations of students with disabilities (Colling, Fishbaugh, & Hermanson, 2003). A program like *Understanding Special Education* (Whitbread, Bruder, Fleming, & Park, 2007) may be particularly beneficial. This program was based on a Train-the-Trainer

model, preparing a parent-educator pairs to provide a series of trainings to groups of parents and educational professionals on (a) steps in the educational process, (b) laws and process affecting special education, (c) the Individualized Education Program (IEP), (d) person-centered planning, and (e) family school partnerships. An underlying premise of this program is that parents and educators alike lack preparation in both effective communication and the perspectives of other stakeholders; by facilitating a discussion between these two disparate stakeholder groups, both sides are empowered to reach out to the other in meaningful ways.

Finally, district personnel should consider changing their procedures to include parent participation in decision-making meetings such as In-School Staffings and to solicit parent input for other less formal meetings. For instance, prior to bringing a child up at Trans-D, educators could request parental input either in writing (sending a note home) or by phone so that parent insights can be incorporated into the discussion; follow-up information about ideas for changing the child's supports or instructional should also be shared with the student's parent at the conclusion of the meeting. Parents' approaches to advocacy may change when they feel included in all aspects of decision-making and are aware of the efforts educators make on their child's behalf.

School district personnel must commit themselves to investigating and developing kinds of activities (even when parents behave in ways that educators find frustrating or inappropriate), just as parents must commit themselves to advocating in ways that acknowledge the efforts and limitations of the school system (even when educators act in ways that diminish the role of and frustrate parents). Yet, Christenson, Rounds, and Gorney (1992) note that home-school collaboration is an attitude, not merely an activity. Educators who reach out to parents because they *want* to, rather than because they feel they *ought* to, are more likely to create sustainable partnerships with the parents of the children they serve. True partnerships are created when parents and educators share common goals, see each other as equals, and both contribute meaningfully to the decision-making. Data from this study suggest that educators and parents are more alike than different in their conceptualizations of inclusive education and desired outcomes for students with ASD. Taking these shared beliefs to the next level will require educators and parents to find ways to recognize and encourage either as meaningful participants in the development of individualized programs for students with ASD.

### Recommendations for Future Research

The data presented in the present study yield not only implications for educational practice, but also avenues for future research. First, although the attitude systems model described previously examines *behavioral intentions*, it does so primarily through the perspective of how educators make decisions about inclusion and what placements they will make under various conditions. By design, less attention was paid to the specifics of educators' approaches to instructional delivery and other forms of support provided in the classroom. While educator participants described themselves as willing, open-minded, and persistent in the endeavors to create inclusion, they also suggested that the behavioral intentions of resistant teachers are likely to differ in important ways (i.e., seeking to promote the status quo of the classroom, rather than promote change and development in the student). Follow-up research should examine how the behavior of educators who are highly motivated to see inclusion be successful differs from those that are resistant to inclusion, in terms of both decision-making and instructional delivery.

Second, the recurring theme of deciding on and developing inclusion on a "case-by-case basis" warrants additional study. If educators find individualized supports and considerations to be of utmost importance, how *do* teachers go about differentiating instruction for these students? What (if any) data do they use to inform their instructional decisions? Although information from focus groups from this study, as well as retrospective discussion of the use of data offers some suggestions (indicating that educators may be inconsistent in their use of data to derive instructional programs), additional *in vivo* research would provide a more authentic representation of educators' actual practices with respect to differentiated instruction and data-based decision-making.

Third, educators' and parents' desired goals for inclusion and perceived attainment of these goals should be addressed in subsequent research. Although themes of increased independence and initiation emerged across both parent and educator participants, examination of individual transcripts reveals that both participant groups struggled to answer this question. Educators focused on process issues (i.e., what they do to attain these goals) and the challenges of helping these kids, but had more difficulty summarizing progress in each of the relevant areas (e.g., social/emotional/behavioral, academic, communication, etc.). Similarly, parents focused

on overall development their children had made, but had a hard time pinpointing which gains were due to their child's inclusion.

These observations beg the question: Why was this question so hard to answer? One hypothesis is that outcomes may be highly context dependent – no one single area consistently improved by inclusion. For educators in an inclusion paradigm working with highly variable children all under the ASD umbrella, it may be difficult to provide generalizations about growth and development made in inclusion. Returning to the theme of “case-by-case” basis, examination of student outcomes might be better explored in a case study approach that follows the trajectory of individual students. Such an approach would also allow for examination of the characteristics of the inclusive education program and environment that may or may not have contributed to the success of the student.

In addition to a case study approach, a broader study of the outcomes of included students with ASD is also necessary. As the cohort of included students with ASD exits the K-12 system, a quantitative group design examining dependent variables such as retention, FCAT scores, graduation rates, and postsecondary outcomes (e.g., employment, college enrollment) could examine the impact of inclusion on major educational benchmarks, in comparison to demographically similar students who participated in the GE setting to a lesser extent. Of course, controlling for relevant personal characteristics that are likely to contribute to these outcomes (e.g., presence of maladaptive behavior, cognitive abilities, etc.) would be an essential part of such a study.

Finally, the attitude systems describing the beliefs and behaviors of parents of students with ASD should also be explored in greater depth. For example, a potentially enlightening study could compare the attitude systems of educators in inclusion to those of parents, comparing them on the exact same questions with respect to beliefs, emotional responses, past experiences, behavioral intentions, and desired outcomes and compare. The current study did not examine parents at this depth, but by examining the overlapping and contrasting areas, educators could have powerful information to improve the home-school partnerships that are essential to special education. Areas of overlap could be used to promote and reinforce home-school relationships (i.e., “Educators and parents share a common vision in [District]”). Additionally, areas of substantial difference (e.g., beliefs about educators’ competencies in serving students

with ASD) could be targeted for improvement. Creating consensus and positive relationships between the two key stakeholder groups is paramount in creating inclusive education programs with community support and long-term sustainability.

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## Appendices



Appendix A

District Ratings on BPIE Self-Assessment, December, 2004

Values and School Climate	Access to General Ed	Policies and Support: Leadership	Policies & Support: Program Dev. & Eval.	Policies & Support: Instructional Support and Pedagogy
4 items M= 2.5 Range=2-3	7 items M=2.4 Range=1-5	5 items M=2.6 Range=2-3	8 items M=3.2 Range=1-5	9 items M=3.2 Range=2-5
20	35	25	40	45
16	28	20	32	36
12	21	15	24	27
10	19	13	25	29
8	14	10	16	18
4	7	5	8	9
0	0	0	0	0

Scales consisted of four to nine questions in each domain area. Each question was rated on a Likert scale from 1 to 5, with lower scores suggesting limited to nonexistent implementation in a given area and higher scores suggesting maximum implementation. Each rating was individualized to reflect the content of the question.

