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Becoming a Teacher in Multiple Voices: An Exploration of Teacher Identity Formation Among Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

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Becoming a Teacher in Multiple Voices: An Exploration of Teacher Identity Formation

Among Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

by

Mary E. Wilt

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the formation of teacher identity among four teachers of students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and my own by examining our perspectives, influences, and experiences at different points in our careers and determining the similarities and differences that exist in our professional and educational experiences. This study focused on how teacher identity is defined within the field of education, the current literature on teacher identity formation, and the importance of understanding the formation of teacher identity among teachers of children with autism, as well as how my own teacher identity has been formed. Throughout my research, I specifically emphasized the relationships between formation of teacher identity and teachers' experiences in and out of the classroom, the transformation or evolution teachers' identities during their careers, and the characteristics and experiences that specifically distinguish teachers of children with autism from other teachers. These main themes were guided by the concept that teacher identity is not only initially formed, but is a constantly evolving and complex process that is affected by teachers' experiences, interactions, influences, and personal and professional growth.

    Through purposeful sampling, four teachers of children with autism in self-contained elementary classrooms within public schools were chosen to participate in this study. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interactive interviews, critical friends' sessions, and the creation of three artifacts by each participant. Artifacts for this

study aided the participants in giving a more holistic view of their identities as teachers of children with autism. Artifacts consisted of teacher self-portraits with reflective prompts, buckets of their experiences with detailed explanations, and, photo journaling. Critical friends' sessions were utilized as a setting to reflect on and discuss each participant's artifacts. Both the critical friends' sessions and the creation of artifacts were based on the work on Samaras' (2011) self-study concept. During analysis, data were coded and categorized based on themes, topics, and key-words-in-context derived from a codebook created for this study. Max QDA, qualitative data analysis software, was utilized to code written data, pictures of the artifacts, and the multi-media critical friends' sessions. Codes were then merged and overall themes, similarities, and differences among participants were noted.

Narrative inquiry, self-study, and autoethnography were utilized to tell the stories of each of the participant as well as to juxtapose my own story with theirs. Findings indicated that these four teachers, like myself, have had similar experiences teaching children with autism, which are in some cases vastly different than the experiences of their colleagues who do not work with this population of students. The findings further indicate that these teachers were all attracted to this specific field because of their home and educational backgrounds. Overall teacher identity was created and transformed through a combination of life events and memorable moments in their teaching careers.

Implications of this study include the need for teacher learning communities for teachers of children with autism, support, and communication among veteran teachers of children with autism with the beginning teachers in the same field, and the need for teacher reflection when working in a position needing the utmost commitment and

dedication.   Narrative inquiry, the act of storytelling, will offer teachers, who may be

struggling, the opportunity to compare their own experiences and find support through

stories of teachers who have similar teacher identity formation experiences.

CHAPTER 1: CHANNELING WINSTON CHURCHILL: AN INTRODUCTION

I often think back to a moment during my first year out of college, a moment when I had to make a decision about who I was and how I wanted my own life to impact others. I distinctly remember that day, standing in front of my boss's desk, in a small office of a doublewide trailer that housed a group of special education service providers for a state run program. I had been called into her office yet again because she was unhappy with various aspects of my work. As a speech pathology assistant, I was told that I spent too much time with the most severe students and not enough with students who would show immediate progress. I was too detailed in my reports and "parents didn't want to know all of that information anyway," but my biggest transgression was simply believing that some of my outlandish therapy ideas would actually work.

At 23 years old, in my first real job, and doing what I thought I loved, hearing that I was failing was crushing news to me, but as I stood there and listened to my boss rattle on, I looked down on her desk and sitting directly in front of her, was an engraved sign. My focus moved directly to it as bits of the one-sided conversation were being processed. I could hear her say that I needed to improve my work, think about other options, and that I was being moved into a different position. That's when I realized I was being fired, being told to quit, and as I heard those words, the letters on the sign came into focus,

"Never, never, never quit," Winston Churchill

At that moment, I realized she was right; I did not belong there, in that office. I needed do the opposite of what my boss was telling me and follow the directions of a sign instead. I would not give in, would not quit. I would not worry about spending too much time with students, not allow my reports to be altered for the reader's sake, but most of all, I would not deny my time and energy to the students that I felt needed the most help. When I decided that I could accomplish all of those things in my own classroom, my teacher identity began to form. I could implement my outlandish therapy ideas with the children who needed someone willing to not give up. I realized that it was those students, the ones who in their own ways, in their own lives, have heard the same speech I just did. I was not good enough, could not do it, and I did not fit even though I felt like I did. I wanted to live by that quote and teach my students, wherever they might be in the future, to do the same.

Ten years later I continue to wonder if anyone else could possibly know how I feel. I wonder how many other teachers have had the same experience of being told to quit, but felt the innate need to teach. I wonder how many teachers understand the process of forming one's own identity as a teacher. Often times I want to give up, find something easier and less time consuming, but each time I go back to that day and that simple sign when my perspective changed. My teacher identity has continued to evolve as I grow as a teacher and as a scholar. The world of autism is tumultuous; most people with autism cannot function in chaos, but thrive off it. In a classroom for students with autism, every decision that I made could change the course of my day. As a teacher and a beginning scholar, I often feel that my life is the same way. Now as a new teacher

mentor, I hope to encourage new teachers of students with autism to explore their own teacher identity.

Each teacher has her own experiences and stories she is able to tell and each one is as unique and important as the next because that is how her personal identity has been formed. Since entering the doctoral program, I have found that my teacher identity has begun to change in a way I could have never anticipated. I look at being in the classroom differently, the curriculum differently, and how to teach children with autism with new insight. I am able to relate to students with autism in a way that I never could have before. I realize their struggles and frustrations with academics and communication. I now understand how someone can read, but not comprehend a single thing on the pages. I have also had the opportunity to self-reflect and evaluate my own way of thinking. While this has not been comfortable, it is something that I have needed to do. I often wonder though, if I hadn't taken the leap to be in the doctoral program, would I have ever had this chance to self-reflect? Would I have ever even known what self-reflection truly was? It was not until recently that I realized what an impact a two-minute conversation of being reprimanded in my first year out of college had on me. I would have never been able to connect a single moment of that disappointment to my entire identity as a teacher.

My self-reflection has also led me to wonder why I did not become a teacher in the first place, which I now realize is simply because I was not supposed to. I spent my life in a family of educators, being told by teachers and family friends that I would be a great teacher too. But, I took a different direction because I wanted to do something that wasn't expected of me, although it led to teaching anyway. Even in my undergraduate

program, I had to take the basic education courses and when I sat in those classes and felt something different than I had ever felt in any course before, I was meant to ignore it. Each moment that I spent not being a teacher was helping to form who I am as a teacher today. I believe that those experiences have also helped to form a new layer to my identity, that of a teacher, a researcher and a scholar. Similar to what Harry (1996) wrote, "To study human perspectives is to study an essentially dynamic process of which the researcher is an integral part" (p. 300). I have begun to adopt a different persona, begun to separate myself as a teacher and now as a researcher of the subject I am so interested in.

I am using this opportunity to explore teacher identity on a very personal level. I look back at my experiences as a teacher as moments in time; clips of my life. The moments that stand out most have actually occurred since becoming a teacher, during my first years of teaching, my transition into becoming a teacher mentor, my journey into the graduate program, and now my life in the doctoral program.

As a new teacher mentor, I work with first and second year teachers of children with autism who are experiencing the same struggles I did in my first few years of teaching. I see how difficult it is for them to juggle all of the responsibilities of being a special education teacher and wonder if they realize that their teacher identity is constantly evolving as they are experiencing and learning new things. I also see my colleagues who have a few years of teaching under their belts and those who are considered veteran teachers. I wonder how much different these teachers' identities are from the new teachers. As teachers in a specialized field, we share one voice, advocates for our students with autism, people who have a passion for working with students with

4

disabilities, but as individuals, we have multiple voices and experiences that have led us to where we are today.

The formation and evolution of teacher identity is a process that all teachers encounter throughout their careers (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Bullough, 2005; Franzak, 2002). In the formation of teacher identity, it is critical to recognize what defines an individual as both a teacher and a person as a whole. Different experiences in life such as an individual's own learning experiences, journey to becoming a teacher, experiences and interactions within and outside of school, and their own beliefs are key components in the development of teacher identity (Assunção Flores & Day, 2006; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2005). In turn, teacher identity plays a role in each teacher's professional development and career. A teacher's ever-evolving identity affects the perceptions of how one teaches, how one communicates their understanding of their role as the teacher, the classroom environment, and the on-going process of professional development (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Lasky, 2005). Pre-service teachers who are able to understand the concepts of teacher identity formation are more likely to be effective and be considered a "good teacher" (Feiman-Nemser, 2003; Korthagen, 2004). Palmer (1997) believes that good teachers share the trait of a strong sense of personal identity, which they are able to infuse in their work.

Statement of the Problem

While teacher identity formation is seen as an important concept to explore throughout the field of education in general, a focus on special education teachers is paramount due to the multiple issues that surround this field such as lack of support, overwhelming caseloads, increasing amounts of paperwork, and stressful positions in

general (Payne, 2005; Thorton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Special education teachers, specifically those beginning their careers, may not only be faced with difficult classrooms, but may struggle to find a sense of purpose and identity during the first years of teaching (DeMik, 2008). These struggles may be exacerbated for teachers of children with autism because these children have broad and extensive needs (Colorado Department of Education, 2013; The Florida Department of Education, 2011; The New Jersey Department of Education 2004). Similar to my own feelings during my first years of teaching, current literature describes some beginning teachers as having negative feelings about their experiences and career. Some first-year teachers use terms such as loneliness, failure, anger, and disillusionment to describe how they feel about their teaching experience (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Ronfedlt & Grossman, 2008; Shapiro, 2010; Webb, 2005). Lack of understanding and support in forming a teacher identity plays a crucial role in frustrations of beginning teachers (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006). Additionally, educators are also limited in the amount of time they have to share professional discourse with colleagues due to their other responsibilities (Dinham & Scott, 2000).

Currently one in 88 individuals are diagnosed with autism, making it more common than diabetes, AIDS, and pediatric cancer combined (Autism Speaks, 2012; Center for Disease Control, 2011). Due to a notable increase in the prevalence of autism, teachers of children with autism are experiencing growing class sizes without additional support or resources (DeMik, 2008; Thorton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Kamps, Royer, Dugan, Kravtis, Gonzalez-Lopez, Garcia, Carnazzo, Morrison, and Garrison Kane (2002) discussed the challenges that accompany the growing population of individuals with

autism including less time to spend working individually with students, increased

paperwork and documentation, and responsibility for more students in each classroom.

These challenges have also advanced the focus by educators on issues related to

behavioral supports, appropriate social behavior, and effective instruction for students

with autism in both the school and the community environments. Trying to appropriately

support this growing population may continue to add stress to already overwhelmed

beginning teachers of children with autism.

Additionally, soaring attrition rates and declining retention rates for teachers in

special education are also related to identity concerns (DeMik, 2008). Special education

teachers who have decided to leave the profession account for their decisions through

such factors as not having a sense of belonging in the school environment, feeling

unsupported, and not being prepared for the realities of being a teacher (Assuncão Flores

& Day, 2006; Parkison, 2008, Valencia, Martin, Place, & Grossman, 2009; Thorton,

Peltier, & Medina, 2007). Because of these multiple issues, teachers strive to develop a

sense of purpose early on and want to belong to a larger social group with others who

share their passion and concerns (Parkison, 2008). However, a lack of information on

beginning teachers' identity formation exists, which demonstrates a need for current

teachers' stories and experiences to be shared. Offering narratives of special education

teachers who can identify with the struggle of teacher identity formation will allow other

teachers to compare their own experiences, relate to a common struggle, and hopefully,

find support through their stories.

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

Defining and understanding teacher identity formation are common goals among researchers focusing on teacher development and the challenges in becoming and surviving as a teacher (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Shapiro, 2010; Zembylas, 2003a). While multiple conflicting perspectives on how teachers construct their professional identity exist, this study was guided by the concept that teacher identity is not only initially formed, but also is constantly evolving, as a complex and on-going process that is continuously being affected as a teacher grows, gains experience, becomes part of a network of other educators, and experiences life on both a personal and professional level. There is not just one component that creates a teacher's identity, but a combination of multiple perspectives that combined, and form their identity as a whole.

One theory linked to teacher identity formation is the idea that socialization is central to identity formation. This theory is relevant in describing teacher identity formation because the focus is geared towards the social aspects of teaching rather than viewing it as a solitary pursuit (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). While both general and special education teachers are likely to be independent in the school setting, for example working in their own classroom and planning lessons individually, there is also a sense of socialization and grouping among teachers. These groupings may be where teachers begin to form both professional and personal relationships that allow them to relate to others and share common experiences and stories. Socialization and collaboration are also supported through professional development, teacher training programs, and observations (Assuncão Flores & Day,

2006). The interactive aspect of socializing with others influences and shifts teachers'

own perspectives of teaching and how they view themselves as a teacher and a

professional (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Hence, as a

teacher begins to view herself differently as a teacher, her beliefs, and identity begin to

change as well. Zembylas (2003a) discusses that there are two major points which are

debatable regarding teacher identity formation, first that it is difficult to explain how an

individual remains the same over time, and second, that socialization plays a role in

identity formation. Lasky (2005) views teacher identity formation from a sociocultural

approach in which social context and cultural tools play a part in the early stages of

identity formation; that a beginning teacher's identity and beliefs are formed through a

variety of structures surrounding them.

Webb (2005) suggests that professional dialogue and time for reflection are

limited in the teacher education process and these issues continue on into teaching. *Being*

in a classroom where many of the children often lack social and interpersonal skills, it

became easy for me to not look for opportunities to socialize with others in the school

setting. However, in moving schools and working with a teacher of children with autism

in the room next to me who was experiencing the same situations as I was, I realized that

discussing these experiences and exchanging ideas with this teacher was priceless. What

I did not realize at the time was that participating in these conversations was actually

helping to form my teacher identity because I no longer had solitary and specific ideas

about my students and my classroom. Suddenly, I had a new perspective to what I was

experiencing and my teacher identity began to evolve. My hope was that by providing

teachers with focus groups it would allow the teachers of children with autism to do

9

something similar to what happened between my neighbor and I exchange ideas and

stories while discovering more about our own teaching practices and how our

experiences affected us as teachers. As I have moved from the classroom into a mentor

role, I see that beginning teachers of children with autism are facing the same

frustrations and struggles that I once was. These teachers want to discuss what they are

feeling and thinking with me and want help and advice related to their classroom. I've

realized again how important it is to share the stories of being a teacher of children with

autism so that other teachers are able to reflect on their own identity.

Also relevant to this study is the theoretical perspective that teacher identity is

directly influenced by emotions. The journal, *Teaching and Teacher Education,* devoted

an entire 2005 issue to teacher identity formation, emotions, and change. Within this

issue, several researchers discussed the challenges teachers face as their teacher identities

form and evolve, and how the needs and emotions of teachers change as they gain more

experiences and education. Shapiro (2010) writes that emotions and teacher identity can

be explored in a variety of ways. This exploration can be through socialization and

interactions, by looking at emotions individually and how they are experienced in

combination with one another, and how emotions are part of the educational process.

Zembylas (2003), who studied teachers' emotions from a Foucauldian perspective and

has completed extensive research on teacher identity and emotions, believes the link

between emotions and identity is becoming more widely studied among researchers who

are interested in learning more on how "teachers are emotionally engaged in how their

selves come to be constituted" (p. 111). These positive *and* negative emotions are part of

experiences both in and out of the classroom and directly relate to the formation of one's

teacher identity (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006). These emotions can be related to current teaching situations or past experiences as students themselves (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Knowles, 1992). Knowles (1992) discusses that these past experiences, whether positive or negative, can influence a teacher in the ways she addresses her own classrooms, implements teaching strategies, or sees herself as a teacher. Shapiro (2010) also reflects on emotions and teacher identity, focusing on the same concept that emotions and teacher identity formation go hand in hand. Teacher identity is formed through experiences and memories, which are influenced by emotions. Shapiro (2010) states, "Much of what drives this notion of identity is our experience in the classroom, both positive and negative. . . It is our experience of *affect* which forms the basis for our sense of professional self" (p. 617).

Researchers commonly address the fact that teacher identity formation is an ever-changing process. Assuncão Flores and Day (2006) discuss that teacher identity formation involves a "(trans)formation of the teacher identity" and that it is an "ongoing and dynamic process" (p. 220). Zembylas (2003) recognized that teacher identity is "constructed and re-constructed" through multiple contexts (p. 213). Lasky (2005) believes that teacher identity "is a construct of professional self that evolves over career stages" (p. 901). Parkison (2008) introduces his framework on teacher identity with an emphasis on reflection and understanding to gain a better perspective on the entire process of identity transformation. Bullough (2005) and Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) both discuss the transformation process involved in teacher identity as well. Many researchers view teacher identity as a shifting, evolving process.

While there are several studies exploring teacher identity formation and evolution through various perspectives, the research continues to focus on pre-service teachers or in-service teachers moving into the role of teacher educators or mentors. There is little research in the area of in-service teachers, specifically those in certain fields. In my own searches to find current literature on teacher identity formation, the most area-specific research related to teachers of math, science, and English as a second language. What I found most interesting is that these areas are considered critical teacher shortage areas, similar to special education, but literature on teacher identity formation in the area of special education is lacking. Special education teachers are aware that their role is ever-changing and that socialization and emotions are integral to running a successful classroom. These same components are also critical to understanding teacher identity formation, which needs to be further studied in regards to special education. There is a need to extend the current literature in special education, specifically in the area of autism in order to gain a deeper understanding about the experiences of teachers of children with autism in regards to their teacher identity formation.

Purpose

The intent of this study was to examine teacher identity among four teachers at different points in their professional careers and to explore the characteristics and experiences that define them as teachers. My goal was to determine the similarities and differences that exist in the formation of teacher identity in these four teachers of children with autism that are each at different points in their careers as well as explore their perspectives, influences, and experiences of how they became teachers through their multiple voices. The goal of the study was to tell the stories and experiences of teachers

working with children with autism and how these experiences have helped to create their teacher identity. These stories are meant be shared, to help other teachers of children with autism make connections, and to have research available that is relevant to their practice and that they can relate to, which may aide in positively transforming their teacher identities.

The "Storytelling" Method

In order to understand and retell the experiences of the participants in this study, both narrative and autoethnography were used. Narrative inquiry allows individuals to reflect on and make sense of their experiences through the stories they tell (Johnson & Golombek, 2002). This can be especially beneficial for teachers because reflecting on teaching practice is a vital component of being an effective teacher. In turn, listening to or reading the narratives of other teachers and their similar experiences allow individuals to make comparisons with their own experiences and teaching practice.

Similar to narrative inquiry, autoethnography also is reflective in nature. Ellis and Bochner (2002) discuss that autoethnography stems from the field of anthropology and the anthropological practice of "reflective ethnography," which highlights the personal experiences of the researcher. Duarte (2007) discusses the benefit of using autoethnography to make sense of findings and fieldwork experiences while completing research. I used autoethnography in this study to juxtaposition my own experiences with those of the other participants in order to give yet another narrative of how teachers of students with autism form a teacher identity and how it evolves over time. I also wanted a chance to tell my own stories, to describe how my own experiences have affected me as a teacher and helped me to become more reflective and help to transform my own teacher

identity. The autoethnographic portion of this study satisfied a *need* to get my own

experiences on paper and share them with others. Similar to the other teachers stories

being told, I told my own story of becoming and working as a teacher for children with

autism. As discussed by Hoffman-Kipp (2008) I believe that sharing my own stories and

first-hand experiences in classrooms with children who have autism offers support to the

stories and experiences shared by my participants. As a teacher of children with autism

for eight years and a mentor for beginning teachers of children with autism for the last

year and a half, I have my own experiences in my evolving teacher identity and working

with this population of students.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

a) With regard to the formation of teacher identity, what are the experiences of
   teachers of students with autism?

b) How does the identity of teachers of students with autism change or evolve in
   relation to teaching and educational experiences?

c) What characteristics and experiences distinguish a special education teacher,
   specifically a teacher of students with autism?

Teach or Go Home: Significance of the Research

My grandmother became a teacher in 1939, 65 years before I set foot in my first

classroom as a teacher. My mother and father became teachers within a few years of

each other in the mid-sixties. Between the three of them they have close to eighty years of

experience in education, yet all I can remember while I was going through college is

them discouraging me to become a teacher. I had heard it all there was not enough

respect from the students, there certainly was not enough money in it to make anything substantial, you never had time off even though teachers did not officially work on the weekends or during summers, and most of all it was just too much work. Beyond those few things, teaching was great, but I would be smarter if I went into a profession that offered me more, pretty much anything other than going into teaching. Yet, there I was standing in my own classroom on the first day with the students not knowing what to do because I had followed my parents' advice and gotten a degree in something more "useful," but my speech degree was no help once I decided teaching was what I really wanted to be doing.

I remember that first day in my classroom like it was yesterday. It was not the same first day as everyone else, but the initial day back from Thanksgiving break in 2004. I had been the speech assistant at my school and had approached my principal about teaching in the newly constructed autism spectrum classroom to make room for our school's growing autism population. I had this view of exactly what my first day with my kids would look like, a little teaching, some getting to know you games, a few songs, snack, and nap to finish up the day.

As I listened to the phone ring repeatedly on my mom's end of the line, the tears streamed down my face. There were children running around me like wild banshees just released from their native habitats and into and new and unknown terrain…my classroom. I had little furniture, no technology, some torn up books, and a rug, a brand new beautiful, colorful rug that a student was quickly and efficiently pulling the threads out of. Finally my mom answered the phone.

