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# Creating an Inclusive Climate for Students on the Autism Spectrum

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## **Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership**

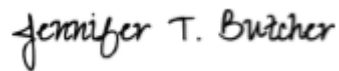


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Abilene Christian University  
School of Educational Leadership

Creating an Inclusive Climate for Students on the Autism Spectrum

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Stephanie Christine Holmes

April 2020

## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my supportive and encouraging husband, Dan, who took over many household duties as I continued to work full-time during my schooling and dissertation process. He reminded me of self-care and time for fun and intentional connection during this dissertation process. Also, I dedicate this work to my children, Sydney and Erica, who cheered me on, and in many ways, inspired me to do this dissertation. Finally, this work is dedicated to all persons on the autism spectrum and those who work tirelessly to provide inclusion and supports for them.

## Acknowledgments

I want to give thanks to God for his goodness, grace, and faithfulness in my life's journey and direction for my now life's work concerning inclusion for persons on the autism spectrum. Jeremiah 29:11 is my life verse that God gives both hope and a future.

I want to thank my husband, children, extended family, friends, and church family, and even clients who were supporting me with prayers and encouraging words in texts and emails checking in on how I was doing and cheering me on to completion.

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## Abstract

The problem that drove this study was the increasing number of students with autism entering the school system, and the barriers often encountered for both academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. Autism Spectrum Disorder, as defined by diagnostic criteria, includes deficits in social-relational communication; social-communication deficits can lead to educational impacts and limit opportunities upon transitioning from the public-school system. The purpose of this study was to examine the barriers to inclusion, which often includes the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) eligibility process itself, from the perspectives of key stakeholders to include Local Education Agency (LEA) representatives, educators, parents of students on the autism spectrum, and those over the age of 18 diagnosed with autism who attended public school. A phenomenological, qualitative study with a critical paradigm was conducted to incorporate 4 populations' individual experiences and perspectives concerning barriers encountered to inclusion as well as suggestions for better practices through and reported successes. This research study examined the phenomena or experience of the 4 different populations to include 9 administrators/LEA representatives, 11 educators, 8 parents, and 7 former students of the public education system. The findings suggest several barriers to inclusion from each perspective and that collaboration of the IEP team is key to the development and implementation of successful IEPS that include both academic and social inclusion goals. Suggestions for inclusive education were explored, described, and outlined from those who experienced the process of or lack of inclusive practices and those who strive to create inclusive environments for students on the autism spectrum.

*Keywords:* autism, inclusion, collaboration, conflict resolution, self-determination theory

## Table of Contents

Dedication .....	i
Acknowledgments.....	ii
Abstract.....	iv
List of Tables .....	viii
Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Background of the Problem .....	2
Generalized Problem.....	3
Statement of Problem.....	5
Significance of the Study .....	6
Purpose Statement.....	7
Theoretical Framework.....	8
Research Questions .....	10
Definition of Key Terms.....	10
Summary and Organization of the Study .....	13
Chapter 2: Literature Review .....	15
Exclusion and Segregation in the American Public Education System.....	16
Special Education Law .....	17
Autism Spectrum Disorder and Academic Achievement .....	30
Conceptual Framework: Models of Disability.....	40
Self-Determination Theory .....	45
Inclusive Educational Practices .....	49
IEP Team: Collaborating for Self-Determination.....	56
Elements of Inclusion: Peers, Teachers, and Administrators .....	58
Barriers to Inclusive Education.....	80
Summary and Preview of Chapter 3 .....	82
Chapter 3: Research Method.....	84
Research Paradigm.....	84
Research Methodology: Phenomenological .....	85
Purpose Statement and Research Questions .....	87
Research Design.....	87
Population .....	88
Sample.....	88
Qualitative Data Collection Methods.....	98
Data Collection and Storage .....	103
Data Analysis/Explication of Data.....	103



Reliability, Validity, Generalizability, and Replicability .....	105
Researcher's Role .....	107
Ethical Considerations .....	108
Assumptions.....	110
Limitations .....	111
Delimitations.....	112
Summary and Preview of Chapter 4 .....	113
 Chapter 4: Results .....	 115
Review of Research Process .....	116
Presentation of the Findings.....	116
Barriers to Inclusion: School Staff's Experiences and Observations .....	117
Barriers to Inclusion: Parent's Experience and Observations.....	125
Barriers to Inclusion: Student's Experiences and Observations .....	132
Barriers to Inclusion: The IEP Process .....	147
Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis.....	173
Summary .....	174
 Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations .....	 175
Interpretation of the Findings.....	176
Recommendations for Action and Further Study .....	195
Reflections .....	197
Conclusion .....	198
 References.....	 200
 Appendix A: IRB Approval .....	 230
 Appendix B: Requesting Permission to Conduct Research.....	 231
 Appendix C: Recruitment .....	 232
 Appendix D: Letters of Consent or Assent.....	 235
 Appendix E: Preselection Surveys for Study.....	 238
 Appendix F: Participants.....	 250
 Appendix G: Permission to Use Surveys or Questionnaires .....	 257
 Appendix H: Guided Protocols.....	 262
 Appendix I: Definitions of Inclusion .....	 273

Appendix J: Coding Matrices for Research Question 1.....	279
Appendix K: Coding Matrices for Research Question 2 .....	281
Appendix L: Coding Matrices for Research Question 3.....	282
Appendix M: Coding Matrices for Research Question 4: Collaboration .....	284
Appendix N: Coding Matrices for Research Question 4: Conflict.....	287
Appendix O: Suggestions for Inclusion.....	291

## List of Tables

Table 1. LRE Placement for *Autism Level 1 (Formerly HFA/Asperger’s) Students...	118
Table 2. LRE Placement for *Autism Level 2 Students .....	118
Table 3. LRE Placement for *Autism Level 3 Students .....	119
Table 4. Suggestions for Training.....	124
Table 5. Aspiration’s Index of Students on the Autism Spectrum .....	147
Table 6. Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meetings: LEA Representatives’ Perspective .....	150
Table 7. Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Educators’ Perspective .....	151
Table 8. Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Parent’s Perspective .....	154
Table 9. Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Across Populations.....	156
Table 10. Elements That Contribute to Conflict: LEA Representative Perspective .....	158
Table 11. Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Educator Perspective .....	161
Table 12. Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Parents’ Perspective .....	164
Table 13. Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Across Populations.....	171
Table 14. Elements of Collaboration Comparing Populations Through the Lens of SDT and Disability Models .....	172
Table 15. Elements of Conflict Comparing Populations Through the Lens of SDT and Disability Models.....	173

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Before 1975, students with various disabilities, formerly called “handicaps,” did not have the same access to public education as their nondisabled or neuro-typical developing peers (Culverhouse, 1998; Mahaney-Castro, 2010; Nielson, 2012; Yell, 2019). In 1975, U.S. Congress passed Public Law 94-142, referred to as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), which mandated that all schools that receive federal funds must provide equal access to education as a right to students with any physical, behavioral, or mental handicaps (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, Rogers, & Rogers, 1998). However, the law did not stipulate the degree of education that was required to be provided (Esteves & Rao, 2008; Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The EAHCA focused on equal access to education for students with disabilities more than protocols and procedures for ensuring quality education for students with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2018a).

Yell et al. (1998) pointed out that in the 1990s, the language of the law was strengthened when Congress updated the federal mandate called EAHCA to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Before this update, students were allowed into the public education system, but many school administrators still segregated students with disabilities from the general education classroom (Culverhouse, 1998; Yell et al., 1998). According to the IDEA, all students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and are to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) to receive an education plan that is more individualized to the students’ unique educational needs (USDOE, 2010; Wright & Wright, 2018a). The change from EAHCA to IDEA also switched the focus from the student’s disability to a focus on the individual student and his or her unique needs (Culverhouse, 1998). The language of the least restrictive environment (LRE) targeted segregation practices of students

with disabilities, and through this Act, the foundation of meeting the individual needs of individual students with special needs in an individualized education plan was laid (National Council on Disability, 2018).

### **Background of the Problem**

According to the UDSOE (n.d.), there are 13 designations or categories mentioned in the current federal laws defining which students are eligible for special education services. Autism is the first category mentioned alphabetically on the list of designations for eligibility for consideration of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). However, having a diagnosis does not ensure a student with autism will qualify for an IEP (Wright, Wright, & O'Connor, 2018). Under the heading of, "The Basic Special Education Process under IDEA," the United States Department of Education (USDOE, n.d.) lists the 10 steps necessary to identify a child who may need services to assembling an IEP team to designing an IEP to implementing and yearly evaluating that IEP. Members of the IEP team include the parents of the child with special needs, the child's regular education teacher, a special education teacher, and the individual that represents the school or local education agency (LEA) accountable for designating resources outlined in the IEP which is a member of the administrative team at the local school (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Wrightslaw, 2013).

In 2004, Congress further strengthened IDEA and changed the name to Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), stating that public schools that receive public funding will be responsible for providing equal education to all students with increased "standards of excellence" and expanded the concept of inclusive practices (Wright & Wright, 2018a). Inclusion was broadened to address academic and social needs in the LRE, but the term inclusion remains vague (National Council on Disability, 2018).

Since the passing of these mandates, many families undergo the process of having a child identified for special needs services, and subsequently must attend several IEP meetings (Wright & Wright, 2018a, 2018b). The Center for Disease Control (CDC, 2016) stated that the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis is the leading developmental disability diagnosed in America today and continues to rise. When the initial mandate was written in 1975, the rate of autism was estimated at 1 in 10,000 children (Hickey, 2013). However, Heussler et al. (2015) stated ASD was vastly underreported and underdiagnosed in the 1970s.

The National Health Statistics Report of 2015 confirmed that in the 2014-2015 school year, over 6.7 million students with disabilities were enrolled in the public-school system with an estimated 1,008,000 students receiving services under the eligibility of autism (Zablotsky, Black, Maenner, Schieve, & Blumberg, 2015). Therefore, Zablotsky and researchers estimated that 1 in 50 children enrolled in the American public school system is diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Since the passing of this first mandate nearly 45 years ago, students with various levels of disabilities have enrolled in the public education system; however, teacher curricula or teacher training have not been updated with training and knowledge of the best practices for educating students with autism in the general education classroom despite the increased numbers of students on the autism spectrum enrolled each year (Barned, Knapp, & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2011; Mahonay-Castro, 2010).

### **Generalized Problem**

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is classified as a developmental disorder with implications of neurological wiring issues that affect different people in different ways, manifesting symptoms at various levels from individual to individual. For this reason, when the American Psychiatric Association's (APA)

diagnostic manual was updated in 2013, ASD was described in levels denoting the amount of support the child may need from “some support” in ASD Level 1 to “requiring very substantial support” in ASD Level 3. ASD can be diagnosed with or without verbal communication capacity, and with or without intellectual impairment components (APA, 2013).

Social communication deficits, social immaturity, and social-relational reciprocity represent the similar features of skill deficits of persons on the autism spectrum while the overall degree of impairment varies from person to person dependent on the specifiers of the diagnosis one’s diagnosis (Attwood, 2007). Deficits in social communication and social interactions are across multiple contexts (Attwood, 2007; Scalise & Holmes, 2015). Children on the spectrum have difficulty developing, maintaining, and understanding social relationships. Children on the spectrum also struggle in sharing space and items with peers, and these children lack social-emotional reciprocity with same-age peers (Prizant, Wetherby, Rubin, Laurent, & Rydell, 2006). Children on the spectrum tend to be three to five years emotionally and socially delayed behind their same-aged peers (Attwood, 2007; Scalise & Holmes, 2015).

Other social communication issues include the tendency of children on the spectrum to read instructions or hear verbal instructions in literal or “black and white” terms, which often cause social faux pas and misunderstandings of the teacher’s instructions or what peers are discussing (Attwood, 2007). IEPs may include social pragmatic speech therapy or social skills therapy to help students on the spectrum who have black and white thinking and social delays, to better understand the social components of basic interactions, as well as how to read facial gestures and body posture to understand better social communication (Scalise & Holmes, 2015; Wright et al., 2018). ASD symptomatology encompasses deficits of social communication, and the school setting is a social-relational environment; therefore, academic success can be greatly

impacted by a lack of social support and socially inclusive practices (Holmes, 2018; Scalise & Holmes, 2015).

### **Statement of Problem**

Since Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a disorder that implies deficits in social skills, attending, social communication and emotional regulation (Attwood, 2007; Scalise & Holmes, 2015), lack of these skills can impede learning and academic potential (van der Werf, 2014) as well as target students on the autism spectrum for bullying (Hong, Neely, & Lund, 2014). Carter (2009) argued that children and adolescents on the autism spectrum are often excluded, bullied, and shunned by both peers and siblings due to significant social deficits, severe sensory sensitivities, and emotional regulation issues. Hebron, Oldfield, and Humphrey (2016) found that students on the autism spectrum are bullied at a significantly higher rate than students with other disabilities or the general population of students.

Van der Werf (2014) found both short- and long-term effects of bullying of students on the autism spectrum to include lowered academic performance, lower performance on standardized tests, and inability to obtain and keep a job, which impacts the ability to earn wages and live independently. Additional long-term effects of bullying put students who are bullied at risk for mental health issues and higher dropout rates (Connolly & Beaver, 2016; Fink, Deighton, Humphrey, & Wolpert, 2015). Factors that contributed to drop out for students with special needs included disciplinary exclusion or lack of understanding from administrators, grade retention, suspensions for behaviors, or missing class that led to lower grades or being bullied (Heinrichs, 2003; Ruijs & Peetsma, 2009). Fitzgerald (2007) suggested that students on the autism spectrum are at higher risk for suicide and other mental health issues more than students



within the general population due to lack of coping skills and ability to handle the social demands of either school or work.

Educators and administrators often argue that social skills are not academic needs and, therefore, it is not necessary to include social skill goals in the student's IEP (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017; Laviano & Swanson, 2017). However, van der Werf (2014) stated that the public-school system is the first place a child will begin their academic journey in a formal setting, and it is the academic process of learning and development that prepares a student for other skills required for independent living as adults. Wright and Wright (2018a) quote the statute under the purpose of the federal mandate IDEA:

...is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (p. 192)

Thus, while social communication skills are not listed as specific academic needs, consideration for skill-building in these areas are important for students on the spectrum who have unique needs for them to be able to transition to work or further academic achievement beyond K-12 schooling.

The problem of practice for examination is the gap that exists in the federal mandate to educate children with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and the act of inclusion of students with ASD in the general education classroom. The best practices for inclusion for students with ASD should include both academic and social inclusion (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017; McCarthy, n.d.; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Wrightslaw, 2012, 2019; Yell, 2019).

### **Significance of the Study**

When parents advocate for inclusive education for their children on the autism spectrum, there is often conflict between school administrations or the general education teacher and the

parents (Laviano & Swanson, 2017; Wright & Wright, 2018b). Parents, advocates, and special education teachers tend to define inclusive practices for students with special needs as both academic and social resources (WEAC, n.d.). Administrators may focus on providing the minimum expectations for a free and appropriate public education (FAPE); whereas, parents of children on the autism spectrum and special education teachers advocate that social inclusion impacts academic success and should be considered equally important to academic resources when writing an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for a student on the autism spectrum (McCarthy, n.d.; Wrightslaw, 2012, Yell, 2019).

This difference of perspective may require professional mediation, advocacy, or legal repercussions in negotiating an IEP for a student on the autism spectrum (Wright & Wright, 2018b), which can be costly to the parents and the school system (Laviano & Swanson, 2017; Wright & Wright, 2018b). Students on the autism spectrum without mental impairments are vastly underemployed or unemployed as adults and unable to live independently (Farley et al., 2017), which indicates that this area of social skills is being neglected when forming IEPs and preparing students for transition beyond K-12 schooling.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. Through a phenomenological qualitative study working from a critical paradigm, participants of the study included key stakeholders of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams located through purposive, convenience and snowball sampling throughout the United States' public education system.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The Education for All Handicapped Children (EAHCA) was based on identifying and classifying students in the public school system based on their handicap or disability, much like what was done in the medical model of disability (Culverhouse, 1998; Rees, 2017; Wrightlaw, 2010). The medical model of disability views the disability as a defect, disease, pathology, or condition which resides inside of the individual with the goal of interventions to be curative or rehabilitative (Berghs, Atkin, Graham, Hatton, & Thomas, 2016; Retief & Lešosa, 2018). Disabled persons must rely on the advice and care of professionals and accept the services or treatments made available to them; in this model, the disability defines the person, and the professionals drive the decisions of treatment (Retief & Lešosa, 2018).

The IDEA wording changed the focus from the disability or the person's condition to the person with a change in focus from focusing on a student's symptoms to devising a plan that is individualized in its approach to identifying not only needs and challenges but the strengths of the student as well (Wright et al., 2018). Disability rights advocates such as Charlton (2000) advocate that disability is not only a medical issue or category but social in nature as well as a condition that is further imposed on the individual by society. Disability advocates declare that persons with disabilities should have a voice in not only the care and services they receive but additionally in the policies that drive and shape the rights and treatment of persons with disabilities (Charlton, 2000).

The social model of disability separates the person's impairment or condition from the social conditions and environment, stating that disability is a socially constructed phenomenon (Berghs et al., 2016; Retief & Lešosa, 2018). The social model examines barriers for persons with disabilities and is closely aligned with the disability as a human rights model (Retief &

Lešosa, 2018). The empowerment model, based on empowerment theory (Zimmerman, 2000), examines possible barriers a person with a disability may encounter but maintains the locus of control to pursue various options for seeking fulfillment in daily living should be in the control of the person with the disability (Moran, Gibbs, & Mernin, 2017).

Although the language of the federal mandates for special education changed from a medical model to social or human rights model, IEPs tend to still focus on the challenges of the disorder(s) of the student with needs instead of the rights of an individual and approach to building skills where there are deficits (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that all individuals need to have competence, autonomy, and relatedness to foster volition, motivation or engagement in order to achieve creativity, persistence, and enhanced performance (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social communication skills are crucial to academic achievement potential, which is thus related to a student's ability to achieve enhanced performance, which aids in the transition to a fulfilling life after K-12 schooling (Amrai, Motlagh, Zalani, & Parhon, 2011).

Wehmeyer (1997) stated that self-determination is a crucial factor in outcomes for students with disabilities. In a study of students diagnosed with intellectual disabilities (formerly called mental retardation), Wehmeyer (1992) argued that autonomy is foundational for independence, which is a goal of special education. Therefore, students with disabilities need specialized instruction in skills necessary for transition out of school (Wehmeyer, 1992). Young adults and adults on the autism spectrum are experiencing the highest under and unemployment rates due to barriers such as the presence of social impairment, maladaptive behaviors, and lack of drive or motivation (Ohl et al., 2017).

Ward (1988) argued (as cited in Wehmeyer, 1992) that students with disabilities must have skill deficits identified, taught, and reinforced to increase their autonomy, independence, and competence. Foden and Anderson (2011) argued that for students with autism teaching, social skills and competencies are key to aiding students with autism, and they called for more research on evidence-based skills programs from the research community. Prizant et al. (2006) stated for success in social communication, and emotional regulation, consideration of the child's ability, learning style, supports and resources available and collaboration of effort between school and home should determine how the child is taught social skills. Because social skills deficits are core issues for students with autism (Attwood, 2007), building social skill competencies can help these students achieve self-determination and better transition options beyond the world of school (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner, Ziviani, & Rodgers, 2010; Elias, 2014).

### **Research Questions**

- Q1.** What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom?
- Q2.** What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion?
- Q3.** What do students on the autism spectrum describe as barriers to social inclusion?
- Q4.** What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP team members observed or experienced that increased conflict?

### **Definition of Key Terms**

**Accommodations.** To ensure all students have equal access to free and appropriate education (FAPE), accommodations aid a student with a learning difference or disability to

achieve the accomplishment of the same material presented in the general education curriculum as presented to the same grade peers without disabilities (Understood Team, n.d.).

**Autism.** The definition of autism used in the IDEA focuses on the developmental delay and disability aspects that affect verbal and nonverbal communication, which negatively impacts the child's academic achievement (IDEA, 1990; IDEIA, 2004).

**Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).** The broadest term to include all aspects of the autism spectrum which in previous diagnostic manuals may have included terms such as Pervasive Disorders, Not Otherwise Specified (PDDNOS), High Functioning Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, Rhett's Syndrome or Tourette's Syndrome (APA, 1994, 2000). ASD is seen as a broad spectrum of developmental challenges where persons have impairment socially, relationally, and behaviorally as well as sensory issues and restricted or repetitive behaviors (APA, 2013).

**Disability.** The categories represented to be served in special education under the category of disability listed by the USDOE include: "autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, emotional disturbance, hearing impairments, intellectual disability, multiple disabilities, orthopedic impairment, emotional disturbance, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injuries, visual impairment and blindness, and other health impairments" (Wright & Wright, 2018a). A disability alone is not cause for special education services, but it must be shown that the disability is impeding or adversely impacting a child's ability to learn and achieve in the academic setting (Wright & Wright, 2018a).

**Inclusive/Inclusion.** A school that incorporates inclusive practices bring the supports and resources outlined in the student's IEP to the general education classroom with little "pullout"

from classes into a segregated environment for services and alters assignments according to the student's IEP (WEAC, n.d.).

**Individualized Education Program (IEP).** The IEP is a document that outlines the needs, challenges, and strengths of a student with a disability who has qualified to receive special education as well as the accommodations, modifications, or resources that the student may require (Wright & Wright, 2018a). The IEP is a formal plan put together to meet the child's individualized needs, which may be impacting the child from receiving FAPE (Wright & Wright, 2018a). These goals should be measurable and indicate progress in academics, extracurricular activities at school, and nonacademic activities available in the public-school setting (Wright & Wright, 2018a). If a student with an IEP, has behavioral challenges which disrupt the school environment and result in suspension or a change in placement, these IEP goals, and educational goals are still offered and measured during the time of suspension; if the behavior is a manifestation of the disability, the behavior should be addressed in the IEP goals (Wright & Wright, 2018a).

**Mainstreaming.** Perles (2015) noted that a mainstreamed student is "pulled out" into a segregated classroom to receive supportive services outlined in their education plan. Neither the teacher nor the student receives real-time support in the general education or mainstream classroom. Perles further explains that a mainstreamed student is expected to complete the same level of work without alteration of assignments as his or her neuro-typical classroom peers.

**Modifications.** To ensure students with disabilities are afforded access to FAPE, modifications are different from accommodations in that the assignments or curriculum is changed or altered with different expectations set upon the student as the same grade peers (Strom, n.d.).

**Social skills.** Skills required for social communication and interaction, which may include basic communication skills, empathy and rapport skills, interpersonal skills, problem-solving skills, and social-emotional reciprocity in social settings. Social interactions are comprised of verbal and nonverbal communication, body and face gestures, and are part of the social communication process involved in daily exchanges among people (Little, Swangler, & Akin-Little, 2017).

**Social Skills Training (SST).** In the context of autism spectrum disorder, social skill training may utilize social stories, video modeling, interventions, group work, social problem solving, scripting, prompting, and self-monitoring activities to improve core deficits of social skills deficits and should be tailored to the individual person as social skills deficits vary from person to person on the autism spectrum (Bellini & Peters, 2008).

**Special Education (SPED).** The purpose of special education is defined by the IDEA (1990) to “meet the unique needs and prepare them [students with disabilities] for further education, employment, and independent living” (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1400[d]). Services to be provided through SPED are for students identified to have a disability (see disability) and are to be at “no cost to the parent” (IDEA, 1990) and are not dependent on what the individual schools may state is in or not in their operating budget (Wright & Wright, 2018a).

### **Summary and Organization of the Study**

In Chapter 1, I introduced the barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature which begins with the history of special education law and how the laws reflect differing models of disability and how those models affect the view of the purpose of special education for students with disabilities, such as students on the autism



spectrum. In Chapter 3, I describe the qualitative approach with a research question designed for gathering data from each member of the IEP team to promote collaborative efforts for the promotion of empowerment for students on the autism spectrum. Chapter 4, the presentation of results from the qualitative design are included, and Chapter 5 includes implications for implementing findings and best practices for students on the autism spectrum as well as limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. It is often assumed that the idea of inclusive education practices are tied to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries; however, Harvard graduate and physician turned educational advocate, Samuel Gridley Howe, is one of the first documented activists to argue in the 1830s that all children should have equal access to education (Donvan & Zucker, 2016; Simons, 2017). Becoming a new nation in 1776 with all of the birth pangs that come with growth and development of the American nation and its national ideals of pursuing life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, not all children were allowed to pursue these American ideals because they did not have access to education (Simons, 2017).

In the 1800s the medical terms for persons with differences or disabilities consisted of idiots, savants, idio-imbeciles, cripples, freaks, slow, retard, lunatic, mental defects, feeble-minded, or impaired in body or mind (Donvan & Zucker, 2016; Hanes, Brown, & Hansen, 2017; Nielson, 2012). Before the medical term autism became a diagnostic label in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many persons who would now be referred to as autistic may have been given one of the above more negatively connotative labels (Donvan & Zucker, 2016). This chapter provides an understanding of the history of the public education system's special education programs through the lens of special education law, and the changing lens of disability models, which has evolved through crucial events such as the Civil Rights movement, a better understanding will be achieved concerning inclusion, educational rights, and the importance of persons with disabilities, such as students with autism, to receive the accommodations and resources to be

both academically and socially included in the public education system and society at large to achieve greater self-determination and empowerment.

### **Exclusion and Segregation in the American Public Education System**

Samuel Gridley Howe of Boston, Massachusetts lived from 1801-1876, and it is believed that his patient, identified as “Billy” in 1846, then called an “idiot with echolalic tendencies,” fit the description of what is now referred to as autism spectrum disorder (ASD; Donovan & Zucker, 2016). Howe worked with cases at the Worcester Lunatic Hospital and came to believe and argue that “idiots” and the “feeble-minded” could be educated (Donvan & Zucker, 2016), and that such coursework could be rigorous and individualized starting with the concept of presuming competency (Simons, 2017). Howe is most known for his efforts to educate the blind but deeply held the belief that education was not to be reserved for the able-bodied or privileged but should be a right for all (Simons, 2017).

While it was never Howe’s intention to segregate students with disabilities from able-bodied students or of “vigorous mind,” the first schools that educated the blind, deaf or feeble-minded students were segregated institutions because these students were not allowed into the public education system in many states at the time (Donvan & Zucker, 2016; Mahaney-Castro, 2010; Simons, 2017). It was the intention of activists such as Howe to prove that these children being segregated from society were capable of learning, and he developed rigorous coursework while tailoring the curriculum to the needs and abilities of each student (Simons, 2017). Howe believed that it was part of the fabric of a burgeoning America to help all children become independent or productive citizens (Nutting, 2018). However, with the rise of the eugenics movement, an age of institutionalization, exclusion, isolation, or removal of persons with defects

(Hanes et al., 2017) became the norm for people with disabilities in the 1800s and 1900s (Mahanay-Castro, 2010).

### **Special Education Law**

Until the 1950s, it was commonplace for children with disabilities or mental illness to be hidden at home or institutionalized seen as outcasts or freaks and thus marginalized by society at large (Mahaney-Castro, 2010). From 1954 to the 1970s, individual states had the right to choose which students could attend school and could refuse admittance or expel students with handicaps or disabilities as they saw fit (Mahaney-Castro, 2010; Yell, 2019). The *Brown vs. the Board of Education* case seen before the Supreme Court in 1954 is most famously remembered as a case against racial segregation in its declaration that “separate but equal education is not equal;” however, this case was important for the dialogue that would emerge that segregation of students is not a good practice for any reason, including students with handicaps (Mahaney-Castro, 2010, p. 8; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). Introduced in 1969 (Mahaney-Castro, 2010) and finally passed into law by 1975 by President Gerald Ford, Public Law 94-142 or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) guaranteed the right of education to all children with disabilities with a process to hold states and local agencies that received federal funding for education accountable for providing an education for all students with handicaps (Mahaney-Castro, 2010; Wrightslaw, 2010; Yell, 2019).

**Rehabilitation Act of 1973.** On the heels of the Civil Rights movement, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Public Law 93-112, was the first Act to mandate:

no otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in Sec. 705(20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of her or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination (Public Law 93-112; Sec 705(20); Rehabilitation Act of 1973).

Wright and Wright (2018a) and Yell (2019) referred to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 as a broad civil rights act that would include the right to education for students with disabilities. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Public Law 88-352; 78 Stat. 241), specifically mentions nondiscrimination practices based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin, but the language of nonsegregation would be foundational to the rights of persons with disabilities. However, this act focused on not allowing discrimination against or allowing access to any program or activity that received Federal financial assistance, which includes the public education system, but the Act did not require specialized or individualized services for those with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

**EACHA of 1975.** Before the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EACHA), local or state-funded schools could refuse admittance to school any student deemed “uneducable,” which affected millions of students before the 1970s (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). While the passage of the EACHA was important for the educational rights of students with handicaps [disabilities], the Act did not prescribe specific programs or how to implement specialized or individualized education to these students (Enforcing the Right to an “Appropriate” Education, 1979; Wright & Wright, 2018a). Lawyers believe that Congress did not prescribe specific measures or standards for specialized education programs because traditionally, education was primarily left up to the state and local bodies for educational services (Enforcing the Right to an “Appropriate” Education, 1979; Yell, 2019).

While the founding fathers held a high regard for education, there is no mention of education in the Constitution to allow the states and local agencies the right to maintain control of public education; however, states have the choice whether or not to accept the federal money

under the condition that acceptance of Federal funds means compliance with federal mandates concerning education (Yell, 2019). Included in the term “handicapped” under EACHA were “mentally retarded,” learning disabled, physically handicapped, and “emotionally disturbed” students (Enforcing the Right to an “Appropriate” Education, 1979).

The EACHA mandated a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students ages 3 to 21 and stated that the education was to be adequate (Enforcing the Right to an “Appropriate Education, 1979; Wright & Wright, 2018a). Wrightslaw (2010) stated that out of concern that administrators may try to persuade uninformed parents that their child does not need specialized services and may dissuade parents from seeking services, this Act gave parents a right of due process to register a complaint if the child was not allowed services and introduced the concepts of the Individualized Education Plan (IEP), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), and Child Find (Martin et al., 1996; Yell, 2019). While the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 mandated access, the EACHA of 1975 specified that identified children with needs should receive individualized or specialized services (Wright & Wright, 2018; Yell, 2019).

However, with such a foundational law in place for students with disabilities, the EACHA of 1975 did not dictate consequences or have authority over schools or states that did not provide FAPE; Congressional hearings of the 1975 era reported that after the Act still 3.5 million children with disabilities were not being served adequately, and 1 million children with disabilities were still without any educational services at all (Martin et al., 1996; Yell, 2019). The focus of FAPE for the student was centered on the child’s handicap or condition, which reflects the medical model of disability, which was prevalent in the 1970s and 1980s (Rees, 2017). Further definition of what FAPE, LRE, and Child Find would be part of the Individuals with

Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, which would come to replace the EACHA (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

**The Americans with Disability Act.** On July 26, 1990, the Americans with Disability Act (ADA), Public Law 191-336, was signed into law (Yell, 2019). While the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 argued against discrimination, the ADA law further declared this “national policy that focuses on the inclusion, independence, and empowerment of individuals with disabilities” (Public Law 191-336) would move from exclusion to empowerment (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). Cited in Crockett and Kauffman (1999), Harkin (1993) stated that the ADA declared the rights of individuals with disabilities not only have equal access to programs, building, and activities funded by Federal money but the right to live as independently as possible and to make choices and to be able to contribute and participate in society in a meaningful way to be included in all aspects of American society pursuing a life and career that would be fulfilling. When this law was introduced to Congress, it was reported that 43 million Americans had physical or mental disabilities (Yell, 2019, p. 122). In 1990, shortly after the ADA was signed into law, The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) would replace EACHA based on concepts outlined in the ADA laws (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). The ADA was updated in 2008 to include persons with short-term and episodic conditions (Yell, 2019).

**IDEA of 1990.** The IDEA of 1990, Public Law 101-476, changed the term from handicap to disability and introduced the idea of person-first language. The EACHA referred to the handicapped child, while the IDEA refers to individuals with disabilities (Yell, 2019). Stating that disability is a natural part of the human experience IDEA mandated:

The purpose of IDEA is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free and appropriate public education that emphasizes specialized education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and to prepare them for further education,

employment, and independent living, to ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. §1400[d])

The IDEA added categories of inclusion for specialized services and added autism and traumatic brain injury to categories to be served as well as the need for transitional planning for students age 16 and older; IDEA approved the use of assistive devices and technology as related services or accommodations for students with disabilities (Yell, 2019). The Act also stated that parents should be considered equal members of a multidisciplinary team that would determine eligibility and services for students with disabilities (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

**IDEA of 1997.** As special education law expanded and the number of students requiring specialized services increased, Congress amended IDEA in 1997, Public Law 105-17 (Wrightslaw, 2010; Yell, 2019). Yell (2019) that while ECHA gave access to education that is individualized to students with disabilities, the amended IDEA required that specialized education not only be adequate and appropriate but emphasize observable and measurable methods to expect and chart the improvement of student performance. The 1997 categories of services include autism, deaf-blindness, deafness, hearing impairment, intellectual disabilities, multiple disabilities, orthopedic disabilities, other health impairments, emotional disturbances, specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, traumatic brain injuries, and visual impairment, including blindness. Yell argued that due to the increasing amount of due process cases where parents asserted that their children's needs were not being met, IDEA also encouraged parents and educators to resolve disputes in nonadversarial mediation.

Yell (2019) added that another component of the updated IDEA was the admonishment to use fair testing practice for establishing eligibility and marking progress as well as disciplining students with disabilities using positive behavioral interventions and supports in a proactive behavioral management plan. IDEA 1997 also mentioned that behaviors that were challenging or



disruptive be examined with a Functional Behavior Analysis (FBA) to determine the function of behavior before implementing a Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP), as well as determine if the behavior is a manifestation of the disability before administering consequences, according to Yell.

**IDEIA of 2004.** On December 3, 2004, IDEA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), Public Law 108-446, which would replace the previous IDEA laws (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). The most significant changes in the law included discipline issues and methods for students with disabilities, identifying students with disabilities, and changes in the Individualized Education Program (IEP) document (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). This Act also stated teachers working in special education should be certified and knowledgeable of special education practices (Yell, 2019).

IDEA, 20 U.S.C., § 140[c][5][F] states that public schools should “provide incentives for whole-school approaches” and “reduce the need to label children as disabled to address the learning and behavior needs of such children.” The IDEIA of 2004 removed the need for stating short term goals in a student’s IEP and instead emphasized measurable annual progress with teachers informing parents of regression or progress every nine weeks (Yell, 2019). Yell said to encourage further collaboration and cooperation among the members of the IEP team that Congress attempted to decrease litigation by limiting the time limit to request a due process hearing to two years from the date the alleged issue arose. Mediation was further encouraged to resolve issues and required parents to request mediation in writing (Wrightslaw, 2016; Yell, 2019). The updated IDEA also gave states flexibility on how to use their IDEA funds, which was met with mixed feelings from parents and advocates of children with special needs (Wright & Wright, 2018b; Yell, 2019).

**IEPs.** As defined legally in 20 U.S.C. § 1401(F) (14), an IEP is “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised according to Section 1414 (d) of this title” (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). All students that have been assessed and found eligible for special education services must be provided with an IEP, which is to be reviewed annually (Giuliani, 2012; Howe, Boelé, & Miramontes, 2018; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). The IEP is the document which ensures the local school agency is providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students identified with needs (Giuliani, 2012; Laviano & Swanson, 2017; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). The IEP should consist of the student’s present levels of performance and needs, goals for achievement that are measurable and reasonable, measures of progress and how they will be communicated, accommodation or modifications that are needed, related services that may be needed, placement and determination of the least restrictive environment (LRE), and transition planning for students age 16 and older (Johns, 2016; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019).

According to Smith (1990) and Yell (2019), the specialized and individualized educational services to be received by students with disabilities are directed and monitored through the IEP process. However, there have been many issues creating adequate IEPs since their inception in 1975 through EACHA (Bateman, 2007; Lake, 2007; Smith, 1990; Yell, 2019). Some of the issues include the lack of teacher training, lack of administrator’s training, poorly developed teams, lack of coordination with the general education teacher, failure to make obtainable or measurable goals, and not allowing parents input or to be a meaningful part of the IEP process (Bateman, 2007; Lake, 2007; Smith, 1990; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019; Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis, & Losinski, 2013; Yell, Katsiyannis, Ennis, Losinski, & Christle, 2016). The IEP is to be individualized to meet the unique needs of the child which is argued to include

academic, social, behavioral, emotional, health, and vocational or transitional needs of the student (Tatgenhorst, Norlin, & Gorn, 2014; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). The central purpose of the IEP is to make sure FAPE is available through a collaborative effort of the local school agency and the parents who make up an IEP team (Yell, 2019).

***IEP teams.*** Through each edition of the federal mandates, the language concerning parental involvement and insistence that parents be seen as equal partners on the multidisciplinary IEP team has been strengthened (Giuliani, 2012; Yell, 2019). Members of the IEP team should include but not be limited to the parent of the student, the student if appropriate, the regular education classroom teacher, the school system representative referred to as local education agency representative (LEA), transitional services agency representatives, a person to evaluate and explain testing results, a special education teacher or provider, and any person deemed knowledgeable about the child (Giuliani, 2012; Johns, 2016; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). If parents desire to invite professionals or other persons familiar with the child and the child's specific needs, they are allowed under the law to bring whomever they deem necessary and do not need to inform or have permission of the school to do so; however, if the local school agency desires anyone not mandated to be present under the IDEA regulations, they must inform the parents in writing of any additional persons invited to the meeting (Giuliani, 2012; Yell, 2019). If a parent invites an attorney to the IEP meetings, the local school agency is allowed to have their legal counsel as well (Yell, 2019). In addition to developing the IEP document, the IEP team will determine the placement of the student to receive special education services. Placement of the student is mandated by the IDEA laws to be in the least restrictive environment (LRE) with the maximum amount of time appropriate with nondisabled peers (Crockett & Kaufmann, 1999; Wright & Wright, 2018a, Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). The LEA is usually

an administrator who is responsible for carrying out the services, especially concerning the placement where the services and resources will be delivered (Wrightslaw, 2013).

*LRE.* Giuliani (2012) and Yell (2019) stated that people often use the terms least restrictive environment (LRE), mainstreaming, inclusion, and integration as synonymous terms but should not do so. There are many perspectives and opposing opinions on the idea of mainstreaming versus including children with special needs in the LRE and the impact on students with needs such as students on the autism spectrum and peers within the mainstream classroom (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; Giuliani, 2012; Howe et al., 2018; Yell, 2019).

The Wisconsin Education Association Council ([WEAC]; n.d.) defines a key difference between mainstreaming and inclusion practices as to the location where the resources are provided for the student. A mainstream student is “pulled out” into a segregated classroom to receive supportive services outlined in their education plan. Neither the teacher nor the student receives real-time support in the general education or mainstream classroom. A mainstream student is expected to complete the same level of work without alteration of assignments as his or her neuro-typical classroom peers (Perles, 2015). On the other hand, a school that incorporates inclusive practices bring the supports and resources outlined in the student’s IEP to the general education classroom with little “pullout” from classes into a segregated environment for services and alters assignments according to the student’s IEP (WEAC, n.d.).

Crockett and Kauffman (1999) suggested the meaning of LRE is vague, which leads to a subjective interpretation of the local school agency representatives. According to Crockett and Kauffman (1999), the words mainstreaming, integration, and inclusion do not appear in EACHA or IDEA laws. Yell et al. (1998) argued that based on the history of special education law and coming out of the civil rights acts, it can be inferred that the law is against segregation of

students for any reason. Howe et al. (2018) argued that superficial attention is given to special education guidelines and procedures in teacher training, and thus the ethical principle of inclusion practices is not taught in educator training. Principals must balance the rights and needs of the students receiving specialized services with the needs of the nondisabled peers (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). The law indicates that if the students with special needs have challenging behaviors that are significantly disrupting the learning of peers, the student may be placed outside of the general education classroom (Giuliani, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

Mainstreaming, in general, means the placement of the student with needs in the regular education classroom with nondisabled peers (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). Inclusion also means placing a student in an age-appropriate general education classroom at a local community school where services and supports will be offered to the student in that classroom in real-time (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; WEAC, n.d.; Yell, 1995; Yell & Drasgow, 1999). The broadest definition of inclusion refers to ensuring that students with disabilities are part of the school community with access to any resource or activity available to general education students (Giuliani, 2012).

Crockett and Kauffman (1999) discussed different levels of integration to include physical, social, and academically aimed interactions to help develop and hone positive social skills for both the disabled and nondisabled peer groups. A continuum of placement starts with the LRE to the most restrictive environment which starts with the general education classroom, then to partial general education classroom and resource room use, special classrooms which are segregated but remain in the same building, to special schools and then to institutions (Yell,

2019). Yell (2019) stated that schools must make “good faith efforts” to provide and maintain the least restrictive environment for students with disabilities (p. 258).

The litmus test to determine LRE, according to Yell (2019), is the DeVries/Hartmann 3 factor test or the Daniel 2 factor test, which has arisen from litigation concerning LRE. Yell (2019) indicated that the primary objective of the LRE based on case law is the appropriateness of the student with special needs, the continuum of placement, the amount of time with nondisabled peers, and if the LRE is individualized, benefits the students, provides integration, and will allow the resources, services, and aids to be used as outlined by the IEP.

**FAPE.** The four components of FAPE as outlined by IDEA laws are that the education provided to students with disabilities will be free to the parents, appropriately designed, and provided through the public education system unless the parent chooses to place the student elsewhere (Giuliani, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). When the IEP team develops an IEP for the student, the local school agency cannot charge the parents for any services, nor can they state that a service will not be provided because of the cost (Giuliani, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2018; Yell, 2019). Whether or not the education is appropriate is defined by the child’s unique needs and the details of the services and accommodations that are outlined in the IEP; case law has broadened the term to include that the education and services be meaningful and promote progress for the student instead of the bare minimum to meet curriculum requirements (Yell, 2019).

Finally, FAPE is only provided to students in the public education system unless the LEA representative has determined and proved that the local agency is not sufficient to meet the needs of the students, but if the local school agency promotes placement to a private school or agency, the education will be to no cost to the parents (Yell, 2019). No one person of the IEP team can

unilaterally decide the placement of a student (Giuliani, 2012; Wrightslaw, 2008; Wright & Wright, 2018a, 2008; Yell, 2019). If the IEP team comes to an impasse as to where a child is to be placed, the child is to remain at the local school agency until mediation or a due process hearing decides placement for FAPE (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

***Due process.*** Parents of the student with needs can seek a due process hearing if they feel the IEP is not being followed or if their child is unfairly denied services, or when impasses occur between the parents and the local school agency (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). Yell (2019) explained that a due process hearing is adjudicative or conducted much like a trial where witnesses are called, and testimonies are cross-examined. Before going into due process, there must be a resolution session for one last attempt to resolve issues before going to court; court is costly to both the school district and the parents and often fosters more adversarial relationships among the IEP team members. However, an option allowed and encouraged before the resolution meeting and preferable to due process is mediation. Over 90% of both teachers and parents that have utilized the mediation process have reported successful resolutions (Dobbs, Primm, & Primm, 1991) which were less costly, promoted greater collaboration and problem-solving, promoted a future working relationship, and involved less overall time (Giuliani, 2012; Lake, 2014).

***Manifestation determination.*** Many students with disabilities have behaviors that can be challenging or disruptive, but what is most important in disciplinary actions regarding students with disabilities is that the practices of discipline are nondiscriminatory (Yell, 2019). IDEA, 34 C.F.R. §300.324 (a)(2)(1) states, “if a student with disabilities exhibits problem behavior that impedes his or her learning or the learning of the others, the IEP team should consider the use of positive behavior intervention and supports to address the behaviors.” Certain aspects of

behavior that are dangerous or illegal have the same consequences for all students, but if a student who has an IEP is to be suspended, removed, or even placed in jail or an institution, the student is still entitled to FAPE and educational services (Giuliani, 2012; Yell, 2019).

Failure to determine if the student's behavior is a manifestation of the disability before employing disciplinary action is an area where many local school agencies end up in litigation or due process hearings (Giuliani, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019). When the behavior of a student with an IEP is problematic or challenging, it is suggested that the agency conduct a functional behavior analysis (FBA) to assess the frequency, location, and function (purpose) of the behavior before devising a behavior intervention plan ([BIP]; Giuliani, 2012; Wright & Wright, 2018; Yell, 2019). Yell (2019) argued the BIP should be developed by the IEP team based on the findings of the FBA and should be individualized, proactive, and multidimensional. A school cannot unilaterally change the placement or invoke severe consequences without an IEP meeting involving the parents. When it is not certain if the behavior is part of the student's disability, a hearing to ascertain the connection or lack thereof is called a manifestation determination hearing (Wright & Wright, 2018a; Yell, 2019).