For example, on a question about the extent to which inclusive philosophies are conveyed in district mission statement, a rating of (1) indicated a mission statement reflecting that all students can learn, while a rating of (5) indicated a mission statement with the following philosophies: all students can learn, schools are accountable for demonstrating adequate yearly progress (AYP), and a preference for providing services in age-appropriate general education/natural contexts for students within neighborhood schools or schools of choice.

## Appendix B

### District Definitions of Continuum of ESE Services at Elementary Level

Developed and disseminated March 2007

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Least Restrictive Environment

Most Restrictive Environment

#### Consultation

General education teachers and ESE teachers meet regularly to plan, implement, and monitor instructional alternatives designed to ensure that the student with exceptionalities is successful in the general education classroom. All teachers providing support to students via consultation with the students' general education teachers are required to maintain a record of the teachers, courses and ESE students to whom they are providing services.

- Previously referred to as "mainstream" or "mainstream consultation"
- No direct assistance provided to student, recommendations provided to teacher(s)
- When student is in Basic Ed with consult only, the meeting must be monthly and face to face between the ESE and basic teachers

#### Content Mastery or Learning Lab (limited pullout)

Direct content instruction is primarily provided by the general education teacher in a general education classroom. Individual support for students identified with exceptionalities is provided by ESE teachers in a content mastery or learning lab center when additional support is needed for a specific and defined time-limited task (students would not be scheduled on a regular basis, only as needed). Defining characteristics/issues:

- Instruction in basic class, student goes to "learning lab" for assistance
- Designated place that can be accessed by all students staffed by an ESE teacher
- Academic support is provided in this setting as needed (not regularly scheduled times)

#### Support Facilitation

An ESE teacher provides support for ESE students' achievement in the general classroom. Support facilitators may move among two or more basic education classrooms working with the general education teachers and students identified with exceptionalities as needed. The frequency and intensity of support varies based upon students' and/or general educators' need for assistance.

- Similar to Team Teach or Resource Assistance
- ESE teacher can travel between classrooms to meet student needs, does not have to stay in class for the entire class time
- Primary focus is meeting the needs of students with disabilities, students without disabilities can be included if grouped with students with disabilities
- 1/3 within class-size

#### Co-Teaching

A classroom in which two teachers, an ESE and a general education teacher, share responsibility for planning, delivering, and evaluating instruction for all students in a class, some of whom are ESE and some of whom are not. In order to be considered co-teaching, this delivery system is provided whenever a class/subject is taught by two teachers and must continue for the entire class period.

- ESE teacher and basic teacher plan together and are responsible for delivering curriculum to all students
- Must be for entire class period, every time the class meets
- 1/3 above class-size

#### Resource Room or Self-Contained

ESE teachers would provide total instruction and focused services in these models in which all of the students being served are students with exceptionalities. The setting for this service delivery model is other than the general education classroom for a period(s) of the school day.

- Can be full or part-time in a separate classroom with no basic ed students
- Pull out services in small groups (all ESE)
- Self contained classes

Appendix C  
Participant Tracking Form

N	Adult			Data Analysis Status			
	Code	Pseudonym	Child Pseudonyms	Member Check	Transcription	Coding	Audit
<b>Focus Group 1: Wed June 14, Stu Serv Conf Room, District Office, 2:00-4:30</b>					<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
1	A1-ESEIncl	Lauren		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	1
2	B1-ESEIncl	Brandy		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
3	A2-ESEPKA	Julie		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
4	C1-ESEPKA	Frances		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
5	D1-ESEPKA	Rhiannon		Reviewed, 1 typo change	1	1	n/a
6	D2-GE	Caryn	Caleb, Mark, Tiffany	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
7	D3-BxSp	Tracey	Ray-Ray, Caleb, Ricardo	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
<b>Focus Group 2: Tues June 27, ESE Conf Room, District Office, 2:00-4:30</b>					<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>1</b>
8	C2-Admin	Helen		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
9	D4-Admin	Maggie		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
10	A5-ESEPriA	Joanne	Jose	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
11	B2-ESEIntA	Darla		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
12	A3-GE	Natalie	Mason, Rob, Andrew, William	1 minor change (3 words), 1 typo	1	1	n/a
13	D5-ESEPriA	Simone		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
14	A4-SchPsy	Beatrice		Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
14	B3-GE	Melody	Thomas	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
<b>Parents</b>							
1	Parent A1	Beth	Trevor	1 name changed	1	1	1
2	Parent A2	Rick & Kim	Alex	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
3	Parent B1	Linda	Miguel	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
4	Parent B2	Shannon	Ryan	Accepted w/ no changes	1	1	n/a
5	Parent C1	Marjorie	Chris/Abigail	1 minor content change, 1 typo	1	1	n/a
6	Parent D1	Martin & Carol	Luke	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
7	Parent D2	Nick & Irene	Mark	Deadline passed w/o feedback	1	1	n/a
					100%	100%	100%

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Appendix D  
Researcher Identity Memo: Summary

- Personal recollections about special education service delivery and inclusion from my own K-12 school experiences: memories of the “special kids,” wondering who they were and where their classes were located, rare opportunities for interaction between students with severe disabilities and general education students.
- A work experience at a group home for adults with developmental disabilities, coupled with beginning graduate training in school psychology, led to an increased awareness of:
  - Positive behavioral supports (PBS), life-skills curricula, vocational training, and social skills instruction to increase independence for individuals with developmental disabilities
  - *Interdependence, or natural supports*, where individuals with disabilities could connect with others in their own community to develop a network of supports to assist in accomplishing their own life goals starts with integration and inclusion at a young age.
    - Individuals who had experienced a lifetime of segregation from their neighbors and limited opportunities to experience community living or supported employment situations had difficulty attaining independence in their daily lives
- Graduate training and work experiences led to reflection on school psychologists’ potential role in facilitating the inclusion of students with disabilities through problem-solving and systems-level consultation, direct assessment of relevant skills, instructional accommodation and intervention, positive approaches to behavior change, etc. Additional experiences in providing these services through training and consultative roles, as well as interactions with parents/advocates of children with ASD, led to increased understanding of parents’ goals for including their children and the challenges that educators face in developing individualized supports for students with ASD in general education settings.

Appendix E  
Educator Informed Consent form

## Informed Consent

### Educator Form

Social and Behavioral Sciences  
University of South Florida

### Information for People Who Take Part in Research Studies

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The following information is being presented to help you decide whether or not you want to take part in a minimal risk research study. Please read this carefully. If you do not understand anything, ask the person in charge of the study.