"Yes," she said as though she had been expecting this call.

"I can't do it," I cried, "They are going crazy. There is no one here to help and I don't know what to do with them."

An aide from the other classroom must have heard either the screaming or my tears because she quickly came over and shooed me out of the room while she gathered up children. I walked outside and pleaded with my mom to tell me what to do.

"This is what you chose," she said, "Now figure it out and go inside and teach or go home."

She probably does not even remember telling me this, but in that moment what she was saying was so true. I was the teacher, the one in charge of those kids that I was letting run around inside and I quickly needed to figure it out or go home. I still have not gone home yet.

It is stories like this that each teacher has- their first day story, their worst moment, their best day of teaching, the experiences that define them as a professional; experiences that have shifted teachers' perspectives on how they view their practice and how they view their students that help to give valuable insights into the true teaching profession and how teaching identity is formed.

While there is an abundance of literature on teacher identity formation, there continues to be a lack of research in this area focusing on specific content areas such as special education. In looking for information regarding teacher identity formation, I was disappointed to find very little related to special education teachers and virtually none on the specific population of teachers of children with autism. Like many other teachers, I wanted to find information specific to my content area; however the research on teachers of children with autism is minimal. Defining and understanding teacher identity

16

formation is a common research focus for many in the field of teaching and teacher education (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006). However, much of the current research on teacher identity formation focuses specifically on defining and understanding identity formation in regards to a theoretical concept such as Jurasaite-Harbison and Rex (2005) and Zembylas (2003) or only focuses on pre-service teachers preparing to go into the field such as the work by Franzak (2002), Parkison (2008), and Webb (2005). Furthermore, researchers who are focusing on special education tend to look more at critical issues such as retention and attrition than on exploring how beginning special educators construct their professional and personal identities. Yet, some of the major issues in special education such as teacher attrition and retention rates, overall teacher satisfaction, and successful teaching careers are directly affected by the formation of teacher identity in beginning teachers (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006). Adding to the current literature on teacher identity formation of special education teachers and specifically teachers of students with autism will help to gain a deeper understanding of this little studied subject.

Through the use of narrative inquiry, this exploration of teacher identity formation gave teachers of children with autism the opportunity to tell their stories and share their experiences of how their own teacher identity has been formed. The results of this exploration provide narrative accounts of lived experiences that other teachers of children with autism can relate to. Being able to relate to other teachers' lived experiences and finding a sense of belonging within a group helps individuals to feel more comfortable and supported in their roles as a teacher (Chase, 2011; Zembylas, 2003b). In a field such as a special education that may be stressful and requires constant reflection, feeling a

17

sense of belonging and support is vitally important. Furthermore, in a field that is

considered a critical teacher shortage area, producing new meaningful literature that

supports current teachers and offers insight to pre-service teachers will be particularly

beneficial. *In my own experience, I often found myself wondering if there was anyone*

going through the same experiences I was in my ASD classroom. As a mentor for

beginning teachers of children with autism, I hear new teachers asking if anyone is "in

the same boat" as they are, does anyone feel the need to "vent as much" as they do, and

"does anyone understand." This research helps to begin filling the gap where research

is lacking and give teachers of children with autism a place to turn to read stories of

other teachers who really do understand what they are experiencing.

Operational Definition of Terms

Throughout this study, teacher identity formation is being defined as the

formation of one's professional identity as a teacher. This identity involves several

characteristics, which may or may not be similar among teachers, such as passion for

teaching and care and concern for children and students. Additionally, this definition

also includes the combination of experiences, beliefs, values, and perceptions that all play

a part in forming one's teacher identity.

A second term used throughout this study is autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

According to the Office of Special Education Programs, autism represents "a

developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and

social interaction, generally evident before age three, which adversely affects a child's

educational performance" (Smith, 2007, p. 433). The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual

of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) lists qualitative impairments in the area of social

interaction and communication with repetitive behavior patterns combined with abnormal functioning as requirements for an autistic diagnosis. The lack of communicative development corresponds to the need for specialized interventions in and out of the school-based setting. Unlike most other disabilities served in the public school system, autism is considered a low-incidence disability. Typically, low incidence classrooms have fewer resources allocated to them. Specially trained teachers, aides, and other educators and professionals must find ways to initiate and implement communication while addressing the special academic needs of each student. Professionals working with children diagnosed with autism have continuously agreed that these children need language support in the classroom. In this dissertation, I am referring to students with autism who have behaviors or cognitive delays severe enough for these children to be given services in specialized self-contained classrooms within regular public elementary schools.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to better understand the information presented in the following chapters, this chapter presents a review of the current literature on teacher identity formation and several factors that teacher identity formation affects. More specifically, this chapter examines both the attrition and retention rates of special education teachers and narrative inquiry in relation to teacher identity as well as a portrait of teaching children with autism. Due to the volume of research on teacher identity formation, defining key terms was imperative. Kagan (1992) explains that while there is a large quantity of literature on teacher identity formation, little is actually known about the evolution of teacher identity and teaching skills. For example, when researching teacher identity formation, one must be careful in deciding whether they looking at general teacher dispositions or how teacher identity is formed.

Multiple reviews of the literature were conducted and research syntheses and meta-analyses were examined in an effort to define and better understand teacher identity formation. This included a review of mixed method and qualitative studies as well. The selected studies in this literature review were not limited to pre-service teachers, but this group of individuals was the focus of most of the research. Furthermore, studies were used that focused on several content areas such as reading and English, mathematics, music, English Language Learners, and elementary and secondary teachers. Throughout

the literature review, studies that focused specifically on teachers in the field of special education were given more priority over other studies.

In this literature review, teacher identity formation is defined as the formation of one's professional identity as a teacher. This identity involves several characteristics, which may or may not be similar among teachers, such as passion for teaching and care and concern for children and students. Additionally, this definition also includes the combination of experiences, beliefs, values, and perceptions that all play a part in forming one's teacher identity.

In this literature review, I begin by addressing the topic teaching children with autism to gain a better understanding of the specific challenges teachers of children ASD face. I then explore teacher identity formation and the struggles in understanding how it is created and evolves for each teacher. Finally, I address special education teacher attrition and retention rates and narrative inquiry, both in relation to teacher identity formation.

Teaching Children with Autism

I will start where my own journey began, not with the creation of my teacher identity because as a new teacher I had no clue what that was, but with the realization that as an ASD teacher, I was in a special kind of classroom that required much more dedication and preparedness than I ever could have realized. I knew that I wanted to work with students with autism, but it was not until I began to extend my own education did I realize the extent to which these individuals need the utmost support.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, autism represents people who have "developmental disabilities and are defined by considerable

impairments in social interaction and communication and the presence of unusual

behaviors and interests," (para. 7). Children can be diagnosed as early as 18 months and

symptoms of autism can last throughout a person's life. Qualitative impairments in the

areas of social interaction and communication with repetitive behavior patterns combined

with abnormal functioning are requirements for a diagnosis of autism (Gargiulo, 2012;

Kamps, et al., 2002; Smith, 2007; Williams White, Keonig, & Scahill, 2007). The

National Institute of Mental Health lists the three major characteristics of autism as

deficits in social interaction, repetitive behaviors or interests, and deficits in verbal and

nonverbal communication (NIMH, 2009). This lack of social and communicative

development corresponds to the need for specialized interventions for children with

autism spectrum disorder in order to increase these skills and aide in building

relationships with others (Carter & Kennedy 2006; Laushey & Heflin, 2000; Wang &

Spillane, 2009). According to the Office of Special Education Programs, autism

represents "a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal

communication and social interaction, generally evident before age three, which

adversely affects a child's educational performance" (Smith, 2007, p. 433).

As the prevalence rates of children with autism spectrum disorder continues to

soar, finding qualified teachers to work with these students becomes increasingly difficult

(Thorton, Peltier, & Medina, 2007). There was a nationwide increase between 1994-

2006 of children with ASD of 834% (The Maine DOHHS/DOE, 2009). The Florida

Department of Education stated that as of October 2009, there were 341,632 students

ages 6-21 served under IDEA, which is 14% of the total population of students. Of this

population, 14,636 of students are diagnosed with a primary label of autism spectrum

disorder, which accounts for 4% of the total population of students. Over a 5 year period, there has been an increase of 4,400 students identified with ASD in the state. Students with ASD are served in a variety of settings, including regular education classrooms, resource pull-out classes, separate classrooms, special schools, and residential facilities depending on their levels of support needed (FLDOE, 2009).

Unlike most other areas of disability addressed in the public school system, autism is considered to be a low-incidence disability. Gargiulo (2012) discusses that 71.5% of students with autism are educated in the school based setting either in regular education classroom or in separate self-contained classes. In the school-based setting, specially trained educators must find ways to encourage communication while addressing the special academic needs of these students and are required to provide evidence-based classroom interventions as outlined in national policies such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and No Child Left Behind (Carter & Kennedy, 2006; Maheady, Harper, & Mallette, 2001; Wang & Spillane, 2009). Many of these evidence-based interventions are implemented to improve the social skills and relationships of students with autism. Teachers are not only expected to use research-based educational practices, teach to the current and ever-changing curriculum, meet the regular and alternative standards, but are also expected to teach functional skills to help students transition into society smoothly (Kretlow & Blatz, 2011; Ryan, Hughes, Katsiyannis, McDaniel, and Sprinkle, 2011). Furthermore, special education teachers often struggle with juggling other responsibilities as well such as training the paraprofessionals working with their students (Robinson, 2011), being the case managers for each of their students, a role that comes with overwhelming amounts of paperwork, and managing larger

caseloads of students as class sizes continue to increase (Billingsley, 2004a; Payne, 2005). These teachers also must ensure that they are collecting meaningful data on student progress and that their students are passing statewide assessments, making adequate yearly progress, and meeting the goals and objectives of their Individual Education Plans (Yell, Drasgrow, and Lowrey, 2005).

Teachers of children with autism need not only to be aware and up-to-date on current curriculum for the various grade levels they are teaching, but also to understand the best practices used in successful classrooms. This can become overwhelming for teachers because there are so many responsibilities associated with educating children with ASD. Ball (2011) discusses the core components to a successful program for children with autism. These components include behavior, communication, social skills, sensory integration, and reinforcement. Schools undertake teaching students in order to prepare them for a successful and contributory life in the community. If students cannot adequately convey emotions, concerns, questions, or any other type of information, they stand at risk of not assimilating to their environment. Society must assume the responsibility of care for these individuals whose skills to communicate are inadequate. In an effort to discern the most effective methodology for teaching those with autism ways to transmit information, educators need to find useful strategies to address this particular group of students. According to Paul and Wetherby (2005), "Because communication deficits are at the core of the autistic syndrome, these deficits affect all aspects of the child's functioning" (para. 5). Additionally, the New Jersey Department of Education posed specific requirements of teachers working with students with autism in their *Autism Program Quality Indicators*. They stated that children with this disorder

"present unique challenges to educators" which include needing extensive educational supports to meet their needs in the deficits of imitation, communication, attention, motivation, and socialization (p. 1). In order for many of these students to make gains in these areas, educators must provide extensive and early interventions beyond the additional supports offered in special education classrooms. The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE) legislation 6A-4.01796 reiterates the fact that teachers of children with autism need additional education in order successfully meet the needs of their students (http://www.fldoe.org/ese/pdf/1b-stats.pdf, 2011). Beyond the requirements of becoming a highly qualified teacher in the area of exceptional student education, teachers of children with autism must also receive a specialized endorsement in order to teach students with autism if they have a caseload of 100% of students with autism spectrum disorders. While there are exceptions to this rule, many Florida school districts are strongly encouraging their teachers of children with autism to take these courses and the FL DOE is offering stipends to motivate teachers already in these classrooms with two full years of teaching experience. As educators, we need to determine the best way to accommodate a child with autism in order to provide the best outcome possible in regards to communication and learning. In relation to teacher identity, this can be very overwhelming for a beginning teacher to understand and implement especially when many beginning teachers are already so overwhelmed.

Teacher Identity

How does being a special education teacher, specifically an ASD teacher, relate to teacher identity formation? As with any other teacher, teachers of children with autism create a professional identity as soon as they walk in the classroom. Identifying and

gaining an understanding of *how* their teacher identities are created and if they are similar to each other's and different from their colleagues will help to gain a deeper understanding of teachers of children with autism. Lehn (2000) wrote a children's book entitled, *What is a Teacher*, which was written to describe teachers' characteristics and responsibilities. While this nonfiction text is geared for primary age children, Lehn accurately describes characteristics of a quality teacher including, "A teacher shares what she knows," "A teacher coaches and guides practice," "A teacher asks questions," and "A teacher explains clearly." Lehn's book could easily describe what many teachers do on a daily basis and what they continue to strive for throughout their careers. While current literature on teacher identity uses more complex descriptions of teacher qualities and responsibilities, the general meaning is still the same. Teachers are many things, but most importantly, they create their identity by the decisions they make, their interactions with others, their beliefs about teaching, and experiences they have (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Jurasaite-Harbison & Rex, 2005; Ronfedlt & Grossman, 2008).

Understanding teacher identity is a difficult concept because it is such a subjective process. Multiple researchers describe defining teacher identity as a complex process because it is somewhat different for each individual (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Identity formation is influenced in multiple ways such as one's own personal identity and background, the environment they work in, their experiences as a pupil, their beliefs about teaching, and several other factors surrounding the school context (Franzak, 2002). Not only is this a difficult concept for researchers to explore, but teacher identity formation is also difficult for beginning teachers to understand.

Identity formation really begins before a teacher ever reaches a classroom or even before they begin a teacher education program. Professional identity formation begins with personal identity formation, understanding and exploring who they are, what they believe in, and how their experiences shape them. As with personal identity formation, professional identity formation shifts and evolves as we develop and gain a better understanding of who we are. Much of the literature involving teacher identity formation focuses on pre-service teachers who are somewhere in their transition from coursework to fieldwork. This focus is based on the fact that teacher identity begins to emerge when pre-service teachers get in the classroom and realize they have to begin forming a professional identity. Ronfedlt and Grossman (2008) discuss that younger teachers and students in undergraduate programs are still working to create their own personal identity, which poses a difficulty when they have to begin focusing on their professional identity as well. Furthermore, pre-service teachers often have difficulties with the transition from student to teacher because their expectations are far different from their reality in the classroom (Franzak, 2002). Darling-Hammond (2007) reiterates this dilemma, emphasizing the need for clinical experiences and coursework being linked in order for new teachers to learn how to "think like a teacher," but also to "act as a teacher." Some younger teachers are facing the problem of how to integrate curriculum, theory, and experience-based knowledge into something that they can use when becoming a teacher and that they have a vision of the kind of teacher they want to become (Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2008).

Assuncão Flores and Day (2006) explored the contexts that are involved in shaping new teachers' identities through a multi-perspective study. This longitudinal

study of new teachers' professional identities explored 14 new teachers' values, beliefs, learning experiences, challenges of teaching, and how they were effective teachers in their respective schools. One of the authors' initial findings from the research showed that the early years of teaching can be considered traumatic and difficult because teachers are trying to adapt to their new surroundings as well as fulfill professional commitments. They also discovered that the new teachers in their study struggled to find a balance between meeting their own needs in creating a teacher identity while trying to meet the needs of being part of a school culture. Assuncão Flores and Day (2006) focused on the importance of teacher identity, identity and emotions, and identity and socialization. Through the use of interviews, questionnaires, and a formal essay written by each participant, the authors employed grounded theory in this study. They found that there were three main influences in the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of professional identity. These included prior influences such as past teachers, initial teacher training and practice such as the assessment of professional learning, and contexts of teaching, which analyzed the process of learning in multiple ways. The common themes among the participants was that their perspectives were changing, self-motivation played a part in teacher identity development, and socialization and school culture impacted how new teachers learned and developed. Similar studies such as Webb (2005) and Smagorinsky, et al. (2004) use qualitative research methods to examine the development of teacher identity and the challenges and accommodations needed to meet those challenges throughout the formation process.

Webb (2005) created an action research project using four pre-service teachers who all "had a passion for the teaching career they were entering" (p. 1). While each pre-

service teacher was going into a different content area, the goal of the study was to examine the systematic collaborative reflection process and aide the four teachers in gaining a better understanding of their emerging teacher identities. The project took place over two meeting cycles consisting of ten meeting dates in the first and second semesters of the school year. The meetings covered a range of topics including the initial reconnaissance to shared beliefs, discussing inclusive classrooms, and identifying issues. The researcher went to on create an action research plan based on the themes from the initials meetings and identify a central research question. The second cycle of meetings focused on professionalism, classroom management, and teacher values. The findings of the action research study indicated that there were three major theme areas which the participants identified as crucial to their teacher identity. These included the influence of teacher education specific to the secondary-school context, the personal domains or boundaries, resilience, and ongoing formation of values, and the professional domain which included the negotiation of technical competencies and classroom, curriculum, and workplace issues. One of the main findings of the research found that "time spent in teaching activities increases confidence as a teacher," (p. 6). This is reiterated in the Smagorinsky et al. (2004) and Thomas and Beauchamp (2011).

Smagorinsky et al. (2004) specifically focused on a single subject case study that followed Sharon, their participant, on her journey from her university program through her first teaching job. The authors' framework for this study was centered on activity theory, which assumes that "a teacher's construction of a teaching identity-is a function of action within social settings whose values embody the settings' cultural history" (p. 9). Their detailed exploration of Sharon's journey was focused around the tensions that are

created and exist in learning to teach and creating a teacher identity. The authors were able to explore these tensions through the use of multiple interviews, classroom observations, and the collection of artifacts such as state-mandated curriculum and teacher planning books. Their findings showed that Sharon had some difficulties, like many other teachers (Franzak, 2002; Webb, 2005), transitioning from the university setting to the internship classroom, and again to her own classroom. The authors recognized that Sharon had many conflicting perceptions of teaching and multiple accommodations needed to be made throughout her first few years. It became evident in the reflection process that the school context, level of support, positive experiences, and increased socialization supported Sharon in visualizing her teacher identity formation as a positive experience.

Similar to Sharon's case, many pre-service teachers do not realize how different their professional life will be from their time working side-by-side in the classroom with a mentoring teacher or being in the university setting (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Korthagen, 2010; Webb, 2005). While there are some misconceptions among pre-service teachers about their future careers and about their own identity, research indicates that strong pre-service teacher programs that foster effective relationships, are supportive, and have professors and mentors with flexibility and can support beginning teachers in the identity formation process (O'Brian, Stoner, Appel, & House, 2007).

Thomas and Beauchamp (2011) also discuss that beginning teachers must understand the connection between the professional self and the personal self.

For a teacher, the self encompasses not only notions of "who am I?",

but also of 'who am I as a teacher?' This tight connection, perhaps even an

inseparable one, confirms that there are intricate and complex dimensions to

identity development, making it difficult to articulate and explore. (p. 763)

Special Education Teacher Identity Formation and Retention and Attrition

Another important concept to address in teacher identity formation is the direct

link between positive teacher identity and higher retention rates and negative teacher

identity and lower attrition rates (DeMik, 2008). The turnover rate among teachers

throughout national public schools is higher than the majority of other occupations

combined (Block, 2008; NCTAF, 2002). According to The National Commission on

Teaching and America's Future, over one-third of teachers leave the profession within

their first three years of teaching, which in many cases means not gaining district tenure.

Education Week, an American Education News Site, states that in 2011 eighteen states

have altered their policies for teacher tenure asking for higher accountability for in-

service teachers and more difficult procedures for new teachers to enter the profession.

The high rate of teachers' decisions to leave the profession includes factors such as low

salary, a lack of a sense of belonging, lack of support for first year teachers, minimal

mentoring from veteran teachers, and not feeling prepared for the realities of school

(Kaiser, 2011; NCTAF, 2002; Parkison, 2008, Valencia, et al., 2009). On the other hand,

NCTAF also addresses the fact that institutions of higher education that offer structured,

supportive teacher pre-service programs have increased rates of teacher hires and

retention of new teachers after graduation. Furthermore, beginning teachers who are

offered support from their schools are more likely to continue teaching and become more

competent in their teaching practices and content knowledge due to positive experiences

during their first year (NCTAF, 2002; Valencia, et al., 2009). These positive experiences

go hand-in-hand with the research on teacher identity, which emphasizes that these kinds

of experiences are a foundational component of teacher identity formation.

Thorton, Peltier, and Medina (2007) address the fact that ninety-eight percent of

school districts in the nation have shortages in special education teachers. Their study

reiterates the same discouraging news as other studies such as Billingsley (2004a) and

Nance and Calabrese (2009), special education teachers are leaving the field due to

reasons such as a lack of support, personal issues, experiences with working conditions,

or to move to general education. The authors report that up to 7.4 percent of first-year

special education teachers transfer to general education classrooms each year. This

percent of teachers continues to affect the overall shortage since the approximate 22,000

new special education teachers beginning each year only fills half of the vacancies in the

country (Katsiyannis, Zhang, & Conroy, 2003). Thorton, Peltier, and Medina (2007)

believe there are a variety of strategies that could be used to recruit and retain special

education teachers such as offering programs and resources to support new teachers in

their professional development, offering support related to socializing in the school

culture, and having peers and administrators work as role models to help positively

influence these teachers. These same strategies are used in supporting new teachers with

the process of teacher identity formation; hence the goal is support the formation, retain

new teachers.

Other researchers are trying to find ways to keep new special education teachers

as well. Billingsley (2004) completed a critical analysis of the research literature

regarding special education teacher retention and attrition. In the analysis, her findings mirrored other current literature, that there are increasingly high attrition rates in special education, which concerns researchers because the largest rate of teachers are leaving to move to general education. Billingsley (2004b) studied factors attributing to lowering teacher attrition such as work environments and teacher satisfaction, school climate, supportive administration and colleagues, professional development, and teachers' perspective of their roles in the school and the classroom. Her findings suggest that current and future research priorities should target teachers' perspectives, teacher preparation and quality, teacher induction, supporting teachers, and role overload and dissonance. Furthermore, teacher characteristics were found to be linked to attrition, with the author recommending that schools pay more attention to young inexperienced teachers who are still forming their own identity.