*Child find.* Congress was concerned that local education agencies and school personnel might either dissuade parents from receiving services or turns a blind eye to students who may have needs if uninformed parents do not know how to ask for assessment or resources (Yell, 2019). With each update of IDEA is a further definition and spelling out of the legal requirement and obligation of school personnel to locate or find any student with a disability or learning divergence which impedes academic achievement to seek to provide adequate services to those students through the assessment and eligibility process outlined in IDEA called Child Find (Giuliani, 2012; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019).



Since the passing of these mandates, many families undergo the process of having a child identified for special needs services, and subsequently must attend several IEP meetings. The Center for Disease Control [CDC] (2016) stated that the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis is the leading developmental disability diagnosed in America today and continues to rise.

### **Autism Spectrum Disorder and Academic Achievement**

Now referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Blumberg et al. (2013) explained that ASD is a complex neurological disorder that includes the following former diagnostic labels, such as autistic disorder, Asperger's Syndrome, and pervasive developmental disorder, not otherwise specified (PDDNOS). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC] (2018) reported the current prevalence of ASD to be 1 in 59 children with 1 in 6 children in the United States having some form of developmental disability from mild to severe making, autism the fastest-growing developmental disorder in the United States.

**Increasing prevalence rates of autism.** Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) as a diagnosis in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manuals* (DSM) has been changed with revisions by the American Psychiatric Association (APA) from a narrower to broader definition of what is included in the autism spectrum as well differing perspectives of how rates are reported (Blumberg et al., 2013; Fombonne, 2001; Rutter, 2005). While pediatrician Dr. James Coplan, a neurodevelopmental pediatrician from the University of Pennsylvania, argued the rates of autism are due to changing criteria and lack of record keeping of autism before the EACHA of 1975, Dr. Martha Herbert, a pediatric neurologist at Harvard Research School of Medicine, examined the rates based on changing criteria and found that of the 1200% increase of diagnostic rates only 400% of that increase could be attributed to change in criteria alone leaving an 800% increase

over 25 years not related to change in diagnostic criteria (Scalise & Holmes, 2015). While research is not clear concerning the causal attributes to the increased rate of autism, the CDC (2018) reports that ASD is found equally among races, ethnicities, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Once thought to be diagnosed at a 10:1 ratio in boys versus girls, the current diagnostic rate in boys (1 in 37) to girls (1 in 151) is now 4:1 (CDC, 2018).

As of the most updated statistics for the 2015-2016 school year, the National Center for Education Statistics (2018) rated students with ASD as the fourth-highest disability category under which students are served under IDEA law which correlates to 1% of the entire population of public schools in the US is served under the eligibility of ASD. While the diagnostic criteria are clearly defined in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (APA, 2013) and the IDEA outlines the definition of autism for eligibility for service (Wright & Wright, 2018a), each child on the autism spectrum may not have the same needs, which is why the “individualized” piece of the IDEA is so important; autism is reshaping special education as a whole, and the public school system has not adapted or responded to handle the increase of students to be served on the autism spectrum over these past 40 years (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017).

**Diagnostic criteria & symptoms.** The 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (DSM-5) places ASD under the heading of neurodevelopmental disorders with the statement that symptoms for developmental disorders typically manifest before grade school (APA, 2013). In addition to the criteria established by the DSM-5, specifiers are added to the clinician, such as with or without intellectual impairment, with or without language impairment, and with or without catatonia (abnormal movements). The severity of the diagnosis is based on social communication impairments and the amount of restricted or repetitive patterns of behavior (APA, 2013).

Diagnostic Criteria for Autism Spectrum Disorder 299.00 (F84.0) include:

A. Persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple

contexts, as manifested by the following, currently or by history:

1. Deficits in social-emotional reciprocity, ranging, for example, from abnormal social approach and failure of normal back-and-forth conversation; to reduced sharing of interests, emotions, or affect; to failure to initiate or respond to social interactions.
2. Deficits in nonverbal communication behaviors used for social interaction, ranging for example, from poorly integrated verbal and nonverbal communication; to abnormalities in eye contact and body language or deficits in understanding and use of gestures; to a total lack of facial expressions and nonverbal communication.
3. Deficits in developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships, ranging, for example, from difficulties adjusting behavior to suit various social contexts; to difficulties in sharing imaginative play or in making friends; to absence of interest in peers.

B. Restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities, as manifested by at

least two of the following, currently or by history:

1. Stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech (e.g., simple motor stereotypies, lining up toys or flipping objects, echolalia, idiosyncratic phrases).
2. Insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence to routines, or ritualized patterns of verbal or nonverbal behavior (e.g., extreme distress at small changes,

difficulties with transitions, rigid thinking patterns, greeting rituals, need to take same route or eat same food every day).

3. Highly restricted, fixated interests that are abnormal in intensity or focus (e.g., strong attachment to or preoccupation with unusual objects, excessively circumscribed or perseverative interests).
4. Hyper- or hyperactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment (e.g., apparent indifference to pain/temperature, adverse response to specific sounds or textures, excessive smelling or touching of objects, visual fascination with lights or movement).

C. Symptoms must be present in the early development period (but may not become fully manifest until social demands exceed limited capacities, or may be masked by learned strategies in later life).

D. Symptoms cause clinically significant impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of current functioning. (APA, 2013, p. 50)

DSM-5 places the following specifiers on ASD, which is important for educators to note in developing the student's IEP. DSM-5 defines the specifiers for social communication as:

Level 1 “Requiring Support” defined as “without supports in place, deficits in social communication cause noticeable impairments. Difficulty initiating social interactions, and clear examples of atypical or unsuccessful response to social overtures of others” (APA, 2013, p. 52).

Level 2 “Requiring substantial support” defined as “marked deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills; social impairments apparent even when supports

in place; limited initiation of social interactions; and reduced or abnormal responses to social overtures from others” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

Level 3 “Requiring very substantial support” defined as “severe deficits in verbal and nonverbal social communication skills cause severe impairment in functioning, very limited initiation of social interaction, and minimal response to social overtures from others” (APA, 2013, p. 50).

What is important to note about the three levels of support is that all three levels of support for ASD require support in social communication. Under “D,” the criteria stated that the impairment is in all areas of the person’s spheres, which for a student would include the educational setting.

Under the IDEA regulations, a student is to receive eligibility for services under special education as defined:

(c)(1)(i) Autism means a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3 that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences. The term does not apply if a child’s educational performance is adversely affected primarily because the child has an emotional disturbance, as defined in this section.

What must be noted is that if a student is diagnosed with ASD (or formerly Asperger’s Syndrome or PDDNOS), the diagnosis alone does not guarantee eligibility for services in the public school system (Wrightslaw, 2019; Yell, 2019). The IDEA adds that the student must evidence that the autism is impacting academic achievement (Wright & Wright, 2018a, 2018b; Yell, 2019). While the DSM-5 (APA, 2013) indicates that through diagnosis impairment is part of the criteria for diagnosis, in the education setting to be eligible for services it must be determined that the student on the spectrum’s impairment is evident and observable by the

classroom teacher and impacts educational outcomes (Wright & Wright, 2018b; Yell, 2019). However, IDEA does not require a formal diagnosis of ASD to be eligible for services under the eligibility status of ASD either (Wrightslaw, 2019). The question as to the level of impairment and what qualifies as impacting academic achievement can be subject to debate by the IEP team (Laviano & Swanson, 2017; Wright et al., 2018).

**Factors that contribute to academic achievement.** Societies care about academic achievement because these achievements affect developmental outcomes for all students that are associated with individual and societal economic prosperity and overall mental health (Byrnes, 2011). Various researchers have examined contributors to academic achievement for all students (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2014; Huang, 2011). Amrai et al. (2011) found that motivation had less impact on overall student academic achievement than one's self-esteem, overall abilities, encouragement, social affiliation, hope to achieve future goals and an overall interest in learning. Huang (2011) found that self-concept was the most significant factor in academic achievement finding high academic performance associated with high self-concept as well those with a lower self-concept that underwent an intervention program that combined self-enhancement and skill development had overall higher academic achievement.

As education has moved in many states toward Common Core standards, Elias (2014) argued that research indicates that social competency skills are a core feature in improving students' ability to meet and exceed common core education standards. Social competency is important for academic achievement because it helps students to elaborate and articulate thoughts reasonably as well as how to challenge a classmate's ideas or reasoning respectfully; social competencies help build strategic thinking and resilience and self-confidence in students'

academic abilities. Described as social-emotional learning skills, Elias described social competencies to include self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relational skills, and responsible decision-making skills. In a case-control research study, Ashburner et al. (2010) found that 54% of students with ASD were underachieving academically even though all students had the necessary intellectual ability to achieve. The inability to regulate behaviors and emotions and social relationships are correlated to underachievement.

**Autism's impact on the student.** Students on the autism spectrum have different academic needs depending on whether or not the student is verbal or nonverbal (without receptive language) or nonspeaking (receptive language intact), has a mental impairment or is intellectually gifted, has receptive language skills, has other learning differences or health issues, and the severity or amount of supports required as outlined in the DSM-5 (APA, 2013). A student on the spectrum may have an IEP that reflects resources for the outlined individual needs which may include but not be limited to extra time on tests or quizzes, modified assignments, separate testing accommodations, physical therapy, ABA, occupational therapy, speech therapy, social skills training, small groups, counseling, or other resources (Wright et al., 2018).

**ASD and academic challenges.** For the scope of this research, participants have been diagnosed before the age of 18 with autism levels 1, 2, or 3 without mental impairment. In an interview, Emily Rubin, a speech-language pathologist with Atlanta's Marcus Autism Center, described the brain wiring differences for students with AS/ASD:

As autism is a neurological disorder that makes it difficult for a child to predict the actions of other people, their ability to cope with social expectations in less predictable environments, make transitions, and use others a source of emotional support is often compromised. Thus, many children with autism are coping with a heightened degree of stress and have developed repetitive, soothing behaviors as coping behaviors. (Murphy, 2011)

Self-concept, social skills, relational abilities, self-regulation, emotional regulation, hope for a future, and encouragement were all listed as factors for academic achievement (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2014; Huang, 2011). According to the criteria outlined in the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013), students on the autism spectrum may have difficulty in all of these areas varying in severity from child to child.

***Autism and social communication deficits.*** According to Watkins, Ledbetter-Cho, O'Reilly, Barnard-Brak, and Garcia-Grau (2019), students with ASD will have limited or hindered success in an inclusive or general education classroom if they are in a general education classroom without supports or resources. The classroom experience is social with numerous social interactions a student will have with the teacher(s) and peers across many activities, both structured and unstructured throughout the day, which is challenging because of the core deficits in ASD center on social communication.

According to Stitche et al. (2010), the level of social skill deficit will manifest differently from student to student on the spectrum with varying degrees of severity. Students on the spectrum have difficulty in the areas of Theory of Mind (ToM), emotion recognition, and executive functioning. Cited by Stitche et al. (2010), Baron-Cohen, Leslie, and Frith (1985) described the inability to understand intentions and thoughts of others or understand that others have different perspectives and thoughts than one's own is what is referred to as Theory of Mind. Coupled with lack of emotional recognition, the student with ASD has an understanding of basic emotions but may not recognize nuances in emotions or facial, gestural, or inflections in tone which may cause the student not to be able to follow social communication in activities in the classroom (Stitche et al., 2010). Impaired or low executive functioning (EF) is the cognitive and emotional regulation processes which are indicated in poor impulse control, cognitive



inflexibility, poor self-monitoring, and inability to plan tasks or order steps or initiate and complete tasks which all impact academic and social progress (Ozonoff, Pennington, & Rogers, 1991; Stichter et al., 2010).

The second set of core deficits are behavioral which may include meltdowns, elopement from the classroom, aggressive behaviors, repetitive behaviors, restricted behaviors, and resistant to change of routine which can affect both academic achievement and social relationships (Emerson, Morrell, & Neece, 2001; Lanovaz, Robertson, Soerno, & Watkins, 2013; Matson & Nebel-Schwalm, 2007; Watkins et al., 2019). Without intervention, training, and supports, the student with ASD may exhibit problematic behaviors, which may lead to internalizing, anxiety, or becoming socially withdrawn (Bauminger, Shulman, & Ayan, 2003). Isolation or exclusion can create a negative impact on the student's mental health and academic performance and create further deficits in other developmental skills (Ostmeyer & Scarpa, 2012; Rogers, 2000).

***Bullying's impact on academic success.*** In general children with special needs experience more bullying compared to the population of neuro-typically developing peers (Fink et al., 2015). The inability to interpret social skills or interacting in a socially awkward way can set students on the autism spectrum up for bullying (Carter, 2009; Hebron et al., 2017). In Carter's (2009) study, the results were reported that two-thirds of students on the autism spectrum indicated they were victims of bullying, and one half of the students in the study were fearful of being bullied and afraid to attend school. Carter suggested that children and adolescents on the autism spectrum are more likely to be bullied, teased, or shunned for being different, but often academically appear bright or exceptional.

However, even if a student does not have an intellectual impairment and is twice-exceptional or gifted academically, students who are bullied have decreased achievement,

lowered ability to focus, less interest in pursuing academic potential, and more likely to skip class to avoid bullies (Hebron et al., 2017). Hong et al. (2015) reported that students on the autism spectrum have higher rates of incidence of both direct (physical or verbal aggression) and indirect bullying (social exclusion and cyberbullying).

Connolly and Beaver (2016) reported that children on the autism spectrum, who they referred to as “easy targets” to bullies, tend to be more prone to mental health problems later in life such as anxiety and depression and will be profoundly affected by being bullied. Bullying has both short-term and long-term effects on academic performance and overall mental health (Greener, 2016), and Fitzgerald (2007) reported adolescents on the autism spectrum from puberty onward would experience more suicidal ideation, thoughts, and completed acts than compared to their typically developing peers. Mayes, Gorman, Hillwig-Garcia, and Syed (2013) reported children on the autism spectrum are at higher risk than the average population for suicidal ideation. Depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation all have a significant negative impact on academic achievement and may impact the student’s ability to achieve their full potential or express potential areas of gifting or talent (Carter, 2009; Connolly & Beaver, 2016; Fink et al., 2015).

The consequences of bullying identified by Kowalski (2019) included adverse physical and psychological effects, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, health issues such as stomach and headaches, and lower academic performance due to increased school absences and lack of concentration in school. Nauert (2018) concluded that even being left out, excluded, or ignored can produce emotional disturbance and decreased academic performance. In addition to increased risk of suicidal ideation or completion, students on the autism spectrum have higher rates of dropping out of school due to social exclusion, social anxiety, or bullying (Kowalski,

2019). Higher rates of dropping out, inability to remain employed or underemployment have made ASD increasingly costly to families and society as a whole (Emerson, Morrell, & Neece, 2016; Zablocki & Krezimien, 2013). Emerson et al. (2016) reported the lifetime cost of supporting someone on the autism spectrum without mental impairment is estimated to be 1.4 million. Thus, early interventions and supports such as social skills will result in significantly better outcomes for students on the autism spectrum and minimize associated costs to society if functional behaviors are increased and appropriate skills taught.

### **Conceptual Framework: Models of Disability**

While critics such as Beaudry (2016) argued society and policy should move beyond the models of disability, other researchers believe understanding the models of disability build a framework for how persons with disabilities have been viewed over time (Berghs et al., 2016; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Retief and Letšosa (2018) noted that there had been many models with variations of names over the last century and outlined nine modes of disability in their research. However, for this research on how the models of disability have shaped policy and educational practices, the religious/moral model, medical model, social model, and empowerment models will be further discussed.

**Religions/moral model of disability.** While not as pertinent to the research on educational policies, the moral or religious model serves to illustrate where negative stigmas or harmful views of persons with disabilities possibly originated (Dunn, 2015; Niemann, 2005; Retief & Letšosa, 2018). Retief and Letšosa (2018) noted from ancient times until the mid-1800s, the religious model was the prevalent view of disabilities. This view holds that disability is either a punishment or curse from God or a deity figure or an opportunity of special blessing for a higher purpose of calling of suffering. Disabilities or infirmities were also seen as tests of

faith or a way for the person to demonstrate character or growth; sickness or disease or disability could be the result of a sin of the person or their parents, which connoted shame on the person and their family (Niemann, 2005). Because of the shame associated with disability or illness, members of society who reflected this shame were often hidden away, abandoned, or marginalized (Dunn, 2015; Niemann, 2005). While this view is still prevalent in developing societies or societies with mystical, magical, or superstitious thinking (Dunn, 2015), this view of disability remains somewhat in society from various religious beliefs but gave way to the medical model of disability in the mid-1800s (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

**Medical model of disability.** Although criticized for depersonalizing those with disabilities, the medical model is seen by many as an important step away from the religious model (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). The medical model of disability defines disability as a condition or impairment located within the person (Beaudry, 2016; Berghs et al., 2016; Manago, Davis, & Goar, 2017; Rees, 2017). Prevalent from the mid-1800s and still used today, Manago et al. (2017) argued that the medical model language is the most stigmatizing language concerning disabilities of all the remaining models.

Berghs et al. (2016) emphasized the medical model focuses on pathology or abnormality with measures and standards wherein the individual is outside of the norm of society; disability is a tragedy and negatively and adversely affects the person and their family. Critics of the medical model argued that this model is biomedical reductionism reducing human beings with challenges to the number of their deficits and problems. The language of the medical model also focuses on solutions or cures devised by the medical profession, which the individual should pursue to pursue maximum ability or reduced suffering (Beaudry, 2016). This depersonalized

approach also compared those with disabilities as less than their nondisabled peers (Retief & Letšosa, 2018).

British activism of the 1960s for persons with disabilities spread to the United States in the 1970s on the heels of the civil rights era of America, and activist and disabled person, Michael Oliver, coined the phrase social model of disability (Retief & Letšosa, 2018). While there is debate concerning the use of person-first language, such as a person on the autism person or person with a disability, Oliver (1990) argued that this terminology reflected the medical model thinking and advocated for the use of a disabled person or autistic person to reflect the identity or experience of the person.

**Social model of disability.** Emerging in the decades of the 1960s and 1970s in the United Kingdom, Beaudry (2016) credited the rise of the social model of disability in America to its founders Vic Finkelstein in the 1980s and Michael Oliver in the 1990s. The social model of disability separates the disability from the person's impairment (Beaudry, 2016; Berghs et al., 2016; Haegele & Hodge, 2016; Wang, 2019). The impairment is the physical, mental, or sensory issue a person may have, while the disability is the experience the person with the impairment has because of societal oppression (Berghs et al., 2016). Disability is seen as a construct of society that excludes or oppresses those with impairment (Oliver, 1990).

The social model for some critics, such as Beaudry (2016), on the subjective experience of impairment, which severs the actual limitations that stem from the impairment itself that decreases one's quality of life or overall functionality. However, advocates of the social model argue, and Oliver (2013) himself stated that the impairment is not denied or diminished, but the medical model does not take into account the attitude, environment, structures, or other barriers which may negatively impact the impaired person (Hogan, 2019; Rees, 2017). Persons with

impairment face exclusion and prejudice, which leads to further disability in the societal context (Oliver, 1990; Rees, 2017).

Beaudry (2016) argued that disability is part of the fabric of society, and a more neutral approach is needed to understand disability and the ethical and moral decisions society must make concerning responsibility towards persons with disabilities. The social model is too subjective, and all persons with disabilities will have the experience or wish to make the disability their identity; some persons with disabilities are severely and chronically impaired while some are less and more acutely impaired. Although giving rise to the importance of the personhood and experience of persons with disabilities, Beaudry found the social model of disability lacking as a model for a broad view of disability. Building from the foundation of the social model of disability, there are many people with disabilities, and disability advocates herald empowerment theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) or the empowerment model of disability.

**Empowerment model of disability.** Moran et al. (2017) argued that all people, with and without disabilities, deserve the right to engage in community programs. According to Zimmerman (2000), empowerment theory does not examine interventions or solutions or even creating an attitude of social change, but empowerment as an approach redefines the role of the professional to the population served as a facilitator or collaborator not the expert or driver of solutions. Zimmerman argued that an empowerment approach changes the role of the person who may need services from passive recipient to a more active role in the choices, implementation, and agenda of possible solutions. The empowerment model builds from empowerment theory in that the act of empowerment looks at processes and outcomes but is more individualized on how various populations may view empowerment in their own context or situation.

The empowerment model looks at the barriers persons with disabilities may face and seeks to create meaningful solutions or giving the power or control over one's life to the person or group that has been excluded or marginalized (Moran et al., 2017). Moran et al. outlined possible barriers to the lack of programs or opportunities, fear on the part of the individual or family member of the person with a disability, lack of knowledge or training on the part of instructors or volunteers in various organizations, and concerns about liability for including persons with various disabilities. The empowerment model looks at such barriers with strength or capability-based approach, believing all persons should have the opportunity to function as independently as they are able and as they choose (Haen, 2013; Moran et al., 2017). The locus of control to achieve or pursue options or alternatives is given to the individual, thus empowering them interpersonally, interactionally, and behaviorally (Moran et al., 2017). Empowerment can be at the interpersonal, community, or organizational levels (Moran et al., 2017; Zimmerman, 2000).

**Models of disability and education.** Rees (2017) noted in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a behavioral paradigm in education, and the medical model was the prevailing model of the era. The focus of education was an external locus of control and driven by educators who determine the best intervention to promote the development of children while helping them get as close to the norm of the population. Thus, the EACHA focused on the handicap or condition, and the education of children with disabilities was more about appropriate norms and standards, like the medical model.

Rees (2017) argued the social model's impact on education was to consider environmental factors and barriers that impact the person with the disability. Instead of separating children with disabilities or diagnosis and compromising their educational rights, a

shift occurred in updated laws toward integration and realizing that children with disabilities are children first. With IDEA of 2004 and current case laws of this decade mandating that children in special education programs not only be given the right to appropriate education but be expected and resourced to progress (Yell, 2019), the impact of the empowerment movement with a call to self-efficacy or self-determination in educating students with disabilities is gaining momentum (Wehmeyer, 1992). The empowerment model and self-determination theory attributes of autonomy, competency, and relatedness work well together to promote better outcomes for students with disabilities, such as students on the autism spectrum (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, and Stancliffe (2003) argued that throughout the centuries, a debate emerged between religious groups and leaders between the concepts of free will and determinism. The philosophical belief that events and human behaviors are determined or a result of a specific preceding cause dominated intellectual thought until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of the field of psychology. According to Wehmeyer and fellow researchers, in the 1930s, practitioners in the field of psychology began to argue that humans as a higher-order mammal have thoughts and a free will which not only separates them from other mammals but influences behaviors and outcomes challenging Freudians and behaviorist psychologists who believed primarily in determinism. As research expanded and the fields of personality psychology and motivational psychology emerged, psychologists studied one's intrinsic motivation and individual personalities to coin the phrase self-determinism.

Wehmeyer et al. (2003) stated that early research by Richard Ryan and Edward Deci in the 1970s and 1980s argued that people have intrinsic need to be self-determining, competent,



and be able to master their own challenges. Therefore, as mandates emerged concerning the education of students with disabilities in the 1970s and the models of disabilities changed throughout the decades, in the light of self-determinism, Wehmeyer and researchers stated that new possibilities emerged for persons with disabilities to control their own lives and destinies reflecting empowerment. They noted self-determination exists on a continuum that encompasses the environment of the person, skill sets, knowledge, attitudes, and one's belief about themselves and abilities and how much they are allowed to choose or control their outcomes. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that the three intrinsic needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are crucial to one's motivation and overall mental health and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Autonomy.** Autonomy is not synonymous with independence and individualism in SDT, according to Ryan and Deci (2002). Autonomy is defined as "being the perceived origin or source of one's own behavior" (p. 8). Olson (2013) linked the concept of autonomy back to Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization in Maslow's hierarchy of needs which include needs for self-esteem, self-respect, and positive feelings about one's self-driven by a need to actualize or become all one can to meet one's potential whatever that is for the person.

Deci and Ryan (2002) concurred with motivational psychology studies that found humans tend to desire to grow and further develop self. One's social environment can increase, decrease, thwart, or disrupt the development of one's concept of self (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2003). The role of the environment is critical to the creation of autonomy (Deci & Ryan, 2002), and for most children, this environment consists of microsystems that will influence the child's development (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). Microsystems for children tend to consist of family, school, and one's peer group (Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

Control is viewed as the opposite of autonomy by Ryan and Deci (2000). The use of extrinsic rewards, punitive measures, lack of choices, imposed goals, and pressure undermines motivation while the acknowledgment of feelings, allowing choice, providing an opportunity for self-direction build one's autonomy and intrinsic motivation. Ryan and Deci argued that teachers who empower or provide supportive environments to children increase curiosity and the desire to learn as well as intrinsic motivation, resiliency, and desire to be challenged for further growth which fosters autonomy. Conversely, they noted, teachers who are controlling and nonsupportive thwart or decrease autonomy, which can lead to loss of interest, imitative, and learning is occurring less effectively.

**Competency.** Beyond mere attainment of skills or having capabilities, Deci and Ryan (2002) defined competency as “feeling effective in one’s ongoing interactions with the social environment” as well as “experiencing opportunities to exercise and express one’s capacities” (p. 7). Interactions with peers in the microsystem of school are the environment wherein children practice their personal competencies; it is within social contexts and situations that provide the best place to learn, practice, and refine one’s skills to gain further competency (Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

Ryan and Deci (2000) argued healthy, well-developing children are curious, active, and playful, seeking to master skills and discover new things as well as explore their environment. Research indicates the ability to grow and develop competency must also combine the self-directed feature of autonomy to fuel intrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is also encouraged when the person not only has competence but perceives they have the competence (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Thus, positive feedback and guided direction with opportunities to build skills can aid in competency and perceived competency. When people perceive competency and feel

autonomous, they are more likely to initiate tasks as well as regulate behavior and feel more independent in the social contexts of which they are surrounded or feel competent in their current microsystem (Deci & Ryan, 2002; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

**Relatedness.** Argued by Ryan and Deci (2000) to add salience to the combination of autonomy and competency, is the third element of SDT, relatedness. Relatedness is not simply being connected to others in a social context but feeling connected with a sense of belonging to others within one's community or social context (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Belonging and safety are part of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in the attainment of self-actualization (Olson, 2013). Ryan and Deci (2000) argued that previous research based on attachment theory indicated that students who are in an academic environment with a caring and engaged teacher where they feel safe and competent will have higher intrinsic motivation and flourish. The converse was also true where students were engaged in academic tasks with a cold or uncaring adult who was not providing feedback or ignoring the student's task altogether; researchers indicated that motivation was lower among those students. Ryan and Deci further explained that relatedness and social context does not mean that the person has to be with others to have motivation or accomplish tasks; in fact, many intrinsically and self-directed behaviors can happen in isolation (which may be the preferred case for students on the autism spectrum) but what is key is the element of a safe environment where support can be accessed by caring adults if needed.

Self-determination can exist on a continuum and may differ for students with disabilities based on impairments or abilities or offered supports, according to Wehmeyer et al. (2003). Some students with disabilities may be in a supportive environment with skills and knowledge with a positive attitude and belief about self with access to supports, and some students may have some or none of the above, which will affect self-determination. Wehmeyer et al. argued that

research shows that competencies and skills can be enhanced with training. Training that is indicated to aid students with disabilities includes developing and setting personal goals, making personal choices, communication skills, and social skills. Researchers have argued that while all students can benefit from being in an educational setting that promotes self-determination, it is more critical for students with disabilities to have training and resources to promote autonomy, competency, and relatedness for better academic outcomes and overall well-being (Algozzine, Browder, Karvonen, Test, & Wood, 2001; Deci & Ryan, 2002; Guay, Ratalle, & Chanal, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, Agran, & Hughes, 1998; Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

For students with challenging behaviors such as students on the autism spectrum, Wehmeyer et al. (2002) argued that environments that support students with self-determination skills would enhance competency and effect personal control as well as reduce challenging behaviors which can increase relatedness by reducing isolation. Ryan and Deci (2000) strongly stated that failure to provide both students and teachers with self-determination skills is detrimental to the overall well-being and outcomes for both student and educator because the environment will produce distress with a reduction in motivation and personal achievement. Teaching self-determination skills will empower students with disabilities to achieve their potential (Wehmeyer et al., 2003).

### **Inclusive Educational Practices**

Nearly three decades of research indicate positive correlation of academic performance and self-determined practices for all students, not just students with disabilities (Buell, Hallman, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 2010; Chao & Chou, 2017; Raley, Shogren, Mumbardó-Adam, Giné, & Simó-Pinatell, 2018; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryan & Powelson, 2014; Wehmeyer, 1992, 1997; Wehmeyer & Kelcher, 1996). Inclusive educational practices incorporate the social and

empowerment models of disability, and these practices build autonomy, competency, and relatedness, which leads to self-determined guided behaviors and better academic outcomes for students with disabilities (Wehmeyer et al., 2003). Although decades of research indicate that inclusive educational practices are most beneficial to both the student with a disability and those without, many countries have policies that mandate inclusion, but these policies are not fully implemented (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kalambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007).

**Inclusion is ethical and right.** Yell and Drasgow (1999), in their legal analysis of inclusive practices, begin their analysis with the basic human right of education for all students and outline the mandated inclusive practices through federal laws for students with various disabilities. Guðjónsdóttir et al. (2007) more firmly argued that while education is a basic right, inclusion in education is a basic right for all students. Kurth et al. (2018) argued that one must start with the premise that education is for all students, both abled and disabled, with benefits to both populations to educate all students together. They noted that the United Nations (UN) has focused on inclusive educational practices for nearly three decades, trying to overcome the various barriers to inclusion. The educational system is a microcosm of society at large; if the school system does not practice inclusion, greater society will not embrace inclusive practices either. Paraizo and Bégin (2018) argued that inclusion without both social and academic inclusion is not completely ethical.

**Inclusion is social justice.** Although three decades of research indicate inclusive practices are socially just in that they provide benefits of social, academic, and behavioral benefits for all students, including students with disabilities, many school leaders espouse inclusive practices without implementation of such practices (Becker, Roberts, & Dumas, 2000; Goodall, 2015; Nishimura & Busse, 2015). White and Cooper (2012) suggested

deinstitutionalizing education completely, the only education practices that represent social justice are inclusive. Thus, if children as students, and their families, are marginalized in the education system, they will continue to be marginalized by greater society and become further marginalized.

The special education system is not merely about receiving a diploma for completing school; the purpose of special education is to prepare the student for life and transitioning beyond the walls of the schoolhouse (Carrington, Berthelsen, Nickerson, Walker, & Meldrum, 2016; White & Cooper, 2012). The rhetoric of inclusion without follow-through is both confusing and detrimental to true inclusion (Humphrey & Lewis, 2009). The environment or the climate of school is crucial to promoting inclusion (Carrington et al., 2016; Goodall, 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, & Scott, 2013; Pantić & Florian, 2015; Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015), which in turn is important for fostering the climate of self-determinism which in turn promote better educational outcomes (Wehmeyer, 1992).

**Factors that promote inclusion.** After the IDEA laws were implementing in the 1990s, Inos and Quigley (1995) outlined basic practices for inclusive education. Inclusive practices begin with school as a sense of community devoted to a common vision with parents and educators working as a team collaboratively to solve problems and remove barriers to inclusion (Goodall, 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Inos & Quigley, 1995; Lindsay et al., 2013; Pantić & Florian, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015). The educators and community form partnerships to promote unity and inclusion and include students as problem solvers to bring services to the student with flexible scheduling and co-teaching teams (Goodall, 2015; Inos & Quigley, 1995). While inclusion may be defined differently from district to district, each school can build its mission

and vision of what inclusion means to that school using a common language (Inos & Quigley, 1995; Pantíc & Florian, 2015).

Humphrey and Lewis (2008) argued that inclusion begins with an ethos or a commitment to all learners' growth and development and safety. Many times, school leaders assume that because, in many cases, students on the autism spectrum can handle academics, they are equally capable of coping with the social stressors of mainstream education without thought to skill-building or supports for the overall well-being of the student. Gordon (2010) argued that while the federal mandates of inclusion are important for the inclusion of students with disabilities, the students' voices were never part of the consideration for the various policies. Gordon stated inclusive education is more than allowing students to be educated alongside typically developing peers; it is about creating a climate of acceptance, belonging, and community.

Inclusive education is far more than equal access to education opportunities and fairness (Gordon, 2010). Researchers have indicated that overall school districts are open to the concept of inclusion but lack implementation fully or lack fidelity (Gordon, 2010; Lakkala, Uusiautti, & Maatta, 2016; Segall & Campbell, 2012; Watkins et al., 2019) or do not create the vision or climate for inclusion (Gray, Wilcox, & Nordstokke, 2017; Holmes, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Wehmeyer, 1992). While favorable attitude is key toward building inclusive environments, a positive attitude alone does not build skills, awareness, or empirically supported interventions and resources for students on the autism spectrum (Goodall, 2105; Segall & Campbell, 2012).

**Arguments against individualized and inclusive education practices.** Financial cost, burden of the IEP process, fear of affecting achievement of nondisabled peers, and burden on the classroom teacher are common complaints of inclusive education with calls to amend or update the IDEA laws (Becker et al., 2000; Czapanskiy, 2016; Gray et al., 2017; Kalambouka et al.,

2007; Kurth et al., 2018; Watkins, 2019). The financial budget of inclusion includes the resources, supports, training, and interventions that students with disabilities may need to make education both individualized and inclusive (Becker et al., 2000; Kurth et al., 2018).

***Overall academic achievement.*** It is rare to hear arguments in this century concerning the fear of reducing overall academic achievement for nondisabled students; however, Kalambouka et al. (2007) conducted a systematic review of the literature concerning studies of effects of inclusive practices on nondisabled students. After searching electronic databases for research on inclusion, beginning with 7,137 documents, the researchers found only 119 documents met their established definitions of exclusion and inclusion in education practices. They reported that there are no adverse effects on inclusive practices. Outcomes were neutral to positive in 81% of the studies.

***Cost.*** A push to remove the “I” in individualization and move toward a more standardized or rule-based approach for developing education plans is supported by Czapanskiy (2016). Arguing that individualized plans be abandoned completely, and education plans based on a disability profile be instituted instead is seen as free and appropriate public education by Czapanskiy. Czanpanskiy proposed a complete overhaul of special education and the IEP process. The IEP process, as well as due process court cases, is costly and inefficient; instead, she argues that a child receives a full evaluation with a complete assessment of needs to adopt a plan that fits other students with the same profile. Instead of a collaborative IEP team, the educators would make the plan open to parent comments, but the parents would not be able to comment or require changes, only make suggestions. The IDEA mandates, according to Czanpanskiy, limits state control of education and mandates excessive financial burden to the school district; therefore, having a rule-based or standardized system would focus on the needs



for a disability profile. As an example, the researcher listed students with autism. She said the two core features of autism include social interaction or social communication deficits and behavior challenges that may be restrictive or repetitive. The solution proposed is to use the common symptoms of autism and utilize the National Autism Center or other organizations that propose solutions or evidence-based practices for these issues and make a profile.

Czanpanskiy cited autism as the fastest growing disability segment affecting the resources of the public-school system requiring the most expensive resources and services. She argues that if all students with ASD receive the same services, it is both equal and fair and meets the mandate of FAPE without individualization; Czanpanskiy also suggested this benefits the parents by not having to participate in the IEP process and will decrease distrust of the school knowing every student is receiving the same services in the district. Thus, this will eliminate due process hearings and reduce costs to school districts.

***Teacher burden.*** Recent studies indicated that inclusive education practices increase stressors on the classroom teacher and promote teacher burnout (Boujut, Popa-Roch, Palomares, Dean, & Cappe, 2017; Gray et al., 2017). Surveying teachers concerning stressors of inclusive education yielded the answers to lack of training, perception of lack of readiness, lack of support, lack of control, lack of autonomy, and exhaustion as stressors, which lead to burn-out for teachers (Gray et al., 2017). Reporting that burnout increases teacher irritability, high absenteeism, weaker classroom management skills, and reduced overall student outcome were results of lowered mental health associated with burnout (Boujut et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2017). Mental health is important for the overall academic performance outcomes for all students, and inclusive education practices can lead to higher stressors and higher burnout rates (Gray et al., 2017). If teachers become burned out, the overall cost to society is in the overall education to all

students if teachers remained exhausted and under stress (Bianchi et al., 2013; Boujut et al., 2017; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The antidote for such stressors is argued to stem from a positive school climate with administrative, parent, and community support which is often lacking in inclusive education practices (Boujut et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2017).

**Arguments for individualized and inclusive education.** As proponents for standardized and rule-based education plans give rise to discussions in the field of education, Valverde (2017) and Mayes (2018) defended IDEA mandates and argue that individualization is crucial to inclusion, and both argue a standardized approach harkens back to the medical model approach of focusing on deficiency and conditions instead of personhood. Mayes (2018) called a rules-based or standardized approach to education plans a reductionist and less effective approach. Applying a “one-size fits all model” to every child with the same disability eligibility will not work. Countering Czanpanskiy’s (2016) argument about creating an autism profile, Mayes stated that the autism spectrum is too complex with too many variables to create such a profile, and by doing so, it does not consider the individual gifts, skills, or talents that may differ from child to child. To make IEPs more effective, Mayes argued for local agencies to have adequate support and training to help each child their individual potential.

Valverde (2017) argued that a standardized approach is against the purpose of IDEA mandates and special education by focusing on the disability and not the person. IDEA is about a child’s unique qualities as well as skill deficits, and Czapanskiy’s (2016) approach will strip the child of dignity and identity. While the standardized approach may bring forth equal treatment, some refer to the civil rights case that equal access is not always fair or appropriate (Mayes, 2018; Valverde, 2017). Standardized approaches will do more harm than good leading educators

toward disability profiling, which is a step back toward segregation and institutionalizing those with disabilities (Valverde, 2017).

To every program, there is a cost, but while some argue that the cost of implementing inclusive education practices, others cite the cost to society (Emerson et al., 2016). It is known in the medical community that early intervention and evidence-based interventions significantly increase outcomes for persons on the autism spectrum (Emerson et al., 2016). ASD is argued to be increasing costs to families and society as a whole quoting a lifetime cost of supporting one person on the autism ranging 1.4 to 2 million dollars (Emerson et al., 2016); however, with early intervention and increasing functional behaviors this cost can be minimized (Fountain, King, & Bearman, 2011; Rogers & Vismara, 2008).

Investing in inclusive practices and individualized approaches should be an investment, and the lack of investment in training and resources is a bigger expense in the long run (Becker et al., 2000). If students on the autism spectrum receive the investment of support which creates the building of skills (competence) with individual choices (autonomy) and a collaborative team to increase core deficits in social communication (relatedness), investing in self-determinism for inclusive education for all students creates a better outcome academically and socially to maximize skills (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Wehmeyer, 1992, 1997) and potential to empower the individual for a more fulfilling life and meaningful experience (Moran et al., 2017) with better mental health outcomes.

### **IEP Team: Collaborating for Self-Determination**

Promoting and providing an inclusive education that is both academically and socially inclusive relies on the collaboration and cooperation of the stakeholders represented by the IEP team (Bai & Martin, 2017; Harding, 2009; Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008; Weber & Young,

2017). Shogren et al. (2015) studied what successful collaboration of key stakeholders would look like through a study of Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT). SWIFT researchers did an extensive study on successfully inclusive schools with in-depth analysis (Shogren et al., 2015). Through SWIFT's study of inclusive settings, five evidenced-based domains were found and supported with extensive literature (Shogren et al., 2015).

Shogren et al. (2015) argued that the first domain indicated is strong administration leadership that is engaged, supportive, and sets the tone for promoting inclusion. Strong administration would set the stage for the second domain of multitiered systems of support for all staff with training and promotion of academic instruction and behavioral support for challenging behaviors. Shogren and researchers stated that the infrastructure of the school's organization would be integrated, promoting collaboration and teamwork with an emphasis at every level for inclusion for all students with differences. A collaborative environment builds trust and engagement with the families and community to build partnerships and cooperation. The fifth domain that ties in the five domains is a policy focus of inclusion that removes social barriers and policies that are barriers to inclusion. Shogren and fellow researchers felt strong leadership and collaboration are key to successful inclusion.

Goodall (2015) added that in addition to strong leadership and collaboration of parents and educators, the voice of the student is crucial for proper inclusion. Research from the autistic voice is missing in most research because they are considered a vulnerable population (Parsons et al., 2011). Goodall argued that while many anti-bullying campaigns exist, inclusive practices also lack peer support or peer training for proper inclusion. Raising awareness and acceptance among the student population would help reduce bullying and promote true community and belonging, valuing the differences in students. This feeling valued, part of a community, and

competent promotes autonomy, competency, and relatedness skills needed for self-determined behaviors or all members of the school community (Goodall, 2015; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

### **Elements of Inclusion: Peers, Teachers, and Administrators**

With the shift to move students on the autism spectrum into the mainstream classroom, studies indicate teachers and peers are not taught how to properly include students on the spectrum socially beyond academic resources (Robertson, McCaleb, & Smith, 2017; Goodman & Burton, 2010). The last decade has seen an increase in programs in public school systems that are anti-bullying campaigns, but these campaigns have focused on differences such as race, gender, sexuality, and religion (Anti-Defamation League, n.d.). School systems often mainstream a child as a must or should to carry out the mandate without inviting students with differences or disabilities to part of the school community socially (Goodman & Burton, 2010; Hornby, 2011). Therefore, mainstreaming and inclusion are often viewed differently from the perspectives of educators and parents, which lead to conflict requiring mediation or negotiation in IEP meetings (WEAC, n.d.; Wright & Wright, 2018b; Wrightslaw, 2013).

**Peers.** The attitudes of peers or classmates are an often-neglected piece of the inclusion equation (De Boer, Pijl, Minnaert, & Post, 2014). However, the attitude of peers alone will not predict understanding or intentional inclusive behaviors toward peers on the autism spectrum (Dillenburger, McKerr, Jordan, Devine, & Keenan, 2015; Dillenburger, Jordan, McKerr, Lloyd, & Schulbotz, 2017; Gus, 2017).

**Peer attitudes.** De Boer et al. (2014) conducted a study on elementary age students concerning their attitudes toward peers with disabilities. Before any intervention was implemented, 40% of the peers responded with a negative attitude toward disabled students, and 60% of peers had a neutral attitude, leaving 0% with a positive attitude toward peers with

disabilities. Sensitivity training was implemented for all elementary students on how to befriend and include peers with learning differences or disabilities. Those attitudes that were negative changed to neutral, and neutral attitudes changed to positive. Several cycles of the sensitivity training program were implemented throughout the school year, and attitudes increasingly changed to positive, yet behavior toward inclusion did not change. The researchers stated in their closing section that attitude alone is not enough to change mindsets toward inclusive behavior. For sensitivity training and positive attitudes to gain momentum into inclusive behaviors is through an atmosphere or climate that continually promotes inclusion at every level of interaction within the school building.

Ranson and Byrne's (2014) research had similar conclusions that anti-stigma or awareness-building campaigns are not clear directions for classroom peers for sustainable behavior outcomes. Noting that females on the autism spectrum experience more mental health issues and debilitating anxiety stemming from exclusion and lack of social skills, Ranson and Byrne developed an anti-stigma program for female classroom peers to promote friendship and acceptance behaviors toward females on the autism spectrum. After the eight-session intervention, peers reported greater understanding and empathy toward females on the spectrum and more favorable attitudes with a slight improvement in accepting and intentional behaviors. However, follow-up of the results indicated that while the knowledge and understanding remained throughout the school year, intentional inclusive behaviors did not continue. The researcher's conclusions were that to promote more prosocial behavior, ongoing training, and intentional contact and social setting that brought together neurotypical and autistic females together would be beneficial.

Dillenburger et al. (2015) stated that the purpose of inclusive education is not only for the education and supports for persons with disabilities, but to aid in the building of an inclusive society at large. Through extensive research of the literature, the researchers found one study concerning adults' opinions of inclusion on adults with autism and inclusive behaviors. The Dillenburger et al. study surveyed 1,000 adults, and 100% of those adults surveyed were favorable of the concept of inclusive practices at school and in the workplace to promote inclusion for society and community; however, only 3% of those surveyed stated they wanted their child to be in a class with someone on the spectrum, and 6% stated they would be willing to work alongside someone with autism (p. 332). Dillenburger and fellow researchers surveyed adults in Northern Ireland wondering if because in France, services to persons on the spectrum are implemented primarily through psychiatrists if this promoted a negative or mental illness stigma.

Dillenburger and fellow researchers surveyed adults on the autism spectrum, and over 50% stated they still had issues making and keeping friends and reported they were bullied or are still being bullied or harassed. Of those adults surveyed, 44% were living at home with aging parents, 33% were in residential or institutionalized care, and 17% in supported or assisted housing. When the general population was surveyed concerning favorable attitude and awareness of autism in adults, 93% of the respondents indicated favor and positive attitude toward adults with autism, yet only 8% indicated they would be accepting if a relative married someone with autism and 58% did not know autism is a lifelong developmental issue. While knowledge and awareness are rising through successful campaigns of Autism Speaks and other autism advocacy groups, there remains a gap in awareness to acceptance and inclusive actions (Dillenburger et al., 2015, 2017).