**Title of Study:** *A Qualitative Study of Educators' and Parents' Attitudes, Beliefs, and Decision-Making Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*

**Principal Investigator:** Jenine M. Sansosti, M.A.

**Study Location(s):** [REDACTED] – elementary schools and district office

### General Information about the Research Study

The purpose of this research study is to find out how educators make decisions about instructional supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as well as their attitudes and beliefs, goals and desired outcomes, and past experiences with regard to educating students with ASD. An additional goal of this study is to determine parents' goals and desired outcomes for their own children with ASD. This study is a dissertation that fulfills the research requirement of the Ph.D. program in School Psychology at the University of South Florida.

### Plan of Study

There are two phases to this study:

1. You will participate in a **focus group** with 7-9 other educators, administrators, and student services personnel from several schools sites that have many students with ASD. The focus group will be run similarly to a large meeting, with the researcher as the facilitator. The purpose of the focus group is to stimulate discussion about instructing students with ASD. While in the focus group, you also will be asked to discuss ideas and strategies for working with two hypothetical (i.e., make-believe) students. You will receive descriptions or "vignettes" describing these students before the focus group so you have some time to think about what kind of educational program you believe is most appropriate for each hypothetical student. The focus group is expected to last 1.5 to 2 hours. It will be held at district office in a private location and food and drinks will be available. Discussion resulting from the focus group will be audiotaped so that it can be transcribed and analyzed later by the researcher.
2. After the focus group, at a time that is convenient to you, you will meet individually with the researcher for a **private interview**. The purpose of the private interview is to better understand your attitudes, beliefs, and feelings about instructional approaches for students with ASD, as well as to learn how decisions about instructional programs for these

## Appendix E (Continued)

students are made at your own school. At the end of the interview, the researcher will ask some “demographic questions” about your background, to get to know you as an individual a little better. This interview should take about 45 minutes to 1 hour and will be conducted at a time and location most convenient for you. Again, your responses will be audiotaped so that they can later be transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

Only the researcher and the doctoral committee will have access to these tapes and transcripts, which will not be labeled or identified using participants’ names. These tapes will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed. Additionally, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript from your individual interview to confirm its accuracy before data are analyzed.

### **Payment for Participation**

You will be compensated for your participation in this study. The [REDACTED] is offering \$13.25/hour and up to 5 master inservice points for instructional/noninstructional personnel. Administrators can also receive inservice points and may be eligible for professional development pay if they are not under contract.

### **Benefits of Being a Part of this Research Study**

You may benefit from the opportunity to discuss instructional approaches for students with ASD among a diverse group of educators from multiple school sites. This may assist you in future instructional planning or problem-solving with students in your own school/classroom.

### **Risks of Being a Part of this Research Study**

**There are no anticipated risks in association with participating in this study.**

However, if you have any of questions or concerns about your participation in this study, please call the researcher (Jenine Sansosti) at 813-545-6746. If any of the information discussed in this study makes you feel uncomfortable or upset, you may contact the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), which is a district benefit program intended to ensure a healthy work environment for all [REDACTED] staff. EAP offers up to 5 free sessions for counseling and referral for personal issues, wellness initiatives, financial advisement, and other specialized programs. You can reach EAP at the numbers below:

- [REDACTED]-2366
- [REDACTED]-2366
- [REDACTED]-2366

### **Confidentiality of Your Records**

Your privacy and research records will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. Authorized research personnel, employees of the Department of Health and Human Services, and the USF Institutional Review Board and its staff, as well as other individuals acting on the behalf of USF, may inspect the records from this research project. *However, participants in the study, such as other educators or parents, will only be permitted to review their own individual interview transcript and will not have access to others data at any time.*

The results of this study may be published. However, the data obtained from you will be combined with data from others in the publication. The published results will not include your name or any other information that would personally identify you in any way. The [REDACTED]

## Appendix E (Continued)

████████████████████ will also not be identified by name, but rather will be described as “the participating district.”

Should you decide to participate in this study, you will be assigned a Participant Code that identifies you by your professional role and the school at which you work. This code will be used for the purposes of identifying your responses on audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other research records. For example, a hypothetical participant “Tina Laredo,” a special educator from ██████████ Elementary, could be noted on all relevant documentation as SE-A, indicating that she is a special educator from School A. In this way, your name or school affiliation will never appear on any documentation associated with this research, and your privacy will be protected at all times. In the final write-up and presentation of this study, all Participant Codes will be replaced with pseudonyms (made-up names) to convey a more authentic sense of the individuals participating in the study. For example, participant SE-A (“Tina Laredo” from ██████████) might be referred to in the study as “Michelle Johnson (*pseudonym*), a special educator from Apple Elementary (*pseudonym*).”

Finally, you will be cautioned to keep all comments and discussion from the focus groups confidential. Please do not share your comments, nor those of other participants, with others outside of the focus group sessions.

### **Volunteering to Be Part of this Research Study**

Your decision to participate in this research study is completely voluntary. You are free to participate or not participate in this research study, or to withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive, if you stop taking part in the study. In addition, your decision to participate will have no impact on your job status.

### **Questions and Contacts**

- If you have any questions about this research study, contact Jenine Sansosti at 813-545-6746.
- If you have questions about your rights as a person who is taking part in a research study, you may contact the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.
- If you need more time to think about whether you want to participate, please let the researcher know at this time. She will contact you in 2-3 days to follow-up.

### **Consent to Take Part in This Research Study**

By signing this form I agree that:

- I have fully read or have had read and explained to me this informed consent form describing this research project.
- I have had the opportunity to question one of the persons in charge of this research and have received satisfactory answers.
- I understand that I am being asked to participate in research. I understand the risks and benefits, and I freely give my consent to participate in the research project outlined in this form, under the conditions indicated in it.

Appendix E (Continued)

- I have been given a signed copy of this informed consent form, which is mine to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Investigator Statement**

I have carefully explained to the subject the nature of the above research study. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the subject signing this consent form understands the nature, demands, risks, and benefits involved in participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator/Authorized  
Data Collector

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Investigator/  
Authorized Data Collector

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



Appendix F  
Parent Informed Consent form

## Informed Consent

### Parent Form

Social and Behavioral Sciences  
University of South Florida

### Information for People Who Take Part in Research Studies

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The following information is being presented to help you decide whether or not you want to take part in a minimal risk research study. Please read this carefully. If you do not understand anything, ask the person in charge of the study.

**Title of Study:** *A Qualitative Study of Educators' and Parents' Attitudes, Beliefs, and Decision-Making Strategies for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders*

**Principal Investigator:** Jenine M. Sansosti, M.A.

**Study Location(s):** [REDACTED] – elementary schools and district office

### General Information about the Research Study

The purpose of this research study is to find out how educators make decisions about instructional supports for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD), as well as their attitudes and beliefs, goals and desired outcomes, and past experiences with regard to educating students with ASD. An additional goal of this study is to determine parents' goals and desired outcomes for their own children with ASD. This study is a dissertation that fulfills the research requirement of the Ph.D. program in School Psychology at the University of South Florida.