DeMik (2008) also researched the attrition rate of special education teachers; however she focused on their experiences through the use of narrative inquiry. This author found it important to "consider the factors regarding current educational practice that may affect job satisfaction of special educators with their jobs and cause them to desire a change in their job status," (p. 23). Narrative inquiry was utilized to encourage discussion between participants about their thoughts and concerns on the high attrition rates in special education. Her methodology employed discussions, interviews, and the exploration of past experiences in five participants. A portrait of each participant was created to form a multi-perspective and in-depth exploration of the various issues in special education. DeMik (2008) found several similarities in the participants' responses to interview questions and the strong emotions, both positive and negative, about

experiences as special education teachers. The participants all shared the same passion

for teaching and drive to help their students succeed, but this passion also evoked

frustration because the teachers faced challenges in making changes in themselves and

their classrooms. DeMik (2008) also found differences in the participants' narratives,

namely that she could not find a specific "type" of person who became a special educator

because there were no common characteristics such as teaching philosophy, personal

experiences, or types of school background among the teachers. While all of her findings

were not as anticipated, she was "pleased with the rich, valuable information," which

allowed her to gain insight into the field of special education (p. 31).

　　　While there is a lack of research specifically focused on the attrition and retention

rates of teachers of children with autism, there is research that indicates the abundance of

needs and supports these children have and the necessary skill sets of their teachers. The

New Jersey Department of Education's 2004 Quality Indicator Report of effective autism

programs specifically outlines the characteristics of effective and successful personnel

working in their programs. In its opening explanation of effective practices, the report

states, "Given the many challenges of effectively educating students with autism and the

crucial role played by personnel, the training and professional development of teachers,

paraprofessionals, and administrators is of paramount importance," (2004, p. 2). Further,

the report specifies that the minimum requirements for these personnel should be at the

very least, a knowledge of working with children with autism. Beyond the daily

responsibilities of special education teachers, teachers of children with autism are faced

with the added challenges of working with children who have deficits in so many

different areas and commonly challenging behaviors. This can lead to teachers easily

"burning out" and attrition rates rising.

Narrative Inquiry and Teacher Identity

DeMik (2008) shares the goal of exploring the field of special education and

teacher identity formation through narratives with such researchers as Florio-Ruane and

Williams (2008), Noddings (1996), and Smagorinsky, et al. (2004). Carter (1993)

discusses that narrative inquiry is one of the most useful research techniques in exploring

teaching and teacher education.

> The special attractiveness of story in contemporary research on teaching
>
> and teacher education is grounded in the notion that that story represents a
>
> way of knowing and thinking that is particularly suited to explicating the
>
> issues [teachers deal with]. (Carter, 1993, p. 6)

Other researchers such as Hoffman-Kipp (2008) and Zeichner (2005) specifically

research teacher identity formation through the use of autoethnography. Teacher identity

is really how each person defines, experiences, and describes the formation process in

their own way. While a limitation of narrative analysis is the large amount of

subjectivity, learning the stories of other teachers and their experiences may be a very

effective way to further explore the themes in teacher identity. Teacher identity tends to

take on different forms as individuals encounter different phases of teaching, professional

development, and life in general (Franzak, 2002; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Knowles (1992)

discusses four sources which play a role in teacher identity formation: childhood or

family experiences, positive role models, previous teaching experiences, and positive or

negative education classes. All of these sources can be described through narratives, the stories that the participants share about themselves.

A narrative, as described by Czarniawska (2004), is understood as written text or as spoken word giving an account of an action, an event, or a series of actions or events that are chronologically connected. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe narrative inquiry as a way of understanding experience. The authors believe that narrative is a collaboration between the narrative researcher and the participants, the people they are writing the narratives about, over a series of times and places, and of different social interactions. Both Czarniawska (2004) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000) describe the process of narrative as living, telling, reliving, and retelling the individual and social experiences of peoples' lives. Narratives truly are the stories of people both lived and told.

Noddings (1996) discussed that teacher stories and experiences are becoming more popular in educational literature. Narrative inquiry transcends all genres such as education, economics, anthropology, theater, communication, political science, feminist studies, history, and philosophy, so these stories are being used to describe a variety of experiences and backgrounds (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Czarniawska, 2004). Narratives are used in qualitative research as a mode of communication to tell stories, organize information about people, and to give life to peoples' experiences. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that narratives are not constructed or ended at specific periods in time, but are always in constant change. They discuss that when writing narratives, "we begin in the midst, we end in the midst," (p. 187). A narrative researcher is not stepping into a scenario that they have created with a

36

specific process in mind and a conclusion to a story they have not yet written. They are

changing and growing with the participants as they spend time collecting field notes and

writing their narrative.

Czarniawska (2004) describes narrative analysis as moving from the field of

practice to the field of research. This movement includes watching how stories are being

made, collecting the stories, provoking the story telling, interpreting the stories, analyzing

the stories, deconstructing the stories, putting together your own story, and setting it

against or with other stories. Florio-Ruane and Williams (2008) "uncovered the paths to

teaching" by collecting and analyzing stories relating to teacher identity and the cultural

arts of memory in two participants. Their study looked at teacher identity through the

past experiences and paths made to becoming a teacher. Their focus was on the

formation and combination of professional and personal identity. The narratives

collected in this study allowed the authors to examine their similar and differing

perspectives of who they were as teachers, "and what we need to 're-member' both

individually and collectively to create ourselves as teacher in the unfolding story of our

profession," (p. 9).

Parker (1997) sums up teacher identity in his article *The Heart of a Teacher:*

Identity and Integrity in Teaching. He states, "When I do not know myself, I cannot

know who my students are," (p. 15). He believes that teachers are unable to teach to the

best of their ability if they do not know themselves. "Face to face with my students, only

one resource is at my immediate command: my identity, my selfhood, my sense of this 'I'

who teaches-without which I have no sense of the 'Thou' who learns," (p. 16).

Understanding teacher identity formation is just that, understanding who one is as a

teacher. As discussed in the literature, teacher identity formation plays an integral role in a teacher's professional and personal life. A strongly formed teacher identity can lead to a strong teaching career and a quality teacher who is able to grow from their experiences, transition between roles, and stay in the classroom beyond the first few years.

Summary

With the prevalence rates of autism continuing to increase, there is a need for highly effective teachers of children with autism in today's classrooms (FLDOE, 2009). While there is an abundance of information on individuals with autism and the evidence-based practices used to support them, there is little information on the *teachers* of students with autism (Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, & Goodwin, 2003). The gap in the literature on teacher identity formation among special education teachers, specifically teachers of children with autism, makes it difficult for pre-service and beginning teachers of children with autism to find literature about those in situations similar to theirs (DeMik, 2008). It is the stories of experienced teachers of children with autism that would be the most beneficial because they have similar successes and challenges. As described by Johnson and Golombek (2002), "teachers' stories of inquiry are not only *about* professional development; they *are* professional development," (p. 6). Narrative inquiry is a way in which teachers of children with autism are able to tell their stories and hear the stories of others to help form their teacher identity. Through hearing other's stories, teachers are able to make better sense of their own situations and allow their own teacher identities to evolve in relation to their own teaching experiences.

The gap in literature on teacher identity formation in special education teachers and the unique experiences teachers of children with autism face, underscore the

significance of this study. As discussed by Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, and Goodwin (2003), there are many new teachers coming into the field of autism with special education degrees or certifications, but little or no experience or education with autism specifically. This makes it difficult for these teachers to meet the needs of their students because they have nothing on which to base their teaching. Providing these teachers with stories of others who have already had similar experiences may help them to better teach and support their students. Through the use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography, the formation and evolution of teacher identify in teachers of children with autism was researched in this study with the ultimate goal of supporting new teachers in this field.

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Research Design

      Teacher identity is described through multiple perspectives, utilizing a variety of

methodologies, but research employing narrative inquiry and autoethnography seem to be

among the most common ways to describe the development of teachers' identities

(Florio-Ruane & Williams, 2008; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Ronfedlt & Grossman, 2008). A

qualitative research design utilizing self-study, narrative inquiry, and autoethnography to

examine the formation of teacher identity was used in this study. Self-study research is

collaborative, reflective research that gives participants hands-on experiences to help

them explore their own teaching, their students' learning, and is critiqued and discussed

by their colleagues or critical friends (Samaras, 2011). Self-study was used in order for

participants to gain a better understanding of themselves as teachers. This was done

through the use of critical friends' sessions (Samaras, 2011) as well as through the

creation and sharing of several artifacts, which helped to give an overall picture of each

participant regarding how they view themselves as a teacher. Narratives were formed

through interviews and through multiple meetings of a critical friends group where the

participants discussed their experiences and created artifacts reflecting on their teacher

identity formation. Autoethnography was used to juxtaposition myself, as a participant,

and my stories with the other teachers. This study evolved as stories were told and

experiences were shared, which led to a rich and in-depth examination of teacher identity

formation in special education teachers. As an additional research tool, various forms of

self-study artifacts were used to help guide the participants in better understanding their

own teacher identity. These self-study tools were linked back to narrative inquiry to help

create more detailed overall stories of each participant in this study. The study took place

in seven phases, which are detailed within the document "Structure of the Study." This

document gives specific information regarding the study steps, data collection, and

analysis (See Appendix A).

This study addressed the following research questions:

a) With regard to the formation of teacher identity, what are the experiences of

teachers of students with autism?

b) How does the identity of teachers of students with autism change or evolve in

relation to teaching and educational experiences?

c) What characteristics and experiences distinguish a special education teacher,

specifically a teacher of students with autism?

Sample

A purposeful sample of four special education teachers from public elementary

schools in a large school district in southwestern Florida was selected for this study.

These teachers were specifically teachers of children with autism in specialized self-

contained elementary classroom settings. Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007) advise that

purposeful sampling should be used to "select cases that are 'information-rich' with

respect to the purposes of the study," (p. 178). In this study, the four participants were

selected for their ability to present "information-rich" narratives surrounding the

formation of their professional identity. Teachers with five or more years of experience

were chosen because they had more time and experiences in the classroom than teachers with fewer years. When considering teachers with "information-rich narratives," participants willing to tell "their stories" surrounding their classroom experiences were selected for this study. During participant recruitment, potential participants were given topics or themes they possibly would have to discuss in their interviews to help them with their decision if they wanted to be considered to participate. Written consent for participants was completed coinciding with the IRB consent from both the university and the school district.

Selection criteria. Participants selected for this study were those who teach in the same school district and teach in elementary level self-contained classrooms for children with autism spectrum disorder. The participants utilize the same curriculum materials for students on the Access Points standards, which align with the Sunshine State Standards and are for students with are on the special diploma track, have attended similar district training for teachers of children with autism, and have access to the same district resources. All elementary teachers of children with autism in self-contained classrooms in this school district must utilize the same district mandated curriculum for their classrooms. This was considered as a selection criteria because not all teachers of children with autism have classes that are just for children with autism. For example, some "ASD" classes are a combination of children with autism and children with intellectual disabilities; therefore the teachers would be using a combination of curriculums. Another example of this is teachers who have children on both Access Points and Sunshine State Standards, which would also allow for a combination of curriculums. For example, in self-contained elementary classroom for children with

autism on the Access Points, teachers are given the full SRA Reading Mastery curriculum and are trained in this and required to use this with the students. District area autism resource teachers complete school curriculum inventory checks to make sure teachers have access to and are using the curriculum properly. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) suggest that the important aspect of participant selection is not only who researchers decide to use, but the relationships that they create with them. In this study, the relationships have already initially been formed because all elementary teachers of children with autism attend the same trainings, professional study days, and are part of a community of teachers who utilize a district internet conference area to share ideas and communicate. The population of teachers who serve students with autism in this district is relatively small in comparison to the overall number of teachers in the district, which is at approximately 20,000 (www.fldoe.org). As previously discussed, because of the unique needs of this population, a variety of opportunities have been put in place to allow for teacher communication and interaction. Furthermore, there are multiple professional development opportunities that are targeted at this specific population. Since I have been a teacher of students with autism and part of the school district for nine years, it was very likely that I would know all of the participants of this study. The depth of each relationship varied, but all of the participants and I knew each other prior to this study. Relationships continued to develop through the interactions involved in the interviews, group research session with critical friends, and through the artifacts created during the research process. As the researcher, I also identified myself as a participant due to my participation in the interactive interviews, critical friends sessions, and in the auto-ethnographical sections throughout the study.

Teachers were selected for this study based on several factors. The participants needed to have had at least 5 years of experience in the classroom as a teacher of children with autism, but may have more. They had to teach in a self-contained elementary level classroom for children with autism. They must also have been in public school in the same school district. All participants in this study were female due to the fact that the majority of the population of teachers of children with autism in the school district being female. Having individuals in the study who are all of the same gender also allowed the participants to have a better understanding of each other's experiences as females in the field. Participants' ethnic backgrounds and socio-economic statuses varied. Three of the participants were Caucasian and one participant was considered mixed raced. Two of the participants were married, one with a small child, while the other two participants were in long term relationships, but not married. Socio-economic statuses varied based on the participants' partners' earnings as well as their own.

Procedures for participant recruitment. Recruitment of participants was done using the internet conference site for ASD teachers through their school district following school district permission. The purpose of using this site was because all ASD teachers in the school district have access to this site and all emails sent through it. This gave teachers the opportunity to read about the study and decide if they are interested and then contact me via email to express interest. An explanation regarding the purpose of the study was provided again to the participants after they expressed their initial interest and the individual was asked if he/she would be willing to participate in the study (See Appendix B). If the individual was willing to participate in the study, informed consent was obtained from the individual through a face-to-face meeting (See Appendix C).

Approximately 10 teachers of students with autism in self-contained classrooms showed interest in participating in the study. Of these teachers, one was male and three taught in classrooms that services both children with autism and children with other low incidence disabilities. Another teacher taught primarily in a self-contained classroom for students with autism, but also fused with regular education teachers for a portion of the day in an inclusive setting for her students. The final teacher who expressed interest was not willing to share stories of her experiences in any detail and was not comfortable after learning more about the study based on the population of students she served and her experiences. The other four teachers met all of the selection requirements.

My role as a researcher and participant. The participants in this study were also made aware of my position as both the researcher and autoethnographer. The teachers were made aware that while I was in the classroom for eight years teaching children with autism, I am now a new teacher mentor in the school district. I explained that in this position, I work solely with beginning teachers (1-2 years of experience) who teach children with low-incidence disabilities in self-contained classroom settings. This position is important to me in context to this study because I am still in the classroom with teachers of students with autism on a daily basis helping with teaching, suggesting strategies, and observing lessons. This change in my position is part of my own teacher identity formation and my own narrative.

Procedures and Data Collection

In order to conduct this study, a variety of instrumentation techniques were used Data consisted of semi-structured interactive interviews using an interview protocol created by me, through critical friends' sessions, and through the creation of three

artifacts. As seen in Figure 1, specific procedures were in place to complete the data

collection process. From my research on teacher identity formation, autism spectrum

disorders, and my methodologies, I created an interactive interview guide and began the

process of interviewing the four teachers. After interviewing the participants, I

conducted three critical friends' sessions where the participants and I created artifacts

which represented our experiences and stories related to our teacher identity. Finally, I

concluded the study by creating narratives of the participants' experiences and my own

autoethnography.
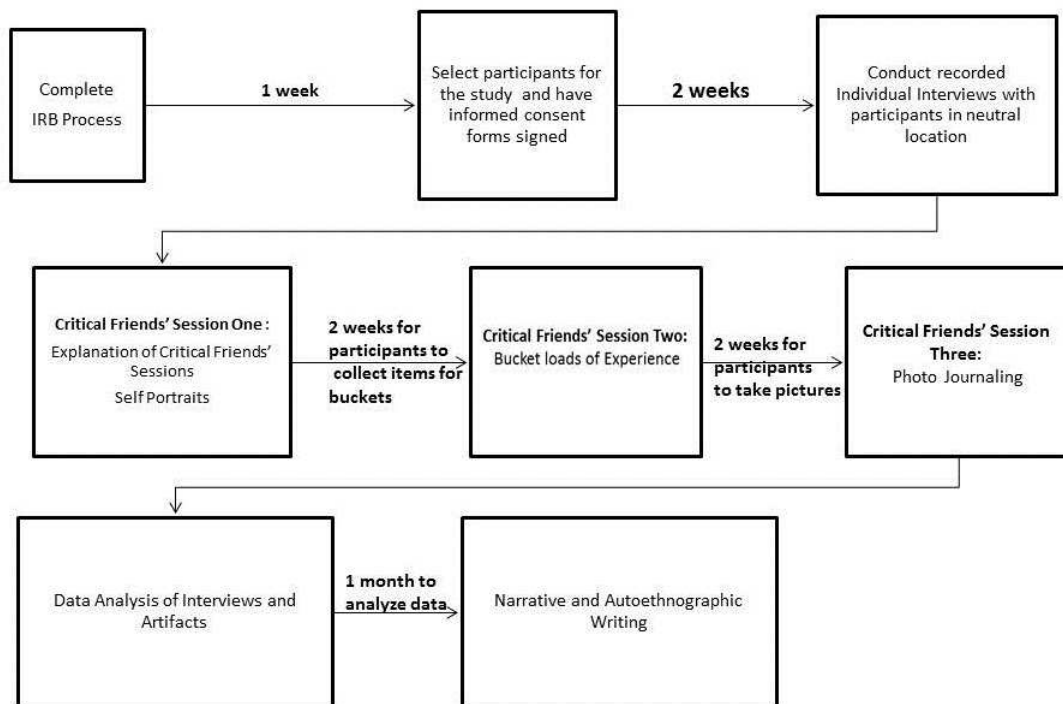
Figure 1. Procedure for completing the study. Time frames between each box indicates
the time between each activity.

Telling our tales. The primary means of data collection in narrative inquiry is

through the use interviews and observations (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000). Semi-

structured interactive interviews were used in gathering narratives of the participants'

experiences regarding teacher identity formation. Rather than conduct formally structured individual interviews, the interactive interviews consisted of a series of guiding open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to describe their experiences and feelings (Seidman, 2006; Trahar, 2009). In semi-structured interviews, the questions asked by the researchers are considered somewhat of an interview guide rather than a specific interview structure (Bryman, 2008). The initial interview guide consisted of eleven questions all relating to teacher identity formation (See Appendix D for interview questions). These questions were developed based on the conclusion and implication sections of the teacher identity literature utilized in this study. Following a semi-structured interview format, all of the 11 questions were asked, but the order was changed, guiding or prompting questions were added, or the interviewee was asked to expand on one area or another, which gave more information about their teacher identity. Bryman (2008), Gall, Gall, and Borg (2007), and Turner (2010) all stress that flexibility is the key to this type of interview because gaining an understanding of the interviewee's experiences may require the researcher to divert from the original interview schedule. Corbin and Strauss (2008) also suggest being less structured with interview questions because respondents generally only specifically answer questions without elaboration for fear of causing problems with the research process. Since I used narrative ethnography to tell these teachers stories, I wanted the feel of the interviews to be more conversational than structured interview protocols. Allowing the interview to flow as the teacher talked helped the participants to feel more comfortable telling their own stories.

Through interactive interviews, the participants and I entered in conversations that mirrored that same story-like quality as the narratives with the participant and me

speaking in a conversational manner and the participant telling the stories of their experiences. An interview guide was created to lead participants in specific directions regarding their formation of teacher identity, but additional questions or discussions occurred based on their answers.

After completing the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process and obtaining consent from each of the participants, interactive interviews were conducted. One interview was conducted with each of the four participants separately, lasting approximately 60 minutes each, after school hours. With participant permission, all interviews were audio recorded. Each of the interviews was completed separately in a neutral location for both me and each of the participants, which allowed for the optimal audio recording and ensured that interviews did not take place on school campuses.

Interviews began by collecting general and specific information on the participants, their age, years of teaching experience, educational level, and any other information pertinent to this study. Interviews steps included: explaining the reason for the interview and how the interview would proceed, beginning with the demographic questions, having the teacher define teacher identity, asking interview questions, discussing the participant's definition of teacher identity again, and transcribing interviews into MaxQDA. After each interview was completed, the reviewing and transcription process began. In the two week period following the interviews, the first coding of the transcripts was completed. This will be discussed further in the data analysis portion of the study.

Learning the process. In the beginning, I had a set idea of how interviews would be accomplished and what the participants' interview answers may have sounded like.

Minutes into the first interview a strong realization hit me that it is not until you are "in the moment" that you realize what an "interactive interview" really is. The term interactive, in the sense of doing an interview, is not just two people relaying information, but much more. Throughout the interactive interviews, I found myself needing to ask more questions, using probing questions to get more detailed answers, and rephrasing questions so that participants had a better understanding of my questions. For example, "give your definition of teacher identity." In each interview, I had to explain what teacher identity was first. As each interview went on, we found ourselves more into discussions about our commonalities in teaching children with autism than what our teacher identity was specifically like. As described by Czarniawska (2004), narratives have to be reduced backwards to a set of understandings, which in this case happened through talking about larger experiences and realizing that we were actually talking about our teacher identities in the process. This became even more apparent in the second iteration of the coding process.

With a little help from my friends. Samaras (2011) uses the famous 1976 Beatles' song to give a definition of self- study research. The author discusses that the goal of self-study is to begin to understand, improve, and assess one's teaching and its impact on their students' learning through tactile knowledge. In doing so, one must not only self-reflect, but also have a group of critical friends who are able to reflect together and offer different perspectives on teaching. Mitchell, Weber, and O'Reilly-Scanlon (2005) explain that there are a variety of different ways to complete self-studies, all of which allow for the researcher to gain a more reflective perspective of their research focus.