*Peer inclusion practices.* Understanding that friendship and belonging are crucial toward mental health and better life outcomes, Boutot (2007) wrote that merely increasing favorable attitudes toward peers with disabilities and placing them side by side in class is not enough to promote inclusive behaviors that lead to friendship. Parents and teachers must work together to promote friendships within and outside of the classroom. Listed among characteristics of being unpopular or excluded, Boutot listed those who tend to play alone, those children that do not have athletic skills, children with inappropriate or extreme behaviors, and those with poor social skills that are difficult to engage in cooperative play make the list. While ASD was not specifically mentioned in the study, these characteristics are part of the ASD symptomatology listed in the DSM 5 (APA, 2013).

Boutot (2007) noted that many times, teachers and schools hide behind confidentiality, claiming parents do not want other students to know about their child's issues. However, research supports that most parents of children with ASD are longing for their child to have one friend and are willing to disclose the diagnosis if asked. Boutot suggested that preparing the students in the general education classroom before the student(s) with disabilities arrive is important to explain behaviors, any devices or supports the student may need, and provide time for students to ask questions to lessen fear or confusion of behavior the child to be included may display. Boutot suggested promoting a system of peer mentoring or peer tutoring rotating students to be a buddy or lunch friend to promote inclusive behaviors and build friendship behaviors.

One-way schools may try to implement and promote inclusion has been through special education clubs aimed at pairing neuro-typical students with special education students for social inclusion. Such programs ask nondisabled students to volunteer to eat lunch with or attend



school functions with students who are not able to be part of the mainstream class due to severe disabilities or mental impairment (Lunch Bunch, n.d.). This practice would fall under peer support, as outlined by Cowie and Hutson (2005). Cowie and Hutson stated that to promote truly inclusive behaviors, classroom peers need to spend time with peers with differences and disabilities intentionally. Peer support behaviors in schools are those that promote befriending, peer counsel, peer tutoring, lunch conversation, and inclusive play in nonroutine portions of the school day.

Wanting to know what knowledge and understanding school-aged children possess about students with autism, Dillenburger et al. (2017) surveyed 3,353 children and youth (p. 766). Overall, children and youth were aware of autism and had basic knowledge concerning strengths and challenges children on the spectrum face. It was found that 43% of students knew someone personally on the autism spectrum and reported a favorable attitude (p. 769). Increased levels of autism and knowledge were associated with a more favorable attitude toward having a student on the autism spectrum in one's class. Factors found associated with higher degrees of inclusive behaviors were found in female participants, those in lower socioeconomic status, and those who personally knew someone on the autism spectrum. While awareness and attitude were keys to promoting acceptance and understanding, the students surveyed also indicated at a high rate a lack of knowledge on how to engage with persons on the spectrum and how to intervene if they witnessed bullying. One out of six students surveyed in the Dillenburger et al. study reported witnessing someone with autism being bullied, and one in ten of those stated they did nothing to help while the majority stated they wanted to intervene or told someone in authority.

***Peer mediated interventions.*** Two evidence-based practices that promote inclusive behaviors as well as reducing bullying and providing peer support and empowerment are peer-

mediated interventions ([PMI]; Bambara, Chovanes, Thomas, & Cole, 2016; Bambara, Cole, Kunsch, Tsai, & Ayad, 2016; Battaglia & Radley, 2014; Collins, Hawkins, & Flowers, 2018; Matthews et al., 2018) and peer mediation (Cremin, 2007; Schlieder, Maldonado, & Baltes, 2014; Turnuklu, Kacmaz, Sunbul, & Ergul, 2009). Both practices empower all students toward inclusive behaviors and prosocial behavior (Cremin, 2007; Matthews et al., 2018; Turnkulu et al., 2007) by promoting school citizenship through promoting individual responsibility of behavior as well as empower the voice of the child (Cremin, 2007).

PMIs are those provided by school peers (Bambara, Chovanes et al., 2016; Bambara, Cole et al., 2016; Battaglia & Radley, 2014). Peer mediated social skills training is more effective than adult mediated approaches, especially with the ASD population (Battaglia & Radley, 2014). Because students with ASD do not pick up on social clues and have core social skills deficits, having trained peers served as the interventionists teach proper engagement and initiation to play or converse as well as how to respond to social engagement is most effective. Through modeling, reinforcing, and immediate feedback by peers, students with ASD will gain competency in social skills.

Many PMI studies were conducted in clinical or segregated settings, mostly directed by adults (Matthews et al., 2018). However, teachers have an extensive workload, and requiring teachers to lead in the social skills efforts can be burdensome and less effective in the sustainability of skills for the student on the autism spectrum. PMIs will limit the demands of implemented a social skills program and empower both disabled and nondisabled students in building better interactions and inclusive behaviors. Matthews et al. stated PMIs that produce sustainable and positive results begin with training of staff and carefully selected peers; peers will be trained on targeted goal behaviors with adult support and supervision for problem-solving

difficult situations or ensuring the plan is implemented with fidelity. Research indicates that evidence-based PMIs result in decreased behavior issues in students with ASD and an increase in prosocial behaviors such as communicating wants and needs and turn-taking. PMIs promote autonomy, competence, and relatedness, or self-determined behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

A specific program referred to as the Circle of Friends was studied by Schlieder et al. (2014). Circle of Friends uses regular assembly time for students to talk through issues and promotes active listening and creative problem-solving approaches. This Circle of Friends program is an adequate way to implement PMIs through a schoolwide approach of inclusive practices, which indicates results in a reduction of bullying overall in the school, a decrease in violence, and an increase in citizenship behaviors throughout the school as well increase empowerment for students with autism. Barriers to effectiveness reported by Schlieder's research team included poor school climate, lack of sustained training and support, and lack of administrative support. Studies of this program in the US and the UK indicate if implemented with fidelity with well-selected peer leaders, an increase in better communication, self-help skills, parent-child relationships, and sibling problem-solving skills are reported by teachers and parents (Cremin, 2007). Despite the increasing evidence of effectiveness, most schools do not utilize PMIs (Matthews et al., 2018).

***Peer mediation.*** Where PMIs are focused primarily on teaching social skills or prosocial behavior (Bambara, Chovanes et al., 2016; Bambara, Cole et al., 2016; Battaglia & Radley, 2014; Collins et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2018). Peer mediation strives to increase peer empowerment and problem-solving (Cremin, 2007; Turnuklu et al., 2009). In a study of 253 mediation sessions of a school district that practices peer mediation, Turnuklu et al. (2009) found positive resolutions in 94% of the cases and only 5% of cases with no solution. Thus, Turnuklu

et al. concluded peer mediation is effective as promoting peace in the school setting as well as problem-solving and empowerment, which is lacking in society at large.

According to Cremin (2007), peer mediation is a form of dispute resolution that promotes social justice as well as restorative justice between victim and perpetrator. Mediation benefits students with developing creating problem-solving skills, repairing relationships, saves time and money in court processes, and reduces stress in the school environment. Peer mediators are carefully selected and trained and carry out the mediations during lunch breaks, recess, and unstructured class times, and are noted by position by either wearing a badge or cap designed by their school. Thus, according to Cremin, peer mediation can only be successful if the administration and school staff are committed to the process as a schoolwide approach and providing regular assemblies concerning the importance of mediation. While resources will be required for training and supports, the results indicated from schools that successfully implement peer mediation report, the cost is worth the results.

Cremin argued that peer mediation is crucial for inclusive education settings to promote the empowerment of all students. Peer mediation combats discrimination and creates a welcoming community and aids in creating better academic outcomes for all students by promoting peace and collaborative problem-solving. Supervision is required when working with special needs populations as well as additional training for the peer mediator. Peer mediation is important for special needs' students according to Cremin because it helps reduce exclusionary punishment such as suspensions and expulsions and naming children as deviant, difficult, or disordered due to behavior challenges. Therefore, if peer mediation, if supported by the administration, promoted understanding and acceptance in the school setting.

*Awareness meets agency.* Wanting to know what knowledge and understanding school-aged children possess about students with autism, Dillenburger et al. (2017) surveyed 3,353 children and youth (p. 766). Overall, children and youth were aware of autism and had basic knowledge concerning strengths and challenges children on the spectrum face. It was found that 43% of students knew someone personally on the autism spectrum and reported a favorable attitude (p. 769). Increased levels of autism and knowledge were associated with a more favorable attitude toward having a student on the autism spectrum in one's class. Factors in this study associated with higher degrees of inclusive behaviors were found in female participants, those in lower socioeconomic status, and those who personally knew someone on the autism spectrum.

According to Dillenburger and fellow researchers, while awareness and attitude were keys to promoting acceptance and understanding, the students surveyed also indicated at a high rate a lack of knowledge on how to engage with persons on the spectrum and how to intervene if they witnessed bullying. One out of six students surveyed reported witnessing someone with autism being bullied, and one in ten of those stated they did nothing to help while the majority stated they wanted to intervene or told someone in authority. PMIs and peer mediation would support students with action points and training to intervene and feel empowered. PMI social skill training is effective in all school-age children from elementary to high school students (Bambara, Chovanes et al., 2016; Bambara, Cole et al., 2016; Battaglia & Radley, 2014; Collins et al., 2018; Matthews et al., 2018). While Cremin (2007) indicated peer mediation can be tweaked from elementary to high school student practices, Smith, Daunic, Miller, and Rowland (2002) found peer mediation effective in middle schools, and Turnuklu et al. (2009) found peer

mediation successful in high school settings to promote inclusion and reduce all forms of bullying.

**Bullying.** Heinrichs' (2003) research indicated that the following types of students are prone to be targets of bullying: physically weak or disabled, anxious persons, insecure persons, children viewed to be socially offensive, clumsy kids, socially immature, students disliked by peers and adults, and students considered weak or different. Although Heinrichs' review was not speaking of students on the autism spectrum, specifically, most of the identified markers of being bullied are part of the autism spectrum of behaviors and concerns. Ruijs and Peetsma (2009) stated that students with special needs who are not socially included or receive social skills training end up with negative socio-emotional effects and are less favorable by nonspecial-need students.

Children with AS/ASD tend to have normal to above-average IQs, but struggle with social impairments in theory of mind, social communication skills, and empathy (Sofronoff, Dark, & Stone, 2011). Students with AS are socially vulnerable to bullies (Elliott, Hwang, & Wang, 2018; Sofronoff et al., 2011), especially ringleader bullies (Smith, 2017; Stellwagen, 2013; Sutton, Smith, & Swettenham, 2001). Bullies have been portrayed as oafs without social skills, but research indicates that ringleader bullies score high in the theory of mind and ability to manipulate others (Sutton et al., 2001). Lonigro, Laghi, Baiocco, and Baumgartner (2014) studied what they defined as "nasty or nice" theory of mind (TOM). Children with high, "nice" TOM were prosocial, empathetic, aware of others' perspectives, and cared for others as a moral standard; students with "nasty" TOM were more likely to lie, cheat, steal, blame, tease, and bully.

Students with accelerated TOM who are low in empathy and prone to narcissistic behavior seek out others to manipulate and those to bully while being stealthy enough not to be caught by adults (Espelage, Hong, Kim, & Nan, 2018; Smith, 2017; Stellwagen, 2013). Most bullying toward students with special needs is nonviolent in modern society, but all forms of bullying have lifelong impacts on students (Ernsperger, 2016). Broadly defined, bullying is comprised of repeated actions that are harmful or unwelcome to inflict pain or discomfort on someone with less perceived power or differences, according to Ernsperger. Both national and international studies indicate that students with differences and disabilities are the most vulnerable population for harassment and bullying. Ernsperger argued that bullying impacts academic achievement because bullying produces long-term effects such as low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, high absenteeism, substance abuse, suicide, and suicidal ideation for its victims.

Peers are not the only individuals reported to mistreat or bully students with disabilities; educators and staff with negative bias or negative attitudes toward students with disabilities, such as those with challenging behaviors, are guilty of bullying or exclusive behaviors as well, according to Ernsperger. Well-meaning policies aimed at reducing bullying and violence referred to as zero-tolerance policies are more harmful than helpful and promote punitive measures and exclusion versus teaching needed skill sets. Well-meaning teachers and administrators who implement zero-tolerance policies do so with the best intentions to reduce violence, but due to lack of understanding and awareness of behavior challenges or social-emotional behaviors of students with disabilities (e.g., autism) treat deviant behaviors and behaviors and outbursts associated with disability the same; disciplining deviant and defiant behaviors the same as those that may stem from disability results in negative stigmas for students with disabilities and adds to

their social vulnerability. Ernsperger concluded that educators' awareness of bullying and how to protect targeted students is crucial to the identification and prevention of bullying practices.

**Teachers.** Teacher attitude concerning inclusion is one of the highest contributing factors to how successful inclusion will be (Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Daane, 2000; Elhoweris & Alsheikhm, 2004; Fakolade, Adeniyu, & Tella, 2009; Hammonds & Ingalls, 2003; Jones, 1984). What is less known is what contributes to teacher attitude but cited as possible contributors include themes such as lack of understanding of autism among teachers, lack of teacher training, and lack of resources and support of administrators to the teachers providing inclusion of students on the autism spectrum (Barnes, 2008; Carrington et al., 2016; Cook, 2001; Cook & Cameron, 2010; Daane, 2000; Elhoweris & Alsheikhm, 2004; Fakolade et al., 2009; Goodman & Burton, 2010; Jones, 1984; Lindsay et al., 2013). Nishimura and Busse found (2015) that those few teachers with a negative attitude toward inclusion felt they did not receive support or were provided proper training or resources.

Also contributing to attitude is the amount of stress brought on by inclusion (Boujut et al., 2017) and whether or not the teacher perceives self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Locke, 2003) which is very similar to components of self-determinism intrinsic needs of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Implicit, unconscious biases (Staats, 2016), as well as lack of knowledge concerning special education law, may also affect the implementation of inclusive education practices by teachers (O'Connor, Yasik, & Horner, 2016).

**Attitude.** Stating that teacher attitude has already been proven to be crucial in the success of including all students, Mulholland and Cumming (2016) argued that positive or favorable attitude does not alone ensure intentional inclusive behaviors from teachers. Favorable attitude



does not increase knowledge or define and implement strategic inclusive behaviors in the general education classroom. Mullholland and Cumming asserted that it is becoming the subjective norm in education to favor inclusion in education worldwide, but there is no correlation of increased positive or favorable attitude and increased inclusive educational practices or behaviors. Studies internationally support the positive trend toward inclusive rhetoric and inclusive education as a means of social justice and equality, yet these studies include implications that studies on including students with autism are lacking, as well as outlined practices or protocols that would lead to better inclusive practices (Goodall, 2015; Pantić & Florian, 2015).

**Bias.** Staats (2016) indicated that teachers choose the field of education with the best intentions to educate children and help them reach their potentials; however, everyone has implicit biases. “Implicit biases are pervasive, and they can challenge even the most well-intentioned and egalitarian-minded individuals resulting in actions and outcomes that do not necessarily align with explicit intention” (p. 29). Staats listed ambiguous or incomplete information, time restraints or pressure, fatigue, and situations where cognitive control may be compromised can create unconscious negative bias. Boujut et al. (2017) asked teachers what factors contributed to stress and burnout when implementing inclusive practices; in addition to lack of training were listed incomplete information, pressure or unrealistic timelines, increased workloads, and feeling lack of control in the classroom.

The factors indicated to form unconscious negative bias (Staats, 2016) parallel to Boujut et al.’s (2017) factors of stressors associated with inclusive practices. An illustration of unconscious bias may be illustrated in Carrington et al.’s (2016) qualitative study on teachers where nearly 100% it was appropriate or highly appropriate to include students with disabilities into mainstream classrooms, yet later when specific conditions were referenced, only 46% of the

same teachers felt it was appropriate to include students on the autism spectrum into their general education class citing behaviors and not feeling adequate to support these students properly.

***Lack of understanding or knowledge of ASD.*** Barned et al. (2011) wanted to better understand the knowledge or understanding of preservice teachers concerning ASD. In their extensive review of the literature concerning curriculum of college courses that prepare future teachers toward providing education to diverse learners, Barned and fellow researchers found that only 8.62 hours of college course work addressed special education in general with little instruction of these 8.62 hours devoted to ASD (p. 302). The researchers surveyed preservice teachers on basic understanding of ASD to find that preservice teachers indicated at 93.3% rate a lack of understanding that ASD is a developmental disorder with 60% incorrectly assuming children eventually grow out of the condition and 20% believing ASD is caused by trauma (p. 309). When asked about the philosophical idea of inclusion in the Barned et al. study, preservice teachers reported at 93.3% favor of inclusion, but when asked who should provide education services to students with autism, these same teachers reported at 53.3% that this should be the job of special education teachers and not general education teachers (p. 309).

Due to a lack of understanding or misconceptions about autism, teachers' attitudes about the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum can be affected by misinformation or wrong information (Mulholland & Cumming, 2016). The diagnosis and symptomatology of disorders such as autism or ADHD are sometimes considered controversial in the teaching profession and can cause conflict in IEP meetings. Some teachers believe symptoms can be affected by diet or that the etiology of autism is poor parenting or lack of discipline; this will affect the relationship of the teacher with the parents of the student. Low disability knowledge or lack of education

concerning specific disabilities, such as ASD, will result in fewer accommodations and less favorable outcomes for students on the spectrum (Avramidis, Bayliss, & Burden, 2000).

Even though ASD is the fastest-growing developmental disorder and leading eligibility category for special education services, Lindsay et al. (2013) also noted a lack of understanding concerning ASD as a barrier to proper inclusion. Teachers indicated that they had never received consistent training concerning ASD, and when they are taught about techniques or protocols upon receiving a student in their classroom, procedures tend to be more reactive and proactive, which is stressful. If any information is given to the classroom teacher concerning a student with ASD, there appears to be a theory to application gap with teachers not understanding why they may be implementing a procedure or strategy; teachers surveyed that a basic understanding and knowledge of autism would help manage challenging behaviors of autism in the classroom. Goodman and Burton (2010) noted that even with basic understanding and awareness of autism, this did not necessarily improve training or resources provided to teachers to include students on the autism spectrum properly.

***Lack of training and resources.*** While federal mandates have been implemented over 30 years, the college curriculum has not adapted to teach the basics of inclusion or facts about basic knowledge concerning autism (Barned et al., 2011). Mainstream teachers will eventually meet and work with students on the autism spectrum, yet most have never been trained with that expectation in mind (Goodall, 2015).

Pantić and Florian (2015) stated that the core components of teacher competencies for inclusion include knowledge and understanding of ASD as well as skills, which can only be acquired through proper training. If future teachers are not receiving training in their education curriculum (Barned et al., 2011), teachers would have to seek training on their own or have it

offered in-service at that their local education agency, which research indicates is not happening (Lindsay et al., 2013). To promote and ensure positive educational outcomes for students on the autism spectrum, qualified teachers are required, and training is part of that proper qualification (Gülec-Aslan, 2013).

Students on the autism spectrum require special approaches and to create an ASD friendly classroom and school environment; this will take intentional effort and support that must start with proper training (Goodall, 2015). After lack of understanding or basic knowledge of autism, lack of training and resources is mentioned by teachers as causes of stress, burnout, or negative view concerning inclusion of students on the autism spectrum despite advocating for equality of education for all students (Carrington et al., 2016; Fennell & Dillenburger, 2016; Goodman & Burton, 2010; Lakkala et al., 2016; Lindsay et al., 2013; Nishimura & Busse, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015). Training will affect academic outcomes and the success of inclusion for students on the autism spectrum (Gülec-Aslan, 2013).

***Lack of understanding or knowledge of special education laws.*** More than 6.7 million students are labeled as having a disability under the 13 categories of the IDEA (Sack-in, 2007, p. 24). More than half of these students will be included in a mainstream classroom (Holdheide & Reschly, 2008; O'Connor et al., 2016). Most students on the autism spectrum are academically capable and will benefit from being in an inclusive environment; therefore, there is high probably students on the autism spectrum without mental impairment will require services and accommodations (Goodall, 2015). Yet, according to O'Connor et al. (2016), most teachers are not aware of the basic special education laws.

Understanding special education law concerning FAPE, LRE, and inclusive environments are imperative for all teachers, not just special education teachers (O'Connor et al.,

2016). According to Blanton, Pugach, and Florian (2011), 57% of students receiving special education services will spend at least 80%, if not more, time of their day in the general education classroom (p. 4) making educators responsible for knowledge of federal mandates concerning accommodating and meeting the special needs of students with disabilities. Ignorance of the law is not an excuse in a due process hearing for not adhering to an IEP or making necessary modifications to the curriculum (O'Connor et al., 2016). A recent survey indicated 75% of teachers had not been trained or taken any courses concerning special education law but relied on information given to them by special education teachers or administrators. O'Connor et al. argued that every professional that works with students with special needs should have a working knowledge of special education law, and results indicated that even special education teachers, school psychologists, and administrators did not have adequate knowledge of special education law. Without a proper understanding of the federal mandates which define child find, LRE, FAPE, IEPs, and eligibility, educators cannot be competent in properly including students with special needs.

***Lack of support from administration.*** Administration, who often serve as the LEA representative for the local agency, are tasked with understanding special education law and providing resources and training for teachers who will be responsible for providing an inclusive education (Bai & Martin, 2017; Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Pazey, Gevarter, Hamrick, & Rojeski, 2014; Praisner, 2003; Weber & Young, 2017). Yet, multiple studies indicate that teachers feel that their administrators do not support an inclusive environment in the school, nor do they support the teacher's efforts of inclusive in the classroom, which leads to stress, burnout, lack of self-efficacy, and feeling inadequate and not prepared to work with students on the autism spectrum in the general

education classroom (Boujut et al., 2017; Carrington et al., 2016; Goodall, 2015; Goodman & Burton, 2010; Gülec-Aslan, 2013; Lindsay et al., 2013; Millholland & Cumming, 2016; Pantić & Florian, 2015; Shogren et al., 2015).

Noted by teachers in Boujut et al.'s (2017) research, modifying or changing curriculum or lessons, as well as the challenging behaviors and social impairments that accompany students on the autism spectrum with inclusive education are stressful enough but add to that high workloads, increased paperwork, negative climate, lack of resources and training and feeling unsupported or unrecognized by the administrator leads to teacher burnout. Shogren et al.'s (2015) research on successful inclusive settings indicated that proper inclusive and positive climate for inclusion starts with the administration.

***Lack of self-efficacy or autonomy, competence, and relatedness.*** All persons need autonomy and relatedness as fundamental needs at home or school; however, autonomy and relatedness are crucial for increased learner outcomes for both student and teacher (Ryan & Powelson, 2014). Self-determinism can be applied to many facets of educational practices to promote learning and increase the competence of one's abilities as this produces intrinsic motivation and personal growth for better academic outcomes (Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan, 2011).

Pantić and Florian (2015) argued that for educational institutions to change, teachers must become agents of change, but to increase teacher agency, teachers must have autonomy and power and perceived competence in their ability to effect change to increase their motivation and perseverance in the face of many challenges of providing inclusive education. They emphasized to have competence and perceived competence; the teacher must have skills and training in

inclusive practices and the ability to build relationships and networks with other educators and professionals for the best outcomes.

Teachers become stressed and burnout because they lack self-efficacy (Boujut et al., 2017). Self-efficacy is the core belief one can achieve one's goals (Bandura, 1997; Bandura & Locke, 2003). Autonomy, competency, and relatedness are core to achieving self-determined behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Boujut et al. (2017) referred to self-efficacy as a protective factor against burnout. Educators must feel that they exert control in their environment and feel understood and supported in their efforts. They noted because teachers lack knowledge, understanding, training, and support, they often report a lack of self-efficacy and feel incompetent, helpless, frustrated, and that they are failing their students. Teachers feel frustrated that they desire to promote social justice and equal education opportunities but are unprepared to do so (Showalter-Barnes, 2008). An ASD friendly school would begin with supportive administration that promotes a positive and favorable climate for inclusion through visionary leadership while supporting and providing resources and training to all staff in a sensory-friendly environment with multiple layers of support of staff (Goodall, 2015).

**Administrators.** A prevailing theme of the research indicated that responsibility for student placement rests with the administrator of the school (Bai & Martin, 2017; Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Pazey et al., 2014; Praisner, 2003; Weber & Young, 2017). Although a collaboration of stakeholders is the best equation for successful inclusion, the one responsible for planting, cultivating, and harvesting the seeds of an inclusive educational setting rests with the one who carries the weight of placement, allocating resources, and interpreting education policy for the school (Bai & Martin, 2017; Harding, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008; Weber & Young, 2017). Ball and Green (2014) indicated

the role of administrators has changed since the IDEA legislation and stated, “With increased focus on providing high-quality education for students with disabilities, the role of the school leaders has changed immensely” (p. 58).

**Factors that affect administrative attitude toward inclusion.** Leadership is a shared responsibility among stakeholders wherein a collaboration of family, school community, and administration must provide an inclusive educational environment (Harpell & Andrews, 2010). According to Staats (2016), an educator’s implicit bias may influence expectations for student achievement and may shape discipline approaches for ambiguous infractions such as “disruptive behavior,” “disrespect,” or “excessive noise” which often this author adds are often part of the autistic student’s existence in the classroom (pp. 30-31). Shogren et al. (2015) stated that inclusion is a top-down matter where administrators must lead. In studies of successful inclusion, administration role, leadership, and support are listed among factors for leadership in the area of inclusion (Casale-Giannola, 2012; Segall & Campbell, 2012; Shogren et al., 2015).

**Knowledge of disabilities, interventions, or instructional methods.** Praisner’s (2003) study was one of the ground-breaking studies to examine administrator attitude, and her PIS has been used in several studies. Praisner found significant evidence that administrator attitude was largely affected by his or her knowledge or training concerning various disabilities and interventions or methods on how to promote successful inclusion. Ball and Green (2014) found administrators with knowledge and understanding had better ideas and strategies of how to guide the school toward an inclusive environment supported Praisner’s (2003) findings. Pazey et al. (2014) found where the administration has experience in special education, practical knowledge about autism, and experience with autism in the classroom, the more prepared and favorable their attitudes toward inclusion of ASD students into the mainstream classroom. Harding (2009)



suggested that where administrators had knowledge concerning Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) and other behavior management techniques, principals were more comfortable with inclusive practices.

Both teachers and administrators are subject to implicit bias (Staats, 2016); therefore, knowledge and understanding of disabilities such as autism spectrum disorder would help combat bias through gathering data, improving skills, gaining information about autism, or training in evidence-based practices. Horrocks et al. (2008) reported that often professional development is focused on teachers, but their study indicated that principals require additional training concerning autism, other special needs, and what adequate inclusion practices would be for the school environment (Harding, 2009).

***Administrative attitudes and impact on teacher's attitudes toward inclusion.***

Administrators who are favorable toward inclusion are more prone to resource professional development for classroom teachers (Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008). Feeling supported and trained are indicators listed in a previous section of the document of a more favorable attitude of inclusion by teachers (Elhoweris & Alsheikh, 2004; Goodman & Burton, 2010). Praisner (2003) hypothesized that principals who are more favorable toward inclusion would lead the way to school climate change to foster an environment for all staff, especially those who would be teaching in an inclusive classroom.

Bai and Martin (2017) indicated that those principals with more favorable attitudes toward inclusion are more likely to provide professional development for teachers. Resourced and trained teachers report a more positive attitude toward inclusion, which is supported by studies of Harding (2009) and Horrocks et al. (2008). Administrative leaders who oppose inclusion believe special education services should be specialized and kept separate from the

mainstream classroom for the benefit of the overall student population. These administrators tend to oppose the placement of students with disabilities, such as autism, in the LRE (Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009).

Research discussion statements of Harpell and Andrews (2010) indicated that the best educational leader is one who is humanitarian, knowledgeable, trained, and able to empower staff and impact teacher attitude to foster co-taught or cooperative inclusion-based strategies. By empowering teachers, Harpell and Andrews argued that this would also empower the students.

*Administrator bias.* Horrocks et al. (2008) noted that the administrator's biases and understanding of inclusion could influence placement factors for students with autism and other disabilities. Horrocks's team indicated that the principal's attitude about including children with autism sway recommendation of placement. Praisner's (2003) study over a decade ago with his *Principals and Inclusion Survey* (PIS) survey indicated only 21.1% of principals were favorable to the idea of including students with disabilities in the LRE defined as the mainstream classroom. Ball and Green (2014) also used the PIS to survey administrator attitudes about inclusion, and a significant number of administrators did not believe that LRE specified inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream settings.

However, if administrators had read Yell's (1995) legal description and application of LRE, it would be clear that students should not be segregated based on ability, and the school's aim should be inclusive practices. Understanding that an IEP team decides a student's placement, Praisner (2003) explained the principal's attitude about inclusion and definition of LRE would be the deciding factor of placing students. Russell and Brag (2013, as cited in Chandler, 2015) indicated principals who hold a more favorable view of inclusion are more likely to define LRE as an inclusive setting for 75% or more of the student's academic day. Summed up by Staats

(2016), “In education, real-life implications of implicit biases can create invisible barriers to opportunity and achievements for some students” (p. 33).

Several articles included research questions or follow-up discussion concerning whether administrators understood the legal language of the federal mandates, and this influenced attitudes toward inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014; Pazey et al., 2014; Praisner, 2003; Weber & Young, 2017). Pazey et al. (2014) and Bai and Martin’s (2017) research found that administrators in their study showed significant deficits on ten factors of knowledge for inclusive practices, but the majority stated administrators recognize they need more training on matters of inclusion. Administrators rated themselves more highly knowledgeable than they were, but clear indications of deficits of practical knowledge and application were evident (Pazey et al., 2014). Harding (2009) concluded that the administrator must first have a working knowledge of what inclusion and LRE mean and are responsible for making sure all teachers and education professionals are knowledgeable and trained in inclusion practices as well. Staats (2016) would argue that the lack of information or ambiguous information would be a step toward bias.

### **Barriers to Inclusive Education**

Over the past decade, arguments rarely arise for segregation or against the educational rights of students with disabilities; however, barriers continue to exist, which make inclusive education practices difficult to implement (Lakkala et al., 2016). Lack of commitment by the administration to an inclusive climate is cited by more than one study as a barrier to inclusion (Becker et al., 2000; Gordon, 2010; Holmes, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Lakkala et al., 2016; Wehmeyer, 1992). Lack of peer support and lack of teamwork among IEP team members contributes as a barrier to inclusive practices (Lakkala et al., 2016). The overall system in

education dedicated to behavior and classroom management, as well as financial policies that limit resources and training, provides a barrier to inclusion (Becker et al., 2000).

Policies meant to provide safety like the “zero tolerance” or policies to promote inclusion such as a “mandated full inclusion of every student” prove more problematic than helpful to inclusion argued White and Cooper (2012). White and Cooper explained that “zero tolerance” for aggression when a student with a disability may act out or behave aggressively being disciplined the same as a student with delinquent behavior is damaging as well as promotes exclusion and negative attitudes toward that student by classroom peers. Zero tolerance, while intending to promote safety, does not act with common sense in accordance with students with disabilities, such as autism, that often has a behavior component. Even full inclusion for all is not adhering to individualization or appropriateness mandates in the IDEA laws. Yell and Drasgow (1999), in their legal analysis, remind educators that inclusion must benefit the student, and in some cases, the student does not benefit from full inclusion as a practice that is individualized to their needs or appropriate for their needs.

Policies or practices that primarily serve the student outside of the classroom or require readiness or prerequisite skill acquisition before allowing mainstreaming do not promote inclusion, according to Kurth et al. (2018). Pilot programs, nonevidence-based practices that promote short-term solutions that do not scale up, are not sustainable and viable and detract from better solutions, which become barriers to inclusive education practices. However, the second most cited reason or barrier to inclusive education is lack of supports and resources for both the student and the classroom teacher (Becker et al., 2000; Holmes, 2018; Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Kurth et al., 2018; Lakkala et al., 2016; Watkins, 2019; White & Cooper, 2012).

### Summary and Preview of Chapter 3

Since the passing of these mandates, many families undergo the process of having a child identified for special needs services, and subsequently must attend several IEP meetings. The Center for Disease Control ([CDC], 2016) stated that the Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnosis is the leading developmental disability diagnosed in America today and continues to rise.

When the initial mandate was written in 1975, the rate of autism was estimated at 1 in 10,000 children (Hickey, 2013). However, Heussler et al. (2015) stated ASD was vastly underreported and underdiagnosed in the 1970s. The National Health Statistics Report of 2015 stated that over 6.7 million students with disabilities are enrolled in the public-school system with an estimated 1,008,000 students who have been diagnosed on the autism spectrum (ASD) were enrolled in the 2014-2015 school year (Zablotsky et al., 2015). Therefore, Zablotsky et al. (2015) estimated that 1 in 50 children enrolled in the American public-school system is diagnosed on the autism spectrum. Since the passing of this first mandate 43 years ago, students with various levels of disabilities have enrolled in the public education system; however, teacher curricula or teacher training have not been updated with the best practices or latest knowledge in technology or understanding gained in the research through the neurosciences (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017) or ethical guidelines for educating students with disabilities (Howe et al., 2018), including students with autism, in the general education classroom with inclusion practices that are both academically and socially based (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017).

Chapter 2 provided a review of the literature which began with the history of special education law and how the laws reflect differing models of disability and how those models affect the view of the purpose of special education for students with disabilities, such as students

on the autism spectrum. In this review, autism spectrum disorder was further defined outlining the needs and impact of autism on the student as well as how social skill deficits impact academic achievement. Through the lens of the evolving models of disability, and the empowerment approach and theoretical framework for self-determination theory are examined. The review further examined how autism spectrum disorder impacts the student, peers, and the classroom as well as discussion challenges to teachers and administrators with a focus on inclusion versus mainstreaming and barriers to creating an inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum.

Chapter 3 introduces a qualitative study with a research question designed for gathering data from each member of the IEP team to promote collaborative efforts to promote empowerment for students on the autism spectrum. In Chapter 4, I present the findings. In Chapter 5, I summarize the study, provides a discussion of the findings, implications for practice and future studies, and make final remarks.

### **Chapter 3: Research Method**

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. Through applied qualitative research using a phenomenological approach working from a critical paradigm, participants of the study were key stakeholders of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams located through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling throughout the United States' public education system and selected for the study through criterion sampling.

Included in this chapter, the reader will find details about the qualitative study, including design, population, sample, and materials, and instruments. Further discussion will examine how qualitative data will be collected and analyzed. The researcher's role, as well as ethical considerations for method, is included. Finally, assumptions, limitations, and delimitations are mentioned.

#### **Research Paradigm**

The paradigm outlines a set of beliefs or states a view of the one submitting the research (Groenewald, 2004). This dissertation study is a matter of social justice and social inclusion with a call for change based on the social and empowerment models of disability (Crow, 1992; Moran et al., 2017; Oliver, 1990), which is indicative of a critical paradigm (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017) which considers issues of power in relationships, equality, privilege, and promotes empowerment of often marginalized groups (Leavy, 2017). While IEP teams are meant to be collaborative among the school officials and parents of the student needing services, often, power dynamics are not equal, and parents do not feel heard as they advocate for their students (Wright et al., 2018).

A critical paradigm (Creswell, 2014) best aligns with the theoretical framework of self-determination theory and goal to discuss and produce self-determined behaviors and empowerment (Ryan & Deci, 2000) for both teachers and students on the autism spectrum. The goals of SDT will address the dual concerns of both the school and parents in promoting collaborative efforts (Fleming & Shaw, 2018) in the setting of social skill goals for students in the IEP process for both academic and social inclusion.

This research study examined the phenomena or experience of different perspectives of members of an IEP team and described and explored their personal challenges or successes in the area of inclusive education for students on the autism spectrum. Suggestions for inclusive education are discussed (see Appendix O), described, and outlined, not from the view of the researcher, but from those who experienced the process of or lack of inclusive practices and those who strive to create inclusive environments for students on the autism spectrum.

### **Research Methodology: Phenomenological**

According to Moustakas (1994) and Groenewald (2004), when a researcher is looking to understand or explain a phenomenon or describe human experience, a phenomenological qualitative approach is the best research approach. The lens of the phenomenological approach in applied research views participants to be more than mere subjects of a research project but partners in the endeavor to describe their reality and their unique personal experiences which can contribute to the knowledge of solving problems or improve interventions and processes (Leavy, 2017; Patton, 2015).

Citing Husserl as the father of phenomenological approach in the twentieth century, Groenewald (2004) stated that Husserl argued individuals are capable of describing their own experiences and explain their personal consciousness which becomes the data for the science of



'pure phenomena' (p. 4) or the method of phenomenology. Moustakas (1994) explained that the goal of phenomenology is within the slogan, "Back to the things themselves!" (p. 26).

Groenewald (2004) argued the phenomenological researcher aims to describe an experience from the perspective of those who experienced a specific social or psychological phenomena and refrain from preconceptions or judgments to present the facts as they are described. Groenewald noted that the researcher will not prescribe or outline an action plan, but instead allow the participants to speak for themselves from their experience and draw conclusions from the data while staying true to the whole experience instead of analyzing specific units of data; phenomenological studies are existential and more about the whole and not about the sum of the parts.

All research must begin with a purpose and statement of a specific problem as well as outline the theoretical perspective and paradigm or lens the researcher is looking through (Creswell, 2014; Groenewald, 2004). However, according to Groenewald (2004), a phenomenological study will explain why a phenomenological approach is best suited for the study and then describe the research participants, how data will be gathered, where data will be stored, and finally how data will be analyzed or what he refers to as "explication of the data" (p. 6).

A phenomenological study was best suited for this research study because each member of the IEP team has a different role, responsibility, and perspective of the IEP process as well as their perception of inclusive education. Administrators and other educators of the local education agency representing the power position of executing the IEP plan will have a different experience from the student on the spectrum who will be the recipient of the plan as well as parents of students who will advocate for the resources and supports they feel their child will

need in the school setting. This study examined the experience of four different groups: administrators, other educators, parents, and persons on the autism spectrum.

### **Purpose Statement and Research Questions**

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system.

The following research questions guided this study:

**Q1.** What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom?

**Q2.** What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion?

**Q3.** What do students on the autism spectrum describe as barriers to social inclusion?

**Q4.** What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP team members observed or experienced that increased conflict?

### **Research Design**

To best collect data targeting a specific audience relying on personal interviews and documents, qualitative research is recommended (Creswell, 2014). Each research question was directed toward a specific population representing the members of the IEP team who are responsible for constructing the IEP and setting goals as well as for deciding placement for the student on the autism spectrum (Wright et al., 2018). The design of the study was explanatory (Creswell, 2014; Leavy, 2017) in nature with research questions addressing a specific population sample's unique experiences and observations for a phenomenological study as outlined above (Leavy, 2017).

## **Population**

The required members of an IEP include an administrator (LEA representative), classroom teacher, special education teacher, someone who can interpret any testing results, the parents of the student on the autism spectrum and when appropriate the student on the autism spectrum (Giuliani, 2012; Johns, 2016; Wright et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). The population for the design included representatives of the IEP team representing the local education agency.

Administrators, general classroom teachers, special education teachers, and school counselors or psychologists and other professionals were preselection surveyed and based on meeting criteria selected for semistructured interviews.

## **Sample**

Because there are four different sample groups, methods of how samples were obtained for each population are outlined. A sample of a minimum number of six to eight of each population of the IEP team was obtained for the study with a larger sample in the educator other population due to the many positions to be included in the population. Each research question was directed toward a specific population of the IEP team for the study. Creswell (2014) stated that phenomenological studies should have three to 10 participants per sample for an information-rich study. These criteria were met in each of the four populations wherein a total of 35 interviews were conducted.

Patton (2015) suggested that when a population is stratified without knowing beforehand how many respondents may respond for each portion of the sample, it is important to make sure the sample reflects individuals in each stratum. At any school surveyed, any teacher or administrator may be part of an IEP team at any given time. Therefore, a sample of seven administrators with two additional country representatives who help train LEA representatives,

as well as 11 individuals comprising general education teachers, special education teachers, and other designated staff who serve on IEPs, resulted in a sample size of 20 representing the public school IEP team members. Also, eight parents and six persons on the spectrum were included in the sample size, but for confidentiality purposes were recruited from any state within the United States, making the sample size 14 for parents and students on the autism spectrum. During the snowball sampling process, a former student from Canada wanted to voice personal experience and concerns for lack of inclusion in the Canadian system as well. While all data were always not included, samples of the individuals' exact quotes are listed as they echo comments made from American students. The total sample size was 35, which according to Patton (2015), a larger sample should ensure equal representation of each characteristic of the stratified population for the sample to be studied. When discussing the dynamics of an organization or system, the larger population size should be considered; however, when addressing concerns of individuals who share a culture or common experience or perspective, the smaller sample size may be considered and preferred (Leavy, 2017; Patton, 2015).

An option for sampling for this research included snowball sampling, which Leavy (2017) indicated is a strategy for meeting the number required for research by allowing participants to suggest additional persons in the field who may be interested in contributing data to research. In addition to recruiting a school district to participate in the research study, as several autism conferences in the southeast, participants were obtained through canvassing conference participants for willing participants and asking potential participants to recommend others who may be willing to participate in the study.

**Recruitment of participants.** Once permission was obtained from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of Abilene Christian University, recruitment began. Participants for the

parent and student populations were largely recruited from sign-ups at conferences through email by email marketing software of Constant Contact (Constant Contact, n.d.). Constant Contact allows for multiple emails to receive the invitation while protecting the recipient's email and personal information from other recipients. The Constant Contact software can deliver the letter of purpose and explanation to the study and a link to the prestudy survey, which will begin with consent or assent before proceeding through the survey. Constant Contact provides analytics of who has seen, opened, or declined the invitation to participate. When someone receives a Constant Contact invitation, they can permanently remove their email from the list if they choose not to participate or receive reminders about survey completion. Because a purposive and intensity sample was sought, each potential participant received a prestudy survey (see Appendix E) to ensure they met the criteria within the sample they were seeking to participate.

After several conferences from 2017-2019, 288 names were collected and kept without contact until IRB approval (see Appendix A), which included 50 teachers, 31 teachers who were also parents of children on the autism spectrum, 123 parents of children on the autism spectrum, four adults on the autism spectrum, six administrators, 20 clinicians, 42 educator others (specialist), and 12 others who were excluded because they did not work in the public education system. A Constant Contact email campaign was designed for each of the four populations. The email contained the recruitment letter (see Appendix C) with the purpose of the study and incentives to participants. The email also contained the preselection survey in a link designed through Survey Monkey explaining that if chosen for the study, a consent form would need to be signed and a 40-60-minute interview scheduled.

From the 288 names, nearly one-third of the emails bounced, and of those remaining emails, the Constant Contact analytics indicated that less than half opened the email. From this

convenience sampling, half of the parent population was obtained, one-fourth of the student on the autism spectrum obtained, one SPED teacher, one LEA representative, and one school counselor. However, adequate numbers for each population were still not met.

When these measures did not meet the required numbers for each population, social media was utilized by reaching out to support and help groups for parents of students on the spectrum and adults on the spectrum requesting participation or passing the survey link onto those who may be interested in discussing their experience in the public education system.

The next process for convenience and purposive sampling to gain educators and administrators/LEA representatives was to reach out to a school district in the state of Georgia for permission to do the study and recruit participants from the school district (see Appendix B). Upon the district's approval, emails were sent to a district that contains 19 elementary schools, nine middle schools, and five high schools in both rural and suburban areas with Title 1 schools located outside of the metro-Atlanta area. The Special Education department personnel helped disseminate the introduction letter and Survey Monkey link for the preselection survey.

The first incentive was for any participant who completed the survey by a specific deadline that their name would be entered into a drawing wherein two names would be drawn for a gift card for supplies for the classroom or school. After the deadline, two names were drawn, and the gift cards were sent. From this recruitment in the district zero principals, two assistant principals, 42 general educators, 63 special educators, two paraprofessionals, four school counselors, four school psychologists, and 18 who classified themselves as other completed the preselection survey. When the administrative/LEA representatives did not have enough to fill the population, I reached out to the head of the county. It was explained that within this district, the county had implemented the position of Special Education Lead Teachers and other LEA

representatives that are trained to perform the LEA duties. While traditionally principals and assistant principals have filled the LEA role, due to the increase of need for IEPs and special education services and lack of knowledge or training or certification in SPED, Special Education Lead Teachers (SELT) are school-based special education support staff located at each school. SELT do not have classroom responsibilities and covers one to two schools to manage the process of SPED evaluations, services, eligibilities, help write IEPs and attend the IEP in the LEA role as well as provide instructional resources and coaching or training to teachers. Because these individuals are in a leadership position and serve legally as LEA representatives, they were included in the administration/LEA population. The information for the study was sent to these educational leaders as well as county personnel who have served in the role or act in the role if IEP conflict escalates to the county level. Through this process, nearly all administration/LEA representatives were found. It was also decided to snowball sample to include any retired administrators who may wish to participate in the study for comparison. Through convenience, purposive, and snowball sampling, the eight to ten required for this population came to nine members for the LEA representative population. Each administrator/LEA representative took an abbreviated version of the PAIS, wherein follow-up questions to the survey were part of the semistructured guided protocol for administrators/LEA representatives (see Appendix H).