### Plan of Study

You will meet with the researcher individually or with your spouse/partner for an interview. The purpose of the private interview is to better understand your beliefs about instructional approaches for students with ASD, as well as to discuss your child's current classroom placement and your own goals and desired outcomes for your child with ASD in that setting. At the end of the interview, the researcher will ask some "demographic questions" about your background, to get to know you a little better as an individual. This interview should take about 1.5 hours and will be conducted at a time and location most convenient for you. Your responses will be audiotaped so that they can later be transcribed and analyzed by the researcher.

Only the researcher and the doctoral committee will have access to these tapes and transcripts, which will not be labeled or identified using participants' names. These tapes will be destroyed once the interview has been transcribed. Additionally, you will have an opportunity to review the transcript from your individual interview to confirm its accuracy before data are analyzed.

## Appendix F (Continued)

### **Payment for Participation**

You will be compensated for your participation in this study. A \$25 stipend will be given to parents who complete the interview.

### **Benefits of Being a Part of this Research Study**

You may benefit from the opportunity to consider your personal goals and desired outcomes for your child with ASD in his/her classroom setting. This may assist you in future IEP planning or problem-solving with educational staff.

### **Risks of Being a Part of this Research Study**

**There are no anticipated risks in association with participating in this study.**

However, if you have any of questions or concerns about your participation in this study, please call the researcher (Jenine Sansosti) at 813-545-6746.

### **Confidentiality of Your Records**

Your privacy and research records will be kept confidential to the extent of the law. Authorized research personnel, employees of the Department of Health and Human Services, the USF Institutional Review Board and its staff, and any other individuals acting on behalf of USF may inspect the records from this research project. Participants in the study, such as educators or other parents, will only be permitted to review their own individual interview transcript and will not have access to others data at any time.

The results of this study may be published. However, the data obtained from you will be combined with data from others in the publication. The published results will not include your name or any other information that would personally identify you in any way. [REDACTED] will also not be identified by name, but rather will be described as "the participating district."

Should you decide to participate in this study, you will be assigned a Participant Code that identifies you by your professional role and the school at which you work. This code will be used for the purposes of identifying your responses on audiotapes, interview transcripts, and any other research records. For example, a hypothetical participant "Tina Laredo," a parent of a child at [REDACTED] Elementary, could be noted on all relevant documentation as Par-A, indicating that she is a parent of a child from School A. In this way, your name or school affiliation will never appear on any documentation associated with this research, and your privacy will be protected at all times. In the final write-up and presentation of this study, all Participant Codes will be replaced with pseudonyms (made-up names) to convey a more authentic sense of the individuals participating in the study. For example, participant Par-A ("Tina Laredo," parent from [REDACTED]) might be referred to in the study as "Michelle Johnson (*pseudonym*), a parent of a child attending Apple Elementary (*pseudonym*)."

### **Volunteering to Be Part of this Research Study**

Your decision to participate in this research study is completely voluntary. You are free to participate or not participate in this research study, or to withdraw at any time. If you stop taking part in the study, there will be no penalty or loss of benefits that you are entitled to receive through school or community resources.

Appendix F (Continued)

**Questions and Contacts**

- If you have any questions about this research study, contact Jenine Sansosti at 813-545-6746.
- If you have questions about your rights as a person who is taking part in a research study, you may contact the Division of Research Integrity and Compliance of the University of South Florida at (813) 974-5638.
- If you need more time to think about whether you want to participate, please let the researcher know at this time. She will contact you in 2-3 days to follow-up.

**Consent to Take Part in This Research Study**

By signing this form I agree that:

- I have fully read or have had read and explained to me this informed consent form describing this research project.
- I have had the opportunity to question one of the persons in charge of this research and have received satisfactory answers.
- I understand that I am being asked to participate in research. I understand the risks and benefits, and I freely give my consent to participate in the research project outlined in this form, under the conditions indicated in it.
- I have been given a signed copy of this informed consent form, which is mine to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Investigator Statement**

I have carefully explained to the subject the nature of the above research study. I hereby certify that to the best of my knowledge the subject signing this consent form understands the nature, demands, risks, and benefits involved in participating in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Investigator/Authorized  
Data Collector

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Name of Investigator/  
Authorized Data Collector

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix G

### Focus Group Interview Protocol

(NOTE: The district's name has been kept on interview protocols to facilitate use in data collection, but it has been blinded here to protect identity.)

#### **Introduction**

*Introduce yourself and tell the group a little about your background and position in the district. Thank participants for agreeing to participate in the study.*

#### **Purpose of the Study**

As you all know and have experienced, ██████ County's student population is growing at an unprecedented rate. One student group that is growing particularly quickly is students with Autism Spectrum Disorders, or ASDs. The "autism spectrum" includes students with classic autism, Asperger's Disorder or Higher-Functioning Autism, and Pervasive Developmental Disorders-Not Otherwise Specified. In ██████ County, this group of students has grown 288% in the last 6 years, creating an interesting challenge for educators as to how to best meet the educational needs of this diverse group of students. You were invited because each of you is an educator at a school with a high number of students with ASD, and your professional role brings you in frequent contact with these students. In this study, I wish to understand how educators, both individually and as a team, make decisions about instruction for students with ASD. I am especially interested in how educators use their past experiences to make these decisions. This focus group interview is the first step. Later, as you know, I will be meeting with each of you individually to discuss similar issues.

#### **Expectations for Participation**

Today we will discuss two hypothetical student cases and I will be asking each of you to participate in a process of making decisions about the best educational program for each student. I will also have some questions for you as a group about your school's approach to educating students with ASD.

Please keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers. It's possible that each of you at this table will have differing points of view. Also, unlike at our typical IEP or problem-solving meetings, we don't have to reach any kind of consensus today; I just

## Appendix G (Continued)

want to hear what your ideas are. Feel free to share your point of view, even if it differs from what others have said. If you want to follow up on something that someone has said, or if you want to agree, disagree, or give an example, please do so. Keep in mind that I'm just as interested in your concerns or negative experiences as we are your successes and your positive experiences. Also, don't feel like you have to respond to me all the time. Feel free to have a conversation with one another about these questions. I am here to ask questions, listen, and make sure everyone has a chance to share. I'm interested in hearing from each of you. So if you're talking a lot, I may ask you to give others a chance. And if you aren't saying much, I may call on you. I just want to make sure I hear from all of you.