Upon completion of all of the interactive interviews, all participants met for the first critical friends' session at a neutral location for all of the participants. During this session, participants were given the protocol for critical friends' sessions. Each critical friends' session lasted between one and half and two hours. The varying session times allowed for flexibility which gave participants enough time to adequately reflect on each of the activities and allow participants to give their input. During the critical friends' sessions, the participations and I engaged in reflective conversations and the creation of artifacts that helped us gain a better understanding of ourselves as teachers. Self-study critical friends' sessions were conducted at three times throughout the data collection process with two weeks between each session. This gave the participants time between group sessions to reflect on the process and come back to the group with more to share.

Samaras (2011) describes critical friends as peers who can help to provoke, mediate, and support new knowledge and understanding. These individuals offer constant support to one another during the research process and help to give feedback and critical reviews through collaborative inquiry sessions (Loughran & Northfield, 1998; Samaras, 2011). *The participants and I used these sessions to share our stories about teaching, describe our experiences in relation to our teacher identity formation, and find similarities and differences in our experiences and stories.*

In addition to interviews, critical friends' sessions were designed with a list of more informal questions and reflective prompts related to experience the teachers might have had and how they feel teaching children with autism (See Appendix E). These groups were used to elicit discussion among the four teachers and to allow them to share their stories with each other, in hopes to help them identify more aspects of their evolving

teacher identity than they originally discussed in their individual interviews. In this study, several types of arts-based artifacts were created to help the participants gain a better overall understanding of their teacher identity.

Critical friends' session one. During the first critical friends' sessions, the participants were asked to create their self-portrait, which portrayed themselves as a teacher and encompassed their experiences and ideas about teaching. Participants were given a variety of art supplies and asked to create a self-portrait, which encompassed their teacher identity and items or people that influenced their everyday teaching. Upon completion of the activity, participants took part in individual and group reflection. This portion of the critical friends' session focused on participants answering reflection questions based on their self-portraits (See Appendix F), which have been adapted from Samaras' critical friend inquiry activity (2011, p. 5-7). The participants and I engaged in a group discussion based on our answers to the reflection questions and explored our experiences and our definitions of teacher identity.

Chase (2011) discusses that some narrative researchers look at visual images as "socially situated narrative texts that demand interpretation" (p. 426). Drawings have been used in prior research to help pre-service teachers understand teacher stereotypes (Weber & Mitchell, 1995), to represent and construct one's thinking about teaching (Weber & Mitchell, 2004), to understand perceptions of themselves (Derry, 2005), and to promote self-reflection (Samaras & Freese, 2006). Furthermore, creating artifacts along with narratives helps the reader to have clearer picture of each participants' experiences and stories. Derry (2005) states, "When drawings and text combine, they have the potential to give the audience a multi-layered look at a phenomenon and may help foster

an embodied understanding," (p. 40). She goes on to explain that drawing allows the readers a deeper experience than reading text alone; it is an alternate mode of knowing", (p. 40). Prosser (2011) explains that art allows the researcher and the participants to experience and imagine what a life other than theirs might be like to live. He discusses that art allows an audience to identify with the stories, characters, and lives that art is often about.

Samaras (2011) gives a detailed description of how to use the arts-based self-study method within a research study. This method was used during one of the critical friends' sessions in which the participants created self-portraits of themselves as teachers. The purpose of these self-portraits was for individuals to communicate their understanding of themselves as teachers and how they see themselves based their experiences in the classroom. Each participant drew a self-portrait of how they see themselves as a teacher of children with autism. Participants chose from a variety of art materials provided to create their self-portrait. Samaras (2011) ensures that participants do not have to have any artistic training to participate in this activity. After creating their self-portraits, participants each wrote write a brief poem, reflection, or narrative about their self-portrait. The author suggests that participants be advised to discuss their thoughts, reflections, and reactions to their own pictures. *I gave the participants the suggested prompts taken from Samaras (2011) to help guide them with the writing process.* After completing the self-portrait and written reflection, participants shared and reacted to each other's portraits without judgment. During this time, participants engaged in a discussion about their reactions to the images, talked about similarities and differences, and connections that linked the pictures (Samaras, 2011). Prosser (2011)

states that visuals are not just about the image or object the viewer is looking at, but the meanings and perceptions attributed to what they are seeing.

At the end of the first critical friends' session, participants were given the materials they need to complete the next activity, *a Bucket Load of Experiences*, for the second critical friends' session, which took place two weeks later. Giving the participants two weeks was sufficient time for participants to gather their materials for the next session and maintain a focus of what they are being asked to do.

Critical friends' session two. The second critical friends' session focused on the participants reflecting on their buckets that they created to better explain their experiences as teachers of children with autism. Samaras (2011) also describes a teacher research artifact completed in the form of a bucket metaphor. This artifact allows the participants to create buckets that they can use to show their critical friends various items and "experiences" from their journey of becoming a teacher of children with autism. These buckets contained "symbolic 'treasures'…gathered from teaching and learning experiences," (Samaras, 2011, p. 106). Prior to the second critical friends' session, the participants were given a bucket to collect artifacts that relate to their teaching experiences and their journey as an ASD teacher. The participants were told to collect artifacts that they felt helped to tell their story about their teaching experiences and items that helped to characterize them as an ASD teacher. Participants were not limited to the amount of artifacts to collect to fill their bucket. At the second critical friends' session, the participants were asked to present their teaching buckets and each gave a description of why they chose the items that filled their bucket. In lieu of having the participants complete essays about their buckets as recommended by Samaras (2011), participants'

oral accounts of the bucket artifacts and their description of the items were recorded.

These descriptions were then transcribed to use within the narratives along with

photographs of the participants' buckets. *To aid the participants in thinking about their*

artifacts, I used the suggested writing prompts from Samaras (2011). I explained to the

participants that these were thinking prompts for them as they collected artifacts for their

buckets (See Appendix G). Critical friends shared their experiences and buckets and

reflected on their similar and different experiences as a group of teachers of children with

autism.

       Critical friends' session three. After the participants reflected on their buckets,

they were given the directions to work on their photo journaling activity. Participants

asked to use their own digital cameras and upload the pictures to me because they felt

more comfortable than using a different camera. After taking photos for the journaling

activity, participants were asked to journal about specific photos based on the reflection

questions that they were given at the end of the second critical friends' session (See

Appendix H). Participants reflected as a group at the final critical friends' session.

The third means of artifact collection in this study was photo journaling. The use of

photo journaling and other visual representations of research have become more popular

throughout the 21st century most recently with technological developments relating to

visual methodologies (Holm, 2008; Prosser, 2011). Similar to the use of Photovoice,

participants in this study took a camera in their classrooms and school and home

environments that they believed will help to tell their stories of their teaching children

with autism. Participants also took pictures of other objects, environments, and visuals

that played a part in influencing their teacher identity. In Photovoice, documentary

photography is conducted by giving individuals who may not normally have the opportunity to take pictures of their surroundings an opportunity to use images to tell their stories (Wang, Burris, & Xiang, 1996). Participants of Photovoice studies are given the opportunity to share their stories and display their photos for the public to view (Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005). In this study, the participants were given the opportunity to share their photos and stories with their critical friends as well as to have these incorporated into their narratives. As with the previous artifacts, the photo journals supported the narratives that tell the stories about each of the participants' experiences of being a teacher of children with autism. Photo journaling is a more structured method of self-reflection that allowed the participants to reflect on their teaching and their classroom environment through a different lens.

Photovoice and photo journaling are an integral part of artifact collection in this study because it links so closely to narrative inquiry. Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, and McCann (2005) link Photovoice to Rappaport's (1998) version of narrative inquiry. The researchers say "storytelling processes aim to capture the stories people tell about their lives because these stories are viewed as a useful venue for understanding the meaning and significance behind the experience (p. 277). Rappaport (1998) goes on to describe that while Photovoice does not fully capture an entire narrative of participants' life experiences, it does allow participants to show small pieces of their social realities. In this current study, the participants were able to take photos of their experiences as a teacher of children with autism and journal about how these pictures help to capture their overall story or experience.

After taking pictures in their respective classrooms or in other environments that they felt have played a part in their teacher identity, participants were asked to write brief reflections or journal entries describing 3-5 of their pictures. Participants also took turns during the third critical friends' session describing each of their pictures and how it is part of their teacher identity. Similar to the method used in the Photovoice study by Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, and McCann (2005), participants were asked three questions about each of their pictures: (a) "I took this picture because. . ." (b) "What is the real story this picture tells?" (c) "How does this picture relate to your experience as a teacher of children with autism or help to distinguish you as a teacher of children with autism?" Participants brought their pictures and journal entries to the critical friends' session and described the pictures they took and their reflections. As a group, the critical friends discussed each set of pictures and how they helped to define the participants as teachers of children with autism and described their teacher identity.

Roles of the researcher. As the researcher, I carried multiple roles in this study. *Throughout the interactive interviews, I interjected my own stories and experiences relating to the responses of the other four participants. By creating an environment for meaningful discussion about teacher identity, I juxtaposed my own story with the stories of the other four participants using autoethnography and narrative analysis. My own stories are told throughout the conversations with the participants as well as telling my own story to situate myself in the research. My initial need to complete this study was based on what I experienced as an ASD teacher, so telling my own story was imperative. As I have gained teaching experiences and changed roles, my own narrative also changed. This is discussed throughout my narrative. As advised in Connelly and*

56

Clandinin (1990) I allowed the participants to first tell their stories and share their experiences so they will not become swayed by mine. Since narrative inquiry focuses on storytelling and the relationship between stories, I needed to be aware of my level of participation in the response portions of interview process. In order to juxtaposition my own teacher identity formation and experiences with my colleagues, I had to find a balance between my roles in this study by audio journaling to reflect on my own thoughts of teacher identity as well as how I feel as the narrator. Audio journaling consists of keeping a regular journal of thoughts and ideas via tape recordings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I will begin to audio journal immediately upon conducting the first interview.

Confidentiality was maintained throughout the study through the use of pseudonyms. The other four participants in this study were made aware that pseudonyms were used in all transcription material and in the narrative produced from the interviews. Interviews were conducted using only the participants' pseudonyms and any other confidential information was left out of the interview transcriptions. The participants' workplace and other identifying demographic information were kept confidential as well.

Data Analysis

In this study, data analysis was used to examine the formation of teacher identity in four teachers at different points in their professional careers, and to explore what characteristics and experiences defines them as teachers. The goals of analyzing the data were to determine similarities and differences in the narratives and to explore the teaching perspectives, influences, and experiences of how they became teachers through

their multiple voices. Analysis procedures were completed for the two different types of data in this study—interviews and written word and visual artifacts (See Figure 2).
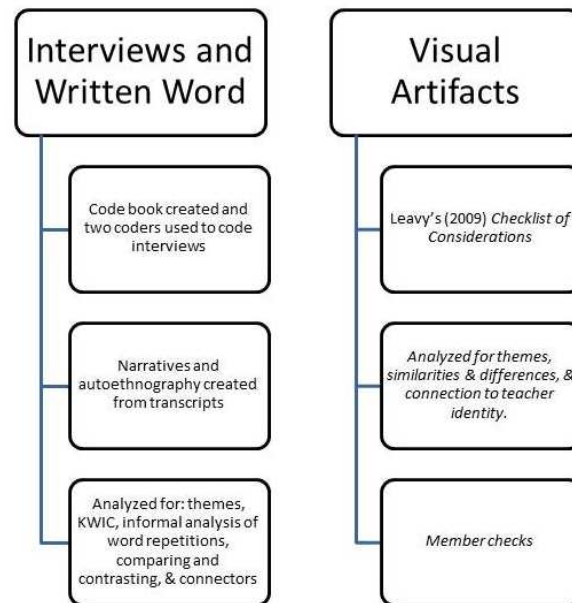
Figure 2. Analysis procedures for two types of data collection throughout the study.

Interviews and written word. After completing member checks of each interview and critical friends' transcript and transcribing the information from my own autoethnography, I began coding in multiple iterations. My own memos and audio journaling were also coded in the same manner in order for them to be included into my autoethnography. An initial reading of the transcripts provided me with a holistic understanding of the participant's thoughts and ideas. The second iteration entailed breaking the documents into topics or themes. The third iteration of coding entailed looking for key-words-in-context (KWIC). After completing and transcribing the interviews, the process of creating a codebook began. I began by reading back through the study and rewrote the iterations into a step-by-step process, identifying the type of coding in the iteration and what categories would fall under each larger section. For example, "interactions" and "influences" were categorized under the theme and topic

iteration of coding. I then began dividing each iteration and focused on more specific

ways to look at the data. Based on the work of DeCuir-Gundy, Marshall, & McCulloch

(2011) each code was sorted into sub-categories as theory-driven or data-driven and the

page number where the corresponding text in the study was noted. These categories were

then color-coded and put into the code book. It was imperative for me to make theory

and data driven connections to ensure that I kept the focus of my research in mind.

Before beginning with the first iteration, I created a coding tree which allowed me to *see*

the connections between the iterations and how each linked to the overall analysis of the

data. This coding tree was a visual representation of how the three iterations of coding

connected to one another, how the similarities and differences connected the codes to the

visual artifacts, and how all of the codes helped to create narratives and answer the

research questions.

After completing the code tree and ensuring that I knew the connections I was

trying to make, I began to create the code book using color-coded card system to organize

iterations of codes (See Appendix I for code book examples). The code book was

specifically created for the second and third iterations of coding, themes and topics, and

KWIC, respectively. Each code was detailed on a single colored index card and

consisted of five code components—code name/label, definition of the code, inclusion

criteria, exclusion criteria, and an example of the code. As the code book was created

and codes were better specified, codes were renamed and relabeled to be as specific as

possible. For example, the code "transformation" was relabeled to

"transformation/evolution" based on the definition of the code, which described both

terms as the same code. Interview questions were also attached to codes to ensure that

themes would match the topics participants were asked about. After the completion of the code book, I created a checklist to use to check codes so that when the second coder read through the code book, they would be able to understand the codes. The checklist was created to ensure that the other coder was clear on the code. This checklist allowed me to color-code whether the code definition was clear, if the code was approved, deleted, or changed to another coding category.

One advanced doctoral student was trained to aide in coding the data based on the coding book created prior to coding the transcripts. Having another coder helped in increasing the effectiveness and quality of the overall examination of interview transcripts (Creswell, 2007). The doctoral student coder was trained to code data for themes specific to teacher identity formation and development and life experiences of participants. The coder was trained by going through each card of the code book and completing the checklist for each code. During the beginning steps of the coding process it became evident that coding independently allowed for too much interpretation of data even with the created code book. The second coder and I re-evaluated this area of the coding process and decided to follow the work of DeCuir-Gundy, et al. (2011) and Harry, et al. (2005) and focus on group consensus of codes after the initial iteration of coding. We began coding by themes using line by line coding, labeled themes that were evident in the data, and in some cases created sub-themes as new codes, which were then filed into the codebook. The discussion and consensus of building the codes allowed me to see how codes related to one another throughout the process. The second coder and I also used in-vivo coding when I felt as though there was a word or phrase that stood out in a transcript. Upon completion of coding, the other coder and I reviewed the codes and

discussed any discrepancies between coded data. Participant narratives and an autoethnography were created from the transcripts and observation to explore the multiple voices of becoming a teacher.

Czarniawska (2004) discusses that in order to think about the data analysis process for narrative inquiry in the analytic sense, the researcher needs to reduce stories backwards to a set of understandings. This same theory is effective in the coding process as well. By bringing the stories backwards to a set of understandings, the researcher is able to code for apparent themes within and among stories, relationships between their own field texts and the narratives of the participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) agree with this line of thought, discussing that a researcher's experience is a dual one; experiencing the experience and being part of the experience itself. This dual experience of the researcher allows them to code for themes between their own experiences and those of the participants.

Narratives and autoethnography were used to report the findings in lieu of traditional analysis because my goal was to create a story of the dialogue within the interactive interviews, not just give information about the participants and the topic (Bratlinger, et al., 2005; Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Transcripts were analyzed for themes and key-words in-context (KWIC) related to teacher identity, identity formation, and life experiences. Targeted key words were taken from the framework of the study such as emotion, "socialization," "interaction," "experience," and "support." Informal analysis of word repetitions helped to identify any key words throughout the context that were frequently used by the participants that were not yet been identified. For example, the words "challenging," "difficult," and "control" were frequently used by the participants.

As we saw these words regularly appear, we realized that they should be coded to address during the analysis phase. Specifically in this study, word repetitions focused on participants' feelings and thoughts throughout the interactive interviews and critical friends' sessions. Comparing and contrasting between participants responses based on the themes during interviews were a key component of analyzing data and writing the narratives. These comparisons were vital in exploring the teacher identity formation of each participant.

While each narrative focused on individual participants; I also focused on the similarities and differences in teacher identity development. Similarities in stories, experiences, beliefs, influences, and other supporting themes in teacher identity formation were color coded and compiled. Similar measures were taken to code for differences in stories. Transitions in thematic content were another area of analysis that was addressed by the researchers. Transitions in discussion of identity formation and transformation help to show an evolution of each participant's own teacher identity.

The final analysis approach for the transcripts being utilized in this study was to search for connectors in the transcripts, which indicated relationships between areas that were not related in initial readings. The analysis of connections occurred during the second two coding iteration. When connectors were found, they were discussed and noted in the memo pads offered through the qualitative data software. These connectors were evident both in the iteration process and while the narratives are being written. Czarniawska (2004) believes the real questions that researchers are asking in the transition from field notes to narratives are the "wh" questions: who, what, when, where, and why. In order to make meaning of what they have already compiled, I continuously

asked myself these questions to decide what kind of message I was trying to convey, what research questions I was answering, and what contexts I was focusing on. The other coder also was made aware of the "wh" questions, which were utilized throughout coding discussions.

I used MaxQDA, qualitative data analysis software (QDA) to aide in systemically interpreting the transcripts. This software helped me to see the data in a structured format. MaxQDA also allows for the insertion of photo and visual artifacts, which were useful to effectively show the participants' creations from the critical friends' sessions. The software also allows for coding of the visual artifacts. I utilized MaxQDA's Intercoder Agreement tool to assist in increasing the reliability of codes. This was used after the KWIC coding (third iteration). The tool allows two coders to compare coding and any differences within the document.

Visual artifacts. To ensure that the visuals artifacts included in this study were of high quality, Leavy's (2009) *Checklist of Considerations* was used (See Appendix J). Connections and reflections of visual artifacts were included in the final product of this study throughout the written narratives to help tell the stories of each participant. Additionally, participants' visual artifacts such as their self-portraits and reflections were analyzed for themes, similarities and differences, and connections to their teacher identity formation. Member checks were used to ensure that participants narratives based on their artifacts reflect the stories they told. This includes the reflections of their self-portraits, their teaching buckets, and their photo journals. The reflections were coded for themes and KWIC mirroring the themes and KWIC in the interview portion of the data analysis.

Through the combination of coded transcriptions and analysis of artifacts from self-study portions of this process, I explored teacher identity using narrative inquiry and autoethnography. These narratives and autoethnography gave a voice to a population that has been widely overlooked in current research and will hopefully prompt educators to continue the exploration through their own stories and multiple voices.

Quality Indicators

To ensure quality of this study, the quality indicator guidelines created by Bratlinger et al. (2005) was utilized. Quality indicator domains include interview studies, observation studies, document analysis, and data analysis. Each domain lists several subsections relating to the conceptual framework of the study. The following domains were included and all appropriate subsections applicable up to this point in the study timeline have been identified and addressed. Participants were purposefully selected, recruited, and representative of the specific population of interest. Demographic and guiding interview questions were reasonable and transcription and sound measures have been identified. All observation components including setting, timeline, observation procedures have been well thought out in relation to this study. Meaningful documents focusing on teacher identity formation and development were used in the creation of the literature review. Finally, as data were collected, the document and data analysis sections of the quality indicator guidelines were addressed and followed.

Narrative inquiry, like other types of qualitative research, must also meet standards of rigor to be considered credible research. Regarding interview studies or the interview components of comprehensive studies, narrative inquirers must make sure that the appropriate participants are selected and represented fairly, the interview questions

are reasonable, there are sufficient instruments to record and transcribe interviews, participants, and sound measures are used for confidentiality (Bratlinger et al., 2005). Because narratives are based around the stories of peoples' experiences, the narrative researcher should be particularly aware that appropriate participants are selected for their subject matter and that the stories of these participants are told in a way that fairly represents them. The narrative researcher must also realize that an interview is just that, an interview, an exchange that does not represent any more than it is (Czarniawska, 2004).

Furthermore, the narrative researcher is also responsible for ensuring the quality of the observation studies or the observation components of comprehensive studies. This includes ensuring the proper systematic collection of field notes, an appropriate setting or people for the observation, the researcher having minimal impact of the setting and fitting into the site, a sufficient amount of time being spent in the field, and sound measures being used in the confidentially of the setting and participants (Bratlinger et al., 2005; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Field notes are an integral part of a narrative researcher's process to creating a narrative. The creation of good field notes requires the researcher to fit themselves into the research setting, immerse themselves into their environment with the participants, all while having a minimal impact on the story they are creating. The shared experiences in narrative inquiry require the researcher to spend time listening to what they have recorded or going over their notes and adding their own interpretations and thoughts on what they experiences while they were recorded someone else's experiences. Throughout the interview process and the critical friends' sessions, I took

detailed notes of our participation and discussions, my reactions to information, and any changes in my thought process about the overall study.