The total number of respondents for teachers was 105. The preselection survey consisted of an abbreviated version of the EAIS (see Appendix E). To choose possible participants for the study, the questions on the survey used to choose participants were from Section III of the EAIS, “Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Autism,” which included questions about placement of LRE, experiences with students on the autism spectrum, and should general

education teachers be asked to work with and include students on the autism spectrum into the general education classroom.

After the 105 surveys were reviewed, I sorted potential participants by the answers to the above questions and designed a spreadsheet of general education teachers looking for eight respondents to represent a mix of rural, suburban, Title 1 schools and elementary, middle, and high school levels. The hope was for three of the eight to respond to set up an appointment for an interview. Four respondents filled out the informed consent form and agreed to be interviewed; only two fulfilled the actual process and interview. The same process occurred for special-education teachers attempting the same mix as well as trying to obtain classroom co-teachers and self-contained classroom teachers. A total of eight were selected. Again, four filled out the informed consent form and set up an interview, but only three completed the interview.

The educator population included classroom teachers and other personnel from the school setting, which may be involved in the process of eligibility for and participation of IEP teams. Students on the autism spectrum often have paraprofessionals, school psychologists, school counselors, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, and physical therapists as additional supports. The total educator population desired was 10-12, given the large variety of educators that may be involved in the IEP process. A total of 25 in the category of other responded. Emails were sent to determine what “other” meant. It was decided to send an informed consent to half of this category to find five additional participants in varying roles as a school counselor had been obtained through convenience sampling. Of the 12 persons who were sent an invitation to set up an interview and informed consent, seven complied with filling out the informed consent (see Appendix D) and agreed to be interviewed; however, five followed through for setting up the interview.



*Prestudy selection survey of administrators and educators*. Potential participants for the administrative or other educator samples were recruited through a school district in the state of Georgia and conference attendees at autism and PBIS conferences in the states of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia representing purposive sampling methods. Administrators received the *Principals Autism Inclusion Survey* (Workman, 2016), and other educators received the *Educator's Autism Inclusion Survey* (Holmes, 2018) as they prestudy survey selection method.

An approved and modified version of the *Principals Inclusion Survey* ([*PIS*]; Praisner, 2003), the *Principals Autism Inclusion Survey* ([*PAIS*]; Workman, 2016) was used for the prestudy survey to obtain demographic information and examine if study selection criteria were satisfied for the potential participant to be part of the purposive sample for the qualitative study. Through obtained written permission and approval to Dr. Praisner and Dr. Workman (see Appendix G), modifications will be made to the *PAIS* to administer to educators referred to as the *Educator's Autism Inclusion Survey* (*EAIS*) for the preselection survey disseminated by Survey Monkey. Praisner's *PIS* focused more broadly on administrators' attitudes toward inclusion of each type of disability, while Workman's modification narrows the focus to the inclusion of students with ASD levels 1, 2, and 3.

The *PAIS* was used without further modifications to presurvey administrators, and the *EAIS* used for other educators that make up the IEP team to obtain Praisner's (2003) original survey took a broader approach to disabilities in general; however, she allowed Workman (2016) to make modifications to replace general disabilities with the subject of autism. Workman's (2016) modifications included the criteria of autism based on the newest edition of the *DSM*

(APA, 2013). Permission was granted to me to replace the term principal with any member of school personnel for the *EAIS* and exclude criteria that only applied to administrators.

Face and content validity were established in Praisner's original *PIS* by involving content experts to assist in developing the questions for the instrument as well as conducting a pilot study making adaptations based on feedback from the panel of experts assembled for content validity of inclusive practices for students with disabilities (Workman, 2016). Workman (2016) changed the term students with disabilities to a more specified population of students with ASD. To establish construct validity of knowledge of ASD, Workman (2016) used criteria from the *DSM-5* (APA, 2013) to formulate the questions concerning the understanding of ASD. An expert panel was assembled, including members of each population, to determine face and content validity to use the *PAIS* and *EAIS* as a prestudy survey for this dissertation study.

The *PAIS* and *EAIS* instruments were sent via email as a prestudy selection instrument to the appropriate population. The *PAIS* was sent to school administrators or school personnel who are legally allowed to serve as LEA representatives for IEP meetings, and the *EAIS* was sent to any other educator who has the propensity to serve on an IEP team to include general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists or other personnel that are trained to discuss and explain testing data, or paraprofessionals or others that may serve on an IEP team. Because psychometrics or isometric data are not being collected quantitatively from these prestudy surveys, an expert panel consisting of a clinician, parent advocate, special education certified teachers, paraprofessionals, a clinical social worker, and a person on the autism spectrum examined the appropriate prestudy survey as well as guided protocol for their respective group to provide face and content validity. The expert panel indicated approval of face and content validity of the preselection surveys.

To ensure ethical measures of least amount of harm to a vulnerable population, an adult on the autism spectrum who works in disability leadership and a clinical social worker examined all materials and protocols to advise on any potential harm or stress for persons on the autism spectrum. Both indicated that discussing any bullying may cause stress but not harm and to proceed with caution. As a clinician and certified autism specialist, I am trained in dealing with stress and meltdowns, and if the person was under any stress during the interview they were given the option of email or dropping out of the study to ensure ethical research standards were applied to a vulnerable population.

Intensity sampling concerns looking for information-rich cases that are not extreme such as valedictorian vs. drop-out but more of a comparison of an above average or below average student (Patton, 2015). Administrators and other educators selected for the qualitative interview portion of the study indicated favorable advocacy or disapproval for inclusive education practices to compare responses. Both administrators and educators will be delimited to have served in their position for at least one completed school year in the public education system.

An incentive to participate in the research for administrators was for an hour of my time of consultation by phone or online platform for his or her local agency concerning inclusion efforts for students on the autism spectrum or having me teach an in-service workshop at no cost on autism awareness or inclusion. If this was not needed, the administrator was offered a gift card to use for teacher incentives for PBIS efforts at the local school. Other educators were incentivized to participate through a \$25 gift certificate drawing for classroom supplies for all those who complete the survey. In addition to the drawing, educators were given an incentive if chosen for the interview to sign up for their interview by a certain date for an Amazon gift card. Gift cards were given even if the interviews were not completed.

*Prestudy selection of parents and students on the autism spectrum.* To ensure that parents and students on the spectrum meet criteria for the study, they also received a prestudy survey (see Appendix E), constructed by this researcher through Survey Monkey. Criteria for parent selection include having a child on the autism spectrum and having participated in at least one IEP meeting in the public-school system. Parents were asked if they have a child on the autism spectrum who receives or has received services with an IEP or 504 and ever participated in an IEP team or IEP eligibility meeting. Parents were asked for IEPs or 504 documents to share as a document for study in the research. Students on the autism spectrum received a prestudy survey to ask if they are under guardianship if they have an official diagnosis of autism and ensure they are over the age of 18. The Survey Monkey delivered prestudy selection survey, (see Appendix E), included questions concerning consent for the survey followed by an explanation that if chosen for the study, a full letter of consent or assent was first be obtained before an interview time established.

As a former educator, school guidance counselor, mental health provider, conference speaker, and current autism specialist and attendee of several IEP meetings as a consultant or advocate, parents who were selected for the study were offered the incentive of one hour of free consultation by phone or online platform from this researcher to participate in the study if selected for the study. Persons on the autism spectrum were incentivized with a \$25 Amazon gift certificate if selected and agreed to participate in the study.

Through these methods, all members of the IEP team were included to create a collaborative approach to academically and socially include students on the autism spectrum. In addition to the educators and administrators representing the IEP team, by involving students and parents in the study gives a voice and empowerment to the population that is affected by lack of

inclusive methods as well as opportunities to learn what is considered to be inclusive and helpful by those who desire to be included. By selecting participants through a prestudy survey, a purposive sample was derived for the interviewing of administrators/LEA representatives, educators, counselors, other professionals, and school psychologists useful to examine barriers and challenges of inclusion as well as promote collaboration of better inclusive practices for students on the autism spectrum. While barriers are important to identify for problem-solving endeavors, it is the hope that this research will provide insight into collaborative processes or inclusion successes that may lead to further study.

Once the participants were identified, selected, filled out the informed consent, a Zoom conference interview link was sent to the participant for the interview. This process protocol was followed for the nine administrative/LEA representatives, five teachers, and six other educators, eight parents, and seven persons on the autism spectrum, fulfilling the required numbers for each population. A full list of participant qualifications is provided (see Appendix F).

### **Qualitative Data Collection Methods**

Creswell (2014) stated that qualitative interviews are used to elicit views or opinions that cannot be captured in standardized surveys and questionnaires. Administrators and other educators took the *Principals' Autism Inclusion Survey* (Praisner, 2003; Workman, 2016) or *Educator's Autism Inclusion Survey* (Holmes, 2018) to predetermine qualification and meeting the criterion for the qualitative semistructured interviews (see Appendix H), and would serve as the sample to gather data for research questions one and four. Parents and students on the autism spectrum who are interested in participating in the study will also receive a prestudy survey to ensure they meet the criterion to be included in the appropriate sample for data collection for

research questions two and three. Parents will also be asked about successful or conflictual IEP meetings for suggestions on collaborative IEP practices in question four.

According to Creswell (2014), interviews may be conducted face-to-face, telephone, online or virtual interview, or by email. After the potential participants took their allotted prestudy survey, I conducted virtual interviews through the platform of Zoom with selected participants. By using Zoom, I was able to have audio and visual aspects available to me for field notes while the interview was audio recorded. In five cases, the school's computer did not have video cameras, and thus an audio-only interview was conducted through Zoom or by phone. In two instances for students on the autism spectrum, half of the interview was sent via email to allow more processing time and reduce stress on the participant. One participant still found the email interview to be too stressful and dropped out of the study, while a nonspeaking individual completed half of the protocol through email. A qualitative study with open-ended questions addressing barriers to collaboration on IEP teams, barriers to social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum, as well as factors that promote collaboration or favor social inclusion practices for students on the autism was the focus of the guided protocol questionnaire. The same questions were asked of each participant but were semistructured as the flow of each interview may have differed, yet the same questions may have been asked in a different order with various follow-up questions depending on the answers from the participant.

**Materials/ Instruments.** An approved guided protocol was used for the qualitative semistructured questionnaires constructed for each sample in the study. The qualitative questions sought to ascertain data concerning barriers to inclusion as well as successful or collaborative processes toward inclusive education practices from multiple perspectives of key stakeholders.

**Guided protocols.** The protocols for building the questions for the semistructured questionnaires for interviews were based on the constructs sought for the measure in the study to include, inclusive practices, perceived inclusion, barriers to inclusion, collaboration, and promoting self-determined behaviors for persons on the autism spectrum. Guided protocols were constructed to answer the appropriate research questions for each population using measures that have been determined to be valid and reliable and will be used to answer research questions four through seven. Each question was specific to a population in the study with a guided protocol directed to that population. Guided protocols are included (see Appendix H).

Permission was granted by Kent McIntosh from Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, a modified version of the *School Climate Survey Suite* (La Salle, McIntosh, & Eliason, 2018) for a portion of each sample group's semistructured interview (see Appendix G). The *School Climate Survey Suite* (SCSS) was originally created by the Georgia Department of Education and called the Georgia Elementary, Brief, School Personnel, and Parent School Climate Surveys (La Salle & Meyers, 2014); however, the survey was redesigned for national use for any school district in the United States (La Salle et al., 2018). The SCSS is a survey measure constructed with a Likert scale and I adapted the questions to open-ended questions for further explanation of answer choice.

The SCSS introduction indicates that the measure is reliable and valid to assess perceived school climate in the areas of connectedness, structure for learning, school safety, physical environment, peer/adult relationships, and parental involvement (La Salle et al., 2018). To maintain full reliability, it was recommended to administer the survey as designed (PBIS Apps, 2019). Hanson and Voight (2014) stated for increased reliability a sample size of 100 students and ten staff are necessary. However, as a qualitative measure, I am interested in why the

respondent chose their answer to gather deeper descriptions from the data beyond a Likert scale response. For example, in the student section, questions include, “Teachers treat with me respect” or “School is where I felt safe” (LaSalle et al., 2018).

As part of the semistructured interview, I asked students to define what they feel is inclusion, and if they chose the school wants them to do well, what are the indicators or behaviors that suggest this? This instrument was originally used for each population, but for the sake of time was only used for the student population of the study. After using the protocol on one teacher and one administrator, the use of the instrument prolonged the interview by 20 minutes, which was not conducive to the time restraints administrators and educators were under to keep the interview under one hour. Therefore, the student portion was the only portion used for all participants in the students with autism population to ascertain their thoughts of inclusion and whether they felt included by their school.

***Administrators.*** Administrators were asked for further clarification of information collected from the *PAIS*. The *PAIS* lists questions about training or knowledge concerning ASD. Administrators who scored in the as favorable or unfavorable for inclusion or consistently chose the least restrictive environment or the more restrictive environment for placement of students with ASD were asked open-ended questions from the *PAIS* as to the type of training, effective training, and how he or she chose placement for students on the autism spectrum.

***Other educators.*** Questions from the *EAIS* concerning training, knowledge, and successful inclusion were asked in an open-ended format to outline barriers to inclusive practices. The final section of the semistructured interview addressed the issue of collaborative IEP teams. Defining collaboration, competitive, or cooperative based on the Dual Concerns Model (Fleming & Shaw, 2018), educators were asked to describe which type of conflict



resolution style they have witnessed or participated in through the IEP process with suggestions to help IEP teams work more collaboratively.

**Parents.** Part of the semistructured interview engaged the parent(s) concerning the goals of their child's IEP that address social skills or social inclusion. The final questions stemmed from the Dual Concerns Model (Fleming & Shaw, 2018) by defining collaborative, cooperative, and competitive conflict resolution to ask parents which type of IEP teams they have been part of in the recent past and open-ended questions concerning barriers to inclusion and suggestions for more collaborative approaches toward inclusive education practices for students on the autism spectrum.

**Students.** Students selected for semistructured interviews were persons on the autism spectrum level 1, 2, or 3 who are not classified as mentally impaired or decisionally impaired to maintain the limitations given under the IRB process. The interview began with specifics about their diagnosis and what age they were diagnosed and how they feel about their diagnosis. A question was asked concerning how interactive or involved they were in advocating for their needs with parents and educators for academic or social needs. Questions from the SCSS student portion was used for discussing school climate and perceived inclusiveness or lack thereof.

In addition to the above, the Center for Self-Determination Theory (2019) has several instruments available for academic research with no charge. Because the study is examining inclusion through the lens of SDT, content, and construct validity as well as reliability and generalizability will be established through established instruments. Questions from the following abbreviated questionnaires were used to assess autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Questions on the following instruments are Likert-scale in answer, but I used the scales in an open-ended fashion. Appropriate portions of the *Basic Psychological Need*

*Satisfaction in Relationships, and Aspirations Index* was used for face, content, and construct validity. These measures have been used consistently with established reliability and validity (Center for Self-Determination Theory, 2019).

### **Data Collection and Storage**

Each of the interviews was audio-recorded and transcribed through a transcription service. The informed consent and assent covered permission to audio record and outlined the measures to ensure confidentiality and storage of data collected. To protect the identity of the participant and confidentiality of the information received from the participant, each participant will be coded by sample type and numbers such as Administrator/LEA Rep 1-9, or Educator 1-11, Parent 1-8, or Student on the Autism Spectrum 1-7.

Data collected will be stored on an external hard drive and kept in a safe to protect the identity and confidentiality of all participants in the study. Abilene Christian University will also store a copy of the data. Because 34, 30-55-minute interviews were conducted, interview data were sent out for transcription. Go Transcript was used to transcribe because they require all transcribers to sign a confidentiality form and confirmed that all data would be completely removed from their databases as well as sign a Nondisclosure Agreement that is required by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). All efforts will be made to protect the identity and information of each participant to provide a minimum risk to all participants in accordance to IRB guidelines and expectations.

### **Data Analysis/Explication of Data**

After the interviews are transcribed, coding is recommended to classify data (Leavy, 2017). Groenewald (2004) cautioned the phrasing of data analysis for phenomenological studies as it indicates breaking down data into units of analysis instead of the study the whole or theme

or overall experience. Groenewald prefers explication of the data for examining phenomenological data.

To provide strength for qualitative research, triangulation of data is suggested, which can include surveys, questionnaires, observations, reviewing documents or artifacts, or field notes (Patton, 2015). Triangulation was achieved through prestudy selection surveys, interviews, field notes during the interview process, and documents, which could include IEPs or other documentation concerning a student provided by a parent or person on the autism spectrum.

**Field notes.** When using guided protocols for interviews and recording each interview, a researcher can also obtain data from field notes, according to Groenewald (2004). While the participant's responses provide primary data, field notes can provide secondary data to help the research retain other important observations from the interview, according to Groenewald.

Groenewald stated that without making an evaluation of the responses, the researcher could use several types of field notes to add to data triangulation for qualitative research studies.

Groenewald outlined four types of field notes to include observational notes (ON), theoretical notes (TN), methodological notes (MN), and analytical memos (AM). I used ON for the purpose of noting what was experienced as the researcher and observed in the interview as to the demeanor or tone or emotional expressions of the participant beyond the words used in the interview to provide the depth of description of the participant's engagement in the interview process. TN is described by Groenewald as useful to noting themes of one's theoretical ties or reflections after the interview and finally, I also used AM after the interview, which is a summary of the interview with notes on possible coding words that were selected for the use of the transcribed data.

**Coding of interview transcripts.** Patton (2015) suggested using more than one type of coding in qualitative research. This researcher used simultaneous coding over the same passages of text to include descriptive coding, in-vivo coding, and pattern coding. Descriptive coding techniques coded for content from each participant looking for themes of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In-vivo coding involves using participants' language or exact words to describe their own experiences, and Leavy (2017) suggested that where studies may involve conflict or power struggles values coding would be useful to analyze data. All coding was done by me.

**Documents or artifacts.** Groenewald (2004) suggested that artifacts for phenomenological studies may include official documents, essays, or poems by participants or follow up questions or thoughts by participants after their interview. Parents were asked for the use of their student's IEP or 504, which are official documents outlining their child's resources and supports. Identifying information is not used if parts of documents are displayed in the study. Students over the age of 18 were asked if they have access to IEPs or asked if they wish to include any work such as essays or poems or papers they wrote to describe their experience of having autism or experience of isolation or friendship to add to breadth of understanding of their personal experience.

Once the data were collected, transcribed, coded, and analyzed, results of findings were displayed in the study for future discussion. Patton (2015) suggested displaying information in a cross-classification matrix. Matrices are used to display results and findings and are available in the appendices.

### **Reliability, Validity, Generalizability, and Replicability**

Qualitative research must ensure validity and reliability differently than in quantitative studies (Creswell, 2014). The researcher can provide validity by checking for the accuracy of the

transcriptions and verifying the accuracy of the findings to provide validity. Creswell (2014) emphasized that a researcher must provide consistency in approach for all members of the population sample for reliability. Therefore, each potential participant received assent and consent letters outlining the study, a prestudy selection survey to meet criteria for the study, and each sample was interviewed with a semistructured guided protocol to obtain information for the appropriate research question.

Validity is also increased through transcription and bracketing the phenomenological reduction, according to Hycner (1985). Hycner noted that through transcription of interviews the exact words are kept to verify what participants stated while protecting the participant's identity and confidentiality, and bracketing requires the researcher to listen to the interview and subsequent audio recordings with openness without judgment to remain as objective as possible to report the phenomenon from the perspective of the one who experienced it. He further described bracketing in phenomenological studies as listening for the whole instead of words and phrases, which may be done more rigorously in coding and reading of transcripts.

Hycner (1985) noted that the lack of a random sample and lack of generalizability to larger samples are criticisms cited in the research community of qualitative studies in general. However, Hycner argued that participants are describing their own experience which creates validity and reliability of their personal accounts, and in phenomenological qualitative studies the issue of random samples is not a detractor of the study because when studying a specific phenomenon or experience a purposive sample is preferred because one's experience does not have to be generalizability to a greater population when the purpose of the study is individual or group experiences. While this study may not be generalizable to a broad larger population, the purpose of a larger sample for the four sample groups seeks to broaden the understanding of each

sample group's experience which may be helpful for the understanding of inclusion barriers and successes to the broader group of IEP team members and explore options to provide better collaborative efforts for IEP teams in the future.

While scientific inquiry requires a litmus test of replicability of study for contribution to the research community, Hycner (1985) argued that in qualitative studies, it essential the methods be replicability because findings may differ depending on the sample and personal experiences of that sample. The methods in this study have been reported so that if further study or similar studies seek to replicate the study, this is possible. A phenomenological study does not claim to be naturalistic or claim to have the ability to predict or prescribe action steps, according to Hycner; therefore, the contribution to the body of research is a better explanation of personal experience and meaning to promote understanding and breadth of perspective of the phenomenon being studied.

### **Researcher's Role**

While this current study does not fit all the criteria for Community-Based Participatory Research or Community-based research (Leavy, 2017), the research design is based upon a call to action or desire to build collaboration among key stakeholders to build an inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public school system. My professional and personal life involves daily interaction with students and adults on the autism spectrum. As a mental health provider and certified autism specialist, I have had the experience of counseling parents and family members whose loved ones on the autism spectrum struggled with suicidal ideation or completed suicide. I have personally worked with students as a guidance counselor and community-based counselor with adults on the spectrum who still suffer from anxiety,

Posttraumatic Stress Disorder, Major Depressive Disorder, or suicidal ideation from feeling different, excluded, or bullied during their schooling years.

Mental health bears a great impact on overall achievement academically, socially, and when one is transitioning beyond school. Although my career and personal relationships involve persons on the autism spectrum, I seek the truth in discussing both barriers and doorways to inclusive education practices seeking the voice and perspective of the key stakeholders responsible for creating an inclusive environment to promote change to enhance self-determination among our educators who will work with students on the spectrum and students on the spectrum. I believe that promoting autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000) throughout the school setting will enhance the outcomes and mental health for persons on the autism spectrum through empowerment and collaboration.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Before collecting data with human participants, approval was obtained from Abilene Christian University's (ACU) Institutional Review Board (IRB). The study involves minimal risks to participants by reflecting on attitudes, knowledge, and reflections of successes and challenges to inclusive educational practices. Because this study sought to include persons on the autism spectrum who went through public education, the IRB classified this population as a vulnerable or special population-based on disability. However, because the population will consist of persons on the autism spectrum classified without mental impairment, the IRB will not consider the sample to be decisionally impaired.

Recruitment of administrators and educators was sought through a colleague employed in a Georgia school district. Site permission was achieved before recruiting anyone. Additional recruitment for administrators and educators, as well as parents and persons on the autism

spectrum, was conducted through autism awareness seminars and conferences throughout the Southeast. While asks for participation in an upcoming dissertation was ongoing at conferences and discussions had with colleagues about potential participation, contact of potential participants was not initiated, and no data collected until approved by the IRB in writing. At conferences, it was mentioned that for anyone interested in participating in research concerning inclusive climate for persons on the autism spectrum, an interest form with one's name and email and best phone number for contact were collected and saved until permission to collect data and make contact had been approved. This was done because conferences are held at certain times of the year and where potential participants would be in large numbers.

An additional external hard drive was purchased to store all dissertation data separately from any shared computer and kept in a safe deposit box for the three-year required period. All survey participants were categorized as administrator/LEA representative, educator, other school personnel, parent, or person on the autism spectrum and assigned a number for research confidentiality. The letter of consent (or assent for persons on the autism spectrum who may still be under legal guardianship) described the purpose of the study, the ability to leave the study, an understanding that all data will be recorded and stored electronically in a secure place for three years.

As a mental health professional who specializes in work with persons on the autism spectrum, I am trained and qualified to interview persons on the autism spectrum. If the person experiences stress or is indicating a meltdown, I am capable of handling this and comply with the ethical research standards to do no harm or allow no harm to the participant.

Persons on the autism spectrum may become stressed in long interview processes. It was discussed upfront that breaks are permitted, and if any sign of emotional distress, we can break



for the day, and the participant can schedule another time. As a mental health provider certified in autism, should the person become dysregulated, I will stop the interview process and help the individual regulate and not proceed if the minimal risk threshold has been passed. To further help minimize stress, I provided a copy of the questions on the guided protocol upon request for the person to know what to expect during the semistructured interview. However, persons on the autism spectrum in my experience enjoy the opportunity to share experiences from their perspective in hopes of helping others and improving outcomes. If the participant has experienced bullying, caution was taken to protect the individual's vulnerability while sharing. The student was asked if they desired to give details, and their boundaries respected if they declined details. I followed up to make sure the individual was not retraumatized by retelling any facts from the situation. After each interview, there were 10-15 minutes of debriefing allowed to make sure the participant was not feeling stress.

### **Assumptions**

As the literature review discussed, the administrator (LEA rep) is most responsible for deciding placement; therefore, it was assumed he or she should be the most familiar with special education law and knowledge concerning ASD. It was also assumed that special education teachers have gone through an educator curriculum based on special education law and trained in developing IEPs for students with special needs, such as ASD. It was also assumed that general educators have the least knowledge about ASD unless they have sought out training or have someone in their personal life with ASD. Another assumption is that attitude towards inclusion is not alone an indicator of inclusive behaviors such as choosing the LRE for students on the spectrum.

Through interviewing parents and discussing IEP goals made for their students with ASD, it was assumed that few would have goals toward inclusion and social skills training unless the parents had an advocate or lawyer aid in the development of those goals. Through interviewing persons over the age of 18 with ASD, it was assumed that many will describe middle or high school as lonely and not feeling autonomous, competent, or related in making and keeping friendships which may cause them to feel disconnected or state they did not feel included by the student body and leaders of their school.

### **Limitations**

Describing constraints outside of the control of the researcher that could affect whether the results are generalizable to other populations is referred to as limitations (Terrell, 2016). The sample size was a limitation of the study. The trustworthiness may be affected by sampling educators within a single school district. Most participants in the administration/LEA representatives and educators' populations were obtained through the single school district recruited. However, three participants were obtained through snowball sampling through conferences and social media to make sure each member of the IEP team was represented in the data collection.

Data were collected through prestudy surveys to identify participants and guided protocols in a self-report manner. Assumptions were made that the participants reported information accurately, and honesty and assumptions are made that others within the same population would share similar feelings.

Emotions and incomplete memories can often affect one's memory or narrative concerning one's experience and must be considered when taking into account each person on the IEP teams' account of collaboration and barriers to building an inclusive environment as well

as individual frameworks of what constitutes inclusive practices (Workman, 2016). Inclusion and required knowledge for success are constructs that are not clearly defined in the study, but neither are these constructs clearly defined in the law or best practices for inclusion, which is problematic for both the study and implementing inclusive practices with a sense of fidelity.

### **Delimitations**

Establishing the boundaries or describing delimitations of a study allow the researcher to control for certain factors as well as provide descriptions of the boundaries should other researchers attempt to replicate the study with a different population (Terrell, 2016). The broadest concept of the study was the concept of inclusive practices toward students with ASD. Because IEP teams are comprised of various positions within the school and parents of the student, each type of member that represents the IEP team were included in the study.

It is not necessary to limit the sampling of educators to those who have been on an IEP team because it is assumed that any teacher or administrator could be called up for that purpose at any time. However, criteria to participate in the study stated that teachers have completed one year of teaching experience and are at least in their second year of teaching, and administrators/LEA representatives could be retired or active but completed at least one year and at least in their second year or higher of administrative position.

Parents of persons on the autism spectrum must have participated in developing an IEP for their students with ASD. Parents involved in the qualitative data collecting must have a child diagnosed with ASD or developmental delays and have attended an IEP meeting or IEP eligibility meeting. Persons on the autism spectrum will be persons over the age of 18 classified as ASD without mental impairment. The focus of an IEP was not as important in this population as much as their experience of inclusion or lack thereof while in the public-school system.

## Summary and Preview of Chapter 4

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. The design of this study examined the perspectives of key stakeholders who aid in making decisions concerning inclusion and following the mandates of federal law, as well as the voices of those who represent the experience of public school represented by the parents of children with ASD who are or have been in public school as well as persons with ASD. Previous studies have focused on teacher attitude or principal's attitude, but this study focused on administrators/LEA representatives, educators, parents, and persons on the spectrum for a complete picture of barriers and challenges to inclusion in addition to indicators of successful inclusion.

Data collected from parents and persons on the spectrum add insight into the experience of public education from the perspective of the children who have had services and an IEP (represented by parents) and persons on the spectrum over the age of 18 reflecting on gaps from the federal mandates to the local school agency as well as successes in implementation of inclusive practices. The study aimed to collect data from multiple voices, perspectives, and experiences to discuss barriers as well as suggestions for better inclusive practices. Through the lens of empowerment and SDT, it is believed that the more knowledgeable and trained the educator, the more likely the school to implement inclusive practices both academically and socially. It is believed that if empowered and treated with respect, students on the spectrum will feel more autonomous, competent, and relatedness, which translates into better transitioning options beyond school and a feeling of purpose and confidence to pursue future goals.

In Chapter 4, I describe the results of the research questions. Qualitative guided protocols were coded for themes in barriers and success with inclusion discussed from representatives of each populations' point of view. Relevant quotes and in vivo coding were used to voice the perspective of inclusion from the student on the spectrum's point of view and experiences.

## Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. Through a phenomenological qualitative study working from a critical paradigm, participants of the study were key stakeholders of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams located through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling throughout the United States' public education system. There were four research questions with data collected to answers the questions posed in the study:

- (1) What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom?
- (2) What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion?
- (3) What do students on the autism spectrum describe as barriers to social inclusion?
- (4) What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP team members observed or experienced that increased conflict?

The purpose of this chapter is to report the results of the data analysis gathered from semistructured protocols designed for each of the four populations in this study. This chapter is organized in the following order: introduction and restatement of purpose, review of the research process, analysis of the data, themes that emerged from the interviews, and summary of findings through the lens of SDT and disability theory models. In this chapter, I discuss how participants were chosen from the preselection survey process, how data were collected through guided protocols in the forms of semistructured interviews, comparison of field note observations, and IEP documents or other artifacts used to address the research questions.

## **Review of Research Process**

This study utilized a phenomenological qualitative study working within a critical paradigm to collect data. Preselection surveys, guided protocols, field notes, IEPs, and other personal writings serving as artifacts were used to identify barriers to social inclusion from the experience and perspective of each population to include administration/LEA representatives, educators, parents, and persons on the autism spectrum.

## **Presentation of the Findings**

Through a critical paradigm with a call for change utilizing a phenomenological qualitative study, the study's purpose was to examine barriers to academic and social inclusion through the experiences, observations, and perspectives of each member of the IEP team and the experiences of those on the autism spectrum in their personal experiences of inclusion efforts. Through the framework of SDT, the goal was to identify barriers to inclusion from each population's perspective to promote empowerment and self-determination for teachers, parents, and those on the autism spectrum. Participants are more than subjects in a research study in a phenomenological study, but partners in the contribution of social problem solving to improve interventions and overall processes (Leavy, 2017; Patton, 2015). Each member of the IEP team has a different role, responsibility, and perspective. The research questions address barriers to inclusion from four different groups: administrators/LEA representatives, educators, parents of children on the spectrum, and persons on the autism spectrum.

A separate section will document the analysis of data from each question in the study. Question one examined the barriers to inclusion from the perspective of the local education agency. Question two examined the barriers to inclusion from the parent's perspective. In this section, the IEPs and other artifacts will be discussed. IEPs will be analyzed to examine if IEP

goals are considered focused on both academic and social inclusion. Question three examined the barriers to inclusion from the perspective of the person on the spectrum. In this section, additional thoughts to transcripts such as emails, articles, blogs, or artifacts that bring depth to the perspective of the person on the autism spectrum will be discussed. A summary of the differing perspectives will be provided with cross-population analysis to document themes that emerged from the data.

The fourth question examined the IEP document and the process it takes to build the IEP to provide the supports for inclusion. This section will analyze the findings of what was found among the different populations against current literature and research in the area of conflict management and negotiation principles.

### **Barriers to Inclusion: School Staff's Experiences and Observations**

Participants who contributed to research question one, "What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom?" included seven administrators/LEA representatives with two county representatives and 11 educators to include general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, school counselor, occupational therapist, and speech-language specialists. Each participant's guided protocol included questions concerning what barriers or challenges the individual faced in their experiences and role to academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. All 20 participants expressed favorable attitudes toward the concept of inclusion, yet definitions varied of what inclusion and inclusive practices entail (see Appendix I). Answers ranged from more academic in focus to full mainstreaming to dependent on available resources. Fourteen of the 20 participants responded to their opinion as to the proper placement of LRE for each level of



autism. Each qualified their answer that IEPs are individual to the student and their needs, but the administrators and educators had differing ideas as to LRE for autism levels 1, 2, and 3. Results of placement, or what was considered to be LRE for each level of autism, are displayed in Tables 1-3.

Table 1

*LRE Placement for \*Autism Level 1 (Formerly HFA/Asperger's) Students*

Placement	<i>n</i>	Role
Regular Classroom/Gen Ed Room	6/7	Admin/LEA
	4/7	Educator/Educator Other
Gen Ed/Mainstream with Supports	1/7	Admin/LEA
	3/7	Educator/Educator Other

*Note.* \*AS Level 1 “requires support,” 7 administrators out of 9 answered 2 did not, 7 of 11 educators answered, 4 did not feel qualified in their role to answer

Table 2

*LRE Placement for \*Autism Level 2 Students*

Placement	<i>n</i>	Role
Gen Ed with Supports	2/7	Admin/LEA
	1/7	Educator/Educator Other
Gen Ed with Pullouts/Resource	3/7	Admin/LEA
	6/7	Educator/Educator Other
SPED Resource Room some Gen Ed PT	1/7	Admin/LEA
Self-contained (based on BEH/BED)	1/7	Admin/LEA

*Note.* \*AS Level 2 “requires moderate support,” 7 administrators out of 9 answered 2 did not, 7 of 11 educators answered (4 did not feel qualified in their role to answer)

Table 3

*LRE Placement for \*Autism Level 3 Students*

Placement	<i>n</i>	Role
PT SPED/Resource Room	1/7	Admin/LEA
Self-Contained Class	6/7	Admin/LEA
(Type depends on OHI, BEH, Multi-Dis, or ID)	7/7	Educator/Educator Other

*Note.* \*AS Level 3 “requires substantial support,” 7 administrators out of 9 answered 2 did not, 7 of 11 educators answered, 4 did not feel qualified in their role to answer

Part of the barrier or challenge to inclusion is the lack of a clear definition of inclusion (see Appendix I) and differing opinions as to placement for students on the autism spectrum. However, when asked specifically what elements or issues contribute to the barriers of social and academic inclusion, the 20 participants representing administration/LEA representatives and educators identified 28 elements that are barriers. The full 28 elements list is provided (see Appendix J). The following themes emerged from the data as barriers from the perspectives of the school staff.

**Behaviors.** The number one barrier identified by 19 of 20 participants said behavior and further defined described the behaviors as unpredictable, unruly, disruptive, aggressive, self-harming, or challenging behaviors. Educator 1, a general education teacher, described the challenge of trying to manage an already over-crowded classroom of 28-32 students, and the combination of even one student with disruptive behavior can greatly affect classroom management. Educator 2, also a general educator teacher with SPED certification, added that overcrowded general education classes could be overstimulating or overwhelming to students on the spectrum, and those elements might contribute to meltdown behaviors, which affect their learning time in the class as well as peer acceptance. Educator 9 explained:

The barriers that I have seen are just the behaviors that interfere with the learning of students. I have a student now who is on the spectrum, but he’s higher functioning. He is

grade level on everything, but he just has very impulsive behaviors. He doesn't understand what is appropriate socially and what's not appropriate socially. When he gets frustrated, he shouts out obscenities in the classroom. You have a group of fourth graders who are hearing obscenities shouted out multiple times a day. He will get upset and have a meltdown, so the students in the classroom have to be removed from the classroom, so that interrupts their learning, interrupts their day.

Educator 1 described similar behavior she has experienced in her classroom with students on the spectrum blurting out or eloping or doing something disruptive that affect the class and stops the teaching to which she said, "I don't feel those students [general education] should have to continue to put up with it." She added, "We can teach people how to treat people, but some of those children [general education] are still going to get tired of those behaviors."

Educator 5, a SPED teacher, felt that many behaviors could be managed in the class if teachers are better trained, equipped, and confident in their approach, but behaviors that are aggressive in any way cannot be tolerated among general education students. Educator 8, a school counselor, stated that some teachers see these children as behavior problems instead of remembering they are children first. Educator 8 added that a lack of social skills for students, as well as a lack of clear understanding of ASD and lack of training, contribute to the behaviors that can become disruptive to the classroom.

Administrators or LEA representatives said that the local agency lacks supports to aid teachers in various behaviors that may accompany the ASD diagnosis. Admin/LEA 2 felt part of the issue with behaviors is that general education teachers become more reactive instead of proactive and often due to lack of understanding of AS will take some of the behaviors such as lack of eye contact or getting out of one's seat as personal attacks because they do not understand the function of the behavior. Two administrators and three educators mentioned that peers can misunderstand these behaviors, and thus peers may not be accepting of the student with autism or the behaviors embarrass older students who then lose face and isolate away from same-

aged peers. Thirteen of the 20 participants suggested that overall general educators lack a basic understanding of autism and behaviors associated with autism, and undergraduate curriculums and in-service training should focus on autism awareness with all educators in a school building.

**Lack of supports or resources.** Usually mentioning behaviors as one area supports and resources are needed, 19 out of 20 participants stated that there is not enough funding for proper supports and resources to support each student and teacher properly for inclusion best practices. Supports could include the amount of staff, communication devices, visual supports, training, and any other resource such as sensory rooms or space for decompression in the classroom for students on the spectrum as a preventative measure for meltdowns. While the number one element educators feel they need support in is behaviors, some other supports and resources are often missing to provide both social and academic inclusion. Admin/LEA 5 added thoughts to her observations on the lack of resources and supports:

I have a unique perspective because we're at the high school, and the thing that I hear often is if I provide this accommodation or if I change this assignment that I'm not adhering to the standards. Maybe some training in how to modify assignments, modify is not the right word, but scaffolding and task analysis so that they can only be familiar with how to do that but also build the understanding that you're not watering down the curriculum when you provide extra support.

Students then may lack supports for academic goals because teachers have lacked supports on how to make modifications or adhere to accommodations in the student's IEP. Admin/Lea 6 added that these lack of supports and resources could lead to conflict or lack of understanding with the parents of these students when she explained:

I think it's important to know that myself as an educator, school districts, we truly do care about students, and we truly care about meeting individual student's needs. I think that sometimes parents also think the school district falls under some barriers in regards to staffing, and lack resources available for students. I think parents don't see that side of it, and it doesn't matter to them. I understand that, but when you're coming from the district perspective, we have what we have to work with, and we really are trying to do the very that we can with the resources that we have.

**School climate/culture.** Former SPED teacher and now country level representative, admin/LEA 8, stated, “Inclusion comes from the top-down.” Fifteen of the 20 respondents said that a lack of school climate or culture that promotes inclusion is an obstacle to inclusive practices. Lack of inclusion was described as administrators/LEA representatives choosing more segregated or restrictive placements or lack of supports to include students who are best served in the self-contained environment opportunities to connect with general education peers. Two educators said they worked in environments where general education teachers may say, “Come get *your* kid out of my class” or “I need help with *your* kid” instead of seeing them as an equal member of their classroom simply because they had an IEP. Some educators stated this lack of inclusive climate might result in a lack of opportunities for students with disabilities or students with autism to have support to participate in sports or clubs or other extracurricular activities.

Admin/LEA 3 stated:

I think they all [students with autism/needs] should be allowed to have the same opportunities as any other kiddos. Regardless of their disability or what they got going on. They should be, at least, have that opportunity to participate, whether the parents want them to or not, or whether they need additional support or not. We do need to look at that piece.

Admin/LEA 8, articulated what many educators discussed about inclusion meaning access to curriculum and activities when she stated:

It absolutely takes the principal and all the administrators sharing the message that every student in this building, they are *our* students. They are general education students first, and some of the students just need extra help and so we have staff members and programs that provide the support that they need. Because every student in our building is not going to graduate college or be career-ready. But it’s facilitating and fostering the ability for high school students to be engaged. It’s building a culture of inclusion around our extracurricular activities. I think what we need to do better is to have open hearts and open minds.

**Lack of training.** Six of nine administrators/LEAs and nine of 11 educators (15 total) stated that the lack of basic understanding or training in autism from administrators and classroom teachers is a huge barrier to inclusion. To become an administrator or LEA representative some basic training is provided concerning SPED law and eligibility requirements, but five of the nine administrator/LEA representatives and most of the educators stated that due to the lack of specifics about autism in the undergraduate and graduate curriculums and lack of in-services provided on autism specifically, that this lack of basics of autism leads to conflict on placement, discussion of LRE, supports for teachers, and proper supports for the student with autism. All 20 participants stated an observation in the number of students receiving eligibility for autism and the increase of autism in the overall student population, yet training and understanding have not kept up with the pace of increase with students. Educator 7, a school psychologist explained:

From my standpoint, I do think gen ed teachers sometimes aren't as well trained or don't have as much knowledge on autism, but they know what autism is, but they may not know exactly how to address it, or some of those symptoms. They don't know how to address it within the classroom setting. As an LEA rep, you hear them a lot of time they're talking from the regs, the law, from that standpoint, and the parents are like, "My child needs more support, how do we get there?"

The school psychologists further explained that understanding laws and regulations are important, but if the administrator does not know or understand what supports are even needed for students on the autism spectrum, this is a problem. As far as the increase of diagnosis and receiving services, the school psychologist said she is seeing ASD becoming the new ADHD in the number of students that may need IEPs and how years prior teachers did not understand ADHD. She sees the same trend happening in ASD at the school level. Educator 6, a lead school psychologist, agreed that ASD diagnoses are on the rise, and she stated, "People are more inclined to pursue that diagnosis outside the school system through outside services." She added

that there is a push to find these students earlier, and even if the student is not being served through an IEP, they may be receiving other supports or qualify for a 504. No matter how students are being served or included, the lead psychologist feels there is an awareness of autism but a lack of understanding or training from key stakeholders concerning the issues with social and academic exceptionalities, which can be a barrier to inclusion efforts. Seventeen of the respondents offered advice or suggestions for the type of training that would best promote understanding of autism and working with students on the spectrum, as indicated in Table 4.

Table 4

*Suggestions for Training*

Training	<i>n</i>
Basic Understanding of Autism/Sensory Information	13/17
Autism Behaviors/Behavior Management/ABA	10/17
SPED Law and Eligibility/Why Accommodations are needed	9/17
Every Admin Should be SPED certified	8/17
Communication Basics/Foundation of Language/Pragmatics	8/17
Inclusive Practices/Strategies	7/17
Eligibility Categories and Their Meanings	4/17
How to Make Accommodations/Modifications	3/17
IEP/Their Purpose/How to Construct Goals	2/17

*Note.* Only 17 of 20 participants answered the question about suggestions for training or what training best helped them.

**Additional barriers.** Other barriers listed by over half of the participants centered around lack of social skill groups and peer mentoring programs as well as lack of flexibility in administration and general education teachers to brainstorm creative ways to bring about social and academic inclusion. Most of the participants listed the broadness of the spectrum itself and

that a one size fits all approach does not work when a student has mixed exceptionalities. Participants noted that students with autism lack social skills or understanding of social norms and this could lead to exclusion by peers and the social nature of the classroom from interacting with the teacher to working in groups to participating in a class discussion can all be overwhelming and confusing for students with autism, and therefore, more explicit training and modeling is necessary to bridge the gaps in social and academic inclusion. The overcrowded classrooms and lack of sensory understanding were among barriers mentioned by over half the respondents in addition to scheduling and working around strict academic schedules to work social skills and social-relational learning for best inclusion.

### **Barriers to Inclusion: Parents' Experience and Observations**

Participants in the parent population are parents of children with an official diagnosis of ASD or Asperger's Syndrome who have attempted eligibility for their child for an IEP or whose child has or had an IEP or 504 in the public education system. One parent was unsuccessful in obtaining an IEP for her son and received a 504 that does not observe or build social skills or communication skills, which she feels leads to feelings of exclusion and social anxiety in her son. This population of participants' answers contributes to research question two, "What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion?" This population stated at least 16 elements that contribute to barriers to social inclusion. IEPs and the 504 will serve as documents as additional data concerning goals that promote or do not promote social inclusion. The following themes emerged from the data.