Just as a reminder, I am going to be both taking notes and tape-recording this session, because I don't want to miss any of your comments. Following our meeting today, I will review the audio-tape and my notes to create a written transcript of the focus group. After I make the transcript, I will circulate it to each member of this team for review, and you will have a chance to clarify any points before the transcript is finalized. I will take great care to hold your comments in the strictest confidence. No names (educators, children, parents, etc.) will be used in any of the reports in this study; either codes (e.g., Teacher from School A) or pseudonyms (e.g., Jane Doe from Apple Elementary) will be used. Finally, it is possible that while we are talking, you may wish to describe experiences regarding current or past students. I welcome this kind of information, but I need to ask that you not give the students' name when you describe your specific experiences. Once I have received your feedback on the transcript, I will erase the audio-tape. Again, thank you for your time.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

I anticipate that this will take approximately 1½ to 2 hours. We'll begin by going around the room one at a time to learn a little more about each other. One final thing: feel free to get up and get some more refreshments during the interview!

1. **Opening question:** Tell us your name, your role at [SCHOOL] and what you most enjoy doing when you are not at work.

## Appendix G (Continued)

2. **Introductory question:** What brought you to education, and (if relevant) specifically to special education?
3. **Transition question:** You are here because you work with a number of students with autism spectrum disorders, both in general and special education environments. Please give an overview of your role in educating these children.
4. What kinds of issues affect your decision-making when deciding the instructional supports and placement of students with ASD (e.g., behavior, diagnostic labels, support needs, available resources, etc.)?
5. What outcomes do you think parents of children with ASD are looking for as result of their child's educational experience? Do parents think their children are achieving these outcomes?

**\*\*INSERT VIGNETTE # 1\*\***

*(Josh)*

### **Vignette Questions:**

6. If this child came to your school today (and you had no other information to go on but this vignette), what kind of instructional plan, including appropriate context or environment, would best meet his/her needs?
7. What specific strategies and supports would need to be in place to support this child's learning and behavioral needs?
  - *(if not discussed in reference to above)* Do you think these strategies and supports could be delivered in general education?
  - Why or why not?
8. Describe your rationale for the plan you have developed. Why do you think these strategies are important?

## Appendix G (Continued)

- If you had to pick one thing on this list that is the most important to you, in terms of educating this child, what would it be?
9. *Review strategies as listed on chart paper:* Did I accurately capture everything that was said?

**\*\*INSERT VIGNETTE # 2\*\***

*(Nathan)*

*(Repeat vignette questions 4-7 for 2<sup>nd</sup> vignette)*

10. What kind of information, experience, etc. do you have that tells you that these are good ideas for students with ASD?

### **Ending questions:**

11. Think about the educational opportunities for students with ASD at your school. What areas could be improved? What are you most proud of?
12. If you were to share “words of wisdom” with educators who are about to begin developing educational programs for students with ASD for the first time, what would you tell them?

### **Generic Probes**

- Neutral agreement or acknowledgement
  - *Um-hm, Oh I see*
- Reflecting in form of a question
  - *So you tried using social stories?*
- Asking for more info
  - *Could you tell me more about why ...?*
  - *Would you explain further?*
  - *Would you give an example of what you mean?*
  - *Tell us more.*
- Ask for clarification on internal differences in what person said
  - *You said earlier that... but just now you told me...?*
- Asking for an opinion
  - *You said that... what do you think about that?*
- Asking for clarification of the meaning of a term
  - *You used the word... What did you mean by that? Can you give me some examples?*

## Appendix H

### Focus Group Vignettes

**Name:** Joshua Trimble (*pseudonym*)  
**Grade:** 3  
**Chronological Age:** 9 years, 9 months

Joshua (“Josh”) Trimble recently moved to FL from New Hampshire. His parent has registered him at your school and shared the following information about Joshua’s history. Your school personnel are working on obtaining more comprehensive records, but for now, your team needs to make a decision about the most appropriate educational context and instructional plan for Josh.

#### Background Information

- Initial evaluation at 4 years old, due to language concerns.
  - Gross and fine motor skills were considerably below average when compared to his same-age peers
  - Additional concerns were noted in the areas of play, social skills, and communication.
  - Josh tended to repeat words or phrases frequently, had difficulty responding to questions, and displayed limited pragmatic communication skills.
- Josh participated in the preschool special education program due to Developmental Delay (DD), as well as speech/language and occupational therapy (OT) services.
- Evaluation from pediatric neurologist:
  - Developmental and language delays were noted, as well as difficulties with visual-motor integration.
  - The report described Josh as “distractible, active, and impulsive.”
  - General and neurological exams suggested normal functioning. To date, Josh has not received a medical diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder.

#### Behavioral/Social Functioning

Throughout Josh’s school records, observations note difficulties working independently and sustaining attention in both small group activities and with one-to-one adult assistance.

- Tantrums were occasionally observed when invited to participate with the class or transition to a new activity. However, as Josh progressed through school, observations of these concerns diminished and his behavior seems to have improved.
- Josh tends to become less attentive and more off-task after approximately 30 minutes of working. After this amount of time, he is usually more easily distracted, often asking if he can stop.
- Josh quickly becomes frustrated with complex activities or tasks with too many items; in these situations, he often cries or yells out, “it’s too hard!” or “it’s not gonna work!” Most of the time, Josh can be redirected to the task with verbal encouragement and minimal assistance.

Socially, Josh does not have a set group of friends. At his former school, he most often spent most of his recess time with younger students (mostly girls) and did not play team



## Appendix H (Continued)

sports, but rather walked around and “chit-chatted” with them. Josh tends to be more comfortable socializing with adults than with peers, and has difficulty initiating conversations and responding appropriately to teasing.

### Communication

Since his initial evaluation, Josh’s expressive language skills have made considerable growth, and he currently has an age-appropriate vocabulary. His records indicate continued difficulty in responding to questions and multi-step directions, as well as pragmatic communication skills. His speech is high in pitch and, when excited, his inflection takes on a “sing-song” quality.

### Academic Skills

- **Reading:** Josh is currently reading at a level in the reading curriculum approximately 4 levels below his same-age peers, at approximately the mid 1<sup>st</sup> grade level. Josh’s fluency, word attack, and comprehension skills are all improving, though they are still below grade-level expectations. He is good at drawing conclusions and making predictions while reading.
- **Math:** Josh’s math skills are an area of strength and are at approximately the mid 2<sup>nd</sup> grade level. Josh uses Touch Math and is proficient with adding, money, time by the hour (not by minute), sequencing, place-value, and basic multiplication skills. Subtraction with regrouping is an emerging skill for Josh; with a reminder to regroup, he is typically able to complete this type of task. Despite being below level in math, Josh’s former teacher reported that he picked up basic multiplication facts (0-5) extremely quickly and likes to act out multiplication strategies she had created to teach students to multiply (e.g., “Hi, I’m 2. Add me 3 times.”).
- **Written Language:** Writing is Josh’s weakest area; his typical writing consists of simple sentences without conventions, capitalization, or punctuation. He has difficulty generating ideas and his spelling is often incorrect, though he makes attempts to sound words out.