Document analysis is the third quality indicator researchers must address. The document analysis consists of ensuring that meaningful documents are found and their relevance is established, documents are sufficiently cited and describes, carefully stored, and confidentiality procedures are in place. Documents were meaningful and their relevance was established by relating them back to the research questions and theoretical framework. The results were sorted and coded in a systematic way and there was a rationale for what was and was not included in the final findings of the study.

The final area is data analysis, which includes the results of data being stored and coded systematically and meaningfully, providing a sufficient rational or inclusion and exclusion criteria, methodology documentation being credible, conclusions containing adequate additions from field notes, observations, and participants, and reflections and connections made to research. As discussed in Connelly and Clandinin (1990), researchers have to be careful not to create "the Hollywood plot" where the conclusion always comes out good. Real life and real stories are not always good, and while the conclusions reached by the researcher may not be the conclusions anticipated, it is their responsibility to give credible documentation, connections, and reflections about their experiences and research. Additionally, a researcher can ensure that participants are fairly represented and their quotations are correct by performing member checks. Member checks were used in this study to allow the participants to verify what they said has been transcribed and analyzed correctly. In the case of narrative inquiry, member checks may include the participants reading their interview transcriptions or written

66

versions of stories they have told to make sure they tell the story they intended to be told.

Through the use of autoethnography, my own personal position and perspective were

addressed. Finally, conclusions were established through a variety of documentation and

connections were made with current research.

CHAPTER 4: THE STORY OF TEACHER IDENTITY FORMATION

"What keeps you in it?" I asked and each replied without hesitation, "My kids."

Although all four women have very different backgrounds and stories; each had striking similarities that all root back to why they've stayed in the field for so many years. . ."the kids." Over the span of four months their stories and experiences began to take shape as each eloquently described their first days, the best days, the worst days, their influences and experiences, and most importantly their teacher identity.

Throughout this chapter you will read the stories of four teachers of children with autism. Their stories were collected through interviews, critical friends' sessions, and three very important artifacts, a teacher self-portrait, a bucket that the teachers filled with their representations of experiences, and a photo journal. Each piece played a key role in describing the participants' teacher identity formation. I begin by taking you through the participants' journeys to becoming teachers highlighting their major influence in working with students with autism, which led to their career choices as well as a discussion of their first day in the classroom. I introduce you to each of the teachers in order to better help you understand their perspectives throughout the narratives. Each section throughout this chapter represents a theme found within the study. Following their initial introductions, the participants' stories are intertwined within the themes. Throughout this chapter, there are also several images of the participants' artifacts that help to better tell

their stories. My goal throughout this study connected to the following research

questions:

a)   With regard to the formation of teacher identity, what are the experiences

of teachers of students with autism?

b)   How does the identity of teachers of students with autism change or

evolve in relation to teaching and educational experiences?

c)   What characteristics and experiences distinguish a special education

teacher, specifically a teacher of students with autism?

I believe that I was able to answer these research questions while creating rich,

detailed narratives of the participants. These participants have shared stories that other

teachers of children with autism will be able to relate to and learn from. Meet Jodie,

Beasley, Jane, and Maria—four teachers of children with autism.

Jodie

Jodie was self-assured with a loud, strong voice and a contagious smile. At 28

years old, Jodie was in her 7th year of teaching children with autism. She has always

taught elementary age students and been in self-contained classrooms her whole career.

With both bachelors and master's degrees in special education, Jodie had a strong

knowledge of content and pedagogy to work with this population of students. She

currently has a class of 10 kindergarten and first graders with autism with one

paraprofessional. When asked if there was a reason that Jodie chose to work with

children with autism, she answered with a definitive "Yes."

As a teenager, Jodie had worked at a facility for individuals with disabilities. One

summer, there was a child with autism who needed someone working with him one-on-

one, which ended up being Jodie's job. Jodie had worked with other children with disabilities who were happy and willing to open up, but working with this child was not the same. Jodie said this child was probably one of the most difficult kids she had ever worked with.

"He didn't want to open up, didn't want to talk; he had meltdowns. And at 18 that was my most difficult. . ."

But Jodie said she liked the challenge with him and was able to establish a connection that others were not. By the end of the summer, the two of them would play a simple soccer game, passing the ball back and forth to each other, interacting with each other, something he had never done with anyone else before. Jodie was hooked and her identity as a teacher of children with autism began to form, years before she started in her first classroom.

Beasley

Beasley was in perpetual motion, throughout her interview her legs crossed and uncrossed; she played with straw wrappers at the table, and went to get a drink several times. Beasley had been teaching for 10 years and was the participant with the most experience in the study. Her current classroom consisted of 10 intermediate age students in 3rd-5th grades. She was serious when talking about her classroom, but became even more so when talking about the "two most important things" in her life, her students, and the root of her existence in teaching, her older sister. Born with Rett's Syndrome and now in a group home setting, Beasley's older sister was her inspiration and her purpose for being in the classroom. She had not had a great educational experience before going into the group home and Beasley often wondered how different her life would have been

if she had been in a different class. As she shared her stories of why she became a teacher, she excitedly stopped to show her latest picture, her face leaning close into her sister whose brilliant smile took up the space on the screen. You can see in both their eyes that they are perfectly content in where they were at that moment. She said that this was the first smile she had seen on her sister's face in three months so she cherished the moment of happiness. Even as she told stories about her classroom and her students, they all begin to weave back to her sister and why she became a teacher.

"Teacher identity for me is someone who's passionate and looks at their kids as who they really are, not their disability. And I think that's been with my background, with my family and my history that, you know, my teacher identity is wrapped up in making sure that my children, that none of them can go back and look at me 10 years later and say that I didn't do a good job or their parents can't do that. So I look at it as the passionate side of myself."

Beasley had not always known that she would be a teacher, but that she had a passion for working with individuals who needed ways to communicate. Although Beasley has been in the classroom as a teacher for 10 years, she started much earlier on as a paraprofessional working in a unit for students with emotional behavior disorders. It was the teaching part of the job that she actually "fell into." She had started going to school as a speech pathologist because she was interested in assistive technology after working with her sister for so many years. The teacher who she worked with decided to move back to regular education and left Beasley with a few choices of what she could do with her life.

She said, "They are either going to get some 'Joe Shmo' off the road who has no idea what they're doing and you're pretty much going to be the teacher, you can go to another classroom in the school and be an assistant in that classroom and know that every time you walk by our kids you are going to cry because you feel like they deserve the best, or you can get your ass back in school and be a teacher yourself because you've got what it takes."

So Beasley decided to go back to school and be a teacher. She took the next year off from being a paraprofessional and finished her own schooling. She ended up staying at the school she interned in and took her first position as an ASD teacher. In her bucket, Beasley showed the picture of her sister that she keeps with her in the classroom to remind her of why she does what she does.

Jane

Similar to Beasley, Jane was also a paraprofessional before becoming a teacher; she also had a family history that pushed her into the profession as well. Jane has been in the classroom five years, the least of all the participants, but has stories similar to everyone else's. She also taught in an intermediate classroom with 3rd through 5th graders. She chose to work with students with autism because they are fascinating to her. Jane described her background as "imperfect" and understands that she had to persevere through a lot to get to where she is now. Growing up with a mother who has bipolar disorder, Jane had experienced the emotional mood swings, the roller coaster of behaviors, and understood the feeling of having high anxiety. Even in Jane's self-portrait, she drew herself with hair that was half smooth and calm and the other a frazzled and crazy mess. Her days beginning calm and many days ending exhausted from

working with her students all day. Her goal as a teacher was to try and figure the kids out, to help them get through situations that she was used to experiencing herself.

"It's so rewarding when you figure out what works and when you can help a child just by doing something so small that can make a huge difference."

Throughout the months of talking with Jane, this is consistently what she went back to, trying to help her students and trying to relate to them because she knew how difficult it can be when your world is chaotic. Jane frequently talked about connecting to the students who other teachers found the most difficult to work with and to teach. Her purpose for teaching revolved entirely around the students in her classroom. Although Jane had recently moved schools, she still referred to past students as her "kids" and kept up with their progress.

Maria

Maria, easy going and strong willed, has six years of teaching experience with a master's degree in special education and a bachelor's degree in communication disorders. Maria's career choice happened randomly. She was working on her bachelor's degree and didn't know what she wanted to do when she was finished. During one of her classes, professors from a special education program came in to encourage students to look into the Masters of Teaching program and Maria made her decision right there. She became a paraprofessional and worked her way through the program, becoming a teacher for children with autism six years ago. Maria's most recent class consisted of nine 2nd and 3rd graders with one classroom aide. She explained her school had a large population of students with autism in five self-contained classrooms. When asked if she would have

ever thought to work with regular education students, Maria shook her head and replied, "Never."

"I just have more compassion for children with autism. I learn a lot from them and they need people in their classroom that really care about them."

Similar stories. It was in these stories of how all four women began their journeys as teachers that our similarities already started to appear. Beasley, Jane, Maria, and I all started off in the field of speech pathology and moved to teaching children with autism. Three of the participants were paraprofessionals, gaining their experience as they went through their education. Jodie, Beasley, Jane, and I had all had an experience or a family background that had led us to the path of teaching. I wanted to know what made them all stay, what qualities they thought made a good teacher, and experiences that formed their identities, but first I needed to hear about their first day of teaching. It's a day that many teachers never forget and often, at least in my case, plays a key role in our teacher identities.

First Day

Each participant was asked about their first day in the classroom and if their experience affected their teacher identity formation. In the interactive interview, the participants were asked to talk about their first day in the classroom and if any details stood out in their minds. Jodie, Beasley, and Jane all specifically remembered this day and the events that either led up to it or how their experience affected their first school year. Maria discussed an experience that happened within her first month, which stood out more to her than her first day.

We just winged it. During the first interview, Jodie sat crossed legged on a chair with her baby in her arms. As the recorders went on and I set up, she commented that the whole process looked very "official" and laughed uncomfortably thinking out loud that she may say the wrong thing. Jodie readjusted the squirming baby in her arms and began her story with the first day in her classroom.

"Oh my goodness—way back when. . ."

Her story began with a classroom aide who was too scared to work with her kids. The aide decided to take a leave of absence when she found out she was going to be working with students with autism that year. Jodie spent teacher planning week alone in her room, setting up and preparing for the year without any help or guidance. While she felt confident after completing her internship, she was not quite ready for what lay ahead. Her new aide was hired the day before school started so there was very little time to get to know each other. Thankfully, each had some experience with a few of the kids in the class, so Jodie felt like there was something on their side. There was one student that Jodie took under her wing from day one, aggressive and difficult to handle, but they tried working with him, and the others, with trial by error. It was successful.

"For lack of a better word, we just winged it to see what worked and established the relationship between her and me. We didn't have any behaviors that day. The year was different, but no behaviors that day."

I'm gonna win this. Beasley, the ten year veteran, retold her first day tale laughing at herself "first day self." "I had. . .a little girl who refused to wear shoes. I had a little boy who would hit his head so hard he would cause himself to get bloody. I was totally scared to death and I had no clue what I was doing and had no clue how to keep

them busy and I thought I was going to throw up every minute of the day. And I don't even remember much of it, I just remember 'if I can make it through the day….'"

"My principal called me to tell me I was opening that unit. . .I went to set up my classroom and get things ready. I go in and there were six boxes. Four with those god awful cardboard bricks and two of them had student resource files and a note that says, 'Sadie doesn't wear shoes, good luck.' And I went what the?! I literally just pulled stuff and went 'ok, I got to make this work'. . .and then it became. . ." she paused thoughtfully and said, "because Sadie was my challenge child. . .We went four hours with her running around my classroom one day while the other ones you know. . .She was my child and I'm like I'm gonna win, I'm gonna win, I'm gonna win this."

Beasley laughed out loud, "I'm gonna win this. And I made it, I cried every day, but I made it through the first year and then I was like, okay I can do this again."

I cannot believe what I got myself into. "My very first day I was a nervous wreck. Nervous wreck!" said Jane, the most timid and quiet of the bunch. "I only had six kids. . .the only time in my teaching career that I've only had six kids. I had this aide who had been an aide for 25 years so she thought she knew more than me which made it really challenging. I had no idea. I had all these lesson plans planned for weeks at a time and I got in the classroom and it was totally not what I planned."

Jane leaned in closer, "I thought day one we were going to start with the routine and procedures, and then I had a student freak out over a noise and run out of the classroom."

"You remember his name don't you?" I asked.

"Yes, yes perfectly. And he hid under a table and I was so stressed out, like I can't believe that this is what I got myself into. Because all of the internships and all of the places I observed, I had watched experienced teachers and they had it all together and I thought I could go in and have it all together. I had all of my visual strategies; they ripped everything off the walls. It was a mess, a mess. And I cried as soon as the kids left. I cried. 'I'm like, I cannot believe what I got myself into' and I came back the next day and I finished up the school year and the next year was just as rough."

It turned out okay. Maria said she realized that she could make it through her first school year in the first few days, but there were still issues. "Not the first day, but the first month I will always remember that one of my student's parents still didn't realize that they had changed classrooms. And I still remember that they thought he was in another class."

"I felt very unsure of how I was going to react. I was a Para prior, but it's different when you are being supervised than just going in and taking over a classroom. Plus I had new co-workers and they were students that I didn't know. It turned out to be okay."

As the women told their stories, I realized that their first days were much like my own because we all felt unprepared and overwhelmed by the students we had decided to work with. I asked the teachers if they felt like it was their first day that they most often thought back to and they all agreed that while they did think about it, it was one of many things that defined them as a teacher.

"It is the little moments" one said, "that is my first reply when people ask what I can tell them about teaching kids with autism." The others nodded their heads in agreement.

My own beginning. *I agreed with them as well, but do not think that would have always been my answer. Ten years ago, I don't think that I would have seen a small moment of victory in my classroom because I was so busy just trying to make it all work. I knew that my students' success would look different from other kids, but I felt as though we would never reach success because they were so many disasters going on in the classroom every day. Over the years, it became easier to manage my classroom and for me to identify the "small moments." My perception of teaching had changed because I have changed as a teacher. The others agreed that teaching perceptions have changed over the years. Those first years felt lonely and like everything was a struggle, but as they gained experience and were able to better reflect on their teaching, their perceptions were clearer and they were able to identify the "small moments" as well.*

Perceptions

The participants were asked if their perceptions of teaching and their own teacher identity had evolved since their first year in the classroom. *I knew that my own perceptions about teaching had evolved, but I also knew that my experiences were different from the other participants. My perceptions about teaching had evolved the most since I entered the doctoral program, understanding how to think more globally and look at my own classroom through the lens of a teacher and a learner. What I never realized was how much of my time, energy, and level of commitment would be altered by becoming a teacher of children with autism.*

78

"I had no idea how much it was going to take over my entire life. Like I thought being as in control as I was at home that I would be able to separate the two. I had no idea how time consuming it was going to be. I didn't realize how much I was going to enjoy working with kids with special needs. I thought that working with kids with autism was going to be something that did for a little while or branched out to other things or moved to regular ed, but I can't see myself working with any other population now," Jane said.

"I mean, I knew it was hard, but it has gotten progressively harder as the years have gone on", Beasley paused and thought about her perception, "We started with no curriculum and learning the curriculum, learning the access points, learning how to advocate diplomatically without getting yourself in trouble, changing people's perceptions of what our kids can and can't do. It definitely seems harder, but I wouldn't change it for the world." Beasley told the group about students physically hurting her every day, going home and wondering what she got herself into; the job getting harder and easier depending on the year.

Maria agreed with Beasley that it does not get any easier, "I thought that as the years progressed you feel more confident with teaching, but every year you get a new set of kids or behaviors and I feel like every year is a brand new year and to me it doesn't get any easier. I mean you're constantly planning and making new things."

Jodie's perceptions really revolved around the parents of the students she worked with over the years. "I knew it was going to be challenging, but I didn't know how challenging certain aspects were going to be. Like I knew the kids were going to be challenging, but I wasn't as an intern you didn't really realize the parent aspect of it until

they are your kids and some parents are more challenging, so that kind of changed my thought process. Now that I'm in my 7th year, I know how to deal with even the most difficult parent, but I've had some situations that were more difficult than others."

It may be Jodie's self-portrait reflection that summed up all of our perceptions the best, "Teaching is a journey, and the path we take may define us as a teacher. There will always be obstacles to overcome and how we choose to face them will set the tone for our classroom. Keep your expectations high and your classroom a fun and safe place (like a home) and your students will succeed. There is nothing that can't be taught with a little fun and games and a lot of laughter." As Jodie read her self-portrait reflection to the others in our first critical friends' session, they all agreed that it was how they had chosen to face the difficult situations and the attitude they took when having obstacles to overcome that kept them all in the classroom. Jodie thought her teaching styles would have stayed the same over the years, but she has become more laid back as she has gotten comfortable in her position.

"I would have to agree," said Jane, "I'm more confident. I know what I'm teaching; I know what I'm doing so I'm more easy-going."

Looking back at her self-portrait, Beasley reflected on if it would look the same her first year of teaching. "It would look different my first year of teaching. My hair would be all over the place, I'd having bruises all over my body, and I'd be saying 'I quit; because that's where I was about 90% of the time my first year. I was lost, I was literally trying to figure things out every day as I went; everyday was a new adventure."

What Makes a Good Teacher?

I wanted to know if the participants thought that teachers of children with autism had different qualities from the regular education and other special education colleagues, which directly related to my third research question. I had always felt that there were specific qualities that were part of my teacher identity that other teachers may not have, but did not know if that was just part of who I am because of my personal history or because of the population of students I worked with. In their individual interviews, I asked each participant a series of questions about teacher identity, the qualities of a good teacher and what defined them specifically as a special educator. In order to keep my own bias about my thoughts on the differences between teachers of children with autism and their specific identities, I did not ask any participants about this directly, but each one of them discussed the differences on their own.

"So, what qualities do you think makes a good teacher? What defines you as a teacher, specifically a special education teacher?" I asked each participant.

"Flexibility and energy. You have to be caring and actually want your kids to succeed, not that teachers don't want their kids to succeed, but you have to be willing to go beyond what the state standards say in my opinion or what the access points say, I mean because I have kids who are 'in-betweeners', so you have to do both and you definitely have to be flexible and willing to go outside the box." Jodie also realized that she was more nurturing now that she's a parent herself. She had a better understanding when a child became upset that it might not be "just a tantrum," but could mean the child was hurting or needed something they could not communicate.

"Patient, caring, and strict," Beasley said, "Organized and understanding. Every child comes with something. But people are still expecting the perfect student and there's no such thing. Having that understanding and being willing to be flexible and to think outside the box. Not being so, 'this is the way it is and this is how it's got to be' because you might have a kid who can show you everything they know, but it's not going to be on the test, it's not going to be pencil and paper, but they can show you they know by something else."

"You have to be patient, you have to be flexible, and you have to be organized. Special needs or not, kids need structure. I think that you have to be caring and compassionate. I think you need to know your stuff and be knowledgeable. How can you teach somebody and not know what you're talking about? And I think you have to be willing to learn and grow and be willing to build your knowledge because things change all the time and you have to be abreast of this. And if you're not willing to change, you're not gonna make it. Probably the biggest part is that you have to be willing to reflect," Jane responded.

"Someone who works hard, who is determined and loves her kids regardless of how stressful it can be at times. Someone who is organized and understands how her students learn," answered Maria.

To work with these kids you have to be insane joked Beasley. "I really think you do! And you have to be able to enjoy the small moments because there's never going to be, you know if we all waited for teacher of the year or you know it's not going to happen, 90% of the time it's not going to happen. Every once in while it does and even sometimes getting those accolades or pats on the back from anybody else, you're not

going to get that. You have to be intrinsically motivated, you have to enjoy the smallest moments."

In the third critical friends' session while going through the photo journals, the idea of intrinsic motivation came back up and all of us agreed that it was rare when a special educator, especially one in a self-contained classroom received any recognition for the hard work they do. There are so many pieces that have to fit together and so much work that goes into making a class for students with autism successful that worrying about getting recognition for what you do is wasting time that could be spent working on planning for the kids.

Beasley recalled a moment that described the feeling she was trying to tell us about. "My grandmother died my first year of teaching, my dad died at the beginning of the year and my grandmother died at the end of the year, and when I found out my grandmother died I was at school and my mother called me and I was just sitting in my chair; I wasn't crying, I was just sitting in my chair and my one little girl came over to me and said, 'you're sad' and hugged me. Those little moments where you know you've connected with a child, where you know the kids will sit there and they will do something silly just because it makes you laugh and they'll do it and they'll know when you're having a bad day and they'll do it. You have to enjoy those small moments because…your big moments don't happen that often."

"We're pulled in so many different directions to meet the needs of our students," said Jodie. What was motivating for her and the other teachers was that even though they were pulled in different directions, when the students made progress, even in small amounts, they were motivated to keep going with their students.

"I feel like sometimes this is not healthy for me because I do spend so much time working with kids and all my free time working and never have any time to myself and it will always be that way, but not because I don't enjoy it and not because I don't like the kids. I think part of it is that I want to put too much into it and then I don't have anything else left to give," said Jane. "We have them for years at a time so we get to see the growth even though they grow at a slower pace we get to see it from year to year to year. It's hard to maintain growth. It's stressful, but we definitely get to see the change. I think that's also one of the reasons why I stick around."

Maria was motivated by her students as well. "I almost think we become more attached to our kids too because we service them typically more than one year".

"I don't do it just for the special ed kids; I do it for everybody so they can realize that these kids are amazing kids. I love my kids. I love going into my classroom every morning, I love getting my kids off the bus. I love everything. I love every moment of it," said Beasley.