**Lack of understanding of autism.** While the school staff felt that behaviors of the student are the number one barrier for inclusive practices, eight out of eight parents felt the lack of understanding of autism by the teacher and seven out of seven that answered felt the lack of



understanding of autism by the administrator is the number barrier to academic and social inclusion. Not all parents had children with behavior goals, but for the four who did have children with behavioral goals, all four stated that over-focus on the behavior and overly punishing behaviors instead of building skills in deficit areas is a barrier to inclusive education. Parents 6, 7, and 8 had children who had substantial behavioral goals in their elementary years. Parent 6 said that in middle school, her child was not having as many behavior challenges, but in elementary school, she felt the teachers for second and third grades focused on the behaviors to the detriment of other goals. She felt that with the teacher over emphasizing behaviors and calling them out in class and her child repeatedly sent to the principal's office that this led to other students picking on her child and making her child the scapegoat for behaviors she did not even do. When she was picked on if she reacted or defended herself, she was the one who received a punishment of consequence. She became an easy target and was stigmatized. She said some students might even try to trigger a meltdown to see her get in trouble. Parent 7 stated that when she and her husband would bring up the lack of social skills and teasing her daughter experienced the school would respond that her behaviors were an issue that if she would stop the behaviors and act more appropriately, she would not be teased, yet did not see reason to promote and build social skills and social competencies. Parent 8 described her son's experience:

He was in high school completely segregated from any neurotypical peers and without any of the usual social and extracurricular activities associated with high school. It felt institutional and where those beyond hope are sent and treated accordingly. He was treated like a prisoner or an animal due to his escalations, which were a product of systemic underestimation of his abilities and disrespect treatment, which caused frustrated and anxiety. All of this, coupled with an adolescent male who has motor apraxia, thus difficult controlling his body intentionally. He's an extrovert and always wanted to and wants to be around people and friends but just did not know quite know how to work that out and needed a lot of support in those situations.

Parent 8's son is on the autism spectrum, level 3, and nonspeaking. The school assumed because he was nonspeaking, he was nonthinking, and his academic goals were never on grade level, and he rarely achieved the supports needed for any form of inclusion. Parent 8's son was not able to complete a diploma in the public school system.

**Lack of resources/supports/funding.** Seven out of seven parents with students with IEPs stated that the school lacked resources and supports or that administrators stated lack of funding was the reason their child did not get a requested paraprofessional, communication device, staff to run social skills groups or activities, or more inclusion in general education classes. One parent said that the communication device, a letter board, and training of staff to use her son's preferred communication device was allowed one year and essentially denied the next by not addressing the issue or hiring proper staff. Another parent stated her child has use of assistive technology in the IEP, yet it was never provided. Four of the eight parents had or have children in a self-contained, which three of four agreed with the placement but felt that there were not enough inclusive efforts to promote activities and engagement with the rest of the student body. Lack of staff was cited as the primary reason for lack of inclusion, although the parent stated their school espouses inclusive practices.

**Social skills goals.** Several comments fall into the social skills or functional goals category to include seven out of eight parents stating the school does not validate their concerns about the child's social or social-functional goals or understand the impact on learning and educational outcomes. Seven out of eight stated the school would not initially allow or include or discussion or gave push back on any goals that addressed peer relationships. Five out of seven stated when social skills were constructed, and there were mostly other socially impaired children in the groups without neurotypical for practice or connection. Five out of seven said

there was a lack of tolerance or understanding by the school of how lack of social skills is tied to being teased, bullied, or socially excluded from peers, and four out of seven stated IEP goals were so focused on yearly academic progress to the detriment of other goals, especially social goals. Several parents provided IEPs and one a 504 for examination.

*IEPs, 504s, other documents.* I received 15 IEPs and one 504, one parent was unable to get a copy of her IEP from the school, two read from their child's IEP or looked for specific goals as I directed during the interview, and two parents had children who had been out of the school system for more than two years and did not have a copy of an IEP readily available. One student interviewed in the students with autism section provided several of her former IEPs.

Three of the IEPs I read or had read to me included actual social skills that involved the inclusion of the student with autism with peers. Parent 1 was insistent of her son's autism diagnosis that his eligibility is changed from OHI to AU and that social skills be included. The school gave such push back to the social skills goals she had to hire an advocate, and after spending nearly \$8,000, she was able to get the eligibility category changed and one social goal that included peer-based skills. Parent 6, who later described her IEP teams and mostly collaborative and successful, had a case manager that advocated and supported the parent's desire for social skill goals designed to help her have positive peer interactions and social problem-solving skills. Parent 7 said that while elementary school years had some social skills goals aimed at behavior goals, she did have pull out services for social skills groups in middle school. However, her daughter was embarrassed by being removed from class for these social groups and did not like to attend, and she did not find them beneficial.

Four of the IEPs had a section heading called social skills, but the social skills mentioned were not peer or friendship-based, they were teacher or classroom-based. Two had goals about

the student responding to prompts from the teacher, one had a goal about lowering one's voice and not being loud when requested by the teacher, and the last one focused on goals during the transition. The one 504 that was received in the IEP eligibility meeting was from parents whose main goals were social skills and social anxiety. The child was having difficulties completing assignments in class and participating in group activities due to social skills issues and social anxiety. On the 504 section impairment information the document reads:

[Child's name omitted] has a clinical diagnosis of Autism. He struggles with the rate of work completion due to attention concerns and anxiety. There are also concerns with social interactions; he tends to prefer to work independently. These concerns *substantially impact* [emphasis added by researcher] his day to day classroom performance. Accommodations to address these concerns are necessary to lessen the impact to his learning.

While the impairment specifies that the interactions and isolation impact learning, an IEP was denied. Upon looking through the document, there is no accommodation or teaching of skills or working on deficits. When I asked the parent what the school's reply to not allowing an IEP is, she said because her son's grades are okay and he does not have a learning disability, and he is not eligible for an IEP. When I asked why there was no social help in the 504, they said that he would need an IEP to address social goals, and he was not eligible. However, he was never tested either for learning or processing issues. The parent stated that each year her son isolates more and does not like to go to school. While some educators fail to see the link of academic or educational impact from lack of social skills, the speech-language specialists included in the study explain the connection is vital. When asked about the importance of social pragmatic language and social skills, Educator 10 stated:

Well, I think it's important, especially at the middle and high school levels. I think at a certain level, and everyone wants to have friendships and have their social network. If they have difficulty with those social skills, they're going to have a hard time acquiring friends. Also, if you think academically at that point, there's a lot more group projects. It's not just necessarily a sit and lecture. You're doing a lot of interacting with your

classmates to do whether it's group projects, whether it's to do group presentations, whatever it is.

Educator 11, also a speech-language specialist stated:

It is vitally important that kids develop social skills. The best way to do that is there needs to be some time for those students where they have direct instruction in a small group, but they've got to have the time and the practice on opportunities with their typical peers to practice the skills. They learn so much by watching their peers. You and I probably know people in our professional lives who have a lot of knowledge, but they don't have the skills to be able to share that knowledge with other people and get along well with other people. They end up not being very successful. It is vital to have relationships with other people. That's probably as equally as important as any academic skill that we ever teach a child.

In reviewing the educator's views of social skills, it is noted that the school psychologists, school counselor, occupational therapist, and speech-language specialists made note that autism has social-communication and social problem-solving deficits at the core that should be addressed in IEP goals to address the needs of the whole child. Three admins/LEA representatives with SPED training echoed this sentiment that education should address the whole child, and social inclusion and social skills are key to educational success and transitional outcomes. Suggestions compiled from parents and educators for better social skill goals and inclusive practices are included(see Appendix O). Suggestions include more support for students with autism in before and after school clubs, pairing or mentoring by a neuro-typical peer, less pull out services, lunch groups that combine both children with and without disabilities, and social-emotional communication and problem-solving curriculums taught as an entire school approach for all students.

**Lack of acceptance or tolerance by peers.** According to my field notes and observations, when we spoke of the lack of inclusion or bullying their child had experienced at school, this provoked the most emotional responses from parents. True social inclusion to parents means that only do their children have access to equal education opportunities and

engagement with same-aged peers, but there is a level of acceptance in the climate of the school and among peers that would result in children being invited to parties or activities outside of school. One parent stated that when her child invited classmates to her parties, none would come, and her parties would include on the adults in her child's life. Three of the eight indicated that their child had been invited at least once to a birthday party by a classmate outside of school, but one qualified her answer by saying the school had a rule that if you passed out invitations at school, the entire class had to be invited. Three of the eight indicated that peers were present at their child's parties or events.

Parent 6 explained the importance of social skills for her daughter diagnosed with Asperger's without academic learning differences:

From day one, since our daughter received her diagnosis, my husband and I have always felt that in order for her to be successful, she needs to have the social skills to operate in a neurotypical world. Because of that, we felt total inclusion in the school system was an absolute must. Because she didn't have special needs when it came to learning or anything, she is actually super smart. She could rise to the occasion and do the workload at school; we felt that is was just as important for her to make those connections with her friends, her peers, her teachers.

Parent 6 disclosed that in one school year, a parent came to her and told her that she was requesting the school not allow their children to be in the same class because her daughter was too much of a distraction. Comments like this hurt to the core, according to Parent 6, because, as she explained, you do not want your child to be rejected or hurt by other peers. Her child did receive teasing from other peers at times for some of her autistic behaviors. Parent 8 stated that although the children in elementary school were a little more accepting of her son, as he got older, their acceptance and tolerance for his differences waned. As she described earlier, her son felt institutionalized and isolated from peers and felt like he was treated like a freak or seen as

one by peers. Most of the parents stated that having autism awareness and training for peers would be important for total inclusion and autism acceptance at school.

**Other barriers.** Other factors that were of concern to at least half of the parent population are the lack of understanding and supports for sensory impact on emotional regulation and behaviors. Parents stated that if the child does not have sensory input or a way to decompress, this could lead to a meltdown and affect peer acceptance and teacher interactions with the child. Parents who did not have behavior goals listed in their child's IEP stated sentiments that because their child did not have behavior issues and grades were on target, the child was "fine" or "going to be okay" or the parent was seen as "making a fuss." To parents, this loops back to a lack of understanding about autism and the variety of manifestations. Some children meltdown, but some children internally shut down. One parent said, "A shutdown child is not learning." Other barriers mentioned included lack of planning beyond this school year to transitions beyond school, and when the school puts specialist goals in such as OT, PT, speech-language or counseling in as consultative without any measurable goals or amount of time allocated, this feels like pandering or trying to appease the parent. Parents who had consultative resources in their child's IEPs stated that these services were not consistent and rarely addressed unless the parent pushed for them. A complete list of barriers is included (see Appendix K).

### **Barriers to Inclusion: Students' Experiences and Observations**

The voices of students on the spectrum are important to include in a study concerning inclusion to hear the perspective of being in the public-school system to express their personal experiences of inclusion or the lack thereof. The critical theory paradigm to research addresses "inequities in power," wherein researchers are called to stress the responsibility of themselves and the majority population to challenge and change the status quo for the betterment of those

who have marginalized (West & Turner, 2018, p. 73). Individual self-concept is shaped through negative and positive social interactions within society (West & Turner, 2018). West and Turner described the Pygmalion effect as one trying to live up or down to the expectations of another. Students on the autism spectrum in this study experienced teachers and administrators who had low to negative expectations of them, which each described as affecting their mental health and self-concept with negative impact.

Muted Group Theory (MGT), a theory under the critical theory approaches stated, “any group that is silenced by the inadequacies of their language” with the silencing dominated from the majority group is a muted group (West & Turner, 2018, p. 495). MTG researchers asserted that members of a marginalized or low power group are often silenced and “rendered inarticulate as speakers” and may be silenced through ridicule (teasing), rituals (social structures and rites of passage), and control through power of decision-making (West & Turner, 2018, pp. 504-505). The experience of all seven persons on the autism spectrum included: feeling teased or ridiculed for their differences, social exclusion, not feeling safe at their school (either emotionally or physically) to be themselves, and they did not always feel welcomed or wanted by the student body. The seven students represent all levels of the autism spectrum from Asperger’s and Autism Level 1 to Level 3 with mixed exceptionalities and included both males and females.

All seven students felt that both teachers and peers lacked basic awareness and acceptance of autism, and they felt stigmatized feeling their autism was deemed to make them less than others in the student body. Five of the seven felt disempowered and did not know how to ask for what they need or felt pushback when they asked for the IEP to be followed or called out a teacher for not making accommodations or modifications that were specified. Four of the seven had behavior challenges at some point in their educational journey and felt that the



teachers did not want them in their class or that they were a burden to a school. When I asked each person how they desired or would have wanted to be treated, each said in some way, “to be treated like a human first.” When asked how teachers treated them, these descriptions came from the students: a freak, a toddler, an alien, a bomb or explosion about to go off, a monster, and an animal that needs to be trained and managed. The four students who had behavior goals felt that the focus was so narrow on the behaviors that instead of being seen as a child, human, or student, they felt they were type-cast the “problem child” or “behavior problem.”

**Student experiences.** The students had mixed reviews about their classroom teachers stating from year to year the teacher’s understanding of autism and their treatment was different, which was confusing. The students felt this same distance and lack of connection from the student body. The students were asked about their experiences. A full list of barriers compiled from the students’ perspectives (see Appendix L).

**Student 1’s experience.** If the student stated they felt excluded, a follow-up question was asked, “What made you feel excluded?” Student 1 stated, “I was just different, and that was not the thing to be. You had to be normal. You had to like everything everyone else likes.” When asked about life outside of school Student 1 said, “I was never invited to do much of anything. I never got invited to parties or sleepovers. I was the odd kid out.” I asked her what she thought teachers needed to understand better. She explained, “It’s [autism] not always easy to see.” She elaborated that this is why a teacher needs to get to know their students personally that have an IEP and not make assumptions about them because she had behavior challenges in elementary school she said, “your behavior reputation follows you” from school year to school year and school to school. She felt the teachers had preconceived notions about her and her autism, and they treated her according to their bias. I asked what she would like to change about school for

students on the autism spectrum and she said, “Make them more included and encourage them when they are excelling but don’t discourage them when they’re failing.”

Student 1 offered some advice for better inclusive practices such as not pulling students out of a general classroom for pull-out or resource because it accentuates the differences, and it is already hard being different as a teenager. She suggested in elementary school using stories that are read by the teacher in reading time or circle time about including people who are different or people with disabilities. She also felt that since many students have special interests in various school subjects, utilizing their strengths on projects or sharing and showing the class, this student does have something to offer to the class. Many times, the student who has a special interest in a certain historical period may be able to create a project or guest lecture on something passionately and maybe create a positive interaction with the peers.

***Student 2’s experience.*** This student attended four different elementary schools by the third grade. She felt that the teachers and administrators did not want her or welcome her into the classroom. Oddly enough, she felt that most of her peers accepted her and understood she was different. She stated that her mother would have the Autism Society do a special class on days she was not present to explain sensory issues and various behaviors. While she felt the teachers and administrators saw her as “a bomb that could go off any second,” during this time, she felt included and liked by her peers; however, at the time, she did not realize she was not invited to parties or events outside of school. Classmates would come to her parties but were she was not invited to theirs. Most of the teasing, bullying, and exclusion was more obvious to her in middle school.

In middle school, because she was a star student and did not experience many behavior challenges, she felt most welcomed by her teachers but excluded and not wanted by her peer

group. Those she felt were friends would later tell her they were her friend out of pity. She was part of a Girl Scout troop, and most of the girls attended her school. They would include her when adults were watching or “use me” because I would work hard on projects, then they “ignored me and left me out at school all the way through high school,” said Student 2. When asked about how she felt at school and her safety, she said, “I disagree on multiple levels. I had a bunch of bullying during my freshman and junior years. It was a constant state of conflict, and I didn’t like it.” When asked about friends in high school, she said, “Some groups were very accepting, but you know how it is in high school. Cliques. I fell into the misfit clique where we were the group no one else wanted.” When asked how she felt treated by the staff at her school, she said that some understood her, most accepted her in middle and high school, but, “There were those who didn’t understand, and they didn’t care that they did not understand.” When asked for a suggestion that would make schools more included, she said:

By explaining that differences do not mean less than. I think the biggest thing, especially middle and high school, was the negative stigma that falls on Asperger’s and autism that we’re different, and we need extra services, so we’re less than the other students really. That’s how some of the other students portrayed it. I think socially, it would have been a lot better if there’s just a greater understanding among my peers.

Student 2 had copies of IEPs. The IEPs were heavy on behaviors in elementary school, and there were not goals socially or in communication. When asked about social goals, she said, “You mean I could have had that? Well, that would have been helpful.” She began in the mainstream room, then next year had a para, then ended up in self-contained classrooms where her behaviors were managed, but her gifted academic needs were not met. Another experience Student 2 wished to share was her time as an Education major. She said in her entire curriculum, there was only one class about exceptionalities, and autism was discussed one day. She said the professor and classmates equated autism with mental impairment. Autism was mentioned briefly in a diversity class as part of the disability population but enough teaching to understand it or

how to include people with autism, only that persons with autism fell into a marginalized group that needed inclusion. In the lifespan development class, she described this experience,

My professor, knowing that I was on the spectrum, kind of let me say something about my experience with autism in the public school setting to my peers. Then she went on with that the textbook said. Even though the textbook was written in 2018, it was so outdated with the terminology. Schools don't update their textbooks and curriculums that much. I almost got in a couple of verbal fights in that class because some students couldn't get it in their heads that the textbook was wrong. I was like, 'Look, you all, I'm level 1 autism, and my IQ is three standard deviations above average. Don't you dare tell me that I have a low IQ because I have a paper that proves I don't!' Then they would say, 'And you can't be autistic because you have a high IQ.' They would get stuck on IQ.

Her final suggestion for inclusion was a challenge to teachers and administrators to lead by example and break the stigma. She also added, "and don't punish the disability because I would get suspended and expelled for behaviors that were part of my disability and inability to communicate." She stated the self-contained class teacher use brute force, and she was injured twice by a teacher and locked in a closet as punishment. A better understanding is needed by both teachers and peers, and she feels this starts when future teachers are in school learning how to be a teacher, and inclusion should be taught at all school levels.

***Student 3's experience.*** Student 3 was asked to describe his school experience. Student 3 is Autism level 3 and nonspeaking. He communicated his answer on his letter board, and his communication partner wrote down his answers. He described his school experience as, "In elementary school, I was in the regular classroom and pulled out. I was self-contained and in specials with the regular classroom. As I got older, I was completely self-contained." I asked him to define the difference from his perspective from nonverbal and nonspeaking, as he identifies as nonspeaking. He explained,

Nonverbal indicates nonthinking, which cannot be further from the truth for nonspeaking autistics like me. It indicates having no language. I have complete receptive language but cannot output my thoughts due to motor planning deficits. As this recording demonstrated, I can speak per se but not reliably or meaningfully. (Note: Person 3 would

repeat a word he was spelling on his letter board and keep repeating that same word over and over as he continued to point and spell out his thoughts on the letter board). The majority of the time [at school], I was treated or spoken to or through as if I were a toddler.

I asked Student 3 if he felt his needs were met socially or academically at school. He responded emphatically on his letter board, “No!” When asked if the school embraced the letter board or used it to educate him better or include him, he replied,

I got pushback from the school that my communication was not mine, and my intelligence was impossible. They begrudgingly allowed it [letter board] after much pressure. One teacher tried to use my methodology to teach me. My mother volunteered her time to the teacher on how to teach me. Otherwise, it would not have happened. It was short-lived, though, as the teacher left and it became clear that the powers that be had no interest in furthering this with other personnel. After the teacher left [that had been trained on letter board], we would have had to start all over again with no support from the IEP team.

Student 3 was requesting a regular education degree but felt pigeon-holed into a special education diploma, and without a teacher using his preferred communication method, he had no hopes of being able to have meaningful on-grade level academic goals. He stated that he “aced the GED preparatory test” in GED classes and was excited to pursue a GED. However, his communication method would not be allowed for the GED tests as well. I asked Student 3 what he wants educators to know about autism or what it is they need to understand. He explained:

That we are the same as other students, yet different. That we have hopes, dreams, goals, feelings, and thoughts. We are competent despite our manifestation. That we are not less but are worthy of appropriate education and school opportunities and of human decency and respect.

I asked Student 3 to share advice for others on the autism spectrum who still may be in public school. He passionately pointed on the letter board, “Do not let anyone degrade or disrespect you or your abilities. Advocate for the support you need because you are not looking for special treatment but equal treatment.” When I asked about how he was treated or how he would describe his public school experience, he described it this way:

It was a nightmare and a joke all rolled into one. And that was with extremely involved and aware parents trying to make the right thing happen. The system is significantly broken. Teachers who are real advocates for students are pressured not to be. The most disturbing thing is that once the error of their ways is pointed out, they still don't want to do the right thing. I haven't even touched on the irreversible damage their restraints and behavior programs produce. Parents who send their nonspeaking autistic child to public schools do so at great peril to their child. My body can behave badly at times, largely out of my intentional control. It is more likely to so do when I am stressed, anxious, demeaned, and ridiculed. It becomes a vicious cycle, and I am viewed as a monster.

Student 3 felt abused at the hands of para, and he had no way to tell his parents until years later when he began using the letter board. He was teased and excluded by peers, and he craved connection and relationship from peers, yet he felt as he got older, he was more and more isolated. When asked about a suggestion for better inclusive practices, he indicated, "It would include a support plan rather than a behavior plan. It would have academic goals on grade level." He could not emphasize enough that schools should allow the person with autism to choose their preferred communication method and not be forced to use one that does not work. He wanted to be part of this study to give a voice to nonspeakers, and his final thoughts for educators and parents and peers about nonspeakers were to start by "presuming competence."

***Student 4's experience.*** Student 4 described herself as successful academically at school, yet the school was not a place she felt safe to be herself, and she did not feel successful socially. She went to school in a rural area and had a small core group of friends, but overall, the student body did not feel welcoming or inclusive, treating her as an equal member of the school. Because she did well academically, she felt the teachers respected her and liked her. She wants to get the message out about accepting students with differences for who they are. She is now a teacher in a rural area, and she does not feel all teachers are aware or accepting of autism. She said, "I think training for staff is important. Pretty much everyone has heard of autism by now but just a little bit more information on what it is, how it can present." While she had some friends, she

indicated she rarely invited to things outside of school, and she was not successful socially as indicated by being bullied and teased at school.

She stated that she attended IEP meetings occasionally, but it was uncomfortable hearing others talk about your challenges and weaknesses. She felt the IEP team treated her mother with respect, but when it came to insisting on higher academics, that it was a hard push from her mother to get her in advanced classes. She did not have any copies of her IEP, but she said she does not recall any social-focused goals. Student 4 wanted to speak to teachers as a fellow educator. Some of the advice she gives to teachers for better understanding and inclusive practices:

Understanding that first of all, not everyone with autism is the same. Different people on the spectrum have different quirks, have different things that set them off, react differently to the same situations. A one-size-fits-all policy isn't always going to work. It's something broad like we will treat these people with respect. Then that is going to work just because one student with autism was helped this or needed to that, doesn't mean it's going to work for everybody as far as what they need to understand when dealing with the student. Getting to know the specific students and what helps them and then as far as training just spreading knowledge and informing people creates a better understanding and I think it's going to help people be able to better interact with those students that is really is important to have a good understanding because a lot of times people fear or dislike or aren't comfortable with things they don't know about. Providing that knowledge even if maybe they don't have a lot of students on the spectrum into their school can be very important and helpful. Be patient, which is difficult. I understand that even more now that I'm in the teaching field. A child on the spectrum may literally be unable to do something you're asking them to because of the autism, because of sensory overload, or maybe once they get to the point where they're super upset or in a meltdown, there may only be one thing that calms them down. You may feel like you are giving in or breaking the rules, but you have to look at the bigger picture, is this helping the child? Is it in their best interest? Realize you have to be flexible because sometimes they're inflexible. They're not purposely being stubborn; it's just how their brain is wired. By having a better understanding of the behaviors you're more likely to be able to come up with a solution that will work and not fail.

When asked about a suggestion for helping peers be more inclusive, she explained, "For peers, explaining at an age-appropriate level, you know their classmates' needs." She clarified that teachers could not give out confidential information but simple details and explanations like,

“Bright lights really bother Johnny, so we are going to keep the lights dimmer.” If students press for why as students do, she said, simple explanation, “Johnny’s brain works differently, and so that’s why he does this, and when he does this, we can help him by...” She wanted to spread knowledge to teachers and peers. She also stated teachers need to lead the way with inclusion, but we can do more to help peers understand more about their classmates with autism.

*Student 5’s experience.* Student 5 also felt she was successful academically because she was gifted and was able to succeed academically without supports. She was not diagnosed with Asperger’s until her junior year of high school. Her diagnosis came when she experienced being taken advantage of by a student at the college campus, where she was doing dual enrollment. She was unable to read the social cues of the danger, and her social nativity was part of how she was put in danger. She told a teacher, and the school handled the matter, but in that process, she was diagnosed with Asperger’s. While she had academic achievement, she said, “I never had social connections nor the training to explain what entitled sexual actions.” While she did not have any social skills or social training, she felt she had teachers that she could trust who would help her when she was emotionally overwhelmed. However, what made her feel disrespected is when teachers would not show up for her IEP meetings. She felt that because she was academically achieving and did not have academic supports, a few teachers would not bother to show up, which made her feel like they did not want to understand her or the other challenges she faced at school. When asked about social inclusion, she described:

I was involved in the drama department, and though I was never very good, they were willing to include me. We went on retreats, and we went out to dinner after shows, and they were very inclusive, but outside of that specific group, I was mostly an academic tool for people. People would take me on to their projects because they knew, ‘Well, she is one of the top ten students of the school, so if we have her on our group, we’re likely to well.’ That’s a nice thought and certainly does feel wonderful to a point, but then to also know that the only reason I got invited to a single social function outside of the theater department was because someone wanted to be close to someone else near me definitely



did not help the depression that I was facing. Especially during that time when you really start to notice how social different you are from other people when you have autism.

When asked if she experienced bullying or teasing, she recalled a traumatic event of public bullying while a teacher watched and laughed. She described the experience:

A lot of what they did bordered between those [bullying and teasing]. It definitely started as teasing. There were points where that did turn into what I would consider bullying, where some of the older males from the group would back me into a corner. There were times I was left hyperventilating on the ground, even in front of the teacher, who then walked out of the room and left me hyperventilating on the ground in a panic attack. I think she thought I was faking it because she was laughing. It wasn't funny. I was not faking it. There was one time I clearly remember being hit with a yardstick across my hand. I learned later one of the reasons one of the guys did this was because it was funny, and it was entertaining to him. When you are enjoying something that hurts someone else, that's where it becomes bullying.

I asked Student 5 to give some suggestions or advice to teachers and peers in public school. She said to teachers,

I'm as much autistic as I am female as I am human. It's all part of who I am; it does not mean I deserve any less respect. Everything you would do with another student. We deserve it as well.

To peers, she said, "Just because we sit alone in class because it's stressful to approach someone doesn't mean we don't want to talk to anyone." She had a suggestion for schools to become places of inclusion for students on the autism spectrum.

My first suggestion would be a mentorship program. With peers that are like them and neurotypical peers that are kind and aware and that are being given information that are willing and interested in doing so that can facilitate their growth through high school. Then second, one would be careful not to call people out for their diagnosis. Do not call out individuals because of weird social interactions in mainstream places and make them feel even more outcast than they already make themselves feel. We should be working on inclusion before it becomes an issue. Make it a lifelong journey; I guess it's something that doesn't get talked about and really should.

After our interview concluded, Student 5 emailed me this thought that she felt was important for this study,

It is so important that people realize that school is not just for prepping people for college or a job. That is an ideal outcome, even for someone who does not struggle with disability. The one common goal for everyone is independence. For some, that might mean getting a job and having a family, but for others that might be graduating high school or even just being able to simply get their needs and wants met without being reliant on another person. For some people, even these goals may be quite difficult, but it is the job of schools to help reach them as much as possible. To help each and every student to become as independent as they're capable of being because this is dignity and this is respect for our fellow humans.

***Student 6's experience.*** Student 6 was diagnosed with more moderate autism and cognitive processing delays but not mental impairment. Overall, he felt successful at school but when asked if he felt safe at school, he said, "Yes and no. I was bullied at times." I asked him if he felt included by the student body, and he said, "Well, not necessarily, because I mostly saw everyone at school or other school-related events like homecoming, football games, prom but never anything outside of school." I asked him what would have made his school experience better socially? He responded, "If people would learn to accept my differences and give me more of a chance." He added, "I want to say just because I can be a little weird; it doesn't make me less human." He asked me if he could read part of a blog, he wrote about stopping stigma against people with disabilities. He read out:

There's so much stigma with autism, and it has to stop. Some autistics are still being forced to hide themselves. For example, if an autistic does something out of the ordinary or makes mistakes, people tell them that they don't want to be friends or whatever. Society can force their way upon others who are different to hide or make their autism. That's now how it works, though, at least not in any way that's healthy. There shouldn't be a stigma. When you are accepting to be someone's friend, you should accept and try to understand all aspects of a person. We autistics shouldn't feel the need to hide anything. People view autism as a source of annoyance, disappointment, or worse in different ways to different degrees. It's not fair to place judgment upon someone when you don't even fully know them. Having a true friend is having someone who accepts you for you, regardless of your flaws. That's my article.

I asked Student 5 if they experienced teasing or bullying. He said he was teased for not being smart and not taking AP classes. "I was called retard a lot." About bullying, he said, "One

football player did punch me into the lockers.” I asked if he felt excluded, and he said, “I never got invited to any parties. I saw pictures on Facebook of people hanging out having fun. I didn’t know anything about it. It really hurts when you find out about a party you were never invited to.”

When asked about suggestions to make school more inclusive, he offered this advice,

Have other students help those, help them get around, or include them at the lunch table. Be nice to them and protect them from being bullied. There are those who are nonverbal, learn how to communicate with them. I have a friend who’s nonverbal and uses the letter board. I’m still learning how to use the letter board with him to teach me to learn how to communicate with him with that. With autism, we may look different or act different, but we still have feelings like anybody else does. We still just want to be included, and we may have flaws, but we still want to be friends.

***Student 7’s experience.*** Asked the same question about success at school and liking school, Student 7 stated, “I disliked high school because I found the focus wasn’t on academia, it was on the social aspects which were my weakest point. I used to dread school.” On overall success, she said she passed high school, but back in the early 2000s, teachers were not as aware of autism, especially in females. Although she graduated, she added, “Socially would be a hard fail.” She described her experience at school sometimes through tears and had to pause and collect her thoughts. She said she was teased and bullied repeatedly and made fun of for not fitting in. She said, “It’s like everyone else got this rulebook that I didn’t get. I think that is a quote from Tony Attwood.” Outside of students that bullied her, I asked her if she felt welcomed at her school or included at all? She said, “No, I didn’t feel included because the teachers treated me like I was an alien, and the students treated me like a freak. I was an easy target to make fun of.” She described a time one girl choked her and another tried to lock her into a locker. She spoke of how difficult aspects of school were socially under stress because when she is stressed or anxious, she becomes mute. She felt her worse experience was something a teacher said. She

was diagnosed at age 13, and her mother told her teachers. They were asked not to tell me because we had a meeting where a psychologist was going to explain it. She became very emotional as she described the rest of the story:

He [the teacher] took me out of the room with the teacher aid, and he proceeded to tell me that I was damaged in the brain, and I was never going to amount to anything, and this is why all the other kids hated me. This is why I would never be able to go to college or amount to anything, worth anything, basically. That I never would be normal and would probably was going to end up in a group home someday, and I would never be able to take care of myself or make money. Essentially, I should just give up now, basically.

I asked her more about how she felt she was treated by the staff. She said she had a few teachers who would accommodate her by allowing her to test in a smaller room or give extra time on assignments, but that was about it. She said they made me feel like “I was just a pain in the ass, pardon me for cursing. They would say, ‘Why don’t you get this?’ or ‘Why don’t you want to do group work,’ or ‘Why are you always causing all these problems,’ and it makes you feel like you are a problem.” She said her teachers were not trained on autism, and many knew she had the diagnosis. She gave the analogy, “You wouldn’t ask me to go in and do brain surgery without proper training. It’s the same thing with teachers; we are asking them to go into a situation unfamiliar to them and somehow just make it up as they go along.”

I asked her to give some advice to neuro-typical peers about how they treat people with autism. She said, “Words have impact. When you call names or do these, it may be funny to you at the moment, but you never know what kind of damage you’re causing inside.” I asked her what she felt teachers needed to know or understand. She said, “Teachers need to be more educated about sensory overload. They need to be educated about the different ways people on the spectrum process information and some of the accommodations that they can offer people on the spectrum.” She added, “When teachers are stressed, they’re going to take that stress out on

their students. If they feel like they're more able to manage, they're going to have time for more of those extras, to help students." She wants educators to know:

When you're teaching someone, how you socially treat them, not only affects how they learn and how they retain information, it affects their self-worth, it affects how they view themselves, the goals they make for themselves, how they feel about their ability to be successful, how they feel about their ability to make friends, to be worth friendship, to just be worth happiness, period. I think that it's very important that teachers take that into account, even when they're frustrated, speaking to students because their words would have value, and they have to remember they are in a higher position of authority.

After our interview, Student 7 had thoughts to add after reading her transcript. She felt this was important for people to understand:

Throughout my education, I was consistently bullied and told I wasn't worth very much because of my disability. Because this happened so persistently, it became something I grew to expect and somewhat resigned myself to as a fact of life. Even to this day, I somewhat expect it when I disclose my disability and looking at it with a fresh perspective, that is something no young person should have to do. It is very damaging to expect and tolerate that sort of abuse, and I guess my point is to say I would hope that future generation will recognize that is wrong and damaging and fight against it not become resigned to it being status quo. It will bleed into adult life and has a major effect on self-esteem and self-worth, as I already alluded to. I hope future generations will demand to be treated with respect and know they are worthy of it.

**Breaking myths about autism.** It was important to each person I interviewed to break myths about autism and help educators know that autism does not stop people from having goals and dreams. They wanted to speak out that because social situations can be stimulating, this does not mean they do not want to be invited to things or included. I gave each person the *Aspiration's Index*, which discusses goals and its importance. Table 5 contains the responses to the questionnaire included as part of the students' guided protocol.

Table 5

*Aspiration's Index of Students on the Autism Spectrum*

Importance of Goal	VI	I	SI	NI
To grow and learn new things	4/7	2/7	1/7	0
To have good friends	6/7	0	1/7	0
To work for the betterment of society	4/7	2/7	1/7	0
To share my life with someone I love that would result in marriage or partnership	4/7	2/7	1/7	0
To have people comment on how attractive I am	0	0	1/7	6/7
To assist and help others	5/7	2/7	0	0
To choose my own career instead of being pushed into a career	6/7	1/7	0	0
To be accepted for who I am	6/7	1/7	0	0
To have people stay in a relationship with me	5/7	2/7	0	0

*Note.* VI=Very Important, I=Important, SI=Somewhat Important, NI=Not Important

Part of the index follows up by asking each person how likely they feel this goal will happen in their future. The majority responded that it is not very likely to accept for who they are, and almost half felt they might not get married. But having good friends and people stay in their lives is an important goal. The likelihood of having life-long friends was felt to be somewhat likely to not likely. As the students kept saying, they want to be treated as equals and humans and for others to understand they have the same wants, goals, and desires and that social skills and social communication deficits can keep them from achieving their goals. Person 5 said, "Inclusion is a lifelong process" it is not just about the academic portion of life but everyone's life journey."

### **Barriers to Inclusion: The IEP Process**

The four populations identified several barriers in creating a climate of inclusion in the public school system for students on the autism spectrum. While the climate that is created by

administrators/LEA representatives, educators and peers are crucial for inclusion and inclusive practices, the IEP team is tasked with producing the IEP and to ensure students with autism are both academically and socially included. The process of IEP building is often be described as conflictual or adversarial. Research question four asked, “What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP teams observed or experienced that increased conflict?”

To gather data, three of the four populations were asked on their guided protocols, “What elements contributed to collaborative or successful IEP meetings,” and “What elements contributed to adversarial or conflictual IEP meetings?” The administrative/LEA representative population consisted of the current administration, retired administration, those in leadership positions that can legally serve as LEA representatives, and those who train LEA representatives at the county level for a total of nine members of the population. Educators for the population consist of general education teachers, special education teachers, school psychologists, a school counselor, speech-language specialists, and an occupational therapist for a total of 11 interviews of this population. The parent population consisted of eight parents with children on the autism spectrum who are currently or were recently in the public-school system. Two of the eight parents did not have IEPs to provide for the study but were able to discuss the summary of goals for documentation of goals for their students diagnosed with autism receiving services in the public system. Each person of each population was interviewed with a guided protocol appropriate for their population. Students on the autism spectrum were not included because only four of the eight had attended an IEP meeting and reported they had not been part of many meetings or remembered anything except that their parents had to advocate for their rights and

needs. Each population's top themes are discussed and then compared across the three populations.

Descriptive coding, in-vivo coding, and pattern coding were used to code each transcribed interview. After receiving the transcription from the transcription service, the transcription was checked against the recording for accuracy and against field notes during the interview as well as each participant was given the opportunity to view their transcript for accuracy and add any further statements to the end of their interview. In the first pass of the transcribed interview, themes and remarks were identified that were repeated for descriptive coding. A coding matrix lists the recurring theme, and then tic marks were recorded to tally each time the remark of a similar type was made by the population separately. The second coding of the transcript looked for the themes and patterns of SDT, which are autonomy, relatedness, and competency. Thirdly, the transcriptions were reviewed for in-vivo language to record specific quotes from participants to emphasize the participant's experience. Lastly, when the results were compiled in the coding matrices, language contrasting collaborative or conflictual meetings were examined, the conceptual framework of medical/professional, social, or empowerment language in disabilities models.

**Elements of collaboration.** While each population had several overlaps as to contributing factors for collaboration, the order, and perspective as to why differs slightly. Each perspective's point of view is further outlined, and full lists and matrices are available (see Appendix M).

*Administrative/LEA representatives' experience.* LEA representatives represent the local agency and are required to understand special education law and ensure compliance of those laws to make sure the student is receiving FAPE in the LRE. This population consisted of nine



individuals; Table 6 outlines the elements of the top three elements that contribute to collaboration from the LEA's experience.

Table 6

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meetings: LEA Representatives' Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	8/9
Relationship (positive, open, consistent, before and after meeting)	7/9
Data/Reports (updated, thorough, clear)	7/9

The table illustrates that communication and relationship and providing accurate data were the top three elements identified by leadership. LEA Participant 2, a current assistant principal said about the importance of communication and relationship:

I think frequent, positive communication between the teacher and the parent outside of the IEP meeting. The relationship between the classroom teacher, if they already have a strong, positive relationship, then at the IEP, even if there is disagreements, they're cordial and they're focused on the best interest of that child.

A lead special education teacher who serves as LEA, LEA 4, at her school describes her process for building a collaborative IEP team starting with listening.

Just listening. A lot of times I find that my parents just want somebody to listen and not to try and give them reasons why we can't do things. When I have parents that are going through concerns, I write them down. I make sure we are solution-focused. I've never been able to understand the us versus them mentality because I think we're all in the same business of education and doing what's best for kids. If we keep that at the forefront, then parents are very responsive to that.

These statements reflect on the importance of communication and relationship (relatedness) of the parent and the school before a meeting which focus on the individualized needs of the child (autonomy), where parents feel listened to (competent) and empowered knowing the child is being recognized as having strengths as well as challenges. A climate of inclusion starts with the leadership of the school. LEA Participant 8, a former SPED teacher and

current Executive Director of Student Services in her county, stated: “I will say it comes from the top-down. It absolutely takes the principal and all the administrators sharing the message that every student in this building, they are our students.”

While educators shared some of the same elements, they shared that an active, supportive, and engaged administrator is key to a collaborative or successful IEP meeting. Of the three populations, administrators/LEA representatives place accurate and thorough data as one of the top three elements of a successful meeting. While other parties feel data and reports are important, they did not make the top three for other populations.

***Educators’ experience.*** While the IDEA laws mandate a classroom teacher, special education teacher, LEA representative, and parent as the core of the IEP team, in the case of students on the autism spectrum, often specialists that will provide specific services for the student are part of the IEP team. When testing has been done, it is required that someone who can interpret the tests be present at the IEP meeting. Table 7 outlines the most discussed experience of collaboration from the view of the educator and specialists who attend the IEP meetings.

Table 7

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Educators’ Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Starting a meeting with positives/successes or growth/strengths	10/11
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	9/11
General Ed/SPED=4/5; Educator Other=5/6	
Attentive/Engaged/Supportive Administration/LEA	7/11
General Ed/SPED=5/5; Educator Other=2/6	
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent	7/11
General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=4/6	
Preparedness of the School/Same Page/Team Environment	7/11
General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=6/6	

The educator's top three elements include communication and relationship, which was similar to the LEA representative's remarks, but the addition of an active, engaged, or supportive administrator supports the research that educators need to feel supported and resourced to have a positive attitude about inclusion. Administrators will be the ones who find the resources and supports or provide in-service training for teachers; therefore, an actively engaged administrator adds to a positive, collaborative environment.

When I asked follow-up questions about what administrators can do to be helpful or supportive or engaged, I received some of the following information. Educator Participant 2, a Gen Ed teacher with SPED training, said:

I've had administrators that are more helpful in the area in that sometimes; I think administrators that let the teachers have more decisions and be able to make some changes that benefit the kid. I guess let the teachers make their own or some decisions.

Educator Participant 3, a SPED teacher, commented about administrators:

"Administration plays a big role in the atmosphere of the school. The administration sets the morale of the students. If the morale is low, then teachers are going to be negative, period."

Educator Participant 5, a SPED teacher in a self-contained classroom, said about her administration:

Actually, this is the most incredible school I've ever worked at, and I've worked at some crazy places. I have a lot of support, and it's the most support I've ever had. The principal comes in and is very complimentary of me or the teacher or our team and talk about all the work we have done to make things happen thus far. I really appreciate that from him.

However, the top element that educators noted as beginning a meeting positively and collaboratively is to begin the meeting with positives or about the growth the child has made before discussing challenges and especially before discussing behaviors. SPED teachers and specialists noted that by starting on the positives, this builds trust with the parents that you are

getting to know the child as a whole and not concentrating solely on the behaviors. Educator 2, a General Education teacher with SPED background and training, explained:

I think the more you start off a meeting like that [IEP meeting] on the negative note that can be a problem too. Like if you start off the meeting with, so Johnny's been having a hard time instead of starting it off positive, I'd have to say I haven't had very many negative ones though [IEP meetings]. Then sometimes I feel like when the parents aren't happy, and they have the advocates come in, maybe that sets up a barrier of not everyone working together. I think it usually goes back to communication. I feel like if you keep up good communication with the parents, and like I said, develop that relationship and keep things toward a positive outlook. Whatever is in the child's best interest.

Educator 8, a school counselor, echoed the sentiments of Educator 2 when asked what contributes to positive or collaborative IEP meetings she stated:

Those meetings start with a positive- I call them positive sandwiches. They start with, is Johnny doing well? How far has Johnny grown already, then move into what we want to target to improve and how to do that, and then what our goals are for the future to bring it full circle so that everybody's on the same team. Everybody's rooting for that child. It's not teacher versus parent.

The comments around starting with the positive also focused on starting the meeting letting parents know we want to help this child, your child is welcome here, and we are so proud of what he or she has done, now let's focus on goals and the next steps. The educators felt this was an important step in relationship building and open, transparent communication with the parent to create a teamwork atmosphere. At least two educators stated that when behaviors are focused on first, it creates defensiveness in the parent because it may feel like only the negative or challenge is what is being seen by the school, and this does not foster a positive, working relationship with the parents.

***Parent's experience.*** Parents also value communication and relationship, and as the LEA representatives and Educators have stated. Parents want to be welcomed and treated as an equal member of the team as well as feel their child is the focus of the meeting as an individual.

Whereas LEA representatives had seven elements they felt contributed to collaboration, and

Educators felt nine elements contributed to collaboration, parents felt 21 elements are important for collaborative and successful IEP meetings. Table 8 indicates the themes that were discussed by all seven of the eight total interviewed whose child has an active IEP.

Table 8

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Parent's Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	*7/7
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent	7/7
My involvement is welcome, appreciate/treated as equal	7/7
I feel listened too/heard	7/7
They address concerns	7/7
They respect my idea/input/suggests	7/7

*Note.* \*Only 7 of 8 have an active IEP

The IDEA mandates state that the parent is to be treated as an equal member of the IEP team, in which parents can feel there is an imbalance of power when there are several representatives of the school present and the parents feel they are the only ones advocating for their child. As the data suggests, when parents feel heard, respected, and treated as an equal member of the team, they report higher collaboration and success from the meeting. Parent 2 from NC, who has a child in a self-contained autism classroom, explained:

In my opinion, when we actually start a meeting talking about my child. Just having a conversation, and not being like, 'Okay, here's the goals- here's the goals.' We always, even legally, need to go through the positive thing, what the parents want for the child, and all that stuff. Just having a genuine conversation about her and her needs, and what we see want to see for her. In the past, we had a teacher who just really took to her and seemed to really get her. That was the most I felt like a successful meeting because she saw so much potential.