### Additional Evaluation Data (from Josh’s most recent reeval last year)

- **Cognitive Functioning.** Assessment results suggest that Josh has a Full Scale IQ that is 90% likely to fall between 72 and 82, which is in the *Below Average* range compared to other children his age.
  - Josh has short-term and long-term memory skills in the *Average* range, consistent with those of other children his age. His ability to learn and use new information quickly is within normal limits and is a strength for him, although he performed better on memory tasks involving numbers than on tasks with words. He also has a good ability to associate information in his memory store and then retrieve it categorically.
  - Josh has significant difficulty with perceiving, storing, manipulating, and thinking with visual patterns, as well as with planning, reasoning, and problem-solving. Scores on these tasks were in the *Below Average* to *Low* range, compared to his same-age peers. He has particular difficulty employing problem-solving strategies when confronted with new tasks.
- **Visual-Motor Integration.** Results indicate that Josh has difficulty integrating and coordinating his visual-perception and motor (finger and hand movements) abilities, with scores in the *Low* range compared to other children his age.

## Appendix H (Continued)

- **Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders.** Josh's mother and teacher completed a rating scale on behaviors characteristic of Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). Results suggest that Josh demonstrates many of behaviors associated with ASD and has a "high probability of Autism," including avoiding establishing eye contact, staring at objects in the environment for at least five (5) seconds, remaining aloof, and becoming upset when routines are changed

## Appendix H (Continued)

**Name:** Nathan Valparaiso (*pseudonym*)

**Grade:** K

**Chronological Age:** 5 years, 6 months

Nathan Valparaiso will be registering for Kindergarten at your school in the fall. Nathan's mother, Mrs. Valparaiso, brought him to your school in the fall of the current year, but decided not to enroll him at the time because (a) he had a late birthday (was "young for grade"), and (b) she had concerns about "his ability to handle the Kindergarten environment." Nathan attended 3 Pre-Kindergarten programs over the course of the last two years; the following is the information you have been able to obtain about Nathan from his previous schools and his mother. Mrs. Valparaiso has approached the team for help with decision-making about the most appropriate educational context and instructional plan for the coming year.

Evaluation Data Nathan was seen by a private child psychologist earlier this year due to "parent concerns about his behavior and social skills".

- **Cognitive Functioning.** Assessment results suggest that Nathan has a Full Scale IQ that is 90% likely to fall between 117 and 123, which is in the *Above Average* range compared to other children his age.
  - Nathan has verbal and visual/spatial processing skills in the *Above Average* range, compared with those of other children his age.
  - Nathan has difficulty with processing information quickly. Scores measuring processing speed were *Below Average*, compared to his same-age peers.
- **Preacademic Skills:** Assessment tasks measuring Nathan's school readiness and preacademic skills suggested that Nathan can identify all colors, all uppercase and lower case letters, and numbers 0-20. Nathan demonstrated adequate understanding of shapes and sizes. He had some difficulty making comparisons between objects, as well as with concepts of direction (next, into, straight, low) and quantity (full, empty, none, alone).
  - Nathan's former teacher at his most recent Pre-Kindergarten reported, "Nathan is a very good reader with a highly scientific mind." She indicated that he is reading at the sentence level.
- **Characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorders.** Nathan's mother completed a rating scale on behaviors characteristic of Asperger's Disorder (AD), which is part of the Autism Spectrum of Disorders. Results suggest that Nathan demonstrates many of behaviors associated with AD and has a "very high probability of Asperger's Disorder." The psychologist made a DSM-IV diagnosis of Asperger's Disorder.

### Behavioral/Social Functioning

- Both parents and Nathan's teachers noted that Nathan enjoys playing video games and studying dinosaurs. Nathan often talks of dinosaurs.
- Nathan was described as having considerable difficulty in group-oriented social situations. Specifically, Mrs. Valparaiso reported to the psychologist that Nathan can become extremely oppositional and negative when routines are broken. He has hit or scratched parents, former teachers, and preschool peers in these situations and often yells or cries loudly when he is not able to get what he wants. The psychological report suggests that these incidents happen approximately 3-4 times a week.

## Appendix H (Continued)

- Nathan has difficulty engaging in social activities with other children (e.g., initiating conversations, joining in activities). His former teachers noted concerns about Nathan “wandering the playground alone,” rarely initiating conversations with peers or join in any game activities with his classmates. When Nathan does initiate a conversation, it is usually about dinosaurs. He has difficulty finding other things to talk about with either adults or peers.

### Communication

No communication concerns have been noted. The psychologist’s report indicates that, according to Nathan’s mother, his language developed normally. The psychologist noted qualitatively that Nathan appears to have an “expansive vocabulary,” particularly with regard to dinosaurs.

Appendix I  
Educator Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

(NOTE: The district's name has been kept on interview protocols to facilitate use in data collection, but it has been blinded to protect identity.)

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to help me understand your thoughts, attitudes, and beliefs about educating students with autism spectrum disorders or ASD. In particular, I am interested in the issue of inclusion of students with ASD in general education settings. The word "inclusion" means many things to many people—I am interested in learning what it means to you, how you feel about it with regard to students with ASD, and how that affects what you do in your professional role. The results of this study will potentially help [REDACTED] schools better support educators of children with ASD both in general and special education settings. You were selected for participation in this study because you are an educational professional in a school that has a high number of students with ASD, and your professional role in the schools brings you into contact with these children on a frequent basis. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers; I am simply hoping to learn more about your thoughts, beliefs, and experiences, particularly those related to inclusive education for students with ASD.

As in the focus group session, I will make notes during the interview to capture your thoughts and ideas in response to each question. Our session today will also be tape-recorded to ensure that I am capturing what you are sharing in an accurate and representative manner. After our session today, I will develop a written transcript of our session together, using a pseudonym or a code name to protect your identity. I will share this information with you, and you will have a chance to clarify any points before the transcript is finalized. No other members of the school team will see your individual transcript. Once I have received your feedback on the transcript, I will erase this audio-tape.