Symbols of teacher identity. In their self-portraits and in their bucket loads of experiences, each participant used similar images and items to detail some of the qualities that were part of their teacher identities. High expectations were present in each self-portrait or reflection of the self-portrait. Beasley drew a picture of "raising the bar higher" around her picture, describing that she raised the bar for all of her students. Jodie wrote "high expectations" at the top of her portrait and Maria explained her high level of expectations for her students. Jane drew stars with "aim for the stars" for her students, and I drew an airplane, explaining that "the sky was the limit." All of the participants discussed that they fully expected their students to achieve great things, make progress

exposed to the regular education curriculum, and to allow themselves to be challenged

(See Figures 3-7).

Figure 3. Beasley's self-portrait

Figure 4. Jodie's self- portrait

Figure 5. Maria's self-portrait

Figure 6. Jane's self-portrait

Figure 7. My self-portrait

The participants also had items relating to hygiene and toilet training because these are skills which were imperative for each of them to teach in their classroom. "No pull-ups in middle school" is one classroom expectation in Jane's class, which motivated the students to toilet train. "No one else is doing these things, working on these skills like ASD teachers." Items and images relating to assistive technology and items symbolizing the importance of community-based instruction trips to help the students gain functional skills were each part of all of the participants' teacher identities. Social stories, picture cards, and circle time or morning meeting items were key items in everyone's buckets as well. These were not just items that represented tools that teachers of children with autism used, but the participants prime mode of communication with many of the children in their classrooms.

"My social stories and picture cards are so popular that regular education teachers have started asking for them," one said.

"I feel like it is something that only ASD teachers do, but that other teachers see and want to try with their students," said another.

Other popular items were art supplies which represented the variety of ways we tried to help our students better express themselves. Role playing, acting, cooking, and art and music therapy were all common activities in each of the classrooms to encourage students to interact with others and help them with their expressive language skills. A few of the teachers also showed pictures of therapy animals used in their classrooms to promote student communication and interactions. Significant to their work as professionals, the participants believed that offering students various means of communication, self-expression, and independence were integral to a successful classroom. All of the participants talked about constantly needing to adapt items to help their students better understand and communicate. The teachers said they couldn't live without technology in their classroom or using picture cards such as the ones from Boardmaker since that is how most of their students communicate.

"I carry my lanyard with sharpies attached to it so I can write things down for my students. I have six flash drives with me at all times. They have all the lessons I've adapted and the Boardmaker pictures I need to help my students," said Beasley.

"I have my picture cards and my lanyard with communication cards with me at all times. I think it is important that my kids know what I am trying to communicate to them and for them to communicate with me and each other," said Jane when going through her bucket. "I think we did the same bucket," she laughed because many of our buckets held the exact same materials that we used for the same reasons.

Figure 8. Jodie's bucket load of experiences

Figure 9. Maria's bucket load of experiences

Figure 10. Beasley's bucket load of experiences

Figure 11. Jane's bucket load of experiences

Figure 12. My bucket load of experiences

Flexibility in a world of routines. Every participant included a planner in their bucket to symbolize their students' need for schedules and routines. However, all of the participants realized that among the qualities that made a teacher of children with autism different from others was the ability to be flexible in a world of schedules and routines.

"Flexibility-I mean you can be going into school on a Monday and have complete lesson plans planned and kid can be coming off a long weekend and have a rough day and you have to evacuate your classroom and Plan B starts and you kind of just have to go with the flow and be on your toes," explained Jodie. When she was showing a picture of her class schedule, another participant laughingly said, "Gee- a schedule…what is that? Like we don't live off of those." The other participants agreed. Jodie went on to tell that her classroom was based on routines and schedules and without that 90% of her

students would not be able to function. "That is the first thing we work on, procedures, structure is very, very important" (See Figure 13).

"I'm easy going in the classroom and at home," said Maria, "However, my students rely heavily on a familiar environment knowing their expectations, structure, and they also have an individual schedule that they follow as well" (See Figure 14).

The participants said that they don't see schedules with the pictures and the detail shown in classrooms for students with other disabilities or in regular education classes. The use of timers, countdown clocks, and warnings for transitions had become part of each the participants' daily life. They agreed that students with autism were more routine-based and schedule-based than any other students they had worked with.

"I think it's very important to be organized. I'm very schedule oriented and so are my students. I constantly have several things going on in my planner," remarked Jane.

I asked the participants if they felt that their students' need for schedule and routine related back to their teacher identity. Their answers were all very similar in that in their personal lives had never been as structured or routine-based until they started working with children with autism. Beasley commented on the fact that her teacher identity had shifted because she was so much more structured so many years into teaching this population of students.

Figure 13. Jodie's students' individual schedules

Figure 14. Maria's daily schedule

Going for broke. When showing her bucket, Jane produced a voided check, which represented the amount of money spent on her classroom and students throughout the years (See Figure 15). This idea of spending so much money led to a discussion about the amounts of money we had all spent in our rooms, but it was really about the amount of support we had received in building our classrooms and our identity transformation as teachers. The participants all agreed that they spent the most money their first and second years in the classroom, but that they could still spend everything in their paychecks on the kids.

"Why did we spend so much money those first few years?" I asked.

"Because we didn't know any better," said Jodie.

"We were overzealous and felt like we had to do everything," said Maria.

"As you start getting more comfortable you start getting more creative...we had to make everything on our own. When I left my first school and started taking all the stuff that I made and I bought, the classroom was empty again," responded Beasley.

The difference between those first few years and now is that we all know how to write grants, to ask our parent/teacher associations for money, get parents to donate, make our own items, and borrow from others. The teachers all agreed that no one warned them how much it would cost to be a teacher and how much they would spend.
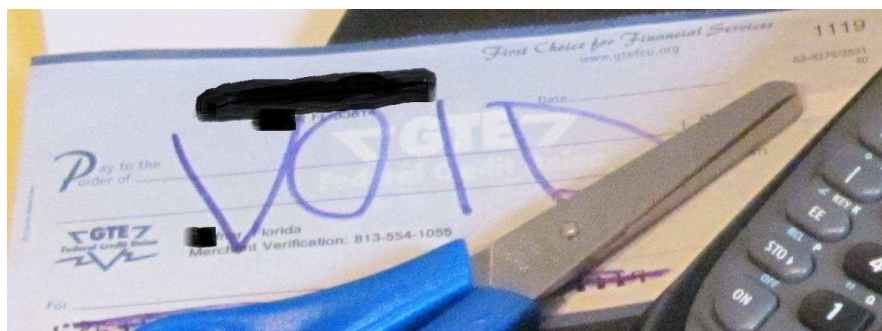

Figure 15. Jane's voided check from her bucket.

94

Support. So, what happens when you've made all your materials, collected

supplies, and need to start teaching? I wondered what else was important to these

teachers to make their classrooms successful. The answer was unanimous- support. All

of the participants said that if it weren't for the support of other teachers, their ESE

specialists, and their paraprofessionals that they would not be a successful as they were in

their classrooms. In each participant's self-portrait, they drew images of their

paraprofessionals, who each said they could not live without. In my own experience, I

knew that the relationship I had with my paraprofessional had a strong effect on my

teacher identity formation as a whole. When I worked with paraprofessionals who were

supportive and worked well with my students, we had very successful years, but when I

had a poor relationship and lack of support, we struggled throughout the year. I felt the

same way about working on a supportive team and with a supportive staff and

administration; interactions with others could affect one's overall teacher identity greatly.

Jane explained her first few years, "I had a lot of people supporting me when I

first started because the school that I first started in, there weren't any experienced

teachers there and I was the only one that had a special ed degree so I didn't have a lot of

people teaching with me that were that supportive, but I had a lot of people in the district

who were there supporting me and helping me out. I had an ESE specialist who was very

positive and encouraging me; telling me that I was doing the right thing. I needed that

affirmation in the beginning and I think that pushed me to keep going for one and it

pushed me to have a little more confidence in what I was doing and try what I wanted to

try. Probably what kept me in the profession to be honest."

"I would have to say my previous ESE specialist was a very positive influence. I think in the way I teach and when I was a para she was very helpful and was a good mentor and someone I could look up to," said Maria. "At my [first] school everyone was pretty nice on a personal level, but teaching wise I didn't think there was any team work among all of us. It was all, everyone was very separate, and if you needed help, oh well. The minute I moved to my new school, I realized that this is where I wanted to be and everyone kind of helped each other out and we had the same goals for the kids regardless if they were in 5th grade or pre-K and at the other school I didn't think that was the way it was at all."

When showing their self-portraits and their photo journals, the teachers described their paraprofessionals as extremely supportive. They also described how they felt or had changed because they were supported.

"These are my two amazing, awesome, wonderful, loving, phenomenal paras who I absolutely adore and love and would be lost without on a daily basis. They are my family, we love each other, we laugh, and we smile. I couldn't live without my assistants. They make my world everyday fun and wonderful," said Beasley.

"My aide helps me with my teaching," said Jodie.

"My paras are my super heroes, my rocks, they're everything," said Jane. "My paras help out a lot with everything." She talked about her paras helping to keep her organized, jumping in and participating with the students on community-based instruction trips, and supporting her in the classroom.

"I think being at the school I'm at and being in the inclusive environment that I'm in, and being respected had made me a better teacher because I've felt more comfortable

to step out of my…to do more. I think it, just kind of evolves you into something more," replied Beasley discussing the support she received from a fifth grade regular education teacher who worked with her class for seven years at her school (See Figure 16).
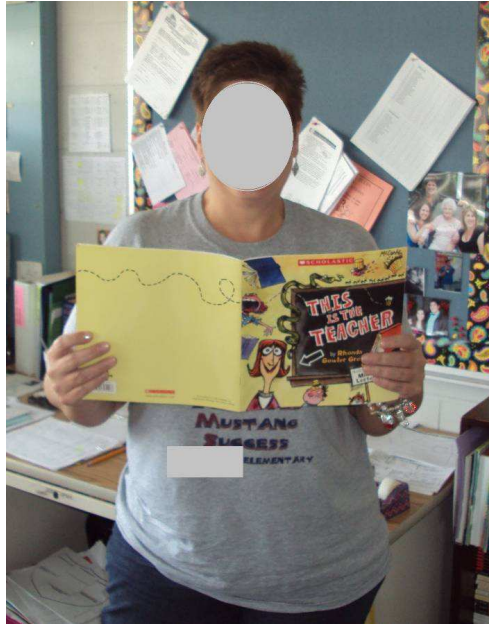
Figure 16. Beasley's 5th grade inclusive teacher.

One of my own most difficult situations with support occurred within one of my last years in the classroom. My classroom aide had taken a leave of absence for several weeks and I was left alone with my students. While there were other paraprofessionals being sent in throughout the day, it was not the same as having someone in the room with me to support me all of the time. I had been promised that when the new school year started, I would get a new paraprofessional and would start the year out fresh. As pre-planning week of that school year started, my paraprofessional who had taken the leave walked into my classroom furious. She had come back and was assigned to work with me again. I kept it together throughout the day, but getting home I fell apart, worried that I would spend another school year struggling to teach on my own, meet all of my students' needs, and to have my students make progress.

The worst day. I wanted to transition from the presence of great support to any times the participants had a lack of support in their classrooms. In most cases, the lack of support for the participants also centered around their worst day or worst moment of teaching. Similar to having lots of support in the classroom and in the school, the lack of support also affected the participants' teacher identity.

The room became uncomfortably silent for me as Jodie began to tell her story of her worst moment in teaching. I suddenly worried if asking this question was too personal, but knew that it was an important part of exploring our teacher identities. Her face was serious and the side conversations dim as she laughed uneasily.

"The day I'd like to forget the most was the day I had to speak to a police officer because I was falsely accused. . .false allegations, you know that somebody would think that we would ever try to hurt a child was probably one of the worst feelings in the world."

"Did you think about quitting that day?" I asked.

"I thought about a lot of things that day," she replied, "But quitting, no, because I had six other students in that classroom whose parents were behind me 100% percent. I sat in the principal's office while she called each parent to let them know that there was a situation, but that their children were okay. What's hard is that now, as a parent, is that I understand. I would have pulled my kid right out of there, but they didn't."

Beasley watched Jodie closely and nodded her head.

"Beasley, are there any moments you'd like to forget?" I asked.

"No, you know what, no, because I learned a lot about myself. Even my last year at my old school I was put through the ringer, investigated for abuse; it brought me to

where I am now. Every morning, I came back from Christmas break and I would cry the whole way to school, fix my make up, and go to school, and as soon as I got back in the car I would cry again. And not about my kids. I always promised myself. . .you know those teachers who are absolutely miserable. . .I will never be that teacher. I said 'I'm quitting. I don't want to do this anymore. It's not fun and I'm not doing right by my kids. And I said I don't want to be that. I refuse to do that to my kids. I refuse to be that teacher. . ."

Heads started nodding. The women agreed.

"It's actually often paras that misconstrue situations," Beasley began, "There was this para that I even let live with me, I got her a job, and then she does this to me. She tells someone later on that admin bullied her into saying something because they wanted to get rid of me. And I said, 'You could have just asked me to leave if you wanted to get rid of me'. People can misconstrue things. I mean once I had child who was as big as I was and there was a table and the girl and then myself and he's barreling at me. And I put my hands out and he threw himself against the wall. And the assistant came out of her room, not even mine, and said, 'Oh my god, you pushed him!' And I said do you see that kid there? Do you see him? She's goes 'yeah', I said she was behind me and the table was behind her. And I didn't want the kid hurt, but she saw what she saw."

While trying to protect one child from another, a para from another classroom made a huge assumption of what was happening in Beasley's classroom. In the process of making sure her reputation was not ruined, she realized that her administration wanted her moved to another school. They had told her that her teaching style was too different and she thought outside of the box. The root of the problem was not a specific situation,

but personality differences. It no longer mattered because for Beasley it was the day the para accused her of pushing a child that would stay in her mind.

"I had an aide when I first started teaching that physically held down a child and wouldn't let the child go," Jane said nodding in response to Beasley's story.

"And the child was screaming and scratching at her and she's yelling at me telling me that I'm not taking control of their behaviors and that I'm not prepared and I don't know what I'm doing, all the while my whole classroom is still in there. I end up getting a phone call from the parent about abuse accusations and the Para actually goes to the principal and tells the principal that it's my fault and that I don't have any control and I had to have all these meetings about something that my Para did. That honestly made me rethink about if I was going to continue keep doing it because I felt like I put so much work and so much effort and it was something I couldn't even control. In hindsight I would have just told her to back off, get away, but I felt paralyzed and it was horrible to see and I felt bad for the kids and I had to deal with the wrath after it."

Maria asked, "Does it still bother you?"

"I'm always overly cautious about it and I'm always really, really nervous when I have a new para come into my classroom. It almost gave me this sense of need for control. Like any extreme behaviors, I have to step back and think if I am part of the problem. But I don't want the Paras to have that control because if they do the wrong thing I am the one it will go to."

Maria was luckier than most, she had never had anything like this happen to her. Her worst day of teaching involved her getting observed and her nerves being out of control, but the observation ending well.

100

During this critical friends' session, I found myself spending more time reflecting on our worst days. I understood how the other teachers felt. I remember the restless nights lying awake in bed worrying about my students. My students had so few communication skills that they became easily frustrated, mad, and aggressive, hands on each other, hands on me. I was constantly worried that someone had bumps or bruises I hadn't written a note home about. And because my students couldn't talk or tell their parents about their day I often wondered what their parents thought of me as a teacher. Thinking back, I would say that these feelings of worry were very time consuming, that my time spent outside of the classroom thinking about my students has hugely affected who I am as a teacher and now who I am as a mentor. Even now, I worry about my beginning ASD teachers' worst days, I get phone calls retelling stories of them making sure they have done the "right thing," I find myself reassuring them through their worries.

Time for reflection. "What is it for you that is your release?" I asked. I wanted to see how the others handle those bad days. Is there a similar thing we all do to try and reflect, to get to the next day? This is one piece of my research questions I knew I wanted to focus on because so many new teachers have told me that they don't know how to deal with the bad days, they don't know what will help them to cope. New teachers want to hear others experiences and thoughts on being a teacher of children with autism so they might be able to apply them to their own situations.

"Picture time!" Beasley responds. Photo journals appear and the chatter starts again. They have all journaled pictures of what represented their teacher identity, each having included something that helped them to cope with the stress of the job. I did not

tell any of the participants what to take pictures of or what to reflect on, but their photos

end up being very similar in topic. To my surprise, each had journaled something that

helped them through the work they do. Some of the pictures were more straight-forward

and others more symbolic, but they each had an answer to what helped them through the

bad days.

"That is my running shoes and my IPOD," said Beasley. "Simply for the fact that

if I didn't take my IPOD and run I would be completely lost sometimes and be a

complete witch in my classroom." Beasley further explained that when she began

teaching, she had no outlet for stress or to get her mind off the classroom. It was not until

she found that she enjoyed running that she could put her days behind her and go for long

runs to clear her mind (See Figure 17).
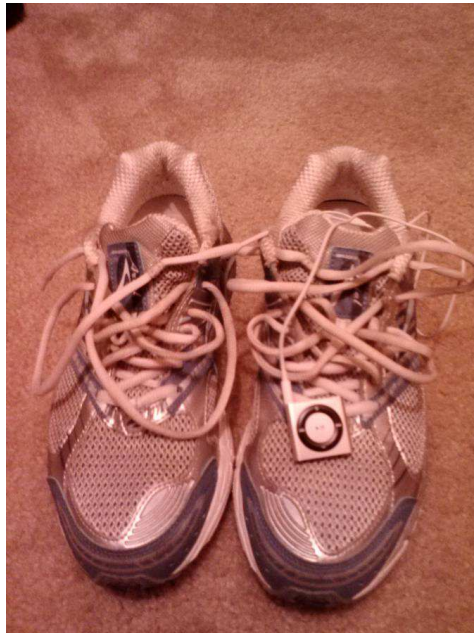
Figure 17. Beasley's running shoes and Ipod

"Yes!" Jane agreed, "I go run around the lake on the weekends. That's my time.

That's what I need." Jane explained that the lake picture symbolized not only her need to

distress, but to have a place to go to and reflect. "I also go to the gym every day. Some

days before school or some days after, but I go every day" (See Figure 18).
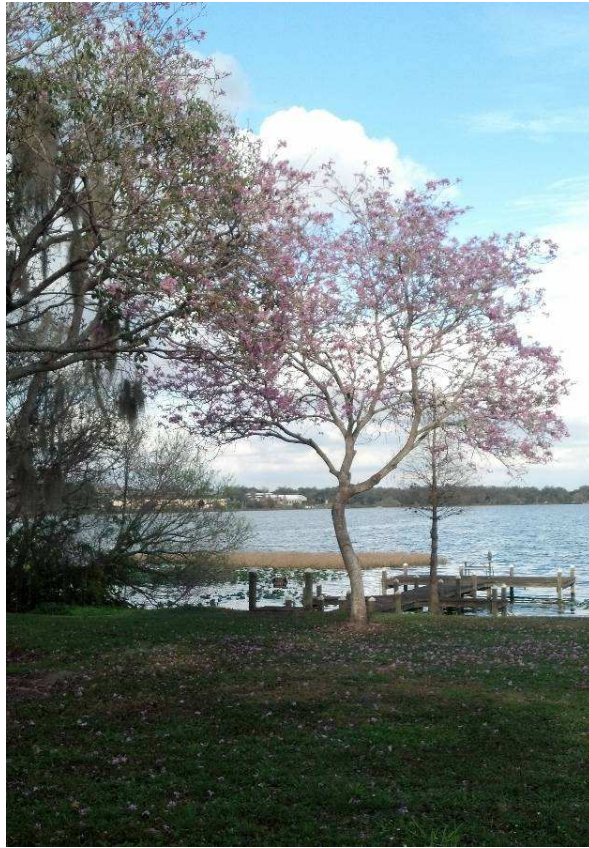
Figure 18. The lake where Jane goes to run.

"Mine's symbolic," Jodie said. "It's not some place I go, but my reminder to stop

and smell the roses. There have been many times that I have had a crazy day or one that

was filled with behavior after behavior, or one thing seemed to go wrong after another

where if you don't take a moment away from it all, you can get lost in what you are really

a teacher for. We have to take little breaks" (See Figure 19).

Figure 19. Jodie says, "They're not real roses, but you get the idea."

"Well mine is more practical," Maria added. "This is where I just sit and do all of my lesson plans, on the couch in front of the television." Maria said she needed the time to reflect on the day and plan for the next by just sitting and having some time to relax. Her couch is where she ended up doing all of her work as well (See Figure 20).

Laughing, "How fitting! Kindergarten Cop," one laughed.
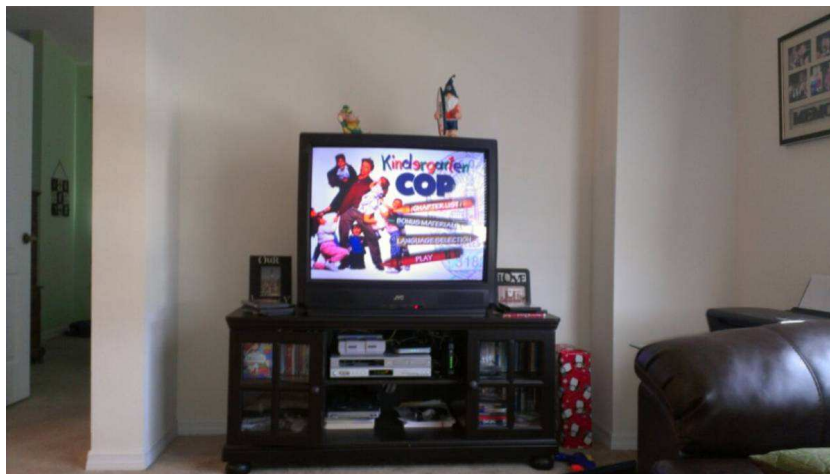
Figure 20. Maria's place to reflect and relax.