Parent 3 from SC, parent of a child whose placement split between general education class and the SPED classroom said:

We actually had one last week. The reason for the meeting, it was actually requested by the school. I had just met with her general education teacher and special education teacher at the end of the first nine weeks just to talk about how [the child] was doing. I did not think there was a reason to meet, but I figure anytime they want to meet and discuss [the child], I try to accommodate that. It was a good meeting. Sometimes, as I am sure you know, Stephanie, you can get somewhat emotional in these meetings when you feel they are not haring you, but this was actually a good IEP meeting, and it was the principal, her special ed teacher and this speech therapist. The four of us had, I think, a good collaborative session.

Meeting to discuss the child's progress and gathering more information even when there was not a specific problem to solve made the parent feel like the school was competent, that they were on the same team (relatedness) and that her autonomy was respected. Parent 6 from GA, whose child is in general education classes with support, said that in her experience, she has had only one negative IEP meeting, and that was to reestablish eligibility after eligibility had been taken. She has friends who have gone through IEP meetings as well, and she stated:

We have been very blessed with the team that has been in place from fourth and fifth grade, and now carrying over to the middle school. What I have heard from friends and acquaintances, their experiences is they don't feel empowered. They don't feel like their suggestions are really considered. They feel like it is us versus them mentality. They don't feel that whole support. I don't know of anyone that has this phone number where they text back and forth with their child's case manager like I do.

The theme that the data illustrated and the in-vivo quotes demonstrate is a combination of the elements of the SDT of Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competency with Empowerment as a driving theme. When administrators empower teachers and parents feel empowered, and the team is drawing on the focus of the best interest of the child in a team effort to develop the child's potential versus focusing on behaviors or the negatives, the process is seen as successful, collaborative, and positive from all populations involved in the IEP team meeting.

***Themes across populations.*** After looking at the data ranking the top themes/values from each population's perspective individually, I took all remarks and tallied them without reference to the population but wanted to examine how many of the total 27 ranked each theme or value. I

wondered how many elements at least one-third or higher ranked ordered as contributing to the collaborative efforts of the team. Which elements were across the populations? Because there were 27 participants, I decided nine being one-third of the total would be cut off for ranking. Therefore, any remark that received nine or higher tallies would be considered the top elements for building collaborative, positive IEP teams. Thirteen elements were found across the three populations. The full list of elements is available (see Appendix M). See Table 9 for a list of elements wherein at least half of the overall participants listed as elements of collaboration.

Table 9

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP Meeting: Across Populations*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	24/*26	A,R,C	E
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent	21/26	R,C	E
If the meeting starts with positives/strengths/growth	20/26	A,R,C	E
Listening/Felt listened to	16/26	A,R,C	E
Address concerns	16/26	A,R,C	E
Focus on my child/student best interest whole child	15/26	A,R,C	E

*Note.* A=Autonomy, R=Relatedness, C= Competency, E=Empowerment, P=Professional; \*One parent was not included as her child did not have an IEP

Of the 13 elements on the coding matrix (see Appendix M) and the top themes represented on the above table, the two SDT themes that rank the highest are Relatedness and Competency. When members feel connected and respect the competency of others, the team is reported to feel more collaborative. Although Autonomy is an important aspect of SDT, its importance is third, scoring only eight of the elements of the total 13 elements listed by participants.

**Elements of conflict.** I wondered if the question is asked in reverse, what elements contribute to conflict would the same 13 elements be mentioned, and would Competency and Relatedness be the main themes. The more empowerment language and actions that were present in the IEP meeting, the findings represent more collaboration. The same three populations totaling 26-27 interviews were asked the question in reverse as to elements that contribute to conflict, adversarial, or tense IEP meetings or eligibility meetings. The same coding protocol and methods were used. Each population's view of what yield's conflict will be separately reviewed followed by a cross-population tally of what at least one-third of the total tallies reported as yielding conflict. It is noted that more elements were listed as conflict, causing than elements that yield a more positive or collaborative environment.

*Administrative/LEA representatives' experience.* Participants were asked what contributes to conflict, and most of the LEA representatives had been SPED teachers before moving to this leadership role. In a follow-up question to LEA participant 4, I asked, "What's been the difference being on the educator side and then being on the LEA side? What difference or placement for yourself or your position are you in?" LEA participant 4 was previously a general education teacher with SPED certification, primarily teaching in the general education classroom, and the following is her response:

I think that being on the LEA side, I can see a big picture, a little bit more than I could be as the teacher that sat in the meeting. When I was just the teacher sitting in the meeting, I was just thinking about my own little isolated classroom, and not thinking about how all the puzzle pieces fit together, but as an LEA, I'm looking at a whole picture, if that makes sense.

Three educators indicated that in the average IEP meeting, the administration or LEA representative tends not to be very active unless conflict or an impasse has arisen. The County Representative, who previously in her career taught self-contained classes and inclusion math



and English for 28 years, was interviewed because she may be called in to be an LEA at times.

LEA Participant 9 indicated about her role as an LEA:

I am called in when the team believes they need someone else to come and help them out with parental concerns and coming to an agreeable IEP. It's usually a contentious situation. I'm not very often invited to meetings where everyone's happy.

Table 10 lists elements that contribute to conflict from the Administration/LEA representative's perspective as to what the most experienced elements or issues result in conflict and impasse when trying to develop IEPs to socially and academically include students on the autism spectrum. The full coding matrix is available (see Appendix N); Table 10 represents experiences at least half of the population experienced in the role of an LEA.

Table 10

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: LEA Representative Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Break Down in Communication	7/9
Teacher not trained in or understand Autism	6/9
When the discussion is behavior/challenged focused	6/9
Disagreement about Placement/LRE/Teacher fit	5/9
Unrealistic Expectations/Demands from the parent	5/9
Parent Doesn't Feel Services/Supports are Adequate	5/9

LEA participant 6, who has been in this leadership role for 12 years and previously was SPED teacher for many years, had this to say about what she observed in IEP conflictual meetings.

Well, I think communication can be a big barrier. The lack of good communication between parent and teacher prior to the IEP meeting that can definitely be a barrier to having a successful IEP meeting. Also, a lot of time evaluators or psychologists, they're having to deliver information to a parent than may be difficult information to receive

because the parents may have their own opinions about a thing. They may have their child participating in some outwork and outside therapies, and so if they're not in agreement with what our evaluator has evaluated or tests, that can cause disagreement. I do think a lot of times, just parent's perception and school's perception can really cause a lot of disagreement within those IEP meetings. Parents may not, a lot of times. Still, we have parents who may not understand the different continuum of services or the different placement options, and they might not trust what the school is doing. I do think that communication and trust are probably two of the biggest factors that contribute to less successful IEP meetings.

Participant 8, a former SPED teacher for 25 years and now trains the Special Lead

Teachers who are able to serve as LEA representatives in her county described her view on origins of conflict in IEP meetings from what she sees each member do to contribute to the conflict as:

I think one of the constant things is the parent. It's that constant push and pull. The parents think that their child should be doing X, Y, or Z or should have made more progress or has not gotten this service that we said would be provided. For usually, for the parents, they feel they haven't gotten something, and then the school district believes that they have provided it, and that's what sets up the conflict.

Many times, our gen ed teachers don't really understand the importance of their role in an IEP team meeting, although we try to explain it and train them as well before going into meetings. I don't know that our gen ed teachers always understand their role or why they're there or what they provide to the team. Also, sometimes it depends if a gen ed teachers does not see a student frequently. I don't think they know what they contribute or how to best contribute information. When the gen ed teacher, actually any teacher, when they start with the student can't do or isn't doing or won't do versus trying to talk about the good things first, or the ways that they're trying to work or the growth that they have seen in the student, that's always challenging.

When they [administrators] just don't have an understanding of special education in general, students with autism in specific, or many times the administrators aren't there. Oftentimes, I don't know how well they really know the students prior to going into an IEP.

Conflict seems to be highest when there is not a team atmosphere, or the school and parents are at odds or in disagreement about the best interest of the child or if the services or adequate or implemented correctly. The main source of conflict centers on the relational of the parent and general education teacher, according to the LEA perspective. In the above table, the totals indicate that lack of Competence or Autonomy appears to be driving the conflict when

there is a lack of relationship or communication (Relatedness). The language used in what drives conflict would be categorized as less empowering, especially to the parent, and more professional disability model language is used, then the parent feels they must advocate for social justice and the rights of their child. These elements set up an us versus them atmosphere instead of a collaborative and team atmosphere.

*Educators' experience.* The general educators and the special educators have the most contact with the student on the spectrum and will be the educators most responsible for implementing the services to the student, although Educator 1, a general education teacher, felt that the main load or “burden” of responsibility falls on the shoulder of the general educator. All educators interviewed felt in other parts of the interview that any educator who will be called upon to integrate or include a student with autism should have proper training and supports in place because, without the understanding and supports, the general educator is being set up for failure. The Educator population felt that were several additional elements that lead to conflict. Table 11 lists the elements that more than half felt contributed to conflictual IEP meetings, and the full coding matrix is available (see Appendix N).

Table 11

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Educator Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
If the Parent feels like we do not like/enjoy/welcome child in the class General Ed/SPED=5/5; Educator Other=6/6	11/11
When the main focus is behaviors/challenges General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=6/6	8/11
Break Down in Communication (Teacher/Parent) General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=6/6	8/11
LRE Placement/Teacher Fit General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=5/6	8/11
Admin is Not Active/Nonsupportive/Not Engaged General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=5/6	8/11
Admin is Not Active/Nonsupportive/Not Engaged General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=5/6	8/11
Gen Ed. teacher doesn't understand AS or lacks awareness/understanding General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=5/6	7/11
Inflexible/Rigid/Defensive Language (from anyone)	7/11
Parent Feels School is Protecting Own Interests- Not Child's General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=5/6	7/11
Parents Do Not Feel Services are Adequate/Correct General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=4/6	6/11

Table 11 reflects data that indicates when there is less relatedness that matters of autonomy and competence seem to drive conflict. Autonomy struggles may derive from the teacher or school team not feeling heard or not feeling their opinions or valid or the parents' not feeling their autonomy is respected, or their opinions and beliefs heard. Of the three components of SDT, the issue of competency or perceived lack of competency leads to language that is more professional disability model-driven and less empowering from the school agency to the parents

and teachers. The more the language that is professional and less empowering, the interactions are less relational, and conflict is higher. Educator 1, a general educator, spoke to her frustrations and needs for autonomy in the IEP process and implementing IEP goals.

I feel the meetings run a lot smoother when I look up or research ideas that may help the student. I might generate a list of different ideas to help the student in an area. Then it just served me better, and when I go to the meeting, prepared with that generated list of ideas so I can say, 'Hey, here are some ideas that I have' versus letting someone else come up with ideas that I possibly can't manage. I feel like as a gen ed teacher, I can better take control of my IEP meetings when I come with a list of ideas that I find manageable, number one, and that also benefits the student. I feel like the resource I lack is time. Not much can be done about that. I think principals are really good at saying they're supportive. I don't think they mean to not be supportive, because I have some wonderful administrators. I think they have so much going on as well that at the end of the day, once the meeting is over, I don't think they are saying, 'Let me go get some interventions for [name omitted],' you know what I mean?

Educator 3, a SPED teacher with about 15 years of experience, indicated that the morale and climate and the role of the administrator are crucial before IEP meetings. He also speaks to the Autonomy and individuality that is needed to be placed on the student.

Administration plays a big role in the atmosphere of the school. The administrator sets the morale of the students. If the morale is low, then teachers are going to be negative, period. From a student's perspective, I think being as educated as possible on the incoming student and how to help that student is beneficial. If a student just comes in class and the teacher has no idea, it's not going to be a good situation.

Speaking to the need for parent autonomy and feeling like the child's autonomy and individualization are being addressed, Educator participant 7, a school psychologist and former practicing clinician, addressed how autonomy or need feeling heard can lead to the autonomy conflicts in the IEP team meetings.

I just had a meeting where we actually had to postpone the meeting, and we got to meet again later to bring in some more people to help mediate the conversation. If a parent comes in with a private psyc., and they're saying that the child has autism, but the school is not really seeing education impact as a result of the autism, a lot of times it can lead to a lot of discord because parents may feel the school is not supporting them. They may feel that their child is not getting the most appropriate services that they need. A lot of

times, parents can get emotional because they might be at their wit's end of not knowing what else to do.

When asked about other factors that she has viewed lead to discord, she added:

I think it's when there's not a clear understanding of what is going on. A lot of times, with the schools I work with, we'd have autism-related classrooms. Typically, those teachers are very well educated on what autism looks like, what those behaviors look like, and they can talk a lot about how we can address those behaviors in the classroom. However, when we're having meetings with a student who's going into a general education class, sometimes the general education teachers aren't as educated on what autism looks like and how to deal with some of those behaviors. So there are times when the language sometimes teachers used in the meeting is not compassionate for a parent to hear because sometimes teachers are just frustrated and they don't know what to do, and they're not able to provide that confidence to the parent about how they're helping to deal with some of the behaviors in the classroom. From my standpoint, I do think gen ed teachers sometimes are not well trained or don't have as much knowledge on autism. Sometimes teachers do not have a lot to add, which then can cause the parents to lose confidence in what's going on.

The school psychologist spoke to conflicts and issues of autonomy and competence. Lack of training and understanding can make the educator feel less competent and feel less agency or autonomy in the classroom, and perceiving this lack of competence makes parents feel more likely to advocate for rights and services or their child's autonomy and less trusting of the competence of the school. The school psychologist added praise for parents being educated and advocating for their children that a participative parent is better than parents who are not involved or do not show up. She felt that the school needed not to fear or be intimidated by an educated parent but to listen to the parent's concerns and sees this most in IEPs that are about autism eligibility. However, when there is conflict, neither teacher nor parent feels empowered.

***Parents' experience.*** As teachers had more to say about what contributes to conflict instead of collaboration, parents had 22 items that they feel contribute to conflict in IEP meetings. The themes also center on autonomy and competency with a lack of relatedness or empowerment. Half of the population and higher agreed to the same issues of the conflict for 17

out of the 22 items listed in the full coding matrix available (see Appendix N). It is important to add that one parent of the eight was not able to get an IEP for their child but after meetings and verified autism diagnosis was told the child could not an IEP but 504. Therefore, many questions did not apply in that one case, but overall, she did not feel listened to or that or concerns or even the teacher's concerns about the child were addressed. Table 12 shows the elements that contribute to conflict from the parents' perspective.

Table 12

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Parents' Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Not listening to me or my concerns about my child	8/8
Teacher does not know/like/want my child in their room	7/7
When the focus is behavior/challenge oriented	6/7
Teacher doesn't understand Autism	6/8
Disagreement on LRE/placement/teacher fit	6/8
Services are not adequate or implemented	6/8
School is protecting self/Not best interest of the child	6/7
Break Down or Lack of Communication	5/8
School is not following the IEP	5/7
*School will not listen to IEE or outside professionals/specialists	5/8
Administration is not active/supportive/engaged	5/7
**When I must bring an advocate	5/7
***When the child's multiple disabilities or issues are not addressed	5/7

*Note.* \*Not all parents had IEEs, \*\*Not all parents had to bring advocates 5 out of 7 had advocates, \*\*\* Only 5 of 7 with an IEP had a child with autism with other disabilities/issues.

In interviewing parents, for those who were resorting to taking an advocate, the common refrain was although advocates were there to help win support for their child it was also disempowering because the parent wanted to be heard and wanted concerns addressed, but it was not until an advocate was brought in that these needs were addressed. Parent 4 explained that

having someone speak for you means your voice was already muted, and the advocate, while knowing the law does not know your child as well as you as a parent, thus feels less collaborative and less like you are being seen as an equal on the team.

The first parent interviewed had already spent around \$8000.00 on an advocate across one school year. There were two areas of contention. The child had social needs that the school did not wish to address. The child had a verified autism diagnosis from a prestigious institution in her state, and the evaluation was ignored. The child had an IEP for ADHD and other learning challenges, but the school would not consider AU (autism) as an eligibility category and thus would not consider the social goals. Half of the \$8000 was spent on trying to have autism added as eligibility so that they could better fight for social skills goals. Once the eligibility included AU, the parent was still unable to get a social skill goal without inviting the advocate back again. She stated that the average preparatory time for an IEP meeting with an advocate and doing research is about eight to ten hours a month, which takes away from her time with her children after school hours. Meetings average two to three hours. In addition to feeling not heard, the resources expended in time, energy, and finances are burdensome. When asked about her biggest frustration in that school year, Parent 1 stated:

I don't know if that's the construct that they [the school] naturally work with and if there's some kind of culture within the school system that frowns upon them [outside professionals/specialists], needing more help from the outside. There's an unwillingness to say, 'We don't got this. We need more help.' I don't know why that is.

Parent 2, when asked if she felt the school had always treated her as an equal or is the school addressing her child's needs, she said this is part of the issue the inconsistency year to year and teacher to the teacher which affects the IEP team year to year. She said:

We've had an up and down kind of history with the school. In our region, they can go anywhere within the country. Last year the teacher had more focus on and really worked



with her [daughter] on making sure she was interacting with peers. This year I have not seen much focus on that.

She continued to explain that her focus is the whole child, and she wants to think long-term about functionality and independent skills and while it was important to be academically focused, what good does that do if the child cannot interact with society and peers. When her concerns are brought up, they are discarded because they are more academic with a focus on that specific year only.

Parent 3's concerns and explanation of conflict focused on the school not always spending time between the teacher and her getting to know the child. Her child is not in the general education classroom, and she agrees with placement and services overall, but where IEP meetings get conflictual for her is when she feels the child is depersonalized and the team is not relational. She explained:

It's about getting to know that student, really assists the parent with the meeting because as far as we say, get to know the child first, then there's a special need. When you start with the special needs and do not give the parents a chance to elaborate about a child some, it becomes a problem because this is like, 'Okay, I'm not being heard.'

Parent 5 from the Carolinas was included in the study even though her son with autism does not have an IEP but instead a 504. The reason for the meeting between her and the school was to discuss eligibility after her son was diagnosed professionally with an autism diagnosis. The 504 had noted social anxiety, and the meeting notes and documentation provided for me stated that the teacher and parent noted social issues, social anxieties, and the lack of getting assignments completed and group work done due to social issues. Those assembled stated that because the child's grades were above average, they did not see the academic impact and did not see where the autism was impacting his academics. The group decided that a 504 was best, although the parent did not agree. The school did not even follow through with testing for

eligibility because they determined unilaterally it was not necessary. The school instead insisted upon a 504. The parent noted she asked where the social anxiety and social goals were that were the reasons for her requesting the meeting. The school stated that 504s do not address those items only an IEP, and again he did not need an IEP in their opinion. When asked specifically about the anxiety or needs, Parent 5 stated:

The social anxiety mostly. He was having trouble completing his lessons because he gets distracted easily. He has two teachers [co-taught]. They didn't even have a clue he was autistic. I had to email each one of them individually, give them a copy of the 504 plan. I had to do that. That wasn't done by the school.

When asked about other elements that made the school year difficult for her and her son, she said that the key element is the teacher, and the teacher attitude can be the “main negative element.” She further explained that after she had the 504 put in place, this was still not implemented and discussed the teacher component:

Well, the teacher once again. That is the most pivotal part in their school experience, in my opinion. The negative experience I had, the teacher said all of the right things in the meetings, and then turned around and did just whatever she wanted when she got back in the classroom.

She stated she may have to get an advocate or support and try again for an eligibility meeting because the concerns are not being addressed and the only measure or reason they felt he did not qualify was because his grades were not negatively impacted, yet the student has severe anxiety about going to school and his interactions in the classroom. She is concerned about the overall impact if the needs are not addressed.

The last two interviews are parents of students who were interviewed in the student population of the study. Parent 7 and her husband were both educators at the time their child received eligibility for an IEP and had put in nearly three decades of service in the public school system. Parent 8, although not a public-school educator, was a professional OT during the time

her son was in school and well experienced with autism. Both parents valued the public education system, yet due to their experience and lack of progress for their children, both parents had to remove their child from the public school system.

Parent 7 said that her daughter ran the gamete of placement when in elementary school, and they were very concerned about her academic and social inclusion in middle school and high school. In sixth grade, she felt the IEP team gave her and her husband precursory respect due to their backgrounds in education yet never really addressed their concerns. They decided to move the student to the father's middle school, and in those years, they felt she got a little more support, and the school years were a bit more successful. However, in high school, the IEP team did not work together to meet either the academic or social goals of the student. Some of her teachers refused to make the accommodations or modifications as if it were not fair to the other students, or they personally did not see her as autistic. She ended up failing some courses, and still, the concerns were not addressed. Parent 7 explained that the teacher's attitude about inclusion and knowledge of autism is crucial. She stated:

Oh gosh. It has to be the right personality. It can't be, 'Well, you're going to just to do it because I've been doing it this way' [in regard to communication with the student] or 'My way or no way at all' that type of mindset doesn't work.

Parent 7 empathized and acknowledged all of the work teachers do and appreciates the extra work, but argued it is imperative for all teachers to understand better autism, special education, and the reasons behind accommodations and modifications. She stated her, and her spouse spoke of concerns with teasing, and the lack of social skills or social skills and one teacher said something like, "Well if she didn't act the way she did she would have more friends, what do you want us to do about it?" Which to the point of the parents, she did not know and hence why they wanted social goals. She said the most pushback was on social skills and

modifications. When her daughter failed some classes, in their pursuit to find a summer program for credit recovery, they found a small, private school, which is where they transferred her to complete her high school education. They felt it was a better fit and the IEP team although respectful in tone and acted as if they treated them as equals and educators; the concerns were not addressed and staying in the school system was no longer in the best interest of their child even though both ended up retiring in 2018 as educators. They felt the system they had served whole-heartedly had failed their child, and this was disappointing.

Parent 8's son has multiple disabilities, whereas the son is closer to ASD level 3, is nonspeaking, and has motor apraxia. It is important for the parent and the son to explain the difference between nonspeaking and nonverbal. He was classified first as nonverbal, and the educators assumed this meant he lacked both the motor ability of speech and receptive language. Parent 8 said, "Nonverbally seems to assume nonthinking." The parent had to take advocates to the meetings and the son's experienced general education and small class setting and all forms of self-contained settings and periods of schooling in the public system and homeschool when the school and parents could not agree on proper academic and social goals. When the son was in high school, a form of communication referred to as a letter board was introduced wherein the son finally had a way to express his voice and communicate with others, yet to be a communication partner with him required training. One teacher agreed to be trained, and this was effective for some of the school year. Unfortunately, the teacher was transferred, and the school did not seem to think about replacing her with someone who was willing to use the letter board or be trained. Upon the start of the new school year, the issue had been addressed. Her son had advocated that he wanted a general education diploma and not a special needs' diploma, and this was not going to be allowed at the school due to his nonspeaking they felt they could not

measure his progress. The son was not able to complete his education in the public school nor allowed permission to use his communication device to take the GED. The parent described her frustrations about the IEP as such:

They [admin/educators] need to be trained to be able to collaborate, to be able to take suggestions, and partner with the parents because the parents are the expert on *their* children, of course, within reason. They should have an attitude of ‘I am in this to meet the needs of the particular student over the school.’ A meeting is for the student to get the education that is *their right* to have. That’s why people on this team went into this profession in the first place!

What the parents have expressed in their frustrations in the public education system is not feeling they are heard and not feeling the child is receiving their educational rights to FAPE. The parents as the advocate for their minor children are usually fighting for the autonomy or individualization and personhood to be recognized as a child with individual needs. As the school year changes, so do the members of the IEP team, which part of the frustration that some years they feel heard and the school year goes well and others it feels like they are back at square one. Each parent indicated that their thoughts are beyond school to transitional outcomes, and when the school does not address social and academic needs, this is short-sided and not thinking of the whole child and future of the child, which they know is part of the federal mandates for FAPE. Overall in the data shown, the score indicates 20 items scored as lack of competency on the part of the school, 15 issues dealt with issues of autonomy concerning themselves or their child, and five were issues of relatedness. In more conflictual settings, there again was an absence of a relationship.

***Themes across populations.*** After each population’s perspective and the experience were examined separately, a list was made across populations. Out of the total number of 27 interviews, the elements listed in the complete coding matrix (see Appendix N). represent at least

one-third or nine members referencing the item or theme as contributing to conflict in the IEP team. Table 13 lists the themes that emerged when all populations' theme was included.

Table 13

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Across Populations*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
*When the focus is behaviors/challenges	20/26
Break Down or No Communication	20/27
*Parent does not feel teacher likes/welcomes/knows child (student)	20/27
Teacher does not understand Autism or lacks Training in Autism	19/27
Disagreement on placement or Teacher Fit or Eligibility	19/27
Parent doesn't feel services are adequate or correct	17/27
The best interest of the school/staff is ahead of the interest of the child	15/27
*Administration is not active/engaged/supportive	15/26

*Note.* \*Number of 26 removed the participant whose child did not qualify for an IEP

As Table 13 demonstrates, when the language of the meeting is more professional model minded that the parent is not feeling empowered or included as a team or when social disability model language is evident wherein the disability is not in itself the only disabling aspect, but the lack of supports, structures, and resources are adding to the student's ability to succeed, there is more evidence of conflict in the IEP meeting. The table also illustrates that the key component of SDT indicated is lack of confidence in competence by lack of training or understanding of SPED law or autism itself produces competence issues in educators in their inclusion efforts for students on the autism spectrum. Previously when team members discussed collaboration, the highest component was relatedness, which is the opposite in the production of conflict wherein members expressed 16 elements in the autonomy theme and seven in the relatedness theme. When the relationship is considered high, the team works collaboratively, when there is conflict

and lack of trust in competence, there is more need for autonomy. Tables 14 and 15 indicate the differences and comparisons of elements in collaboration and conflict.

Table 14

*Elements of Collaboration Comparing Populations Through the Lens of SDT and Disability Models*

Population	<i>n</i> of Elements	SDT Theme Scores	Primary Model Lens Used
Admin/LEA	7	Autonomy=5 Relatedness=6 Competency=7	Professional Model Language=1 Social (Justice) Model Language=1 Empowerment Model Language=6
Educators	9	Autonomy=5 Relatedness=9 Competency=9	Professional Model Language=0 Social (Justice) Model Language=1 Empowerment Model Language=9
Parents	21	Autonomy=9 Relatedness=14 Competency=13	Professional Model Language=2 Social (Justice) Model Language=3 Empowerment Model Language=17
IEP Team	13	Autonomy=8 Relatedness=12 Competency=12	Professional Model Language=1 Social (Justice) Model Language=2 Empowerment Model Language=12

In comparing Tables 14 and 15 contrasting collaboration and conflict and the themes of Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competency and their relation to the use of Professional, Social, or Empowerment Models of Disability Theory, themes emerged. When there is a lack of the elements of SDT, there becomes a more competitive nature and use of professional language (from the school) and more need for social justice or social model language (from the parent).

Table 15

*Elements of Conflict Comparing Populations Through the Lens of SDT and Disability Models*

Population	<i>n</i> of Elements	SDT Theme Scores	Primary Model Lens Used
Admin/LEA	11	Autonomy=4 Relatedness=1 Competency=11	Professional Model Language=10 Social (Justice) Model Language=4 Empowerment Model Language=0
Educators	19	Autonomy=13 Relatedness=6 Competency=18	Professional Model Language=17 Social (Justice) Model Language=12 Empowerment Model Language=0
Parents	22	Autonomy= 17 Relatedness=6 Competency=21	Professional Model Language=17 Social (Justice) Model Language=14 Empowerment Model Language=0
IEP Team	23	Autonomy=16 Relatedness=7 Competency=22	Professional Model Language=18 Social (Justice) Model Language=13 Empowerment Model Language=0

**Theoretical Framework and Data Analysis**

Compare the two charts of Collaboration and Conflict and the themes of Autonomy, Relatedness, and Competency and their relation to the use of Professional, Social, or Empowerment Models of Disability Theory. Empowerment is most in alignment with SDT, as empowerment looks at the barriers with a capability-based approach (Haen, 2013; Moran et al., 2017). When there is a lack of the elements of SDT, there becomes more of a competitive nature of professional language (from the school) and more need for social justice or Social Model Language (from the parent). According to the Dual Concerns Model, when needs of self and other are in balance and where the relationship is valued as well as the outcome, the climate is more conducive to peaceful resolutions and maintaining relationships (Fleming & Shaw, 2018). While each population outlined their view and experience concerning barriers to social and



academic inclusion for students on the autism spectrum, the IEP eligibility process and IEP team's relationship are crucial to the process of inclusion and inclusive practices.

### **Summary**

Chapter 4 began by reviewing the purpose of this study and restating the four research questions. The process was reviewed as to how the data were collected and analyzed. Major themes associated with the theoretical framework were outlined and discussed. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of the summary of findings, implications, some limitations of the study, recommendations for future research, and discussion of findings through the understanding of communication theory and conflict resolution theory.

## **Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to examine barriers to social inclusion and contributing factors to the inclusive climate for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. Through a phenomenological qualitative study working from a critical paradigm, participants of the study were key stakeholders of Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams located through purposive, convenience, and snowball sampling throughout the United States' public education system.

Best practices for the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) should equally consider academic and social goals in the IEP's observable, measurable goals to best support students with autism in the public education system (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017; McCarthy, n.d.; Wright & Wright, 2018a; Wrightslaw, 2012, 2019; Yell, 2019). The public-school system is where children start their academic journey and develop their sense of self and are the best place for students to learn social and independent living skills (van der Werf, 2014). Some educators have argued that if a student with autism has average or grade-level grades, then their autism is not impacting their academic outcomes, and social skill deficits alone should be considered for an IEP (Claypool & McLaughlin, 2017; Laviano & Swanson, 2017). However, lack of social skills not only impacts educational outcomes but can lead to exclusion, teasing, and bullying for students on the autism spectrum, which can have an overall negative impact on mental health (Connolly & Beaver, 2016; Fink et al., 2015). Students with ASD are at higher risk for suicide and mental health issues more so than general population students (Fitzgerald, 2007). The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to examine barriers to inclusion for students on the spectrum from the perspectives of key stakeholders and from the perspective of former public school students on the autism spectrum.

In addition to examining barriers to inclusion, this study also focused on suggestions for inclusive practices and included the voice of experience from students who experienced inclusion or the lack thereof. Four research questions guided this study: (Q1) What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom? (Q2) What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion? (Q3) What do students on the autism spectrum describe as barriers to social inclusion? (Q4) What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP team members observed or experienced that increased conflict?

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

This chapter includes the interpretation of the findings as well as recommendations for future research. This study incorporates a critical approach calling for change from the status quo to give voice to students who have been marginalized and not included in studies because many IRB's consider these students to be a vulnerable population. The importance of change will be illustrated, and the chapter will end with researcher reflections and conclusions.

**Comparing studies.** Through guided protocols in semistructured interviews, 35 participants answered questions concerning academic and social inclusion from their unique perspective. These 35 participants were asked about their belief about inclusion, attitude toward inclusion, experience with autism spectrum, and barriers they experienced or observed to academic and social inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. Many schools espouse inclusive practices and favor toward inclusion but lack implementation or modeling of such

practices (Becker et al., 2000; Goodall, 2015; Nishimura & Busse, 2015; White & Cooper, 2012).

All members of this population stated they were for inclusive education, yet, as illustrated in Appendix I, had differing ideas as to what defined inclusion. As illustrated in Tables 1-3, administrators and educators have differing perspectives for placement for LRE. For some, inclusion centered around mainstreaming, for some access to curriculum, and for some it centered on connectedness to the student body and climate of the school; yet mainstreaming and inclusion are not equal or synonymous (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999; Giuliani, 2012; Howe et al., 2018; Yell, 2019). Crockett and Kauffman (1999) suggested the meaning of LRE is left to vague and is therefore open to the subjective interpretation of the local agency which supports the frustration several in the population experienced different schools within the same county offering different services and lack of consistency of programs and resources from school to school.

Previous research found lack of understanding of autism by the general classroom teacher (Barned et al., 2011), lack of understanding and misconception of autistic behaviors (Mulholland & Cummings, 2016), lack of desire or knowledge on making accommodations or modifications (Avramidis et al., 2000), lack of proper training and resources (Barned et al., 2011; Pantić & Florian, 2015), lack of understanding SPED law (O'Connor et al., 2016), lack of support from administrators (Bair & Martin, 2017; Ball & Green, 2014; Harding, 2009; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Horrocks et al., 2008; Praisner, 2003; Weber & Young, 2017), lack of self-efficacy (Ryan & Powelson, 2014) and undergraduate curriculums training for future teachers (Barned et al., 2011) were barriers to proper inclusion of students with special needs such as students on the autism spectrum.

This study's findings supported previous research findings as each of these elements were also mentioned by educators and LEA representatives and parents of students with autism but mentioned in different order of impact from each perspective. Boujut et al. (2017) stated that self-efficacy is a protective factor for teacher burnout, and teacher stress and burnout will negatively impact educational outcomes for all students. Self-determination components of autonomy, competency, and relatedness are equally important to the adults serving and caring for students as well as to the students themselves (Ryan & Powelson, 2014).

In concurrence with Pantić and Florian (2015), this study's findings also found that training on ASD should be a core competency of all teachers, as ASD is the fastest-growing developmental disorder and leading eligibility category for special education services (Lindsay et al., 2013). In 2016, The United Kingdom announced that all teachers would be required to have training in autism due to the rise of autism and goal of mainstreaming students with autism. Espinoza (2016) quoted a member of the education department as saying, "Every teacher deserves the right training, and every autistic child needs a teacher who understands them." Teachers who are controlling, nonsupportive, overuse extrinsic rewards, and overly use punitive measures decrease autonomy and negatively impact student self-concept (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students on the spectrum who spoke about punitive measures also spoke of the negative impact on their self-concept and mental health. Teacher training promotes competency, which Ryan and Deci argued is important for all people, and increased competency will contribute to better outcomes for all.

Bias can be a contributing barrier to proper inclusion from teachers and administrators if behaviors from students with autism are repeatedly described as "disruptive," "disrespectful," or "excessively noisy" with overly punitive measures and practices (Staats, 2016). In addition to

bias, lack of knowledge of disabilities, interventions, and instructional methods (Ball & Green, 2014; Praisner, 2003) and lack of understanding SPED law will impact the inclusion of students with autism because lack of knowledge about the specifics of autism will shape placement and disciplinary practices. Students who participated in the study who had behavior intervention plans stated that they were often punished for behaviors that were manifestations of their autism through exclusion, trips to the principal's office, suspension, and even expulsion. For students interviewed whose IEPs were heavily behavior focused, there was not an understanding of the function of the behavior, and often a behavior was punished instead of a skill taught or replacement behavior. Lack of eye contact, fidgeting, meltdowns were seen as disrespect and disruptive by teachers these persons in this study had during their educational experience. For example, Student 2 and Student 3 both eloped from their classroom often. Both experienced punitive measures for this behavior as the behavior is disruptive to classroom learning. Student 2's function of eloping was usually one of two reasons for escape/avoidance of a difficult task or being overwhelmed with sensory input. Student 3's elopement was about attention. He wanted a student or teacher to chase him and interact with him because he felt isolated and sought connection and sensory input. The same behavior was treated the same way with punishment, yet each student had a different reason for elopement. Many participants echoed this sentiment, "Students with autism are all different. A one size fits all approach will not work."

The climate of the school is crucial to promoting inclusion (Carrington et al., 2016; Goodall, 2015; Humphrey & Lewis, 2018; Lindsay et al., 2013); this idea was echoed by special lead teacher coordinators, educators, parents, and students from this study. Relatedness is a feeling of connection and a sense of belonging (Deci & Ryan, 2002) and is central to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (Olson, 2013). Parents of students and students interviewed themselves

reported a sense from some schools of not being wanted or welcomed or seen as a burden to the teacher or the school.

Administrator attitude toward inclusion is one of the greatest impactors of teacher attitude toward inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014; Hardin, 2009; Horrocks et al., 2008). Administrators will decide what training will be offered, how teachers will be supported, and how funding is allocated for resources and supports. In this study, all but two administrators/LEA representatives were SPED certified. In this study, those LEAs interviewed with SPED certification were supportive of inclusion and getting necessary supports and resources to their teachers. However, it was reported by some of the LEAs when they were teachers and some teachers that they have not always served under supportive administrators, which makes their efforts of inclusive much more difficult.

**Research question 1: What challenges do administrators and educators face in their efforts to include students on the autism spectrum academically and socially in the general education classroom?** This question was answered by the use of guided protocols and semistructured interviews of nine administrators/LEA representatives and 11 educators. Each was asked in their experience what they perceived, observed, or experienced in trying to include students with autism spectrum and barriers to that process. While findings from this study supported research findings across studies spanning decades, it was interesting that each population ranked the barriers differently. While all of the above factors were mentioned by members of each population, each population's list of barriers ranked items in a different order.

The belief or observation that scored the highest among this population was the behaviors of the students on the autism spectrum. Nineteen out of 20 said behaviors that are unruly, unpredictable, challenging, aggressive, or self-harming are the number one reason they feel

students with autism have barriers to inclusion. Nineteen out of 20 also said that there is not enough support and resources to support the inclusion of students with autism, and this could mean staff support, communication devices, visual supports, and other means. Perhaps this explains why students and parents of students on the spectrum stated that they often felt the number one focus in IEP meetings and goals are behavior focused instead of academic, social, or independent functioning or skill-building. Parents with students that had these type of behaviors, and students interviewed who had behaviors felt the personhood or individualization of the child is neglected when behaviors are the number one focus. However, this population that represents the “school’s side” of the inclusion equation feels the behaviors and lack of support and resources are the number one reason these students are not included properly.

When asked about the use of FBAs or training teachers had concerning behaviors, some had training on behavior management and classroom management in general, and these techniques are applied or used on students with autism. However, an elementary understanding of the functions of behavior is lacking in training and lacking in IEPs I obtained and examined. An FBA is crucial before developing a BIP as one can accidentally reinforce behavior that they think they are punishing. Person 2’s elopement was “punished” by sending her home from school. Therefore, she learned that any time she wanted to go home to escape sensory issues or workload, all she had to do is run or pretend to hit someone, and she would “get to go home.” Because the school did not know the function, they were reinforcing the behavior. Person 3 ran for attention and to engage socially, and the punishment was to socially isolate him and put him in more and more restrictive environments, which fueled the need to run and engage more. Again, the school felt they were punishing or trying to extinguish the behavior but were reinforcing.



The lack of understanding about behaviors of autism and the lack of supports for skill-building and replacement behaviors and building compensatory strategies are more helpful with students on the spectrum than zero-tolerance punitive policies. This supports what 15 out of 20 participants stated as a barrier concerning lack of training in autism of administration and general education teachers as well 16 out of 20 stating the climate of the school is set by educational leadership, and lack of inclusive climate will drive the direction of how behaviors are viewed and dealt with by administration and teachers. Evidence-based domains of proper administrator support of inclusion is described by Shogren et al. (2015) as strong, supportive administrative leadership, infrastructure of school that supports inclusive efforts, multitiered support systems in the school for all staff, and building collaboration through mutual trust and cooperation with all of those who are supporting students with needs at school and in the home. Inclusion is not just an educational concept; school-based inclusion is an aid in building an inclusive society at large (Dillenberger et al., 2015).

Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) are also found to more helpful with students on the autism spectrum than the punitive measure that calls the student the out and exacerbates their differences to the other students in the classroom. In elementary school, it is a big deal to be sent to the principal's office, yet those students interviewed, and some parents interviewed explained how being sent out or away is part of the inclusion barrier because it presents the student in a negative light to other peers because they appear to be causing problems in the classroom. Twelve out of 20 felt that inflexibility of administrators or general education teachers on creating strategies for inclusion for individual students was a barrier to proper inclusion because of the overuse of punishment instead of creative strategy building.

The school population also listed students with ASD lack appropriate skills or norms concerning appropriate class and social behaviors as well they nonacceptance of peers for lack of understanding, discomfort, or fear of behaviors observed by students with autism. This explains why IEPs that had one or two social skill goals that I viewed or discussed with parents and students mentioned skills associated with the classroom only and not peer interaction. Social skill goals mentioned by educators in their interviews and social skill goals examined in IEPs reflected language such as “Student will respond to teacher prompting” or “Student will raise his hand or point to a visual when help is needed instead of disrupting the class” or “Student will respond appropriately in class too.” These social goals were targeted toward classroom management more than teaching social skills, social norms, or building peer relationships. There is a stark contrast to what parents feel should be appropriate social skills building and goals than what the school defines as social skills. Specialist that were interviewed understood and explained the important of having peers and belonging and social pragmatic language, but mentioned scheduling and interference with academic time as barriers to having more social groups or peer social skill building within the school day, although they believe students with autism need these skills not only for school, but for life.

Many educators suggested peer awareness campaigns to help peers better understand their classmates with differences. Yet, Ranson and Byrne (2014) stated that anti-stigma or awareness campaigns are not enough to promote inclusion that instead, peers need to be taught how to accept and include beyond awareness. Friendship and belonging are crucial to mental health (Boutot, 2007). Dillenberger et al. (2017) added that while awareness and attitude are important to inclusion, students need explicit instruction on how to include, engage, and befriend persons on the spectrum. Students on the spectrum need explicit instruction on social rules and

social engagement, but not for the purpose of trying to “neuro-typicalize them” or make them conform socially, but to better understand their social environment.

Attwood (2007) said in working with persons on the autism spectrum for over four decades that students on the spectrum feel like everyone else has the rulebook for social engagement, and they are trying to play this social game without the rules while everyone else seems to get it intuitively. Self-concept, social-skills, relational abilities, self-regulation, emotional regulation are all factors cited in research as impactors on academic achievement (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2004; Huang, 2011). Most of these required skills are mentioned as skill deficits in the autism diagnosis contained in the *DSM* (APA, 2013), yet are not intentionally addressed or taught and often not seen in many cases as eligibility for special needs services, as in the case of Parent 5’s experience. Persons with disabilities face exclusion and prejudice, which leads to further impact in a societal context (Oliver, 1990; Rees, 2017). It is imperative that skills be taught school-wide for both peers and students on the spectrum to create understanding and intentional engagement that could produce friendship and involvement with peers outside of mandated school activities and mandated or promoted inclusive activities. Speech-language specialists, school psychologists, and the school counselor concurred that teaching and modeling social instruction and social-problem solving was crucial to the success of students on the autism spectrum in school and life beyond school.

Finally, the mixed exceptionalities and capabilities academically students may have in addition to the broadness of the spectrum are factors mentioned that can become barriers to proper inclusion. In an interview, Bonanno (2020), coordinator of graduate programs in special education for Bay Path University, stressed the “I” in IEP to keep IEPs individualized to address the “unique needs of the student,” as mandated in the federal law, and focus on educating the

whole child. Through getting to know the child/student as an individual person first, then assessing strengths and challenges, a better plan can be developed and the child served adequately.

**Research question 2: What do parents of students with autism describe as barriers to social inclusion?** While lack of understanding of autism and inadequate supports and resources were listed as two important barriers, parents also focused on feeling dismissed or that their concerns about their child's social skills, or lack thereof, are not treated with equal concern by the school. Much of the barriers observed by parents center on not allowing true social skills in the child's education plan, putting together social groups with all students with ASD lacking NT peer models, lack of tolerance and inclusion by peers, not acknowledging or making the eligibility for special services due to autism, ignoring outside professional advice, over punitive measures for behavior associated with autism, and over-focus on the academic to the detriment of social skills, functional behaviors, and independent behaviors, illustrated in Appendix K. The parents kept referring to the IDEA laws that FAPE in the LRE includes both academic and social inclusion to "meet the child's unique need" as stated in the law. Parents of children with average or high IQ whose child is making A's, B's, and C's are concerned that grades and progress receive too much value and not considering the extra effort, slower processing, additional outside supports that are all contributing to academic success, and focusing on one school year and not the bigger picture of preparation for life and outcomes become high school. Peter Wright in Wrightslaw (n.d.) stated:

The reason these students are achieving and passing is that parents are spending countless hours helping their children with homework, reviewing material, and studying for tests. Parents also spend a great deal of money year after year on tutors, thereby providing services themselves. Another factor in the academic success of these students is that many of their teachers do an outstanding job of individualizing instruction and modifying curriculum and tests. These children are not failing because they are not being allowed to

fail. Parents and teachers are giving this type of support because they understand the devastation that comes with failure.

Wrightslaw (n.d.) included a link to a redacted letter from OSEP (OSEP, 2009), wherein the letter stated:

In your letter dated October 8, 2009, you specifically referenced students with high cognition disabilities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), Asperger's Syndrome, and specific learning disabilities related to reading, writing, and mathematics who struggle to timely complete grade-level work and have difficulties with organizational skills, homework completion, affective areas, social skills, and classroom behavior, reading and math fluency, writing and math operation.