Before we begin, let me tell you a little more about the procedure. This interview will last up to 60 minutes. We will really try to respect these time limits. Also, I may say some things that sound repetitive, such as "tell me more about that" or simply repeat back what you said in order to ensure that I am really understanding your experiences or perspective. If at anytime you feel uncomfortable, please let me know, and we can

## Appendix I (Continued)

move on to the next question or reschedule the interview for a later time. Finally, it is possible that while we are talking, you may wish to describe situations regarding current or past students in your classroom. I welcome this kind of information, but I need to ask that you not give the students' name when you describe your specific experiences. Do you have any questions? If you're ready, let's begin."

*The researcher will use a combination of clarification and paraphrasing in order to ensure accurate understanding of the educator's experiences. In addition to asking the primary research question, the researcher will ask follow-up questions about topics using probes specified below. For each area, the researcher will ask:*

*"Tell me more about \_\_\_\_"*

*or*

*"There are a couple of other things I was wondering about. Tell me more about \_\_\_\_."*

1. **Introductory Question** (will differ for each educational professional)
  - GE: Tell me about how you came to have students with ASD in your classroom.
  - SE: Tell me about how you came to be a resource teacher for students with ASD in general education classes.
  - Admin/Specialists: Tell me about how students with ASD have come to be in general education classrooms at your school.
  
2. Within education, the word "inclusion" and its associated practices can mean many things to many people. How do you define inclusion?
  - (If participant asks for clarification on the term "inclusion," use the phrase: *Inclusion is generally defined as the practice of educating students with disabilities with their general education peers.*)
  - Is it the same in all situations or does it look different for each student?

## Appendix I (Continued)

- Is inclusion (and its goals) defined differently for different populations (e.g., students with learning disabilities vs. students with developmental disabilities such as ASD)?
3. What are the characteristics of a “good candidate for inclusion?”
- Probes, areas to consider:*
- Behavior
  - Academic skills or needs
  - Social skills
4. Describe experiences you have had related to including students with ASD that have led to your current understanding of inclusion.
- *Probe for educators’ feelings about situations if participant does not include this in their response:*
    - How did you feel?
    - How did that make you feel?
    - Describe your feelings in that situation.
5. What are some of the reasons why parents might want their children with ASD included in general education classrooms?
- What goals do you think might parents have for their children?
  - Given this list of potential goals that parents might have for their included children, think about the students with ASD in your own classroom. Are they achieving these goals?
    - Why/why not?
    - What alternate goals do you have?
      - *Probe for reasons that reflect teachers’ own personal perspective and past experiences associated with those views.*
    - How do these differ from those you think parents might have?

Appendix I (Continued)

6. What are some of the reasons why teachers or parents might not want to include students with ASD in general education classrooms?
- *Probe for reasons that reflect teachers' own personal perspective and past experiences associated with those views.*
  - *Probe for educators' feelings about situations if participant does not include this in their response:*
    - How did you feel?
    - How did that make you feel?
    - Describe your feelings in that situation.
7. Once a child has been placed in general education, how do you determine if it is a successful placement that should be continued or an unsuccessful placement that should be discontinued?
- What kinds of things would be happening to indicate to you that general education is not an appropriate placement?
  - *Probe for reasons that reflect teachers' own personal perspective and past experiences associated with those views.*
  - *Probe for educators' feelings about situations if participant does not include this in their response:*
    - How did you feel?
    - How did that make you feel?
    - Describe your feelings in that situation.
8. As you recall, in the focus group, a large group of educators from many backgrounds considered the educational needs of two hypothetical students to determine the most appropriate instructional setting and program. Tell me about how similar decisions for students with ASD are made at your school.
- Prompts:
    - (If mentioning meetings):
      - Who participates in these meetings? Are all of these members present at every meeting?



## Appendix I (Continued)

- How many meetings (on average) are there?
- Are there occasions in which decisions are made (even informally) outside of the team setting? Describe those occasions.
- When in a formal meeting to make these kinds of decisions, does one person dominate the conversation? If so, who is it and what is their dominant perspective?
- What are the primary issues on which you and your colleagues focus when making decisions about instructional supports and placement of students with ASD (e.g., behavior, diagnostic labels, support needs, available resources, impact on peers, potential costs, etc.)?

### **Final question:**

9. Imagine you are in an elevator of a city building for a work-related conference or function. Someone walks into the elevator, sees that you are an educator by your XXXXXXXXXX Schools ID badge, and asks you to define your attitude and position on inclusion of students with ASD in general education settings. You don't have a lot of time to share your background or your experiences, like we did today; you have to get your ideas out quickly and get your point across by the time you both reach the top floor. Think for a minute about how you would sum up your feelings in the time it takes to get from the ground floor to the top floor (we'll say about 1-2 minutes). When you are ready, let me hear your 1-2 minute "elevator speech" describing your attitude and overall position on inclusion of students with ASD.

**Demographic Questions:** "I just want to ask a few questions to get information about your background. Again, this information will be kept in strictest confidence and will not be reported with any identifying information. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of these questions, please let me know."

- How old are you?
- How many years have you been teaching?

## Appendix I (Continued)

- What is the highest degree you've earned? Do you have any special endorsements related to education?
- How long have you worked in [REDACTED] Schools? How long have you need at [SCHOOL]? How long have you been in your current position?
- **Teachers Only:** How many TOTAL children are there in your classroom/pod? How many have ASD? What (if any) other disabilities or ESE categories are represented in your class/pod?
- Have you had any previous employment experiences related to individuals with disabilities and/or inclusion? (If so, please describe)
- Do you have children of your own? If so, do any of your children have a disability that impacts their education?

**Final comments:** "Thank you for your contribution to this project. This was a very successful interview, and your honesty and forthright responses will be an enormous asset to my work. Again, I very much appreciate your involvement."

Appendix J  
Parent Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

(NOTE: The district's name has been kept on interview protocols to facilitate use in data collection, but it has been blinded to protect identity.)

Thank you for volunteering to participate in this interview today. The purpose of this interview is to help me understand your thoughts about your child's experiences in the general education setting. I am interested in understanding what goals parents of students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (or ASD) have for their children when they are educated in an inclusive setting. You were selected for participation in this study because your child, [NAME], is one such child with an Autism Spectrum Disorder who is currently educated in the general education setting for the majority of his/her day. This interview is part of a larger study on educators' thoughts, attitudes, and decision-making about inclusion for students with ASD. My hope is that the results of this study will potentially help [REDACTED] schools better support educators of children with ASD both in general and special education settings. Your perspective on NAME's experience in general education will be incredibly valuable in helping us achieve that goal. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers; I am simply hoping to learn more about what goals you have for NAME in general education and your thoughts about his/her progress toward those goals."