"My own time to reflect and think about my days needed to be about shutting my brain down first," I told the others. In order to do that, I needed to read something that was not about kids or autism or any teaching practices. A book or my nook went everywhere with me as a teacher and still does as a mentor (See Figure 21).

Figure 21. My own way to relax and reflect.

The Teachers They Have Become

One common theme among the participants was how they had grown as teachers. In the first few years of teaching they needed help and support from anyone willing to offer it. They looked for leaders in the school or in the community of teachers of children with autism to help them become comfortable in the field. They felt overwhelmed by the students, the paperwork, and the responsibilities of being teachers. For all of the participants, they had recently found themselves in the leadership roles and as the teachers that others turn to for help.

"The longer I have been teaching, the more I have shifted from learning how to do things and going to other teachers to being part of a community of teaching other people.

It's the shift in starting to be a trainer versus being the one at every single training," said Jane.

"I will see teachers in trainings and introduce myself as the trainer and they become excited; they know who I am," Beasley.

"A new ASD teacher was so excited to work with me and have my former students because apparently I know what to do to get them ready for her class. And she teaches the older kids, but she was excited that they go to me first because I know what to do to get them ready for her," said Jodie.

All of the teachers had begun working on advanced degrees throughout their time as teachers, either on their autism endorsement or on their master's degrees. One said that in the beginning she started because we needed these endorsements to go on as ASD teachers, but that she went to get her master's degree because she saw herself beginning to apply what she was learning in the program in her own classroom. There was a shift in her identity formation when she realized that she was now more comfortable as a teacher and *could* apply what she was learning versus being so overwhelmed as new teacher that what she had learned in her bachelors program did not work in her room.

"I definitely think I've learned a lot in the seven years. Getting my master's, I'm more aware of what the difficulties with kids with autism are and their learning styles since I got started," said Maria.

When going through her bucket Beasley showed an ID from her university. "I'm getting my master's in autism and it's very much starting to take over my life and I'm starting to put things in place in my classroom."

I could relate to all of the participants' shift from teacher to leader within the school district. In my beginning years of teaching I never expected to become a leader within the district. I attended trainings to finish my certification in special education, but did not expect be the person that would one day help write trainings and then present them to new teachers in the field of autism. Throughout the process of working towards my master's and doctoral degrees, I found myself more aware of the strategies I was using in my classroom and how I could help others by sharing what I was doing. It was not until recently that I realized I have made the shift from a learner to a leader.

Socialization. All of the participants discussed the need for socializing with others in their field. A common theme I discovered among them early on in the study, but that they did not see in themselves until the end of the study, was that they all referred to teachers of children with autism as "us" and any other professional working with their students as "them." I had noticed similar comments by the beginning teachers that I had worked with, but realized that this was common across this field of teachers who felt like they did a different job than their colleagues. The participants also displayed a level of defensiveness about their positions in regards to explaining that teachers of children with autism have different experiences than their peers.

"I think a lot of it is that we seek other people who do what we do because other people don't understand it. They don't typically understand what a day is like for us. So to get to see other people who know, it's exciting," explained Jane.

"And when you're sitting there and you say 'he hit me, but it's okay' and they don't agree, you know it is because they don't understand," added Beasley.

107

During the second critical friends' session, we all talked about a time or situation where something had happened that seemed ordinary to us, but that other teachers could not understand. One participant said that when she walks into the teacher's lounge sweaty and disheveled, the other teachers look at her in pity, but it is her who pities them because they had not just experienced a break though moment with a child like she did. She went on to say that other teachers did not understand the amount of work or dedication and commitment that goes into teaching this population of students. The other participants agreed that they felt like they put more time, commitment, and effort into teaching than their colleagues.

Commitment. Throughout the process of asking the participant about their experiences, the theme of commitment was very strong. Each participant, including myself, felt a heightened level of commitment because they felt as those the students needed someone who was willing to advocate for them and support them even when others would not. Even in the participants' descriptions of some of their most difficult experiences, they would emphasize that they were still committed to helping the students and working through rough days. At some point during the group sessions, each teacher described that they felt their level of commitment in working with students with autism was part of their teacher identity. When reexamining my research questions, the theme of commitment related to my third research question focusing on the characteristics of teachers of students with autism.

"I had a student who was extremely aggressive for years and the first day of my first year of teaching intermediate ASD, I had spent the entire summer making visual schedules, giving him a break area, all of that stuff, and he had some adjustment issues at

the beginning, but over time he went from being that aggressive student that nobody

could handle and being sent to a center, to being one of the shining stars. I had him for 2

years and when he moved on to middle school his teacher sent me an email saying that he

was his favorite," it was moments like those that kept Jane committed to the job.

"At my first school we had a program called Big Friends, which was where 5th

graders came in and worked with my kids as mentors. One of my kids gave a speech at

the 5th grade graduation and they all got certificates and one of my 1st graders actually

spoke on the microphone to all of the parents and the 5th graders. He spoke about what

the Big Friends were and it was like a thank you speech. He read it like a book," recalls

Jodie proudly. Jodie spoke about striving to have her students interact with one another

and with other members of their school community and how important it was to their

development (See Figure 22).

"It's once they finally grasp something, it's like an 'aha'. I'm in tears half the

time. One of the kids who I had last year literally sat down at the breakfast table this year

and said hi to everyone and used their name and everything and I was bawling because he

couldn't do that last year or any year prior and it took up until 3rd grade for him to be able

to interact like that," Maria explained why doing her job was worth it.

"The kids have made me stay. Watching them, the little moments, the little things

when they get it, watching them do something that they haven't done before, and getting

the phone calls from parents you. I will never forget a phone call from a parent and she

was in tears." She had told Beasley that her son had interacted and participated in an

activity with his cousins for the first time over the holiday break. "Those moments.

Those moments when my kids look at me and they go 'aha'; or watching them struggle

with something and then get it. That to me is just amazing. Seeing my kids move

forward…it may seem miniscule, but it's those miniscule moments that keep me going.

That's kept me going for 10 years."

Figure 22. Two of Jodie's students. "This is a natural moment
between these students. This is what I strive for in my classroom."

My own level of commitment for working with students with autism has increased

with my experiences of being an educator. Prior to becoming a mentor, I was certain

that I would never want to leave the classroom setting. However, after learning about a

position where I could work with beginning teachers of children with autism and teach

them strategies of how to be successful with this population of students, I realized that my

perceptions had changed. I understood that even though I would be leaving the

classroom, my level of commitment in working with students with autism could still be

just as strong. Throughout the group sessions, both Beasley and Jodie stated that they

would never want to leave the classroom, which made me reevaluate my own level of

commitment to these students. At times throughout the study, I worried that the

participants may have seen me as less committed because while I was a teacher of

children with autism, I now hold a different position I found that this altered my own teacher identity because I had to become more confident in the role I am currently in and how it is portrayed by others.

Keep calm and weather the storms. Jane's self-portrait reflection described it all. In a few short paragraphs, she was able to sum up who she is as a teacher; her teacher identity, her purpose for being.

"As a teacher I strive to make the impossible possible. I push my students to aim for the stars, and I expect nothing less than their best. I believe that as a teacher of children with autism I must be resourceful, flexible, and organized. I also feel that must continuously work to give my students the tools and modes to access and conquer their world. I work hard to make sure my students have a voice, are aware of their community, and are equipped to be productive members of society. I love to use technology and music in my classroom. I find it most engaging for myself and my students. I also seek to be comfortable and to make my students comfortable even if that means getting rid of chairs and using exercise balls to sit on. I try to remember that as I did not come from a perfect background and faced many challenges, my students are no different and they must be loved and supported to achieve their goals. Although my schedule workloads, and classroom can be CRAZY I feel it is important to keep calm and weather the storms."

Our kids aren't broken. "I brought band-aids," Beasley told us, "not just because we use them, but to symbolize how people see our kids. Everybody thinks our kids are broken, but our kids aren't broken. They are kids who are not broken and who I adore and show me every day just how awesome they are."

The participants all agreed that their strong belief that the students were capable to be successful was essential to their identities as teachers of children with autism. When Beasley brought out her band-aids and gave her explanation, the other participants mirrored her opinion. It was the similarities in their teacher identities and in the experiences and transitions they have encountered throughout their careers that helped to create the narratives of who they were as teachers of children with autism. At the end of the study, all of the participants agreed that while they were able to better reflect on their own experiences and practices and may have grown as teachers as part of this study, their focus still remained the same, on "their kids."

Summary of Our Stories

Throughout this chapter, I have presented the stories of four teachers of children with autism as well as shared my own stories through the use of autoethnography. In doing so, I have discussed how the participants' experiences affected their teacher identity formation, how teachers' identity formation evolved in relation to their teaching and educational experiences, and that there are characteristics and experiences that distinguish teachers of children with autism from their peers. Each section throughout this chapter represented a theme or topic found within the study. Following their initial introductions, the participants' narratives were intertwined within the themes. Throughout the chapter, images of the participants' artifacts were displayed to support in telling their stories. The participants' stories were collected through interviews, critical friends' sessions, and artifacts—a teacher self-portrait, a *bucket load of experiences*, and a photo journal. Each piece played a key role in describing the participants' teacher identity formation.

Through the use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography, I was able to illustrate the experiences that most stood out to the participants in regards to their definitions of teacher identity formation. I began by introducing each of the participants in order to better help you understand their perspectives throughout the narratives. The participants' shared their journeys to becoming teachers, highlighting their major influence in working with students with autism, which led to their career choices. Participants then discussed their first day in the classroom and how their perceptions had changed since their first few years. I go on to write about what qualities the participants thought helped to create a good teacher and discussed their common symbols of teacher identity among teachers of children with autism. These symbols included flexibility, schedules, and support. The participants and I reflected on our worst days of teaching and how reflection supported us when we needed to take time to ourselves. The narratives and autoethnography concluded with describing the teachers we had become, including how socialization with colleagues, commitment, and perseverance all were a part of our teacher identity formation and evolution.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Utilizing a qualitative research design featuring narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and self-study, I examined the teacher identity formation of four teachers of children with autism. Through a combination of interactive individual interviews and three critical friends' sessions, participants discussed their experiences, stories, and influences with regards to the formation and evolution of their teacher identity. I also utilized autoethnography through the use of memo, audio journaling, and my participation as a participant in this study. Participants created artifacts representing themselves and their experiences as teachers of children with autism. These artifacts included a teacher self-portrait, a *bucket load of experiences*, and photo journaling. Throughout this study, my goal was to answer the following research questions:

a)   With regard to the formation of teacher identity, what are the experiences of teachers of students with autism?

b)   How does the identity of teachers of students with autism change or evolve in relation to teaching and educational experiences?

c)   What characteristics and experiences distinguish a special education teacher, specifically a teacher of students with autism?

The findings of this study, which include narratives, autoethnographic pieces, and visual artifacts illustrate that the participants' teacher identity formation has been an evolving process based on their teaching and educational experiences with children with

autism. Additionally, the findings suggest that teachers of children with autism have specific characteristics and experiences that distinguish them from their colleagues. The information presented in this study aligns with the current literature on teacher identity formation and supports the need for more research on teachers of students with autism.

Where Do We Go From Here?

I recently observed a first-year teacher working with her class of students with autism. The children were up and down from their seats, one rolling on the floor, another watching a thin band of threads wave back and forth in the air; completely oblivious to everything around him. The teacher and her aide were dripping with sweat, each holding a student's hand while calling to another.

It's been a rough day," she quickly said as she ushered two students by my chair.

"I get it," I responded.

"Do you?" she asked, looking at me like no one could ever understand the position she is in.

"I truly do get it," I replied as I helped her get her students seated and talked softly to one as she got the others back on task.

The lesson went on with little chaos and the teacher slowly regained a sense of order in the room. While still harried and trying to multi-task between teaching and behavior management, she was able to complete the lesson. At the end of the observation I thanked her and began to leave the room, saying goodbye to each student on the way. As I made it to the door I heard the teacher quietly say to her aide, "I think she does get it."

Moments like these make me realize the importance of this field of research. There are teachers of children with autism everywhere, both new and old who feel as though no one understands the unique position that they hold. Jane truly stated it best when she said, "I feel like I have to be everything to every one of my students—I have to be their friend, I have to teach them to communicate, I have to teach them toileting skills, I have to teach them to hold a fork, but at the same time I have to teach them how to add and subtract and read. . .we're everything for our kids. . .And there's no other child that I have ever worked with, with or without autism that are like the kids in my class. Kids with autism are definitely unique- and not all of them are the same, in one class you have the whole spectrum."

The Need for Self-Study Research in Education

Self-study research plays an important and increasingly recognized role in the promotion of teacher education and well as in teachers' reflection of their work (Freese, 2005; Hoban & Brickell, 2006; Loughran, 2005; Loughran, Berry, & Tudball, 2005; Zeichner, 1999). Through self-study, teachers recognize the importance of the work they do and how it applies to their own classrooms and the students they are teaching. Loughran (2005) argues that by focusing on teachers' personal practice and their experiences, educators might be able to better understand the complexities of teaching and learning, which can be addressed with pre-service teachers. Teachers are constantly adapting their practices and strategies to respond to the needs of their students, therefore Loughran suggests it is only natural to have them to look at their practices through self-study. In this study, the participants constantly referred the needs of "their kids" and discussed their need to change and adapt daily based on their students. Through the self-

studies of each participant, I discovered powerful information about the teachers learning, teaching practices, and identity formation.

The self-study portion of my study brought me back to my initial research questions:

a)   With regard to the formation of teacher identity, what are the experiences of teachers of students with autism?

b)   How does the identity of teachers of students with autism change or evolve in relation to teaching and educational experiences?

c)   What characteristics and experiences distinguish a special education teacher, specifically a teacher of students with autism?

I was able explore answers to these questions through the participants' narratives, artifacts, and their stories of how their prior experiences, influences, and characteristics of themselves as teachers shaped and transformed their teacher identity throughout their careers.

With regard to my first research question, the participants' stories of their experiences as a teacher of autism were seen throughout the reflections that connected to the self-study artifacts. During the individual interviews, Maria was more reserved than the other participants; however when describing her picture during the third critical friends' sessions, she began to describe how she works with her students and how experiences that she has had in her classroom affect what kind of lessons she teaches. When Maria began teaching, there was a lack of research-based curriculum to use with her students, which forced her into creating lessons on her own that would teach and engage her students. In her current classroom, Maria still incorporates functional and independent learning skills with her students that she has found successful in the past.

The Importance of Critical Friends

The critical friends' sessions quickly began to be known to our group of five as our "chat fests." Recorders had to be turned on as soon as the women started arriving because their tales of the day were on the tips of their tongues. The reflection prompts and artifact questions helped the participants focus their thoughts; they answered their questions with ease, incorporating stories of misplaced items, screaming kids, bumps and bruises, and major successes along the way. What the critical friends' sessions actually did was to allow our group to be part of a community of women who all shared the same experiences and culture that few others do. Moments into the first critical friends' session I saw the link to socialization as part of teacher identity formation. The need for socialization among the participants was apparent, even noted by one participant that it was nice to have conversations with others who understood their situations. One theory linked to teacher identity formation is the idea that socialization is central to identity formation. This theory is relevant in describing teacher identity formation because the focus is geared towards the social aspects of teaching rather than viewing it as a solitary pursuit (Smagorinsky, Cook, Moore, Jackson, & Fry, 2004). While both general and special education teachers are likely to be independent in the school setting, for example working in their own classroom and planning lessons individually, there is also a sense of socialization and grouping among teachers.

The teachers began thinking about their own experiences in a different way after hearing the others talk, their identity shifting even as we were discussing what teacher identity was. One example of this occurred in the third critical friends' session as the group reflected on their photo journals. Jodie had repeatedly stated that she did not feel

like her teacher identity formation had changed throughout her seven years of teaching even though her stories illustrated a shift. When retelling the group about her worse day of teaching, I asked her again if she felt like quitting that day or if that experience had changed her as a teacher. She described that her "thought process" had changed and that the experience was a "turning point" in her career. After hearing the other participants discuss their own stories, Jodie realized that her experience played a large role than she had realized.

"I take more of a lead role now because I see how it can go wrong quickly and I've seen, you know, at my new school I'm more of a leader type on my team," Jodie stated.

As previously discussed, the interactive aspect of socializing with others influenced and shifted the teachers' perspectives of teaching and how they viewed themselves as teachers and professionals (Assuncão Flores & Day, 2006; Ronfeldt & Grossman, 2008). Similar to the work of Luttrell (2003), the participants in this study were asked to create self-portraits and artwork, which allowed the teachers a form of self-expression they often asked of their students, but rarely participated in themselves. It was in the creation of the self-portraits and the writing of their reflections, that some of the most in-depth reflective conversations occurred. Like Luttrell's study with teenage girls, the participants in my study gave more details about themselves and gave more in-depth stories in the group sessions. The group conversations based around their artwork led to rich conversations among the participants that mirrored the topics in the interviews.

During the critical friends' sessions, one topic that consistently came up was the participants' perceptions about teaching children with autism and how they had evolved

over the time in their classrooms. All of the participants agreed that being able to talk

with other individuals who had experienced similar situations to theirs made it easier to

talk about their perceptions of teaching. For example, in the individual interviews all of

the participants discussed that teaching was not as easy as they thought it would be and

that it did not get easier as they became more experienced. During the second critical

friends' session, the participants spent several minutes exploring the concept of their

changing perceptions and found that they had similarities directly related to teaching

children with autism. They agreed that even though they serviced some of the same

students for several years, those students could be very difficult to connect with or see

progress with because of difficulties with sever behaviors or limited success with several

different strategies. This could be very frustrating because the teachers were sure they

would make large amounts of progress with all of their students right away and this was

not the case. Being able to discuss this with others allowed the teachers to discuss the

similarities in their feelings and thoughts.

Another theme that emerged throughout the critical friends' sessions was the high

level of commitment of all of the participants. During the individual interviews, all of the

participants talked extensively about their students, but briefly about the specific of being

committed to being in the field. The high degree of commitment for all of the teachers

was a focus several times during the critical friends' sessions, especially when the group

would discuss difficult situations or behaviors and that they were still committed to

helping the students even when feeling discouraged. Participants also explored their

level of commitment in regards to the amount of time they spent preparing for teaching,

creating resources, communicating with families, and supporting students to become a functional part of society.

The Power of "Art"ifacts

Throughout this study, the creation and reflection of artifacts was vital to forming narratives about each of the participants. As discussed in the importance of the critical friends' sessions, the collaborative work and discussions among the participants were key to revealing crucial moments of transformation in each participant's teacher identity. While the artifacts were imperative to learning more about the participants, it was their reflections related to the artifacts that told the real stories. In some cases, participants would see other's artifacts and realize they had left out something important to themselves, editing and adapting their artifact to better tell their story. One participant left her classroom aide out of her self-portrait, but quickly added her in after reflecting on the fact that she could not run an efficient classroom without the support of her paraprofessional. It was important for her to go back to her self-portrait and discuss the need for support in the classroom and its effect on her teacher identity. "*Visual*… is not about an image or object in of itself, but more concerned with the perception and the meanings attributed to them," Prosser (2011). In this study, it was the perceptions and meanings surrounding the images that were important to the participants telling their stories accurately and meaningfully.

The use of art work within research allowed the participants the ability to reflect, describe situations or experiences, and evoked emotions, which figures, facts, and statistics rarely do. The audience is able to identify the stories told within art through the lives and characters which are represented, Prosser (2011). Art allows both the

researcher and the reader to imagine what it might be like to live in the shoes of the participant and in this study, what other teachers of children with autism are feeling or experiencing. This was integral to this study because the participants, while having different stories and experiences, had similarities in their identity formation that will be useful to share with others.

Autoethnography and Narrative Inquiry

I found myself nervous at first to interject my own stories into the mix. These women were talking about a field I am passionate about; they were discussing the same kids I love to work with, but I did not want lead their stories in one direction or another with my own. I quickly realized that in order for my own story to be told and to find some semblance of answer to my research questions, telling my story was just as important as them telling theirs. "Merely listening, recording, and fostering participant stories, while ignoring the researcher's is both impossible and unsatisfying," state Webster and Mertova (2007). When researchers tell their own stories, the stories of the participants unite with them to form an entire new collaborative narrative. When new narratives are formed, new paths for research and bridges for the gaps in literature begin to emerge. It was my stories that helped to bridge the gap between the narratives of the other participants and also helped to make connections to research questions I was asking. *My experience of being a teacher of children with autism for several years is what began this process of creating the study. In my own experience, I had seen other teachers who were in similar situations and wanted a way to explore their issues, problem solve, and communicate with others about their careers. My own thoughts and*

stories lead me to creating the specific research questions in this study and helped me to make connections between the participants' narratives.

I realized that as the participants had more opportunities over the months to share their stories and their artifacts with one another, they each became more reflective. At the beginning of the individual interviews and in the last critical friends' session, I posed the question, "What defines you as a teacher?" The participants' answers changed throughout the process because they had become more reflective as teachers themselves. Maria, for instance, described herself at the beginning of her interview as "organized and stern"; however throughout the study she began to give more details as to what really described her personally and professionally, "committed, strong willed, persistent, patient." At the beginning of the study, Jodie stated that she was "no different now than when I first began teaching"; however through the creation of her artifacts and her reflections of her artifacts, it was apparent that she is a different person. Even in her description of her personal life, Jodie described that having a small child at home has affected how she empathizes with her students at school. Jodie's stories indicated that her teacher identity was not only affected and changed in relation to teaching and educational experiences, but also to changes in her outside life. "…Storytelling is a natural and common form of human communication, and that storytelling is used to communicate those elements of experience that have a profound impact on an individual," (Webster and Mertova, 2007).