The IDEA is silent about 'gifted' or 'twice-exceptional children,' although some states include gifted children in their exceptional children programs. Letter to Lillie/Felton is a policy letter about special education eligibility that was published by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) in 1995. This letter clarifies several key points: eligibility teams may consider support provided by parents; children with high IQs are not excluded from special education eligibility; evaluations must include testing of the seven areas mentioned in the special ed regulations. Opinion/policy Letters are not law but represent the position of a federal or state agency.

With regard to students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), the Analysis of Comments and Change in the regulations implementing Part B of IDEA (71 Fed. Reg. 46540, at 46647 and 46652, August 14, 2006) contemplates that there will be some students with high cognition who need special education and related services.

Discrepancy models are not essential for identifying children with SLD who are gifted. No assessment, in isolation, is sufficient to indicate that a child has an SLD.

Wright et al. (2018) addressed a parent's concern about social skills in IEP goals by answering:

Yes, the IEP team must look at your child's unique academic, developmental, and functional needs. This includes her needs for social and independent living skills. Her deficits in social skills should be addressed in her IEP. If she is doing well academically, then her IEP may not include academic goals. (p. 35)

Wright et al. (2018) remind the reader that the purpose of the IDEA is, as he quoted the law: "Prepare the child for further education, employment, and independent living," so children are "prepared to lead productive and independent adult lives" and to "develop economic sufficiency" (p. 38).

The parents in the study discussed they are not seeking anything outside of what they feel the law allows for best measures in preparing their children with autism for life. They expressed frustrations with the lack of understanding of autism as the key to this because if one truly understood the core deficits of autism to meet the clinical definition and diagnosis for autism, the school should see the impact of social skills and the need for social skills and understand the social environment of the school is the best environment to provide this instruction for educational outcomes and life outcomes. Many of the specialists who are trained for determining eligibility kept saying that a diagnosis alone of autism does not meet eligibility, and Wright et al. (2018) concurred that diagnosis of any category alone does not automatically assume 504 or IEP will be written for the child. However, Wright et al. (2018) argued that Autism is an IDEA category, and significant effects of social interactions that are adversely affecting any part of educational outcomes should be considered for eligibility.

Another barrier and frustration that garnered much discussion by parents was the negative focus on behaviors, punitive measures, and using placement as a punishment for behaviors associated with autism, which is a manifestation of the disability. Wright et al. (2018) explained that any behaviors that are harmful to self or harm to other students which disrupt or interfere with academic achievement of any student might result in a change of placement, but a functional behavior assessment (FBA) should be utilized in making a placement change due to behaviors. They added that change of placement should be disciplinary and punitive to keep the student away from inclusive education, but after the team refers to an FBA, they develop a behavior intervention plan (BIP) to improve behavior, teaching appropriate behavior, replace problem behaviors, and provide supports for positive behavior change. Wright et al. also argued that research supports positive intervention and supports (PBIS) over punitive measures to create

better behavior in a positive, supportive environment. When schools argue that PBIS is not enough or defend more punitive measures or more restrictive environments, research by Molloy, Moore, Trail, Van Epps, and Hopper (2013) stated the issue they found is an implementation of all the “key ingredients” of PBIS.

Molloy et al. (2013) further argued that a school-wide approach and implementing elements of PBIS resulted in fewer referrals to the administration and a more positive climate and behavior change. Giulianai (2012) and Yell (2019) also suggested that FBAs, BIPs, include PBIS strategies. In the IEPs examined for this study, students with behavior goals did not have FBAs, and parents who wanted FBAs to focus on social skills and interactions or a study the function of specific behavior they felt was impeding academic achievement were not allowed. One parent who spent \$7,000-\$8,000 was able to achieve one social skill goal. The specialists interviewed for this study agreed that understanding autism, the behaviors, the lack of social skills are essential to a true understanding of ASD to develop a truly individualized IEP for supporting students with autism in the school system.

The parents of students on the autism spectrum echo many of the sentiments the students interviewed discussed as barriers. While parents in this study understand that behaviors are a consideration of placement, they do not want to see behaviors and changing behaviors as the predominant goal in an IEP. They understand that some behaviors associated with autism will be barriers to inclusion and peer acceptance; however, this is one of their arguments for social skills, social-communication, and social-problem solving strategies. Byrnes (2011) stated that academic achievement and favorable transition outcomes are not only important for economic prosperity, but overall mental health and self-concept.

Because persons with disabilities tend to face exclusion from society, this leads to further impact in the societal context (Oliver, 1990; Rees, 2017). Therefore, Zimmerman (2012) supported empowerment for persons with disabilities, and I concur, to include the recipient of services and change their role from passive to active in partnership in designing and implementing solutions that best fit their needs. For parents of children who are minors, they represent and advocate for the needs of their child as the guardian, and when the student is older should be allowed to participate in developing a plan to meet their specific goals and needs for true empowerment.

**Research question 3: What do students on the autism spectrum describe as barriers to social inclusion?** The students in the study indicated feeling teased, bullied, and socially excluded by peers at school, and half indicated not feeling welcomed by teachers or the school itself. All participants felt that school was not a safe place emotionally, by all, and physically, by half, to be themselves. While many interacted with students in extracurricular activities provided by the school and sometimes events associated with that activity, the students did not often receive invitations from peers to outside events or parties. Three females indicated they received ‘pity’ invites or invited because others wanted them in a group or project to use their skills and intellect but not truly want to be with them as people. Six of the seven felt that how they were treated by peers or school staff was detrimental to mental health or had a negative impact on self-esteem and self-worth. The students advocated that understanding of autism, support, and skill-building is what students with autism need but were clear that they want to be accepted as autistic and not forced into social norms or forced ‘neuro-typicalization’ to be made to fit into society according to what on-autistic people decide is normal or acceptable. One student remarked that if ‘normal society’ or ‘neurotypicals’ are the more flexible and social part of



society, why is the pressure to be flexible and conform placed on those with disabilities in the social arena? Each student emphasized to treat students with autism as people or human, because they did not feel humanized or individualized in their school settings.

Researchers have indicated repeatedly that self-concept, social-skills, relational abilities, self-regulation, emotional regulation, and encouragement factors provide hope for the future and academic achievement for all students (Amrai et al., 2011; Ashburner et al., 2010; Byrnes, 2011; Elias, 2014; Huang, 2011). The inability to regulate behaviors and emotions and proper social development are correlated to underachievement (Ashburner et al., 2010). Huang (2011) argued self-concept is the most significant factor of achievement. When students with ASD feel unwelcomed, unwanted, unsafe, excluded, and misunderstood and worse bullied, this leads to negative self-concept and impact on mental health which impacts academic or educational achievement (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001; Côté-Lussier & Fitzpatrick, 2016; Hamachek, 1995). Untreated mental health concerns account for higher economic costs to the American economy than cancer or diabetes (Trautmann, Rehm, & Wittchen, 2016).

The clinical definition of Autism Spectrum Disorder recognized in the *DSM* (2013), *International Classification of Disease* [ICD-10], and definition of autism for IDEA eligibility all mention social impairment and clinical levels of impaired social development, for better inclusive practices a student who is diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder of any level will need positive, social supports and skill-building for self-esteem, autonomy, competency, and relatedness to achieve more self-determined behaviors (Ryan & Deci, 2000) in the school setting, as well as understanding and acceptance by staff who serve them and peers in class with them for optimal education achievement and life outcomes. A safe atmosphere with supportive adults and

peers creates an atmosphere of relatedness where individuals can best achieve autonomy and feel competent (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

**Research question 4: What practices have IEP team members employed that reduce conflict and increase collaboration in determining goals for students on the autism spectrum, and what practices have IEP team members observed or experienced that increased conflict?** Participants of three populations administrators/LEA representatives, educators, and parents were all asked what elements, themes, issues contribute to collaboration or conflict in IEP meetings? Each population mentioned these from their perspective. It is interesting to note that when the data were examined across populations using the score of nine (1/3) of 27 as the cut-off for salient themes, at least 1/3 of the participants remarked on 14 themes that lead to collaboration and 23 were found for promoting conflict. When the collaboration was felt among team members the elements of a relationship, communication, and focusing on the whole child and the child's best interests were key to forming a collaborative atmosphere, while lack of relationship, communication breaks down and feeling the school was out for their own interest were themes of conflict. The thread running through both collaboration and conflict-centered around whether or not the administrators and general education truly understood autism and were properly trained and the perception of incompetency and lack of understanding autism were pervasive in promoting the understanding needed to form relationship, communication, and forming a team atmosphere that all aspects of the child were being considered when forming goals and objectives in the IEP.

The themes found in collaboration illustrated themes of self-determination theory that when relatedness and competency are high individual members feel less need to fight for autonomy or their individual voice or perspective; however, when there is conflict, there is a

higher need for autonomy and social justice and a premium placed on competency when relatedness is not present. These findings support communication theory and self-determination theory. “Communication is a social process in which individuals employ symbols to establish and interpret meaning in their environment” (West & Turner, 2018, p. 5). West and Turner further break down communication into social and process that, at its core, communication is a social process. They define social as “people interacting” and process as “ongoing, dynamic, and unending occurrence” (p. 5). Communication between school and parent is crucial to promote collaboration, relationship, and mutual respect. When participants defined what they mean by communication, they used words like “constant,” “positive,” “on-going,” “respectful,” that is “open,” “honest,” “transparent,” and “mutual.” When communication was described in conflict situations, it was described as “break down of communication,” “negative,” “nonexistent,” “delayed,” or only when something “bad” or “challenging” was happening.

Shapiro (2017) added that relationship is stronger when there is strive for harmony and not victory and when people feel triggered, attacked, threatened, and delegitimized, this will break down communication and thus the relationship. The Dual Concerns Model (Fleming & Shaw, 2018) is used to illustrate that collaboration is a dual focus on self and other which creates a win-win environment; however, when matters of social justice are present there may be more assertive measures or competitive components or us versus them in the communication process, and relationship is sacrificed for results. Shapiro (2017) stated that to build a relationship identity, there needs to be a valuing of other and differences and perspective to promote autonomy, yet promotes affiliation and respect through relatedness and shared meaning.

IEPs can become emotionally charged when parents feel their voice is not heard or they are dismissed, their child’s rights are not being considered, there is lack of competency in

training and understanding, and they feel they are not welcome or equal members of the IEP team when advocating for the right and needs of their child. Educators and administrators are admonished to remember that when the core of someone and what or who they love feels attacked, the person will feel less autonomy and agency, and this moves them from team to adversary (Shapiro, 2017). Shapiro stated that when one's core identity is threatened emotions will come into play and arguing facts and logic against emotional threat will prove to be futile; however, when one's autonomy is recognized, appreciated, accepted affiliation and relationship can be built, and the parties can form a shared meaning. Educators in this study described that when parents felt heard, concerns were addressed, and their input was welcomed, these led to more collaborative or partnership in IEP team building.

Jones and Brinkert (2008) stated that at the heart of the conflict are the elements of power, identity, and emotions. If there is a threat, perceived threat, or feeling of overuse or misuse of power this can trigger identity and emotions which will produce conflict; the more one feels powerless and less autonomous the more the person will feel the need to defend instead of relating (Jones & Brinkert, 2008). Shapiro (2017) argued that identity and perceived identity is the key because if a person is caught in what he calls emotional vertigo, the focus is in the past, fears, failures, disappointments or feelings of disempowerment which promotes defending and possible retaliation or need to empower themselves further. This may lead to an assumption of bad intentions and misaligned character; to resolve conflict, one must resolve to listen to past accusations for the feelings or intangibles and triggers driving the communication (Stone, Patton, & Heen, 2010).

The IEP is the document that will create goals to promote academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. Therefore, the collaboration of all team members is crucial

for successfully developing and implementing goals of inclusion. Each population listed different perspectives and order of what led to collaboration and conflict. Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, and Switzer (2012) stated when parties have differing opinions, that this already starts them in different pools of meaning; to create successful crucial conversations, a pool of shared meaning is what they refer to as the “birthplace of synergy” (p. 25). Stone and Heen (2015) stated when there is conflict, and each will view the other as the problem. Each person’s pool of meaning is composed of individual thoughts, feelings, experiences in a matter, and our personal pool of meaning drives our actions propels one in a direction (Patterson et al., 2012).

Patterson et al. (2012) argued that the higher the stakes, the higher the probability for emotional involvement, which keeps conversations in personal pools of meaning and creates opposing or adversarial sides. For parents of students on the autism spectrum and those students on the spectrum, education and transition outcomes after school, social skills, and independent or functional skills are very high stakes and represent future goals and future impact. Developing trust and making the atmosphere safe is crucial to building relationships and communication through shared meaning (Patterson et al., 2012). Stone and Heen (2015) stated the four skills of managing conversations include listening and asserting while focusing on process and problem-solving. Patterson et al. (2012) stated to make the atmosphere safe to build necessary trust the key elements are developing mutual respect, developing mutual purpose, apologizing when appropriate, repairing misunderstanding, speaking assertively without aggression, and managing one’s own story while listening openly to another are elements to successful crucial conversations (pp. 79-80).

Many of the participants echoed the same sentiments in promoting trust and communicating the same ‘pool of meaning’ by focusing on the whole child and staying on track

with the child's best interest at the heart of the IEP conversation to prevent emotional escalation and derailing of the process. Parents and those with SPED training and specialists in the education field from this study added that the whole child means the positives, growths, and potential in addition to the challenges or behaviors of the child. Each side holds something sacred to them, according to Shapiro (2017) honoring that which is most sacred and valuable to the person will decrease conflict and build affiliation which aligns with self-determination behaviors of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Through collaboration and understanding, focusing on the whole child with an understanding and training in autism, more inclusive practices can be developed and implemented to include students on the autism spectrum socially and academically.

### **Recommendations for Action and Further Study**

While this study included 35 participants, which is a large sample for phenomenological research, one of the limitations included that most LEA representatives and teachers had SPED certification or came out of SPED. It would be a recommendation of future studies to have administrators, LEA representatives, and educators without SPED certification to broaden the perspective of barriers to inclusion and suggestions for better inclusive practices. To hear from the perspective of the general classroom teacher on his or her experiences trying to employ inclusive practices without proper training, resources, and support.

Secondly, while it is proper to protect persons with disabilities from exploitative or harmful studies from adverse effects as a vulnerable population to some degree, it can be equally harmful to mute the voices of students on the autism spectrum in describing their own experiences from inclusion to the lack thereof in the public school setting. As Autism is the leading developmental disorder and educators stated that more students with Autism are

receiving eligibility in special services, we need to hear from their voice what they need, what they experience and is currently being done in public school helpful or harmful. As the federal mandates moved from the medical model to empowerment model in language from 1975 to 2004, students on the spectrum and their parents need to be empowered to and partnered with to advocate what services and resources and when and how the services are received would minimize stigma and bring about positive impact on the educational experience.

There is research concerning peer understanding of disabilities in general, but few studies on the knowledge and understanding of peers concerning autism and how autism manifests in the student population. Anti-bullying campaigns have not been effective in reducing bullying of any kind. Campaigns are not needed, but a better understanding of autism and how to befriend, accept, and engage students with autism is needed. One such study recommendation is to understand what peers think or know about autism.

One of the barriers to social skills clubs or intentional, structured social instruction is time or schedule. Students on the spectrum mentioned the stigma of being called out for pull-out services. A further suggestion is for a school engaged and established in PBIS to incorporate a social-communication, and social-problem solving program or curriculum for all students and report the impact on climate, inclusion, peer acceptance, and social skill-building.

Finally, further research is recommended for peer mentoring, and peer-pairing programs of inexperienced general-education teach with experienced teachers in the area of autism inclusion. In addition to peer-pairing of students with autism and general population peers for building acceptance and building a better climate for the inclusion of all students, I hypothesize that autonomy, relatedness, and competency could be built in mentor programs that would lead to better inclusion practices.

## Reflections

In the past decade, persons on the autism spectrum have entered my counseling practice struggling with anxiety and depression and relating impactors of self-worth to their schooling years. While autism is a neurological wiring issue and not a mental health disorder, many suffer from mental health issues based on how they are treated in school and community. Many clinicians, including myself, are seeing suicide and underemployment on the rise in the spectrum population. Many parents, including personal experience, have lost hours of sleep worrying and spent many hours preparing for IEP meetings out of concern for our children on the spectrum and their future. Parents usually outlive their children, and the concern for how their child will function and live beyond their lifetime is of great concern. Educators work already in the overcrowded classroom and are given little resources, and supports and training for autism inclusion yet are mandated to do so under federal law. The IEP process can be taxing for individuals and put a strain on relationships between the school and parents of the child. Yet, all parties must come together and focus on what is best for the student for better mental health, better academic achievement, and better transitional outcomes beyond school.

While there is a cost to better training and more funding for consistent resources to support students on the spectrum, there is a greater cost to society economically when students who could achieve more are limited due to a lack of resource and mental health issues. It is a greater travesty that individuals with autism would view themselves as not worthy of accommodating, feel left isolated, and suffer from PTSD, anxiety, or depression from teasing, exclusion, bullying and simply not feeling wanted but the system where they will spend up to 12-16 years of their lives.



Qualitative research based on phenomenology is based on subjective experience and a critical approach calls for action based on the bias or definition of call to change from the perspective of the researcher. While I minimized bias through including all perspectives of the IEP team, used guided protocols approved and validated by an expert panel, I am a parent of a person with autism who underwent struggles in the public-school and watched the impact of peer exclusion on my child's mental health and academic performance. I am a counselor that has walked parents through the suicide of their teens and young adults on the autism spectrum who could not face another day in school or felt their life outcomes were hopeless. It is because of my experiences, I felt called to bring a voice to these struggles and call for change on how we view inclusion and how we as a society view persons on the autism spectrum while respecting the view and opinions and perspectives of each population as they shared their views and experiences. I believe we can work together and empower students on the autism spectrum to achieve their potential, whatever that is for each individual.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined and discussed barriers to academic and social inclusion for students on the autism spectrum in the public-school system. A school system in Georgia, as well as educators from NC and SC, helped share their experiences and insights and suggestions for inclusion. Parents from VA, NC, SC, and GA shared their experiences and insights of both victories and battles in educational inclusion for their children with autism. However, students on the autism spectrum were given a voice to share their experiences, thoughts, dreams, and pave the way for better inclusion and acceptance from peers, educators, and greater community for better inclusion for people on the autism spectrum.

Through empowerment and self-determination, IEP teams are better equipped to collaborate and focus on the best interest of the student. Collaboration must be intentional and built through relationships and trust as conflict is easier and a result of dismissing concerns and inadequate communication among parties. Not only is the focus of this study on empowering students and their parents, empowerment for educators and administrators through knowledge, supports, understanding, and training impacts outcomes for all parties involved in the process. The greater message and finding of this study underscores the research of White and Cooper (2012) who argued we must de-institutionalize education and only educational practices that are inclusive should be approved and implemented; for if the education system continues to marginalize student with differences, this marginalization will be a continuance in society at large.

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## Appendix A: IRB Approval

**ABILENE CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY**  
*Educating Students for Christian Service and Leadership Throughout the World*  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
320 Hardin Administration Building, ACU Box 29103, Abilene, Texas 79699-9103  
325-674-2885



September 9, 2019

Stephanie Holmes

Department of Conflict Management

Abilene Christian University

Dear Stephanie,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board, I am pleased to inform you that your project titled "Creating an Inclusive Climate for Students on the Autism Spectrum",

was approved by expedited review (Category 7 ) on 9/9/2019 (IRB # 19-081 ). Upon completion of this study, please submit the Inactivation Request Form within 30 days of study completion.

If you wish to make any changes to this study, including but not limited to changes in study personnel, number of participants recruited, changes to the consent form or process, and/or changes in overall methodology, please complete the Study Amendment Request Form.

If any problems develop with the study, including any unanticipated events that may change the risk profile of your study or if there were any unapproved changes in your protocol, please inform the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs and the IRB promptly using the Unanticipated Events/Noncompliance Form.

I wish you well with your work.

Sincerely,

*Megan Roth*

Megan Roth, Ph.D.  
Director of Research and Sponsored Programs

## Appendix B: Requesting Permission to Conduct Research

The purpose of this e-mail is to request the participation of schools in [name removed] County in a study concerning creating an inclusive environment for students on the autism spectrum both academically and socially. This study will be part of a doctoral dissertation designed to identify school personnel's attitude toward the inclusion of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) into the general classroom. Part one will be a prestudy selection survey, which will involve a survey questionnaire which will take 10-15 minutes to complete. Part two of the study will select participants for a semistructured interview, which may take 30-45 minutes to complete by phone, email, or digital platforms such as Skype or Google Hangouts. If you are interested and willing to allow your school principals, general classroom teachers, special education classroom teachers, and other personnel who may be involved in developing and implementing IEPs, please reply to this email affirmatively, and a Letter of Consent and Confidentiality will be sent to you. If you have further questions, please let me know.

Participants will first receive the email explaining the study through Survey Monkey. The Survey Monkey preselection study survey will ask for consent by checking boxes of areas of consent before moving to the questions. The researcher will choose 6-8 administrators and 6-8 other educators for an interview.

Before participating in the interview, each participant will have a letter of consent with a signature before moving forward in the interview process. Each administrator that participates in the interview process will be offered a free hour of autism consultation from the researcher, who is an expert in the field of autism inclusion. Each teacher that participates in the interview will receive a \$25 gift card for supplies in his or her classroom. Anyone who fills out the survey will be eligible for a drawing for a gift card, even if not selected for the study.

Thank you for your consideration.

Stephanie Holmes, Certified Autism Specialist

Abilene Christian University, Doctoral Candidate

## Appendix C: Recruitment

### Initial Contact Letter/Email for Recruitment Administrators/Educators

Dear Educator:

Autism Spectrum Disorder is considered by the Center for Disease Control to affect 1 in 59 children, and the National Health Statistics Reports indicate an increasing number of children needing resources and accommodations for the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, when autism was added to the list of eligibilities for services in special education services, more students with ASD are being served in the public school system.

As a doctoral candidate at Abilene Christian University, I have designed a study to investigate the attitude of school principals, educators, and other personnel responsible for developing IEPs and its effect on placement selection for students with ASD. You and your school have been selected for participation in this study with permission given by \_\_\_\_\_ for the school's participation. Or you are receiving this email because you indicated a willingness to participate at an autism conference.

Attached is the link that will connect you to the survey. To complete the questionnaire, please click on the following link (link removed).

Please complete the survey by October 30, 2019.

After results are analyzed, you may be selected for a semistructured interview. A drawing will take place among all names whether or not selected for the interview portion.

I am available if more information is needed [information omitted].

The information provided for this study will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be reported.

Although you will not have a direct benefit from this study, you will be aiding in the growing knowledge of proper inclusion for students on the autism spectrum, both academically and socially.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Stephanie C. Holmes, MA  
Ed.D. Candidate  
Abilene Christian University

## Initial Contact Letter/Email for Recruitment Persons on the Spectrum

Dear Student/Young Adult,

Autism Spectrum Disorder is considered by the Center for Disease Control to affect 1 in 59 children and the National Health Statistics Reports indicate an increasing number of children needing resources and accommodations for the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, when autism was added to the list of eligibilities for services in special education services, more students with ASD are being served in the public school system.

As a doctoral candidate at Abilene Christian University, I have designed a study to investigate the attitude of school principals, educators, and other personnel responsible for developing IEPs and its effect on placement selection for students with ASD. You are receiving this email for recruitment because you indicated a willingness to participate at an autism conference. This study aims to include the experience of the parents and students in the IEP process and overall inclusion practices in the public education system. Attached is the link that will connect you to the preselection survey. To complete the questionnaire, please click on the following link. (link removed)

Please complete the survey by September 30, 2019

You may be selected for a semistructured interview. Each participant will be offered a \$25 gift card. I am available if more information is needed at (personal information removed).

The information provided for this study will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be reported. Although you will not have a direct benefit from this study, you will be aiding in the growing knowledge of proper inclusion for students on the autism spectrum, both academically and socially.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Stephanie C. Holmes, MA

Ed.D. Candidate

Abilene Christian University

## Initial Contact Letter/Email for Recruitment of Parents of Persons on the Spectrum

Dear Parent,

Autism Spectrum Disorder is considered by the Center for Disease Control to affect 1 in 59 children, and the National Health Statistics Reports indicate an increasing number of children needing resources and accommodations for the diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Since the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990, when autism was added to the list of eligibilities for services in special education services, more students with ASD are being served in the public school system.

As a doctoral candidate at Abilene Christian University, I have designed a study to investigate the attitude of school principals, educators, and other personnel responsible for developing IEPs and its effect on placement selection for students with ASD. You are receiving this email for recruitment because you indicated a willingness to participate at an autism conference or through social media contact. This study aims to include the experience of the parents and students in the IEP process and overall inclusion practices in the public education system.

Attached is the link that will connect you to the preselection survey. To complete the questionnaire, please click on the following link. (link removed)

Please complete the survey by September 30, 2019

You may be selected for a semistructured interview. Each participant will have availability after the research for a free consultation of one hour of the researcher's expertise in the field of autism. I am available if more information is needed (information removed).

The information provided for this study will be kept confidential, and no identifying information will be reported. Although you will not have a direct benefit from this study, you will be aiding in the growing knowledge of proper inclusion for students on the autism spectrum, both academically and socially.

Your participation in this study is greatly appreciated.

If you have changed your mind, this is okay, and feel free to have yourself deleted from the list.

If the link did not work and you wish to participate, please contact me at the email address above, and I will send you a new link.

Sincerely,

Stephanie C. Holmes, MA

Ed.D. Candidate/ Abilene Christian University

## Appendix D: Letters of Consent or Assent

Letter of Consent & Confidentiality: Parents  
Creating an Inclusive Environment for Students on the Autism Spectrum

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to in the following dissertation study conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes of Abilene Christian University.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. \_\_\_\_\_

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview concerning the goals of my child's IEP and questions concerning my child's autism diagnosis. I understand the purpose to discuss challenges and successes experienced in developing and implementing my child's IEP.

\_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand the interview will be audio recorded. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that all information will be kept confidential and information will be stored and kept in an external hard drive kept in a locked safety deposit box up for three years. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will not be identified in the study with any identifying information. My name will not be used any identifying information changed concerning me, my child, or others I speak about during the interview. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand some exact quotes may be used in the data or quoted without identifying me specifically. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that if I inform the researcher that I or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to relevant authorities and may have to do so without my permission. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand there will be a transcribed record of my interview kept for up to three years. \_\_\_\_\_

This research is being conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes, MA, and Certified Autism Specialist with Abilene Christian University.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of research participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Letter of Consent & Confidentiality: For Participation of an Adult Child not under Guardianship  
Creating an Inclusive Environment for Students on the Autism Spectrum

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to in the following dissertation study conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes of Abilene Christian University.

I understand that even if I agree to allow my child to participate now, I can withdraw him or her at any time and he or she may refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. \_\_\_\_\_

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing, and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview concerning my child's experience in the public school system. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that my child nor I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand the interview will be audio recorded. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that all information will be kept confidential and information will be stored and kept in an external hard drive kept in a locked safety deposit box up for up to three years. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that my child nor I will not be identified in the study with any identifying information. My name will not be used any identifying information changed concerning me, my child, or others I speak about during the interview. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand some exact quotes may be used in the data or quoted without identifying me specifically. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that if I or my child inform the researcher that I or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to relevant authorities and may have to do so without my permission. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand there will be a transcribed record of my interview kept for up to three years. \_\_\_\_\_

This research is being conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes, MA, and Certified Autism Specialist with Abilene Christian University.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of research participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

Letter of Assent & Confidentiality: For Participants on the Autism Spectrum Who May Still be  
Under Legal Guardianship of a Parent

Creating an Inclusive Environment for Students on the Autism Spectrum

I \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily agree to in the following dissertation study conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes of Abilene Christian University.

I understand that even if I agree to participate now, I can withdraw at any time or refuse to answer any question without any consequences of any kind. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I can withdraw permission to use data from my interview within two weeks after the interview, in which case the material will be deleted. \_\_\_\_\_

I have had the purpose and nature of the study explained to me in writing and I have had the opportunity to ask questions about the study. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that participation involves a semi-structured interview concerning my diagnosis of autism and my experience in the public school system. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will not benefit directly from participating in this research. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand the interview will be audio recorded. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that all information will be kept confidential and information will be stored and kept in an external hard drive kept in a locked safety deposit box up for up to three years. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that I will not be identified in the study with any identifying information. My name will not be used any identifying information changed concerning me, my child, or others I speak about during the interview. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand some exact quotes may be used in the data or quoted without identifying me specifically. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that if I inform the researcher that I or someone else is at risk of harm, they may have to report this to relevant authorities and may have to do so without my permission. \_\_\_\_\_

I understand there will be a transcribed record of my interview kept for up to three years. \_\_\_\_\_

This research is being conducted by Stephanie C. Holmes, MA, and Certified Autism Specialist with Abilene Christian University.

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of research participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date



## Appendix E: Preselection Surveys for Study

### Administrator/LEA Representatives Pre-Selection Survey Principal's Autism Inclusion Survey

The purpose of this study is to determine the opinion of school-based administration toward the inclusion of students with autism in the general education curriculum and to gather information about the types of training and experience that school administrators have. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge and provide responses that reflect what you believe.

This survey is being used as a pre-study selection survey for selecting a sample for further study.

A survey was distributed online through Survey Monkey.

What is your first name?

I give my consent to have this research contact me should I qualify to be included in the interview portion of the study Yes No

I understand if I am selected for the study, I will be required to sign a full consent form, which is kept securely and confidentially as required for dissertation research for up to 3 years. Yes No

What state do you hold a position as administration or LEA representative? \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that if data is used from this survey, the researcher will not give any identifying information in a study about me. Yes No

Survey used with Permission from April Workman based on the work of Cindy Praisner.

### **SECTION 1- Demographic Information**

The following information in this section will only be used to describe the population being studied.

1. Approximate number of all students in your building:

0-250          251-500          501-750          751-1000          1000 or more

2. Average class size for all students:

0-9          10-19          20-29          30-39          40 or more

3. Approximate percentage of students with IEPs in your building (DO NOT INCLUDE GIFTED):

0-5%          6-10%          11-15%          16-20%          21% or more

4. Approximate number of students with IEPs in your building that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day (DO NOT INCLUDE GIFTED):

0-20%          21-40%          41-60%          61-80%          81-100%

5. Approximate percentage of students with a diagnosis of an Autism Spectrum Disorder in your building:

0-5%          6-10%          11-15%          16-20%          21% or more

6. Approximate number of students with an Autism Spectrum Disorder in your building that are included in regular education classrooms for at least 75% of their school day:

0-20%          21-40%          41-60%          61-80%          81-100%

7. Your job title:

Principal          Assistant Principal

8. Grade level of your school

Elementary          Secondary

9. Your age:

20-30          31-40          41-50          50-60          61 or more

10. Gender: Male          Female

11. Type of School: Urban          Rural          Suburban          Title I

## **SECTION II- Training and Experience**

1. Years of full-time regular education teaching experience:

0          1-6          7-12          13-18          19 or more

2. Years of full-time special education teaching experience:

0          1-6          7-12          13-18          19 or more

3. Years as a school administrator:

0-5          6-10          11-15          16-20          21 or more

4. Approximate number of special education credits in your formal training:

0          1-9          10-15          16-21          22 or more

5. Approximate number of in-service training hours in inclusive practices:

0          1-8          9-16          17-24          25 or more

6. Approximate number of in-service training hours in Autism practices:

0      1-8                  9-16                  17-24                  25 or more

7. Most of your special education training has occurred within the last \_\_\_\_\_ years:  
 1-5      6-10                  11-20                  21+

8. Are you certified in special education? No Yes

9. Mark the areas below that were included in your formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses (10% of content or more):

- a. Academic programming for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_
- b. Characteristics of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_
- c. Behavior management class for working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_
- d. Special education law
- e. Crisis interventions

10. Do you have personal experience with (an) individual(s) with a disability outside of the school setting, i.e. family member, friend, etc.? No Yes

If yes, please indicate the relationship to you.

Self    Immediate family member    Extended family member    Friend                  Neighbor  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

11. In general, what has been your experience been with the following levels of autism in the school setting? Mark one level of experience for each level (of autism).

Level 1 Autism (requiring support)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
---------------------------------------	------------------------	----------------------	------------------	----------------------	------------------------

Level 2 Autism (requiring substantial Experience Support)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
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Level 3 Autism (requiring very substantial support)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
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**SECTION III: Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Autism**

Please answer the following 10 questions regarding students who exhibit characteristics of autism. These students may have been diagnosed or referred to as Autism, Asperger’s Syndrome, or PDDNOS

1. Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with autism in the school setting.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                  Uncertain    Agree                  Disagree**

2. Schools with both students with autism and students without disabilities enhance the learning experience of students with severe/profound disabilities.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

3. Students with autism are too impaired to benefit from the activities of a regular school.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

4. A good regular educator can do a lot to help a student with autism.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

5. In general, students with autism should be placed in special classes/schools specifically designed for them.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

6. Students without disabilities can profit from contact with students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

7. Regular education should be modified to meet the needs of all students including students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

8. It is unfair to ask/expect regular teachers to accept students with autism [into their classrooms].

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

9. No discretionary financial resources should be allocated for the integration of students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

10. It should be policy and/or law that students with autism are integrated into regular educational programs and activities.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree            Disagree**

#### **SECTION IV-Most Appropriate Placement for Students with Autism**

Although individual characteristics would need to be considered, please mark the placement that, in general, **you believe** is most appropriate for students with the following levels of autism:

**1. Level 1 (requiring support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

**2. Level 2 (requiring substantial support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

**3. Level 3 (requiring very substantial support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

*Thank you for taking the time to answer all of the questions on this survey. Your assistance in this study is greatly appreciated!!*

Space for contact information to be reached for the interview portion: \_\_\_\_\_

## Educators/Teachers Pre-Selection Survey

## Educator's Autism Inclusion Survey

The purpose of this study is to determine the opinion of school-based educators toward the inclusion of students with autism in the general education curriculum and to gather information about the types of training and experienced educators. There are no right or wrong answers, so please answer the questions to the best of your knowledge and provide responses that reflect what you believe. This survey is being used as a pre-selection survey for selecting a smaller sample for further study.

A survey was distributed online through Survey Monkey.

What is your first name?

I give my consent to have this research contact me should I qualify to be included in the interview portion of the study. Yes No

I understand if I am selected for the study, I will be required to sign a full consent form, which is kept securely and confidentially as required for dissertation research for up to 3 years. Yes No

What state do you hold a position as administration or LEA representative? \_\_\_\_\_

I understand that if data is used from this survey, the researcher will not give any identifying information in a study about me. Yes No

Survey used with Permission from April Workman based on the work of Cindy Praisner.

---

### SECTION 1- Demographic Information

The following information in this section will only be used to describe the population being studied.

12. Your job title:

General Education Teacher    Special Education Professional    Paraprofessional  
 TA  
 Psychologist/Counselor    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

13. Grade level of your school

Elementary    Secondary

14. Your age:

20-30    31-40    41-50    50-60    61 or more

15. Gender: Male    Female

16. Type of School: Urban    Rural    Suburban    Title I

**SECTION II- Training and Experience**

2. Years of full-time regular education teaching experience:

0      1-6              7-12              13-18              19 or more

2. Years of full-time special education teaching experience:

0      1-6              7-12              13-18              19 or more

3. Approximate number of special education credits in your formal training:

0      1-9              10-15              16-21              22 or more

4. Approximate number of in-service training hours in inclusive practices:

0      1-8              9-16              17-24              25 or more

5. Approximate number of in-service training hours in Autism practices:

0      1-8              9-16              17-24              25 or more

6. Most of your special education training has occurred within the last \_\_\_\_\_ years:  
1-5    6-10              11-20              21+

7. Are you certified in special education? No Yes

8. Mark the areas below that were included in your formal training such as courses, workshops, and/or significant portions of courses (10% of content or more):

a. Academic programming for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_

b. Characteristics of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_

c. Behavior management class for working with students with Autism Spectrum Disorder \_\_\_\_\_

d. Special education law

e. Crisis interventions

9. Do you have personal experience with (an) individual(s) with a disability outside of the school setting (i.e., family member, friend, etc.)? No Yes

If yes, please indicate the relationship to you.

Self    Immediate family member    Extended family member    Friend    Neighbor

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

10. In general, what has been your experience been with the following levels of autism in the school setting? Mark one level of experience for each level (of autism).

Level 1 Autism (requiring support)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
---------------------------------------	------------------------	----------------------	------------------	----------------------	------------------------

Level 2 Autism (requiring substantial Experience)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
---	------------------------	----------------------	------------------	----------------------	------------------------

Level 3 Autism (requiring very substantial support)	Negative Experience	Somewhat Negative	No Experience	Somewhat Positive	Positive Experience
---	------------------------	----------------------	------------------	----------------------	------------------------

**SECTION III: Attitudes Toward Inclusion of Students with Autism**

Please answer the following 10 questions regarding students who exhibit characteristics of autism. These students require minimal amounts of support within the general education setting and may have been diagnosed or referred to as Autism, Asperger's Syndrome, or PDDNOS.

1. Only teachers with extensive special education experience can be expected to deal with students with autism in the school setting.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

2. Schools with both students with autism and students without disabilities enhance the learning experience of students with severe/profound disabilities.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

3. Students with autism are too impaired to benefit from the activities of a regular school.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

4. A good regular educator can do a lot to help a student with autism.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

5. In general, students with autism should be placed in special classes/schools specifically designed for them.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

6. Students without disabilities can profit from contact with students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

7. Regular education should be modified to meet the needs of all students including students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

8. It is unfair to ask/expect regular teachers to accept students with autism [into their classrooms].

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**

9. No discretionary financial resources should be allocated for the integration of students with autism.

**Strongly Disagree   Strongly Agree                      Uncertain   Agree                      Disagree**



10. It should be policy and/or law that students with autism are integrated into regular educational programs and activities.

**Strongly Disagree    Strongly Agree                      Uncertain    Agree                      Disagree**

**SECTION IV-Most Appropriate Placement for Students with Autism**

Although individual characteristics would need to be considered, please mark the placement that, in general, **you believe** is most appropriate for students with the following levels of autism:

**4. Level 1 (requiring support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

**5. Level 2 (requiring substantial support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

**6. Level 3 (requiring very substantial support)**

- Special education services outside the regular school
- Special class for most or all of the school day
- Part-time special education classes
- Regular classroom instruction and resource room
- Regular classroom instruction for most of the day
- Full-time regular education with support

Thank you for taking the time to answer all of the questions on this survey. Your assistance in this study is greatly appreciated!!

Space for contact information if chosen for the study: \_\_\_\_\_

## Pre-Selection Survey

## Educator Other

1. Do you currently work in the public school system? Yes No
2. Have you ever worked as a counselor, school psychologist in the public education system?
3. If you answered no to both 1 &2, please indicate N/A. If you answered Yes to either question, please indicate your role in the public school system?  
School Psychologist School Counselor Counselor Other NA
4. What is the most recent state in which you worked in the public school system?
5. What is your first name?
6. What is the best email to reach you if you are selected for the study?
7. I understand that if selected for the study, I will be asked to sign a consent form.
8. I understand that all survey respondents will be put in a drawing for a gift card regardless of selection.
9. If I am selected for the study, I will be offered an hour consultation with this researcher in her field of expertise as a certified autism specialist.
10. While I gave my name and contact information, I understand that all information will be kept confidential and will not be given out in any way. This researcher is required to keep all data secure and confidential for up to 3 years.
11. I give the researcher permission to contact me if selected for the study.

## Pre-Selection Survey

## Parents of Students on the Autism Spectrum

1. Do you have a child on the autism spectrum who has attended school in the public education system?
2. How many years did or has your child attended public school?
3. Have you ever attended an IEP meeting/eligibility meeting?
4. If yes, how many?
5. How many years of your child's schooling did they have an IEP?
6. Have you ever had an advocate with you in the IEP meeting?
7. I understand that participating in this pre-selection survey is optional, and by selecting Yes, I am giving permission, consent, for the researcher to contact me, should I qualify for this study. Yes No
8. Contact information if selected for interview: \_\_\_\_\_
9. If I am selected for the study, I understand I will be asked to provide full consent for the study. Yes No

## Pre-Selection Survey

## Persons over the age of 18 on the Autism Spectrum

1. Do you have a diagnosis of ASD (Autism, Asperger's, or PDDNOS)? Please check which served as your diagnosis. Autism Spectrum      Asperger's      PDDNOS
2. If your diagnosis was ASD, which level? Level 1 ASD    Level 2 ASD    Level 3 ASD
3. Are you under guardianship? If so, this means if you are selected and wish to participate in the study, a guardian will have to give consent before the interview. Yes    No
4. Are you over the age of 18?
5. Are there any other specifiers or additional learning issues?  
Non-Speaking/Non-Verbal      Intellectual Impairment      Catatonia      Selective  
Mutism
6. Did you ever attend public school?
7. Did you have an IEP or 504 plan?
8. Did you ever attend an IEP or 504 meetings while in school?
9. What is your first name?
10. How may I contact you?

## Appendix F: Participants

Administrators/LEA Representatives: Served or Haved Served in Various GA Counties

LEA 1:Position/Title: Retired Assistant Principal

SPED Certified or Trained:No

Experience in Education: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's Degree or higher

LEA 2:Position/Title: Assistant Principal

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Experience in Education: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 3:Position/Title: Special Educaiton Lead Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Experience in Education: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 4: Position/Title: Special Education Lead Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Experience in Education: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 5: Position/Title: Special Education Lead Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Experience in Education: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 6: Position/Title: Special Education Coordinator

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 7: Position/Title: Special Education Lead Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 8: Position/Title: County or District Level Position

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 25+ years

Education Level: Master's or higher

LEA 9: Position/Title: County or District Level Position

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 25+ years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educators: Serve or Have Served in NC, SC, or GA

Educator 1: Position/Title: General Classroom Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: No

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 2: Position/Title: General Education Classroom Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 3: Position/Title: SPED Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 4: Position/Title: SPED Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 1-5 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 5: Position/Title: SPED Teacher

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 6: Position/Title: School Psychologist

SPED Certified or Trained: No

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 7: Position/Title: School Psychologist

SPED Certified or Trained: No

Education Experience: 1-5 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 8: Position/Title: School Counselor

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 17-25 years

Education Level: Maser's or higher

Educator 9: Position/Title: Occupational Therapist

SPED Certified or Trained: Unknown

Education Experience: 17-25 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 10: Position/Title: Speech Language Specialist

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Educator 11: Position/Title: Speech Language Specialist

SPED Certified or Trained: Yes

Education Experience: 11-16 years

Education Level: Master's or higher

Parents:

Parent 1: Resides In: VA

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Autism Level 1/Asperger's Syndrome

Specifiers: Other Learning Challenges

Student Receives Services: Mainstream Classroom

Parent 2: Resides In: NC

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Autism Level 2 or 3

Specifiers: Multiple Disabilities and Intellectual Delays

Student Receives Services: Self-Contained Autism Specified Classroom

Parent 3: Resides In: NC

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Autism Level 2

Specifiers: ADHD and Echolalia

Student Receives Services: Self-Contained Classroom

Parent 4: Resides In: SC

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Autism Level 2 or 3

Specifiers: Mild Intellectual Disability

Student Receives Services: Mainstream Classroom with Paraprofessional and Pullouts



Parent 5: Resides In: SC

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Autism Level 1

Specifiers: Anxiety

Student Receives Services: Through 504 in Mainstream Classroom

Parent 6: Resides In: GA

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Asperger's Syndrome

Specifiers: Exceptional/Gifted

Student Receives Services: Mainstream Classroom with Pullout Services and Supports

Parent 7: Resides In: GA

Autism Diagnosis of Student: Asperger's Syndrome

Specifiers: Multiple Health Issues and Learning Challenges

Student Received Services: Mainstream Classroom with Pullout

Additional Information: Student Graduated from Private School

Parent 8: Resides In: GA

Autism Diagnosis: Autism Level 3

Specifiers: Non-speaking, Motor Apraxia, Other

Received Services: Self-Contained Classroom

Additional Information: Unable to Graduate/ Communication Resources Issue

Persons on the Autism Spectrum

Student 1: Resides In: Southeast

Autism Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome

Specifiers: Multiple Health Issues

Received Services: Mainstream Classroom with Pullout

Additional Information: Graduated from Private School; Currently in College

Student 2: Resides In: Southeast

- Autism Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome/Autism Level 1  
Specifiers: Twice Exceptional/Gifted/Anxiety/Learning Differences  
Received Services: Self-Contained/Mainstream/Co-Taught/Gifted  
Additional Information: Graduate Student
- Student 3: Resides In: Southeast  
Autism Diagnosis: Autism Level 3  
Specifiers: Non-speaking, Motor Apraxia, Other  
Received Services: Mainstreamwith para/Self-Contained  
Additional Information: Wanted a highschool diploma or equivalent
- Student 4: Resides In: Southeast  
Autism Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome  
Specifiers: None  
Received Services: Mainstream with supports  
Additional Information: College Graduate works in Public Education
- Student 5: Resides In: Southeast  
Autism Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome  
Specifiers: Exceptional/Gifted/Anxiety  
Received Services: Mainstream with supports  
Additional Information: Dual Bachelor's Degrees, Furthering Education
- Student 6: Resides In: Southeast  
Autism Diagnosis: Autism Level 2  
Specifiers: Learning Differences, Mild Cognitive Delays  
Received Services: Small Classroom Setting/Co-Taught  
Additional Information: College Graduate and Autism Blogger
- Student 7: Resides In: Canada

Autism Diagnosis: Asperger's Syndrome

Specifiers: Selective Mutism/Anxiety

Received Services: Told Did Not Qualify for Services

Additional Information: Pursuing College

## Appendix G: Permission to Use Surveys or Questionnaires

October 6, 2018

Dr. Praisner:

My name is Stephanie C. Holmes, and I live in Atlanta, GA. I am currently working toward my Doctorate of Education with a specialty in Conflict Resolution and Mediation Studies through Abilene Christian University. I found a modified version of your survey through the dissertation work of April Workman to specifically examine attitudes of principals of inclusion for students on the autism spectrum. If Dr. Workman also approves of the use of her work, I would like to use the survey modified from your original survey to survey the attitudes of those who are members of the Individualized Education Plan team. Your work has been instrumental to my research, and thus your work would be properly cited in my research.