I will make notes during the interview to capture your thoughts and ideas in response to each question. Our session today will also be tape-recorded to ensure that I am capturing what you are sharing in an accurate and representative manner. After our session today, I will develop a written transcript of our session together, using a pseudonym (e.g., Jane Doe from Apple Elementary) or a code name (e.g., Parent from School A) to protect your identity and that of your child. I will share this information with you, and you will have a chance to clarify any points before the transcript is finalized. No one at the school will see your individual transcript. Once I have received your feedback on the transcript, I will erase this audio-tape.

"Before we begin, let me review the procedure. This interview will last up to 60 minutes. We will really try to respect these time limits. Also, I may say some things that sound repetitive, such as "tell me more about that" or simply repeat back what you said in order to ensure that I am really understanding your experiences or perspective. If at

## Appendix J (Continued)

anytime you feel uncomfortable, please let me know, and we can move on to the next question or reschedule the interview for a later time. Do you have any questions? If you're ready, let's begin."

*The researcher will use a combination of clarification and paraphrasing in order to ensure accurate understanding of the parent's story. In addition to asking the primary research question, the researcher will ask the parent an open-ended follow-up question about topics specified below. For each area, the researcher will ask:*

*"Tell me more about \_\_\_\_"*

*or*

*"There are a couple of other things I was wondering about. Tell me more about \_\_\_\_."*

1. Please tell me the story of how NAME came to be in TEACHER's classroom.
  - Length of time in inclusion
  - Previous placements or educational settings
    - (If previously in a more restrictive setting) Who decided that NAME should be in a non-special education setting for most of his/her day?
    - What were the reasons that NAME was placed in general education?
  
2. Within education, the word "inclusion" and its associated practices means many things to many people. How do you define inclusion?  
Probes:
  - (If participant asks for clarification on the term "inclusion," use the phrase: *Inclusion is generally defined as the practice of educating students with disabilities with their general education peers.*)
  - If answer consists primarily of supports: What does "successful inclusion" mean for NAME? What kinds of things would he/she be doing? What kinds of things would he/she NOT be doing?
  - Is it the same in all situations or does it look different for each student?

▪ Appendix J (Continued)

- Is inclusion (and its goals) defined differently for different populations (e.g., students with learning disabilities vs. students with developmental disabilities such as ASD)?
3. This list shows several different categories of skills that children work to develop throughout their years in school. Thinking about NAME's progress and skill gains as *a result of being included*, tell about what gains NAME has made in each of these areas:
- Academic/Vocational Skills
  - Communication
  - Behavioral/Social-Emotional Functioning
  - Community Integration & Normalization
  - Recreation/Leisure Skills
    - *Prompt for specific skills if only domain areas are discussed.*
4. Using the same list, think now about what other goals you have for NAME. What other gains in skills would you like to see him/her work on in school?
- Academic/Vocational Skills
  - Communication
  - Behavioral/Social-Emotional Functioning
  - Community Integration & Normalization
  - Recreation/Leisure Skills
  - Follow up for each desired outcome: How do you think that could be accomplished?
5. Today we've talked about the skill growth that NAME has made as a result of being included and additional goals that you would like to see NAME achieve in the coming years. Given all of this information, please describe your feelings about the overall success of NAME's participation in general education so far.

## Appendix J (Continued)

6. Is there anything else you would like me to know about your child's experiences in general education?

**Demographic Questions:** "I just want to ask a few questions to get information about your background. Again, this information will be kept in strictest confidence and will not be reported with any identifying information. If you feel uncomfortable answering any of these questions, please let me know."

- How old are you?
- What is your marital status? (Married, divorced, single, etc.)
- How many children do you have and what are their ages? Do you have any other children with disabilities?
- What is the highest degree you've earned or grade level completed?
- What is your current occupation?
- Do you have any roles that involve you in your child's school and/or classroom above and beyond typical parent responsibilities (e.g., PTA, classroom volunteer, etc.)?

**Final comments:** "Thank you for your contribution to this project. This was a very successful interview and your honesty and forthright responses will be an enormous asset to my work. Again, I very much appreciate your involvement."

Appendix K  
Definition of Inclusion in Participating School District  
(Retrieved from District's website on March 5, 2008)

Inclusion is a term used to encompass the concept of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).

Successful inclusion is based upon a commitment to provide opportunities for all students to learn and interact with age-appropriate peers. Central to inclusion is consideration of the child's level of ability and capacity to benefit within an adapted learning environment. Successful inclusion requires planning, staff development, on-going support, resources, and communication.

**Core Beliefs**

1. All individuals have value.
2. All students can learn and become productive members of society.
3. For all students, there needs to be a variety of services within a continuum of placement options that offers opportunities to learn with age-appropriate peers.
4. Personnel must receive ongoing training and support in order to design and implement curriculum modifications to meet individual student needs.
5. All students deserve the best education possible in an environment which promotes the development of the individual.
6. Successful, appropriate inclusion is based on proactive professional involvement, adequate financial resources, and effective community participation.
7. The curriculum addresses individual student needs through quality instruction and ongoing assessment. Employing a variety of strategies, the service delivery model should be a collaborative effort among parents, professionals, and students.
8. Successful communication systems must be developed and nurtured through sufficient amounts of regularly scheduled consultation and planning between basic and ESE staff members and supported by on-going, proactive communication among professionals, agencies, and other community shareholders.

## Appendix K (Continued)

**Inclusion** is a term used to encompass the concept of **Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)**.

LRE is the only term actually contained in the law.

- The essential difference between the concept of inclusion and of traditional mainstreaming lies in the key question the IEP team asks in determining the placement of a student.
- The difference in the two questions is a fundamental shifting of responsibility from the student proving an ability to survive in the mainstream to that of the staff identifying the specific supports the student needs for a successful placement.
- The placement decision focuses on the level and nature of supports required by the individual student, not a predetermined label /program delivery model.
- Successful inclusion is based upon a commitment to provide opportunities for all students to learn and interact with age-appropriate peers.
- Central to inclusion is consideration of the child's level of ability and capacity to benefit within an adapted learning environment.
- Successful inclusion requires planning, staff development, on-going support, resources, and communication.



## About the Author

Jenine M. (Ziemann) Sansosti obtained a Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree in Psychology from the University of New Mexico in 2000, graduating *summa cum laude*. In 2002, Jenine earned a Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in School Psychology. Jenine received an Ed.S. degree in School Psychology from the University of South Florida in 2006. Her Ed.S. thesis, examining the intervention knowledge of general education teachers, was awarded the Outstanding Graduate Research Award by the Florida Association of school psychologists (FASP). While completing a doctoral specialization in *Service Delivery Systems for Students with Special Needs*, Jenine also served as a Research Associate at the Center for Autism at Related Disabilities (CARD-USF). She currently works as a Nationally Certified School Psychologist (NCSP) in Northeast Ohio. In addition, she has authored several publications and gives regional presentations on strategies for supporting students with Autism Spectrum Disorders.