"My identity as a teacher identity has transformed because of this process. This was supposed to just be research, but I am a different teacher coming out of this than I was going in," one participant stated.

"My story is getting told the way I want to tell it," said another. There were stories that were always meant to be told, but never the audience in which to share. This study gave the participants the opportunity to share their stories with others who understood their experiences.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research should be continued in the field of teacher identity formation of special education teachers, specifically those of children with autism. Focusing on teachers at different levels in the field such as secondary teachers or pre-kindergarten teachers and focusing on teachers at different points in their careers may help to broaden the perspectives on teacher identity formation. Additionally, presenting the current research and narratives to beginning teachers of children with autism and to pre-service teachers would be beneficial in helping them to explore connections to stories and identify what teaching may realistically be like.

Furthermore, future research should also focus on the use of narrative inquiry and autoethnography for use with teachers. One participant stated, "Sharing stories of teachers are more realistic than expecting teachers to look through quantitative data. I want to know what others have been through, not their data. I already have enough research and enough people looking at the data in the classroom. I want to know if other teachers have had the same experiences I have; if they can offer advice when I come upon difficult situations." Webster and Mertova (2007) state that it is the stories we hear or read about and the learning context we are focused on that are normally intended to help us learn. Stories with a focus directly on the subject matter or about the strengths and shortcomings of teaching are those we can better relate to and learn from. The

authors say that narratives about teaching and learning can be used as valuable educational research tools.

Research based on how self-study helps current teachers in special education reflect on their teaching practices and their professional self and growth as a teacher would be beneficial to the field as well (Freese, 2005). As noted in previous research explored in this study, self-studies have the ability to help teachers take ownership of their work as well as their theories on teaching practices and teaching children with disabilities. In a field where many research-based practices may not work with specific children, learning from other teachers' practices and theories may help a beginning or struggling teacher. Furthermore, veteran teachers can benefit from hearing their colleagues stories to support them in focusing on specific pedagogical practices and theories they may already be applying in their classrooms or ways they can improve their practice based on others positive or negative experiences. Hoban and Brickell (2006) also discuss the idea of teachers' level of transferability, thinking about moving their ideas on teaching from a one dimensional point of view to a multi-dimensional point of view. Through the use of self-study teachers would be able to think about and reflect on their teaching practices, content, behaviors, and standards, for example, as pieces of multi-dimensional way of teaching instead of only looking at teaching as one-dimensional, a piece at a time. This would be beneficial in research on teachers of children with autism because the idea of a well-developed classroom and a reflective teacher supports student learning, especially when working with difficult populations of students.

Recommendations for Future Application

Teacher learning communities are necessary to help teachers in similar fields with their professional growth. Similar to professional learning communities, these communities would not only allow teachers to focus on the data and accountability measures relating to the classroom, but also to share stories and problem solve based on shared experiences and an understanding of the students they are working with. The socialization between the participants in this study is a prime example of how effective a teacher learning community can be. Several times throughout the study, a participant would share an idea or strategy they had used in their classroom and another would want more information to apply with their own students. Specifically, the photo journals allowed the participants to "see" each other's classrooms and work spaces as well as see products of student work and share ideas related to best practice. Currently, a website loosely resembling the idea of a teacher learning community exists for teachers of children with autism in our district, however better facilitation of this site and a push for teachers to share would be beneficial.

Among the group of participants, we also recognized that creating a time for social groups and socialization among teachers of children with autism would be beneficial. It was agreed that this would be better planned by teachers to happen outside of the school setting. Participants recognized several other veteran teachers who would benefit from this experience to share ideas and possibly take part in "make and take" activities based on ideas learned through different teachers' stories of their classroom experiences.

Creating a district-based teacher buddy program to share stories with beginning teachers may help with the disillusionment phase connected to the first few years of teaching (Moir, 2011). Allowing veteran teachers to share stories, offer encouragement, and help new teachers make connections to their own experiences may motivate beginning teachers of children with autism to stay in the field. Furthermore, these relationships may also help teachers in difficult positions to have decreased feelings of isolation and lack of support as suggested in the beginning of this study.

Summary

Through the process of studying these four teachers of children with autism, I have gained a better insight on my own teaching practices as a mentor for new teachers and as an educator of pre-service teachers. While it is evident that teaching research-based practices is imperative, this research has allowed me to see that it is just as important to share stories and experiences of teachers who may have had similar experiences.

Furthermore, I have seen a shift in my thoughts on the types of research methods I used in this study. While narrative inquiry and autoethnography were appealing to me at the beginning of this process because I liked the idea of the "storytelling method," I have realized that these methods are particularly useful in discovering information about the field of teaching and in sharing the data on teaching practices. Combining narrative inquiry, autoethnography, and self-study have helped to create the "rich, thick, and in-depth" narratives I was striving for throughout this process.

This study was initially created to look at the teacher identity formation among four teachers of children with autism. Much like the participants, I found that this

process made me look at my teaching practices and my overall experiences with a more critical lens. In listening to others stories, I found myself reflecting on experiences and influences that I did not realize were even part of my own teacher identity. Over the past year that I have spent creating this study, recruiting participants, carrying out the study, and now writing the narratives, I have found myself reflecting on my own time in the classroom, my teaching practices, and most importantly my experiences with my students. Some stories and memories come to me quickly, remembering moments of excitement like a student's first word at age eight, moments of despair when I thought I would not get through another day, and moments where teaching felt "just right."

Having the opportunity to form bonds with the other participants and to share the stories that I have felt were such an important part of my teacher identity has been helped to shift some of my beliefs and transform my teacher identity even more. In the past few months, I have found myself listening closer to my mentees when they are need to tell the stories of what happened in their classrooms, I compare their development to my own when I first started teaching, and I have heard myself say multiple times that we have all been there and that I can understand what they are going through. I believe that I was able to answer my research questions and that, while different readers will have different perspectives which will affect how they interpret the narratives, the stories of teachers of children with autism and the evolution of their teacher identities is evident.

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<center>129</center>

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Structure of Study

Phase 1 of Study

1. My experiences of several years of being a teacher begins this process..
 	
      a. I saw other ASD teachers having similar experiences.
 	
 2. I learned that there is a way to "talk" about or research this information using narrative inquiry.
 	
      a. I have a story; others have stories that need to be told.
 	
 3. I began my own autoethnography of how I became a teacher.
 	
      a. My research questions begin to form.
 	
 4. I began a literature review to see if my research questions have a "place" in the current research.
 	
      a. They do!
 	
 5. I work on my method and realize that it will be a combination of autoethnography and narrative inquiry that will best answer my research questions.
 	
      a. I learn about self-study and this method fits perfectly into my research.

Phase 2 of Study

6. I start the process of narrowing down how I will choose participants. This becomes finalized shortly after.
 	
      a. I recruitment participants.
 	
 7. From the research on Teacher Identity Formation, Autism Spectrum Disorders, and the methodologies I created an interactive interview guide and interviewed each participant individually.
 	
      b. Some interviews took me places I did not expect, this is addressed in the presentation.

c. All interviews were transcribed by me and an outside transcriber for reliability as well as by the Max QDA software program.
d. Member checks were completed.

Phase 3 of Study

8. The 1st Critical Friends' Session took place/1st artifact was created
a. We met, discussed the protocol for critical friends' sessions, and created the artifact (self-portraits as teachers).
b. Participants answered reflective questions; discussion of teacher identity was focused around artifact.
c. Participants were informed of 2nd critical friend's session and artifact to create.
d. I transcribed the group session.
e. Member checks were completed.

Phase 4 of Study (2 weeks between sessions)

9. 2nd Critical Friend's Session/ 2nd artifact was presented
a. We met, discussed the protocol for critical friends' sessions, and presented bucket loads of experience.
b. Participants answered reflective questions about buckets; discussion of teacher identity was focused around artifact.
c. Participants were informed of 3rd critical friend's session and artifact to create.
d. I transcribed the group session.
e. Member checks were completed.

Phase 5 of Study (2 weeks between sessions)

10. 3rd Critical Friends' Session/ 3rd artifact was presented
a. We met, discussed the protocol for critical friends' sessions, and presented photo journaling.
b. Participants answered reflective questions about photos; discussion of

teacher identity was focused around artifact.
c. I transcribed the group session.
d. Member checks were completed.

Phase 6 of Study

11. I uploaded all of the multimedia, pictures of artifacts, and transcriptions into Max QDA.
a. Began the coding process. This will be detailed in the presentation.
b. Coded all of the information. The software allowed me to see what was coded.

Phase 7 of Study

12. I created the narratives beginning with the large codes. Ex: 1st day of school, support, commitment.
a. Narratives began with introduction of participants.
b. Specific artifacts and the reflection of those artifacts as well as interviews informed the stories.
c. Directly used analysis data to write the stories.
d. Autoethnography was incorporated into the final study in the same manner.
e. When narratives were based around picture, the pictures were inserted within the text.
f. Member checks were completed.
13. As I was writing chapter four I could see where chapter five was already being created with the texts, codes, and in my group sessions memos. I realized that we had been discussing what teachers need, what research could be done, and where to go within our group sessions. These informed my writing for chapter five.

Appendix B: Recruitment of Participants

Recruitment of Participants: Becoming a Teacher in Multiple Voices: An Exploration of Teacher Identity Formation among Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

IRB Study # Pro00008359

My name is Beth Wilt, a doctoral candidate from the Department of Special Education at the University of South Florida. I would like to invite you to participate in my research study to learn more about the teacher identification formation of ASD teachers. You may participate if you are self-contained ASD teacher in an elementary school setting with 5 or more years of experience. Please do not participate if you are a teacher with less than 5 years of experience, are not in an elementary school setting, or do not teach ASD.

Purpose of the study

You are being asked to be part of this study because you are a teacher of children with autism with five or more years of experience in a self-contained ASD classroom at the elementary level.

The purpose of this study is to:

- Examine teacher identity among four teachers at different points in their professional careers and to explore the characteristics and experiences that define them as teachers.
- Determine similarities and differences that exist in the formation of teacher identity in these four teachers of children with autism that are each at different points in their careers as well as explore their perspectives, influences, and experiences of how they became teachers through their multiple voices.
- This study is being completed in partial fulfillment of a degree of doctor of philosophy and is being completed by a student.

As a participant, you will be asked to:

- Participate in one 90 minute semi-structured interactive interview using an interview protocol created by me.
- Participate in three critical friends' sessions, each lasting approximately 2 hours. These sessions will take place every two weeks with participants collecting artifacts in between sessions. The critical friends' sessions will consist of creating and reflecting on three different small projects that help to describe their teaching experiences. Participants will be given detailed information and materials for their creations at each critical friends' session.
- Overall, participants will give approximately 6 weeks to this study. If critical friends' sessions take longer than anticipated and participants need more time to reflect, it will be decided as a group of how to proceed.
- Audiotaping will take place for interviews and of critical friends' sessions for transcription purposes. Photos will be taken of artifacts created by the participants.

.

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study. You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study. There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study.

If you would like to participate in this research study, please email me at the following email address: mary.wilt@sdhc.k12.fl.us.

Do you have any questions now? If you have questions later, please contact me at mary.wilt@sdhc.k12.fl.us or you may contact my advisor, Dr. Ann Cranston Gingras, at 813-974-1387.

Appendix C: Informed Consent to Participate in Research

Informed Consent to Participate in Research
Information to Consider Before Taking Part in this Research Study
IRB Study # Pro00008359

You are being asked to take part in a research study. Research studies include only people who choose to take part. This document is called an informed consent form. Please read this information carefully and take your time making your decision. Ask the researcher or study staff to discuss this consent form with you, please ask him/her to explain any words or information you do not clearly understand. The nature of the study, risks, inconveniences, discomforts, and other important information about the study are listed below.
We are asking you to take part in a research study called:
Becoming a Teacher in Multiple Voices: An Exploration of Teacher Identity Formation among Teachers of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

The person who is in charge of this research study is Beth Wilt. This person is called the Principal Investigator. However, other research staff may be involved and can act on behalf of the person in charge. She is being guided in this research by Ann Cranston-Gingras, PhD.

The research will be conducted at a neutral location such as a public library, which will be determined by the participants and the researcher.

Purpose of the study

You are being asked to be part of this study because you are a teacher of children with autism with five or more years of experience in a self-contained ASD classroom at the elementary level.
The purpose of this study is to:

- Examine teacher identity among four teachers at different points in their professional careers and to explore the characteristics and experiences that define them as teachers.

- Determine similarities and differences that exist in the formation of teacher identity in these four teachers of children with autism that are each at different points in their careers as well as explore their perspectives, influences, and experiences of how they became teachers through their multiple voices.
- This study is being completed in partial fulfillment of a degree of doctor of philosophy and is being completed by a student.

Study Procedures

If you take part in this study, you will be asked to:
- Participate in a semi-structured interactive interview using an interview protocol created by me and through critical friends' sessions. Interactive interviews will be conducted using audio recording for transcription purposes.
- Upon completion of all of the interactive interviews, all participants will meet for the first critical friends' session at a neutral location for all of the participants such as a local library group room. During this session, participants will be given the protocol for critical friends' sessions and will complete the self-portrait activity. Upon completion of the activity, participants will take part in individual and group reflection. At the end of the first critical friends' session, participants will be given the materials they need to complete the activity, a Bucket load of Experiences, for the second critical friends' session, which will take place two weeks later.
- The second critical friends' session will focus on the participants reflecting on their buckets that they created to better explain their experiences as teachers of children with autism. Giving the participants two weeks is sufficient for participants to gather their materials for the next session and maintain a focus of what they are being asked to do.
- After the participants reflect on their buckets, they will be given the materials to work on their photo journaling activity. After taking photos for the journaling activity, participants will be asked to journal about specific photos based on the reflection questions (Appendix H) that they will be given at the end of the second critical friends' session. Participants will reflect as a group at the final critical friends' session.
- Participants will each be asked to complete one 90 minute interview. All participants will also be involved in three critical friends sessions, each lasting approximately 2 hours. These sessions will take place every two weeks with participants collecting artifacts in between sessions. Overall, participants will give approximately 6 weeks to this study. If critical friends sessions take longer than anticipated and participants need more time to reflect, it will be decided as a group of how to proceed.
- Research will take place throughout the first semester of the school year at a neutral and convenient location for all participants.
- Audiotaping will take place for interviews and of critical friends sessions. Photos will be taken of artifacts created by the participants. Audiotapes will only be accessible to the researcher and another doctoral student helping to transcribe the information. The information will not be identifiable; the tapes will be

maintained for 5 years following the study. After the time period, tapes will be destroyed and data will be erased.

Total Number of Participants

About four individuals will take part in this study at USF. A total of four individuals will participate in the study at all sites.

Alternatives

You do not have to participate in this research study.

Benefits

We are unsure if you will receive any benefits by taking part in this research study.

Risks or Discomfort

This research is considered to be minimal risk. That means that the risks associated with this study are the same as what you face every day. There are no known additional risks to those who take part in this study.

Compensation

You will receive no payment or other compensation for taking part in this study.

Cost

There will be no additional costs to you as a result of being in this study.

Privacy and Confidentiality

We will keep your study records private and confidential. Certain people may need to see your study records. By law, anyone who looks at your records must keep them completely confidential. The only people who will be allowed to see these records are:

- The research team, including the Principal Investigator, study coordinator, research nurses, and all other research staff.

- Certain government and university people who need to know more about the study. For example, individuals who provide oversight on this study may need to look at your records. This is done to make sure that we are doing the study in the right way. They also need to make sure that we are protecting your rights and your safety.

- Any agency of the federal, state, or local government that regulates this research. This includes the Florida Department of Health, and the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) and the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP).

- The USF Institutional Review Board (IRB) and its related staff who have oversight responsibilities for this study, staff in the USF Office of Research and Innovation, USF Division of Research Integrity and Compliance, and other USF offices who oversee this research.

We may publish what we learn from this study. If we do, we will not include your name. We will not publish anything that would let people know who you are.

Voluntary Participation / Withdrawal

You should only take part in this study if you want to volunteer. You should not feel that there is any pressure to take part in the study. You are free to participate in this research or withdraw at any time. There will be no penalty or loss of benefits you are entitled to receive if you stop taking part in this study.

You can get the answers to your questions, concerns, or complaints

If you have any questions, concerns or complaints about this study, or experience an adverse event or unanticipated problem, call Beth Wilt at 813-899-9273.

If you have questions about your rights as a participant in this study, general questions, or have complaints, concerns or issues you want to discuss with someone outside the research, call the USF IRB at (813)974-5638.

Consent to Take Part in this Research Study

It is up to you to decide whether you want to take part in this study. If you want to take part, please sign the form, if the following statements are true.

I freely give my consent to take part in this study. I understand that by signing this form I am agreeing to take part in research. I have received a copy of this form to take with me.

_____   _____
Signature of Person Taking Part in Study   Date

_____
Printed Name of Person Taking Part in Study

Statement of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

I have carefully explained to the person taking part in the study what he or she can expect from their participation. I hereby certify that when this person signs this form, to the best of my knowledge, he/ she understands:
- What the study is about;
- What procedures will be used;
- What the potential benefits might be; and
- What the known risks might be.

I can confirm that this research subject speaks the language that was used to explain this research and is receiving an informed consent form in the appropriate language. Additionally, this subject reads well enough to understand this document or, if not, this person is able to hear and understand when the form is read to him or her. This subject does not have a medical/psychological problem that would compromise comprehension and therefore makes it hard to understand what is being explained and can, therefore, give legally effective informed consent. This subject is not under any type of anesthesia or analgesic that may cloud their judgment or make it hard to understand what is being explained and, therefore, can be considered competent to give informed consent.

_____   ____
Signature of Person Obtaining Informed Consent   Date

Printed Name of Person Obtaining Informed Consent

Appendix D: Interactive Interview Questions

Demographic Information:

1. How old are you?

2. How many years of teaching experience do you have?

   a. Has all of this experience been in ASD classrooms?

3. What is your highest level of education?

4. Is your educational background in special education or have you switched from another profession?

5. What grade level do you teach?

   a. How many students are in your classroom?

   b. How many adults other than you are in the classroom?

   c. What is the demographics of your school setting?

Interactive Interview Questions:

1. What is your definition of teacher identity?

2. How would you identify yourself as a person and as a teacher?

3. What made you become a teacher, specifically a special education teacher?

4. What has made you stay in the field of teaching?

5. Has your perception of teaching changed since you have been in the classroom? How?

6. Talk about your first day in the classroom, your best experience as a teacher, and the moments you would like to forget.

7. Discuss any positive or negative experiences affecting the formation of your teacher identity.

8. What qualities do you think make a good teacher?

9. What defines you as a teacher, specifically a special education teacher?

Appendix E: Critical Friends' Reflection Questions

(Adapted from Samaras, 2011)

1. What questions have you been asking yourself about your teaching practice?

2. What teaching issues do you find yourself constantly facing working with children with autism?

3. How can this group help you better understand your teacher identity?

4. What do you wonder about your teaching practice? I wonder about

    _____ because

    _____.

5. Why is this issue important to you? What experiences have you had that make these issues important?

Appendix F: Suggested Prompts for Self- Portraits

(Adapted from Samaras, 2011)

1. How does this self-portrait make me feel?

2. How does it relate to my teaching?

3. Is this portrait related to a particular revelation in my teaching journey?

4. What does the self-portrait reveal about my perception of identity as a teacher?

5. What is the context of my self-portrait?

6. Is anyone else included in my self-portrait? Are they peers, family, friends, students? If so, what does it suggest about my relationship to those persons?

7. Are there objects in my self-portrait? Do they carry any special meaning to me and/or others?

8. What would I title this self-portrait?

9. What might a curator write about this self-portrait?

Appendix G: Suggested Thinking Prompts for Teacher Artifact Buckets

(Adapted from Samaras, 2011, p. 105)

1. Explain why you chose these objects.

2. Share what the artifact represents in your teaching,

3. What is the time period of the artifact?

4. Are there others involved in this artifact memory? What role do they play? What is their influence on your thinking? So they see things the way you do?

5. What metaphor would you choose to represent, symbolize, and reinforce the significance of this object to you?

6. Express an emotion that this artifact brings forth for you. Describe where that emotion generates from and might extend to in your teaching. Be descriptive.

Appendix H: Photo Journaling Prompts

(adapted from Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann, 2005)

(a) "I took this picture because. . ."

 (b) "What is the real story this picture tells?"

© "How does this picture relate to your experience as a teacher of children with autism or help to distinguish you as a teacher of children with autism?" Participants brought their pictures and journal entries to the critical friends' session and described the pictures they took and their reflections.

Appendix I: Code Book Examples

KWIC spec.

Transformation/Evolution

The teacher gives a description or definition of their transformation/evolution as a teacher.
The teacher uses the term (either) when describing their experiences.

Inclus: Transformation   Change
        Evolution   transition
        Evolving

Exclus: Any word not describing this

EX: Jodie's explanation of NOT transforming, which actually described how she transformed.

Topic

Good Teacher Qualities

Teacher gives description of what they think the qualities of a good teacher are. Teacher may just use a list of adjectives here.

Inclus: Answer to question 8 (see back)
        Listing qualities of a good teacher

Exclus: Describing themselves or their own teacher identity

EX: I am patient, strict, flexible... (Jodie)

Appendix J: Checklist of Considerations

(From Leavy, 2009, 233-234)

1. How does the use of visual art help address the issues in this study?

2. What alternatives are available and why is visual art most appropriate in this study?

3. How does the theoretical framework support the use of a visual approach?

4. Will the visual art in this study exist independent of the research project of be created via participatory methods or be created as a representational form, and if so, by whom?

5. How will the visual art component speak to the other components in multi-method research?

6. What method best suits my research objectives?

7. How will visual art be used?

8. If there is transfer between words and images, how will this translation process be understood?

9. How will authenticity be evaluated?