I am looking forward to your response. If you have any further questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to ask.

**CINDY PRAISNER <XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX>**

Oct 6, 2018,  
7:16 PM

to me

Hi Stephanie-

I grant my permission to use the survey. My version was also adapted, so I am attaching the instrument section of my dissertation so that you can read it.

Best wishes!  
Cindy

## Permission to Use Survey

## PAIS

October 14, 2018

Dr. Workman,

I am writing to ask for permission to use the modified survey you created for your dissertation study based on the work of Dr. Praisner concerning the attitudes of principals toward the inclusion of students on the autism spectrum. My name is Stephanie C. Holmes, and I working on my Doctorate in Education with a major in Organizational Leadership with a specialty in Conflict Resolution and Mediation Studies. I am pursuing my degree through Abilene Christian University. I would also like to make some minor modifications for the use of the survey to other members of the Individualized Education Team who would be part of creating a plan for students on the autism spectrum.

I look forward to hearing from you. If you have further questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Dr. Praisner has given permission since your survey was based on her work, and I would love to have your permission as well.



**April Workman <XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX>**

Feb 4, 2019,  
1:18 PM

to me

Stephanie,

You are more than welcome to use this survey and modify it in any way you wish. I would ask that you send me the changes to look at, just because I am always looking at expanding my own research. Hope this helps.

---

PBIS Climate Survey Used in Guided Protocol for Students on the Autism Spectrum

May 28, 2019

To whom it may concern:

I am writing to seek permission to use portions of the PBIS: School Climate Survey for dissertation research. My research concerns building inclusive climates for students on the autism spectrum. However, my research will be qualitative, and I would like to adapt the survey for interpersonal interviews.

For example, for students on the autism spectrum, I would use the School Climate Survey:

Middle/High and ask them to rate the question as the survey indicates, "I like school."

Strongly disagree      Somewhat disagree      Somewhat agree      Strongly Agree

But I would ask why and try and to gather further information for that choice for the qualitative study.

I would like to use the School Climate Survey: Student

I would use the questions in the same format with the open-ended question in an interview to ask why they chose their answer or elaborate. I would qualify them to answer the question based on the experience.

So a modification under School Safety I would ask

"My student with ASD feels safe at school."

Strongly disagree      Somewhat disagree      Somewhat agree      Strongly Agree

Then ask why they chose that option and what was safe or unsafe for their student

I would, of course, cite the survey in the research. Although the manual states the instrument is free to use because I am modifying it to a semi-structured questionnaire, I wanted to obtain permission for the use of the instrument for my dissertation research. While I do not attend

Georgia State, I have spoken numerous times for them at their GA PBIS conferences. Below is a

link to my part of my literature review for my dissertation studies presented at last year's GS PBIS conference.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/gapbs/2018/2018/90/>

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Stephanie C. Holmes, MA

Certified Autism Specialist

**Stephanie Holmes**

**Subject:** Permission to use Survey

MAY 28, 2019 | 02:40PM PDT

**Kent McIntosh** replied:

Hello Stephanie,

You have our permission to use the School Climate Surveys in your dissertation research. Because your institution recommends the use of published measures, I recommend administering the items as established, and adding follow-up open-ended or rating questions throughout, as opposed to removing or altering questions.

Just note that these surveys are actually the Georgia School Climate Survey Suite, so these surveys are already administered across Georgia.

I'd recommend the La Salle and Meyers version. The other one is just an administration manual. But if your chair insists, go with them!

Best wishes with your important work!

Kent

## Permission to Use SDT Questionnaires

Open Permission is given at the Center for Self-Determination Theory

<https://selfdeterminationtheory.org/questionnaires/>

Research on Self-Determination Theory has included laboratory experiments and field studies in several different settings. In order to do this research, we have developed many questionnaires to assess different constructs contained within the theory. Each questionnaire page will typically include:

- the scale
- description of the scale
- a key for the scale, and
- references for articles describing studies that used the scale

\*\*\* Please note that all questionnaires on this web site, developed for research on self-determination theory, are copyrighted. You are welcome to use the instruments for academic (non-commercial) research projects. However, you may not use any of them for any commercial purposes without written permission to do so from the Center for Self-Determination Theory.

Click on any questionnaire name below to access the scale or set of questionnaires and other information.

### Questionnaires Used for the Guided Protocol: Persons on the Autism Spectrum

Aspirations Index (Abbreviated Version)

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction in Relationships (Abbreviated Version)



## Appendix H: Guided Protocols

### Administrators/LEA Representatives

#### Section 1: Follow-up from PAIS

On the Principal's Educators Autism Inclusion Survey you indicated \_\_\_\_\_ experience toward inclusion.

Can you tell me more about that?

- You indicated you had \_\_\_\_\_ years of experience with students with autism.  
Can you tell me more about that?
- You checked \_\_\_\_\_ for training. What training would say was most effective in working with students with autism? \_\_\_\_\_  
What additional training would you like to have? \_\_\_\_\_
- If they checked personal experience with autism, ask who this person is and how long they have had contact or known them \_\_\_\_\_
- In choosing placement for Autism Level 1 Students you chose \_\_\_\_\_  
Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?
- In choosing placement for Autism Level 2 Students you chose \_\_\_\_\_  
Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?
- In choosing placement for Autism Level 3 Students you chose \_\_\_\_\_  
Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?

#### Section 2: Questions: About IEPs

1. Have you ever served on an IEP team?
2. If yes, think of the most positive or successful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and the team?
3. Follow up: In your opinion, what helps an IEP team work collaboratively?
4. Think of the most negative or unsuccessful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and team?
5. What are challenges you have face to including students with autism academically?

6. What are the challenges you have faced to including students with autism socially?
7. What content area would help you better understand students with autism?
8. Have you ever had special education law training?

### Section 3: About You

Grades taught: \_\_\_\_\_

Areas taught: \_\_\_\_\_

Highest held degree: \_\_\_\_\_

### Section 4: Closing Thoughts

What is important for parents and others to understand about your experience as an administrator in your role as LEA Rep?

What is inclusion to you?

#### Guided Protocol Educators

This guided protocol is for general or special education teachers or assistants.

### Section 1: Follow-up from EAIS

On the Educators Autism Inclusion Survey you indicated \_\_\_\_\_ experience toward inclusion.

Can you tell me more about that?

1. You indicated you had \_\_\_\_\_ years of experience with students with autism.

Can you tell me more about that?

2. You checked \_\_\_\_\_ for training. What training would say was most effective in working with students with autism? \_\_\_\_\_

What additional training would you like to have? \_\_\_\_\_

3. If they checked personal experience with autism, ask who this person is and how long they have had contact or known them\_\_\_\_\_

4. In choosing placement for Autism Level 1 Students you chose\_\_\_\_\_

Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?

5. In choosing placement for Autism Level 2 Students you chose\_\_\_\_\_

Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?

6. In choosing placement for Autism Level 3 Students you chose\_\_\_\_\_

Can you tell me about how you came to that choice?

## **Section 2: Questions: IEPs**

1. Have you ever served on an IEP team?

2. If yes, think of the most positive or successful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and the team?

3. In your opinion, what helps an IEP team work collaboratively?

4. Think of the most negative or unsuccessful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and team?

5. Does your administrator support you and provide resources for including students with autism in your classroom?

6. What are the challenges you have face to including students with autism academically?

7. What are the challenges you have faced to including students with autism socially?

8. What would help you feel more confident or competent to include students on the autism spectrum?

## **Section 3: About**

Grades taught: \_\_\_\_\_

Areas taught:\_\_\_\_\_

Highest held degree: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Section 4: Your experience**

Is there anything else that would help describe or explain your experience as \_\_\_\_\_ to work with and include students on the autism spectrum?

What would help build an understanding of autism for neurotypical peers to create understanding and acceptance for student son the autism spectrum?

What does inclusion look like to you?

#### **Guided Protocol School Personnel:**

This population may include paraprofessionals, school counselors, or school psychologists, occupational therapists, or speech pathologists

IEPs

1. Have you ever served on an IEP team?
2. What is your position?
3. How long have you served in that position?
4. If yes, think of the most positive or successful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and the team?
5. In your opinion, what helps an IEP team work collaboratively?
6. Think of the most negative or unsuccessful IEP team meeting you had, what were the elements of that environment and team?
7. Does your administrator support you and provide resources for including students with autism in your classroom?
8. What are the challenges you have face to including students with autism academically?
9. What are the challenges you have faced to including students with autism socially?

10. What would help you feel more confident or competent to include students on the autism spectrum?
11. Have you had any courses or training in special education law?
12. Where did you learn about autism spectrum disorder?
13. What additional training would be helpful to you to understand autism spectrum disorder and inclusive practices better?
14. What is inclusion to you?
13. Is there any additional information that helps describe your experience working with students on the autism spectrum in the public school setting?

#### Guided Protocol: Parents

1. Does your child receive services for special education?
2. Does your child have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder?
3. Does your child's diagnosis-specific mental impairment?
4. Where does your child receive services?
5. Do you feel your school addresses your child's needs academically?
6. How?
7. Do you feel your school addresses your child's needs socially?
8. How?
9. Does your child's IEP contain any social skills or social inclusion goals outside of placement goals?
10. If your child's IEP includes social skills goals, what was the process like to get those goals put in the IEP? Your idea? School's idea?
11. Does your child have friends at school?

12. Does your child like school?
13. Do you feel your child has been left out, excluded, or bullied for behaviors associated with their autism?
14. Think about your most positive or successful IEP team meeting. What elements made it positive or collaborate?
15. Think about your most negative or unsuccessful IEP team meeting. What elements contributed to that
16. Did your school implement the IEP, as stated in the meeting?
17. What have you suggested for more inclusive practices for your child?
18. How were they received?
19. Do you feel your school treats you as an equal member of the IEP team? Why or why not?
20. Have you ever had an advocate or lawyer assist you with an IEP?
21. What would aid in collaboration in IEP team meetings?
22. What do you want schools to know about the importance of inclusion for your child?

\*\*\*If the Parent provided IEP review IEP and talk through goals.

#### Guided Protocol

#### **Voice of the Student (Person with Autism Spectrum Disorder)**

Do you have a diagnosis of ASD?

Are you under the guardianship of someone?

Which level?

Are there any other specifiers or additional learning issues?

Did you ever attend an IEP meeting while in school?

Used with Permission: PBIS School Climate Survey Suite: Student

1. I like (d) school.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

2. I feel/felt successful at school.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

3. I feel my school has high standards for achievement for everyone.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

4. My school sets clear rules for behavior.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

5. Teachers treat/treated me with respect.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

6. The behaviors in my class allow the teachers to teach.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

7. Students are frequently recognized for good behavior.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

8. School is a place where I feel/felt safe [added to be me].

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

9. I know/knew an adult/ had an adult that I can/could talk to if I need/needed help.

Strongly Disagree      Strongly Agree      Uncertain      Disagree

Explain answer:

Inclusion:

1. Did you feel included by other students at your school?
2. Did you feel welcomed by the staff at your school?
3. How could the school have been a better experience socially for you?

### **Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction in Relationships (Abbreviated Version)**

In My Relationships

Please respond to each statement by indicating how true it is for you. Use the scale:

1 is not true at all to 4 somewhat true to 7 very true

1      2      3      4      5      6      7

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel free to be who I am

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel like a competent person

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel loved and cared for

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel inadequate and incompetent

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel I have a say in what happens and can voice my opinion

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel distance in our relationship

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel capable and effective

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel a lot of closeness and intimacy

When I am with \_\_\_\_\_ I feel controlled and pressured to be or act in certain ways.



## Aspirations Index (Abbreviated)

**Everyone has goals or aspirations. These are some things many individuals hope to accomplish over their lives. You will have life goals presented to you one at a time, and you will be asked three things. How important is this goal to you? How likely are you to attain this in your future? And How much have you achieved the goal already?**

### **1. To grow and learn new things?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

### **2. To have good friends?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

### **3. To work for the betterment of society?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

### **4. To share my life with someone I love? (marriage)**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

### **5. To have people comment on how attractive I am?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

**6. To assist or help others?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

**7. To choose what I want to do/ a career I love instead of being pushed along in life**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

**8. To be accepted for who I am?**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

**9. To have enduring relationships (people stay in relationships with me)**

How important is this to you?

How likely is it that this will happen in your future?

How much have you already attained this goal so far?

**About School and Inclusion:**

1. What do you want peers to understand about autism?
2. What do you want teachers to understand about autism?
3. What are suggestions to better include students with autism in school?
4. What advice do you give to other students with autism still in school?
5. Did you experience teasing for being different?

6. Did you experience bullying?
7. Are you comfortable discussing the incident (s)?
8. What do you think it important for others to understand about your school experience?
9. Were you included by students at your school at social events outside of school?

## Appendix I: Definitions of Inclusion

### Admin/LEA Definitions of Inclusion:

LEA 1: To help each student reach their highest potential whatever that is and set the climate for inclusion

LEA 2: For those in self-contained units for saying high functioning students with AS but we try to incorporate them when ready social-wise into co-taught class settings in the main school building. It is also thinking long-term what would help these students pick a path [after school], instead of 1 day or 1 year at a time.

LEA 3: I think they [students with autism] should be allowed to have the same opportunities as any other kiddo. Regardless of their disability or what they got going on. They should have opportunities to participate whether parents want them to or not, whether they need additional support or not. We need more uniformity within every county because every county does seem to deal with SPED and autism differently.

LEA 4: I think mainstreaming is huge. I think students should not be removed from the general education setting and in the rarest occasions when all other things have been exhausted. I think we have to train our teachers.

LEA 5: I think it [inclusion] gives general education students a chance to broaden their horizons. I see it benefits both students, socially especially.

LEA 6: Inclusive practices are, in my opinion, educating students with disabilities and interrelated programming. That could be a student getting services in a general education classroom by a special education teacher and by special education parent and teachers working collaboratively with that general education teacher to develop an environment for success for that student. A good educator is going to learn what her students need and if they don't have a skill set or know what is needed for a student, and then they're going to get the training to support that student to be successful. Students with autism have the same rights as all students.

LEA 7: You have a mixture of students, different levels with different disabilities, and some don't have disabilities. It [inclusion] can be with a parent help supporting a teacher, or it can be co-taught. It really depends on what the kid needs.

LEA 8: Creating a culture in that school and in the classroom of everybody is different, everybody is their own, and we need to be kind and then allowing opportunities for the social-fostering of the positive. It [culture of inclusion] comes from the top-down, it absolutely takes the principals and all administrators sharing the message that every student in this building- they are out students. We need to do better about having open hearts and open minds. Every one of our students is valuable and has something to contribute and that we can all learn from each other.

### Educator's Definitions of Inclusion:

Ed 1 (Gen. Ed.): I definitely don't think it's [inclusion] for all students. When I think inclusion, I just feel like it is including students to the best of our ability in every part of the general academic day. I do believe they should be included in activities. They should definitely feel like part of the school and part of the study body. I just feel like for them to meet their goals, a smaller setting is better and not as overwhelming.

Ed 2 (Gen. Ed. with SPED certification): I think there's different levels of inclusion. I think that if someone is fully included, then to me, that looks like they're in the general education setting for pretty much most of the day. Maybe with or without supports. Some inclusion for other kids could mean they just get to go to specials with other students in their grade level. For some kids, that's all the inclusion they can actually handle. I think inclusion can look like different things.

Ed 3 (SPED Co-taught): I'm a proponent of students having access to the curriculum. They're going to be around everybody not classified as special ed. They are going to be in that environment, and they're going to be held to the same or similar expectations as those they're with. Good teachers find a way regardless.

Ed 4 (SPED Small Room Setting/Co-taught): These kids are people, and they all have potential and to shut them down because they're low functioning or to say they can't make it or don't belong in this setting is highly offensive. I have the idea anybody can learn if you provide accommodations. If you're able to provide the supports they need to reach the goal, then they can reach it. They can grow. You're going to be better for it. Society's going to be better for it.

Ed 5 (SPED Self-Contained): Inclusion is being given access to all the tools, academics, and social interaction as any other age-related peer. It looks like an accommodated, modified version, and that would look different for every student. Giving the same access to the same things in a modified, accommodated way.

Ed 6 (School Psych.): I wish that we could make a concerted effort to find the passions of our students with autism and figure out how those passions can be put to work in a school in a way that will help them feel more part of the school. We don't go that extra mile, and I think that's something we can do better at.

Ed 8 (School Counselor): I think that is [inclusion] means to design individual service delivery for each child based on their needs. Since autism is such a broad spectrum, you have to really think what is the big use for the child and how can they access the material with their difficulties. So, working with a teacher and possibly EC teacher if they have an IEP to make the materials accessible and help them to be able to stay in class with their disability. I think one of the biggest things is for adults in the building to model

encouragement of peers that are struggling or have disabilities and encouraging others to just be kind to one another and model that in class.

Ed 9 (OT): Inclusion is just the student being in a classroom with their general education peers as much as possible with whatever level of support that they require. Us as adults, the way we respond to these students has a lot to do with the way that the students do.

Ed 10 (Speech-Lang): I think it [inclusion] starts with conversations with out typical students just about how everyone is different. Just not necessarily focusing on why certain people are different, but the fact everybody is different. Everybody bring something to the table. Where we got a lot more inclusion happening is because we already instilled some of the basic foundational skills. Social training not just for children with disabilities but for the typical child, like how to communication and befriend. Social communication is the key. (She elaborated to say social communication is important for administrators, general education, peers, and persons on the spectrum).

Ed 11 (Speech-Lang): It [inclusion] means that to the extent, we're able to trying to serve the children as much as possible with their peers, their gen. ed. peers. To the extent that is best for the child and meets their needs.

#### Parent's Definition of Inclusion

Parent 1 (Elementary School Parent): I would say that they need to make an effort to spend some quality time with these kids in social situations and get to know them. It's really easy for the teachers to start to see the class to class and [need] to start seeing them as individuals.

Parent 2 (Elementary School Parent): Different students are on different levels and have different abilities. For us, we say this year after year, the most important thing is that she's happy in her environment, that she is relationships, that she is engaged in things she wants to do. You want them to be happy; you want them to feel comfortable, safe. Functionality is like our number one goal. Of course, we want her to learn academic skills. I would prefer more focus on other skills. Any goals should be more functional in nature and how to increase her social network.

Parent 3 (Middle School Parent): I believe that they can address it [inclusion] better as far as they have students that come into the classroom from upper-grade levels like their seniors, but I feel they can do more as far as different community activities. I understand they're having an issue with the vocational department as allowing them to go out and access the community. I want my child to be recognized and respected as an individual. A schedule is very important, but you want your child to have this social skill and this outlook that somebody else loves me, or somebody else want to be around more than just my teacher or my mom. Somebody else wants to know my name and wants to know me

as an individual and as a person. The need for somebody else to know that they're there. They need to have knowledge of how to live.

Parent 4 (Elementary School Parent): The first time I wanted to see her more in general education, they did this assessment. They said she doesn't have the language ability. She's verbal, but more of receptive language. She doesn't have the skill needed to be in a general ed. setting. It's [inclusion] important for her to see what is expected of a typical student and all the appropriate behaviors that are seen in a typical classroom. I wish there was an ABA therapist in every classroom; this would be so helpful to the teacher. But if [my child] cannot function in society with appropriated peer interaction skills, all the education in the world isn't going to really matter. Academics serve their purpose, but all of the peer interaction that she gets from a general ed. setting is equally important in my opinion.

Parent 5 (Elementary School Parent): My child is in Gen ED, but he isn't included and doesn't feel included. I suggested they pair him up. Like in a reading group or when working on a project. I suggest pairing him with girls that seem to be more understanding. Boys are fairly mean. I want to give them [school staff] the feedback that I get at home, about schools and about how they handle things so they know how it affects him. How do we get people to promote inclusion? Kids are cruel sometimes. I think they need to be a bit more aware of what's going on. [Bullying] gives him a lot of anxiety. It has made him a bit reclusive when he tries to make friends it doesn't work and then he just quits trying. I think it's changed his attitude about school.

Parent 6 (Middle School Parent): My husband and I, our biggest goal more than academic, just making sure she is socially fitting in at school and have friendships. Knowing Asperger's, it is hard for to make and retain friends. We made sure we mention it in the IEP meeting. A lot of help comes from speech therapists in relating with the social situation inside the school with friends. They help her with social stories and social problem-solving.

Parent 7 (Parent of Young Adult): Children are very complex, and there is lots of different individual circumstances. I think that in general ed., the gen ed. population teachers aren't given the information on or just a blip in training or pre-service unless they're special ed. teachers. Maybe a class teacher who pushes in, and it's [autism] as an assigned class. Without knowing, understanding how the child is wired, where their f=deficits are, where their strengths are, and how to help the child one-term, not just also thinking of it as their own nine months, but the step up. Think, "This is a long timeline of your life, and I'm supposed to help you succeed for this time period of time and come out more positive.

Parent 8 (Parent of Young Adult): The [IEP] meeting is for this student to get the education that is their right to have. It is also to remember why it is called Individualized Education Program. Each student is an individual and need specific supports, goals, personnel, methods, staffing to be able to achieve their education goals. That need should trump the needs of the system. If this student is a square peg, he or she cannot be jammed in a round hole to meet the school's need. If you meet one person with autism, you've met one person with autism. I want first; for I guess people like my son, presume competence. if I could broaden it to presume humanness. These children are human beings with the same feelings, the same thoughts, and the same fears. Actually, probably much more elevated anxieties because of their difference and the way they are perceived and treated. They're per human beings, and they all deserve to be able to develop emotionally, socially, academically, physically, in every arena like everyone else.

#### Person on the Spectrum's Perspective of Inclusion

Student 1 (AS): Make them [schools] more included and encourage it when they [student with autism] are excelling, but don't discourage them when they're failing. We're still human. Taking them [students with autism] out of the class makes all the other students notice their differences more.

Student 2 (AS): Autism is not a one size fits all. The minute you stop treating us like there's a Band-Aid to fix us, it's when you would automatically start seeing more students wanting to include them, or you will see them doing better in school because the teacher is taking time to get to know them. Don't punish the disability [behavior]. See me as a person, not a disability. Make a better effort to know the student and get to know their students and figure out what will work with that student.

Student 3 (ASD L3): I should have equal access to education at the appropriate skill level and with the support necessary to achieve this in the setting with peers of all types. We [people on the spectrum] are the same as other students yet different in that we have hopes, dreams, goals, feelings, thoughts. We are competent despite our outward manifestations. We are not less but worthy of appropriate education and social opportunities and human decency and respect. Social relationships and interactions connect us to the community of human beings that education seeks to serve better.

Student 4 (AS): Understanding that first of all, not everyone with autism is the same. Different people on the spectrum have different quirks; they have different things that set them off, react differently to the same situations. A one size fits all policy is not going to work. Getting to know the specific students and what helps them and then as far as training, just spreading knowledge and informing people creates a better understanding. I think it's going to help people to be able to interact with those students [students with autism] that is really important to have good understanding because a lot of times, people



fear or dislike or aren't comfortable with things they don't know about. Providing the knowledge even if maybe they don't have a lot of students on the spectrum in their school can be very helpful and very important. For peers explain at age-appropriate levels their classmate's needs (later she added and of course maintain confidentiality and respect boundaries).

Student 5 (AS): All of us deal with people on the spectrum every day, know that's nothing but a label and labels don't really matter. I'm as much autistic as I am female as much as I am human. It's just part of who I am. It doesn't mean I deserve any less respect. Everything you would do with another student, we deserve as well. We may need some extra support in doing those activities. Don't invalidate your students. Most kindergarteners don't get excluded, even if a bit different. If we can start working on those skills of inclusion in peers, in our staff, having staff members at all levels of schools be actively inclusion. Inclusion is life-long; it starts at birth til the day you die.

Student 6 (ASD L2): Well, just because I am a little weird doesn't make me less human. I have feelings just like anyone else. I even wrote an article about stopping the stigma against people with disabilities. There shouldn't be a stigma. When you're accepting to be someone's friend, you should accept and try to understand all aspects of a person. People view autism as a source of annoyance, disappointment, or worse in different ways and different degrees. It's not fair to place judgment upon someone when you don't even fully know them. There are those who are non-verbal, and we need to learn how to better communicate with them.

Student 7 (AS): Especially being a woman on the spectrum, it is very important because there are lots of myths about people on the spectrum, especially women, which some would tell you are basically unicorns that don't exist. I think it's important to make society better, so people on the spectrum don't have to deal with all the crud that older people on the spectrum or Spectrumites has had to deal with. Peers need to know that their words have an impact. You never know what kind of damage you are causing on the inside. Teachers need to be more educated about sensory overload and how people on the spectrum process information. I think smaller classes would be helpful so teachers can have time to get that connection with their students and help them learn. When you're teaching someone how you treat them not only affects how they learn and how they retain information, it affects their self-worth, it affects how they view themselves, how they feel about their ability to successful, how they feel about their ability to make friend, to be worth friendship, to just be worth happiness period. I was told I wasn't worth much because of my disability [by a teacher].

## Appendix J: Coding Matrices for Research Question 1

***Barriers to Inclusion: Administration/LEA Representatives/Educators' Perspectives***

Recurring Remark/Theme	LEA	ED	<i>n</i>
Behavior of Student Unruly, Unpredictable, Challenging Aggressive, Self-Harm	8/9	11/11	19/20
Not Enough Supports/Resources Staff, Communication Device, Visual Supports, etc.	8/9	11/11	19/20
Climate/Culture of School not Inclusion Focused	7/9	9/11	16/20
Teachers/Admin not trained in basics of ASD	6/9	9/11	15/20
ASD Students lacks appropriate skills/norms For what are appropriate class/social behaviors	4/9	11/11	15/20
Mixed Exceptionalism/Capacities/Range of Abilities in one AS student	6/9	7/11	15/20
Lack of Social Groups/Peer Buddies/ Social Communication Curriculum/Social Goals with Peers	4/9	9/11	13/20
Non-Peer Acceptance/Lack of Understanding/Fear (Pacing/Stimming/Rocking/Sent out of Class to Principal	4/9	9/11	13/20
Inflexibility of Administration or General Educator Will Not Think Creativity or Outside of the Box	4/9	8/11	12/20
Broadness of Spectrum/Highly Individualized Plans (What works for 1 may not work for another ASD student)	3/9	9/11	12/20
Lack of Understanding ASD students need explicit Teaching/Modeling for Social Instruction and Social Problem-Solving	2/9	10/11	12/20
Lack of Social Skills/ Navigate Social Interactions Group Projects/Class Discussions/ Public Speaking	3/9	9/11	12/20
Social Naivety/ Lack of Skills Can Lead to Teasing/Exclusion/Bullying	2/9	9/11	11/20
Overwhelm by Sensory Elements in Class Meltdowns/Eloping	2/9	9/11	11/20

When Gen Ed Teacher Speaks about a Child As Burden in the Class or Language "Not my Student" or "Those SPED students"	2/9	9/11	11/20
Overcrowded Gen Ed Classrooms	5/9	5/11	10/20
Gen Ed Won't Make/Doesn't Know How To Make Accommodations/Modifications using language "It's not fair to other students"	4/9	6/11	10/20
Lack of Understanding of Function of Autistic Behaviors/Lack of FBAs in BIPs and IEPs	3/9	7/11	10/20
Gen Ed Teacher takes eye contact, blunt responses Or other AS behavior too personally or punishes behaviors as disrespect	4/9	5/11	9/20
Teacher is Reactive not Proactive	4/9	5/11	9/20
Schedule/Structure of School Day in Middle/High Not Conducive for Social Groups or Social Curriculum	4/9	5/11	9/20
Not all Admins have SPED certification or only the Basics in SPED law	4/9	5/11	9/20
High IQ or Above Average IQ (can do class work) Cannot Handle Social Aspects of Class	3/9	5/11	8/20
Lack of Sensory Tools/Space or Decompression Space in Main Classroom	1/9	7/11	8/20
Social Skills Goals Focus more on Class Interactions and less on Peers/Making Friends	1/9	7/11	8/20
Lack of Faculty facilitated supports for Extracurricular Activities for AS students	4/9	3/11	7/20
*Lecture Based Lessons with Little Visual Supports Not Enough Hands On/Relies too Much on Audio (which is not strength for ASD)	3/8	3/11	6/19

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One Administrator/LEA was not asked the Question

## Appendix K: Coding Matrices for Research Question 2

***Barriers to Inclusion: Parents' Perspective***

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
Lack of Understanding of ASD by teacher	8/8
Not having funding for/supports to adequately support needs of child	7/7
Lack of Understanding of ASD by admin	7/8
Not validating concerns about social communication/social anxiety And impact on Educational Goals	7/8
Not Allowing Social Skill Goals in IEP or 504	7/8
Focusing on this school year and not functional or communication Goals after School years/transitional goals	7/8
Putting Social Skills groups with all AS kids without NTs	5/7
*Over focus or punitive focus on behaviors/0 tolerance	5/7
Not addressing sensory issues and its impact	5/7
Lack of Tolerance by peers (bullying/teasing/exclusion)	5/8
Not acknowledging Autism diagnosis	5/8
Focus on Academic to the Detriment of Everything Else	4/7
Putting OT, PT, Sensory, Social, Counseling as Consultative with Without Goals or Measures or Expecting Progress	4/7
If the child's grades are "ok" and no disruptive behaviors "child is fine"	4/7
Social Communication Goals only focus on teacher prompts or class Behaviors and not Peers and Life Skill Communication	4/7
School psychologists invalidate IEE or outside professional suggestions	3/7
**Child was invited to party by peers outside of school	3/8
Child had peers come when invited to their own party	3/8

\*Not all children had behavior goals or concerns \*\*One child was only invited because the school had a rule all students must be invited; when there was no such rule in later years no longer invited

## Appendix L: Coding Matrices for Research Question 3

***Barriers to Inclusion: Students with Autism's Perspective***

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>
*Did not feel safe at school/Safe to be me at school	7/7
Did not feel included by student body	7/7
Lack of Peer Awareness of Understanding about Autism	7/7
Lack of Teacher Understanding of Autism/Lack of Individualization	7/7
Experienced Teasing for Autistic mannerisms or behaviors	7/7
Experienced Verbal Bullying	7/7
*Lack of social supports or social communication training	6/6
*Lack of TRUE social skills training in IEP	6/6
*Mixed abilities/Mixed Exceptionalities	6/6
Experienced Exclusion	6/7
Was not invited to parties outside of school or events with peers	6/7
How I was treated by peers/teachers was a detriment to my mental health Or Self-Esteem	6/7
Teachers should have set an example for inclusion	6/7
Stigma of having Autism/being Autistic felt	6/7
I didn't know how to ask for what I needed	5/7
Did not have explicit social training/social problem solving	5/7
*School did not always make the accommodations/refused supports	5/6
Wasn't treated as a person by school/peers (Treated like a toddler, monster, burden, alien, animal, problem, outcast, bomb/explosion)	5/8
*Felt no power/Not treated as Equal in IEP	4/6
If I was doing well academically/grades they (school) assumed I was okay	4/8

Teacher did not respect me/want me in their class	4/8
School did not make me feel welcome/wanted	4/8
Felt the school's best interest was valued over mine	4/8
Taken advantage of for my social nativity	4/8
*Because of Academic Giftedness, some teachers/admin felt I shouldn't have IEP	3/6
*Data was not updated or kept up to date for supports I needed	3/6
*IEP was behavior goal heavy or more behavior goals than anything else	3/6
*IEP did not always have grade level academic goals	3/6
*Pull out resources in teen years exacerbate differences/point you out	3/6
Oversized/Overcrowded classrooms	3/7
Your behavior reputation follows you	3/7
Lack of administrative understanding of Autism/Punitive	3/7
Experienced physical bullying by a peer	3/7
*When teachers do not show up for IEP/feels like they don't care	2/6
*Had a teacher advocating for more inclusion/school pressured them not to	2/6
*Physically harmed/traumatized by a teacher/parapro in self-contained class	2/6

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\* 1 Person did not have IEP and this is why out of 6 not 7, question is IEP specific

## Appendix M: Coding Matrices for Research Question 4: Collaboration

## Themes Related to Collaboration

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP meeting: LEA Representatives' Perspective*

Recurring Remark/ Theme	n	SDT	Model
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	8/9		E
Relationship (positive, open, consistent, before and after meeting)	7/9		E
Data/Reports (updated, thorough, clear)	7/9		P
Focusing on student's best interests/services	6/9		S,E
Starting a meeting with positives/successes or growth/strengths	5/9		E
Build trust and confidence with the parent	4/9		E
Listen to the other party's (parent's) concerns/need/validate	4/9		E

*Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP meeting: Educators' Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	n	SDT	Model
Starting a meeting with positives/successes or growth/strengths General Ed/SPED=4/5; Educator Other=6/6	10/11	A,R,C	E
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent) General Ed/SPED=4/5; Educator Other=5/6	9/11	A,R,C	E
Attentive/Engaged/Supportive Administration/LEA General Ed/SPED=5/5; Educator Other=2/6	7/11	R,C	E
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=4/6	7/11	R,C	E
Preparedness of the School/Same Page/Team Environment General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=6/6	7/11	R,C	E
Active/Involved Participating Parents General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=4/6	6/11	A,R,C	E
Listening to the Parent (Mutual Listening) General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=3/6	5/11	A,R,C	E
Addressing the Parent's Concerns General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=3/6	5/11	R,C	E

If the Parent feels like we like/enjoy/welcome child in the class General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=4/6	5/11	A,R,C	E
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***Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP meeting: Parent's Perspective***

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	7/7	A,R,C	E
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent	7/7	R,C	E
My involvement is welcome, appreciate/treated as equal	7/7	A,R,C	E
I feel listened too/heard	7/7	A,R,C	E
They address concerns	7/7	R,C	E
They respect my idea/input/suggests	7/7	A,R,C	E
If the schools welcomes/loves/supports my child	6/7	A,R	E
If the meeting starts with positives/strengths/growth	5/7	A,R,C	E
Preparedness of School Team/School team same page	5/7	R,C	E
Focus on my child as a whole child (academics/social)	5/7	A,R,C	E
When I'm an equal member of team/Expert on my Child	5/7	A,R,C	E
When school implements IEP quickly/accurately	5/7	C	S,E
If Admins/Teachers truly understand Autism	5/7	C	E
If I trust the teacher/school	5/7	R,C	E
When the team listens to outside professional's tests/data	5/7	C	P
When I am considered an equal expert on my child	5/7	A	E
If the administration/teacher understand AS behaviors	4/7	C	E
Consistency/Follow through after communications	4/7	C	E
Ged Ed/SPED/Case Worker working together before/after mtgs.	4/7	R,C	S



Good/Updated/ Thorough Data/Reports	3/7	C	P
When I see Inclusion goals (social goals)	3/7	R,C	S

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***Elements That Contribute to Collaboration in IEP meeting: Across Populations***

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
Communication (open, honest, transparent, consistent)	24/27	A,R,C	E
Relationship of the teacher/parent; school/parent	21/27	R,C	E
If the meeting starts with positives/strengths/growth	20/27	A,R,C	E
Listening/Felt listened to	16/27	A,R,C	E
Address concerns	16/27	A,R,C	E
Focus on my child/student best interest whole child	15/27	A,R,C	E
Parent Participation Welcomed	14/27	A,R,C	E
Preparedness of the School/Same Page/Team Environment	14/27	R,C	E
If the schools welcomes/loves/supports child	13/27	A,R	E
Good/Thorough/Update Reports/Data	12/27	C	P
Trust	11/27	R,C	E
Respect of Parent input	10/27	A,R,C	E
Attentive/Supportive/Engaged Admin	9/27	R,C	E
Respect of Parent input	9/27	A,R,C	E

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Educator Other= all other specialists or educators that are not Gen Ed or SPED, SDT Component: A=Autonomy, R=Relatedness, C= Competency; Disability Model: E=Empowerment, P=Professional, S=Social

## Appendix N: Coding Matrices for Research Question 4: Conflict

## Themes Related to Conflict

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Administration/LEA Representative Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
Break Down in Communication	7/9	R,C	P
Teacher not trained in or understand Autism	6/9	C	S,P
When the discussion is behavior/challenged focused	6/9	A,C	S,P
Disagreement about Placement/LRE/Teacher fit	5/9	A,C	S,P
Unrealistic Expectations/Demands from the parent	5/9	A,C	P
Parent Doesn't Feel Services/Supports are Adequate	5/9	A,C	S,P
When advocates or county representative is present	4/9	C	P
When the School Team is not Prepared	4/9	C	P
When Trust is Broken/Mistrust of Parents to School	4/9	C	
Outdated or Incomplete Data/Reports	3/9	C	P

*Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Educator Perspective*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
If the Parent feels like we do not like/enjoy/welcome child in the class General Ed/SPED=5/5; Educator Other=6/6	11/11	A,R,C	S,P
When the main focus is behaviors/challenges General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=6/6	8/11	A,C	S,P
Break Down in Communication (Teacher/Parent) General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=6/6	8/11	R,C	P
LRE Placement/Teacher Fit General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=5/6	8/11	A,C	S,P
Admin is Not Active/Non-supportive/Not Engaged General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=5/6	8/11	A,C	S
Admin doesn't understand AS or SPED laws General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=6/6	8/11	C	S,P

Gen Ed. Teacher doesn't understand AS or lacks awareness / understanding General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=5/6	7/11	C	S,P
Inflexible/Rigid/Defensive Language (from anyone) General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=6/6	7/11	A,R,C	P
Parent Feels School is Protecting Own Interests- Not Child's General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=5/6	7/11	A,C	S,P
Parents Do Not Feel Services are Adequate/Correct General Ed/SPED=2/5; Educator Other=4/6	6/11	A,C	S,P
Overall Climate of School not Inclusive General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=2/6	5/11	A,R	S
Us/Them or Win/Lose Competitive Attitude General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=6/6	5/11	A,R,C	P
If parent is in denial about Autism General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=4/6	5/11	C	P
When Gen Ed Teacher does not understand their purpose/role in IEP General Ed/SPED=0/5; Educator Other=5/6	5/11	A,C	S,P
If an IEE, Child has Diagnosis of Autism but not Eligible for IEP General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=3/6	4/11	A,C	S,P
Different Definitions/Ideas about Inclusion General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=1/6	4/11	A,R,C	S,P
School Team is Not Prepared General Ed/SPED=1/5; Educator Other=3/6	4/11	C	P
Unrealistic Expectations of Parents General Ed/SPED=3/5; Educator Other=1/6	4/11	A,C	P

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***Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Parent Perspective***

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
Not listening to me or my concerns about my child	8/8	A,R,C	P
Teacher does not know/like/want my child in their room	7/7	A,R,C	S,P
When the main focus is behavior/challenge oriented	6/7	A,C	S,P

Teacher doesn't understand Autism	6/8	C	S,P
Disagreement on LRE/placement/teacher fit	6/8	A,C	S,P
Services are not adequate or implemented	6/8	A,C	S,P
School is protecting self/Not best interest of the child	6/7	A,C	S,P
Break Down or Lack of Communication	5/8	R,C	P
School is not following the IEP	5/7	C	S
*School will not listen to IEE or outside professionals/specialists	5/8	A,C	S,P
Administration is not active/supportive/engaged	5/7	C	S
**When I have to bring an advocate	5/7	A,C	P
***When the child's multiple disabilities or issues are not addressed	5/7	A,C	S,P
Us/Them or Lose/When Competitive Attitude (from either side)	4/7	A,R,C	P
Inflexible/rigid/defensive language (from either side)	4/7	A,R,C	P
Different definitions/understanding on Inclusion	4/7	A,R,C	S
Mistrust	4/7	C	S,P
Gen Ed and SPED are not communicating	3/7	C	S
I feel demeaned/negated/not welcomed	3/7	A	S,P
Teacher refused to make IEP accommodations/modifications	3/7	A,C	S,P
Eligibility of Autism is not considered (school chose OHI/BED)	3/8	A,C	S,P
When I see no progress on goals year to year	3/7	A,C	S,P

\*Not all parents had IEEs, \*\*Not all parents had to bring advocates 5 out of 7 had advocates. \*\*\* Only 5 of 7 with an IEP had a child with autism with other disabilities/issues

### *Elements That Contribute to Conflict: Across Populations*

Recurring Remark/Theme	<i>n</i>	SDT	Model
When the main focus is behaviors/challenges	20/27	A,C	S,P
Break Down or No Communication	20/27	R,C	P
Parent does not feel teacher likes/welcomes/knows child (student)	20/27	A,R,C	S,P
Teacher does not understand Autism or lacks Training in Autism	19/27	C	S,P

Disagreement on placement or Teacher Fit	19/27	A,C	S,P
Parent doesn't feel services are adequate or correct	17/27	A,C	S,P
The best interest of the school/staff is ahead of the interest of the child	15/27	A,C	S,P
Administration is not active/engaged/supportive	15/27	A,C	S
Inflexible/Rigid/Defensive language (from any party)	13/27	A,R,C	P
Administration doesn't know SPED law or understand Autism	13/27	A,C	S,P
School team is not prepared/on same team	12/27	C	P
Not listening to/addressing parent's concerns	10/27	A,R,C	P
When advocates or county representatives present	10/27	A,C	P
There is a Win/Lose; Competitive or Us/Them Atmosphere	10/27	A,R,C	P
When General Ed teacher does not understand role/purpose at IEP	10/27	C	P
Parent mistrust of teacher/school/team	10/27	C	
Gen Ed Teacher refused to make accommodations/modifications	9/27	A,C	S,P
Different definitions of Inclusion/inclusive practices	9/27	A,R,C	S,P
Parent doesn't feel school is implementing the IEP	9/27	C	S,P
Unrealistic expectations or demands of a parent	9/27	A,C	P
Climate of tone of school toward Inclusion	9/27	A,C	S,P
If the school will not include IEEs or outside professional opinions	9/27	A,C	S,P
Parents do not feel the IEP is being followed or followed consistently	9/27	C	S,P

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Educator Other= all other specialists or educators that are not Gen Ed or SPED, SDT Component: A=Autonomy, R=Relatedness, C= Competency; Disability Model: E=Empowerment, P=Professional, S=Social

Appendix O: Suggestions for Inclusion  
Suggestions from Educators and Parents

1. Include Neuro-Typical (NT) peers in Social Skills Groups
2. More Clubs and Activities to Allow Students with ASD to participate with support before and after school
3. Bring NT Students into the Self-Contained Classes for more NT-AS interactions
4. Teach School-Wide AS awareness and sensory training
5. Teach a social-emotional curriculum to all students in the classroom as part of the Elementary School curriculum. All can benefit from instruction and reminders.
6. Social Skills groups need to teach more than scripted talk and greetings and focus on social stories and social problem-solving and resiliency
7. Less punitive approaches for behaviors. If you treat the child like a ‘problem-child’ it creates a stigma with peers and other teachers
8. More pairing of appropriate NT peers with AS students in groups for Positive Behavior Supports and Modeling. Use paras and adults for support in interactions.
9. Allow communication devices or supports that are appropriate for the child/student
10. Best Buddies or clubs focused on interactions of NT and AS students for all grade levels, not just elementary school.
11. Go beyond anti-bullying and what not to do to how to befriend others and how to accept people with differences.
12. Think long-term and not short-term. What does this student need to be functional and independent outside of school? What helps this student after school, in making IEP goals every year!
13. Address the whole child and their needs in the IEP academically, socially, functionally, and behaviorally
14. Understand the functions of AS behaviors
15. Have peer groups for all levels of AS, not just AS 2 and 3, AS level 1, and Asperger’s need social helps as well.
16. Acknowledge that social-communication deficits will impact overall education goals.