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Teacher Perceptions of Working with Children with Specific Special Education Exceptionalities in the General Education Classroom

Kimberly Geneva Fisher
University of Southern Mississippi

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The University of Southern Mississippi

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC
SPECIAL EDUCATION EXCEPTIONALITIES IN THE
GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

by

Kimberly Geneva Fisher

Abstract of a Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate School
of the University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

ABSTRACT

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF WORKING WITH CHILDREN WITH SPECIFIC SPECIAL EDUCATION EXCEPTIONALITIES IN THE GENERAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

by Kimberly Geneva Fisher

May 2013

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which general education teachers in elementary schools believe they are prepared to teach children/students with specific special education exceptionalities in the general education classroom. The study addresses the exceptionalities of: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability and using a multiple method quasi-experimental design that yielded quantitative and qualitative data. The study used an original instrument entitled the General Educators Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE). The instrument used a vignette/scenario design to assess levels of perceived preparedness. Third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers in South Mississippi were asked to participate in the study. An original instrument was developed because there was not one available that followed the vignette/scenario format.

For the quantitative phase, study data showed that general education teachers appear to be largely uncertain about their preparedness to meet the needs of students with special needs. There was a difference in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with students with disabilities based on the child's eligibility category; educators perceived they were better prepared to address the educational needs of students with specific learning disabilities than those who were in one of the other three disability classifications. Furthermore, data revealed that the level of perceived

preparedness of general education teachers is related to selected background characteristics that include level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, years of experience, and the amount of professional development in special education they have attended.

Qualitative results revealed that educators do not believe they are prepared to teach students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Respondents indicated the need for more special education classes during the teacher preparation experience, including more practical hands-on experiences. Respondents expressed the need for more collaboration with special education personnel and assistance with resources, materials, and making modifications/accommodations in the classroom. Of the four exceptionalities addressed in this study, teachers perceived they are most prepared to serve students with specific learning disabilities and least prepared to serve students with autism and emotional disabilities.

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Approved:

Michael Ward
Director

David Lee

J.T. Johnson

Marge Crowe

Susan A. Siltanen
Dean of the Graduate School

May 2013

DEDICATION

This body of work is dedicated to my wonderful family. First, to my parents, Clyde and Marthelma Breland, I miss both of you on a daily basis. Thank you for giving me the best childhood anyone could ask for. Thank for always encouraging me to reach for my dreams. I sincerely hope you both are proud of me. I'm extremely proud to be your daughter.

To my brothers, Craig and Algenon, thanks for being awesome best big brothers. Both of you have been supportive and encouraging throughout this process, and I thank you for that. To Kenny, Tambra, Richard, Richard, Jr., and Rishad, I love all of you and you have a special place in my heart. To Anita and Leslie, thanks for making me laugh when I needed it.

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To each and every one of you, thank you. I would not have been able to complete this journey without each one of you. Good luck in all that you do and may God continue to bless all of you!

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to determine whether general education teachers in elementary schools believed they are prepared to work with children/students with specific special education exceptionalities. The widespread participation of U.S. public schools in educating children/students with disabilities can be considered a fairly recent phenomenon (Osgood, 2002). Historically, children/students with disabilities were educated in separate schools. The rationale for separating children with disabilities from their non-disabled peers was supported by an extensive belief that “the segregation and even isolation of these children was in the best interest of pedagogy, school management, and social control” (Osgood, 2002, p. 27). However, between 1930 and 1960, with improved research and increased identification of children with disabilities, this trend changed dramatically. During this time, various states passed laws allowing public school systems to set up separate classes for students with special needs (Osgood, 2002). The movement to include children/students with disabilities in the general education setting began to emerge in the 1970s (Mungai & Thornburg, 2002). Kauffman and Hallahan (1995) noted “Until the early 1970s, the special self-contained classroom was the primary service delivery mode for providing special education” (p. 6). Passed in 1975, Public Law P.L. 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), required states to develop and implement policies that provided educational opportunities to children with disabilities in order to receive federal funding. This law, which in its current iteration is entitled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), guarantees children with disabilities a free and appropriate education (FAPE). This federal statute changed and “improved the

way children/students with disabilities were identified, educated, and evaluated with trios of initials such as IEPs, LREs, and LEAs” (Karten, 2008, p.4). The law guaranteed an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for children/students with disabilities, afforded them the opportunity to learn in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and mandated these services be provided by their local education agency (LEA). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act also guaranteed children/students with disabilities and their families due process protection. Due process is the procedure used by schools and parents to resolve disputes (Wrights law, 2011). Over the years, EAHCA, which was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), was expanded to include preschoolers and the birth to three years of age populations.

In 1990, EAHCA became P.L. 101-476 or the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). This change symbolized “the beginning of people first language, meaning it was not the disability that came first, but the individual” (Karten, 2008. p. 25). Karten rewords the acronym IDEA to stand for *It Delivers Educational Access*. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of (2004, 1412) and its statutory predecessors have increased access for children/students requiring special education services in the general education classrooms through inclusion or mainstreaming (Karten, 2008; Mungai & Thornburg, 2002; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). In many cases, the least restrictive environment for these children is a general education classroom with their non-disabled peers (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000; McLeskey, Hoppey, Williamson, & Rentz, 2004). Not only have these changes in laws and policies provided new opportunities for children/students with special needs, but they have also brought about new concerns. Daane et al. (2000) contended the increased number of children/students with special needs

in the general education classroom has “raised numerous questions about the roles and responsibilities of school personnel in providing appropriate education for all students enrolled in our public schools.” (p. 331). In many cases, inclusion is beneficial to the children/students with special needs; however, there are questions about how it affects general education teachers. Most of these educators have little experience or training in working with children/students with special needs (Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Petriwskyj, 2010). Perceptions of teacher preparedness is an important subject of inquiry. Knowing how prepared teachers are to work with diverse learners is important because of the impact inclusion may have on teacher effectiveness, teacher satisfaction, and student achievement. Over the years, research has shown that teachers’ expectations in turn impact the nature of their preparations for teaching (Daane et al., 2000). Because of this correlation, it is important to assess general educators’ perceptions regarding the children/students requiring special education services in their classroom and their own preparedness to adequately instruct these students.

Statement of the Problem

Understanding how teachers perceive their students and their own capacities to teach students with disabilities is a useful area of inquiry. It is also important to determine if these perceptions are influenced by the actual disability category. “Federal guidelines for special education, defined in the reauthorization of IDEA (2004), recognizes thirteen different disability categories through which students may be deemed eligible to receive special education and related services” (Maanum, 2009). These categories are:

1. Autism
2. Deaf-Blindness

3. Deafness
4. Emotional Disability
5. Hearing Impairment
6. Mental Retardation (Intellectual Disability)
7. Multiple Disabilities
8. Orthopedic Impairment
9. Other Health Impaired
10. Specific Learning Disability
11. Speech or Language Impairment
12. Traumatic Brain Injury
13. Visual Impairment (Including Blindness). (p. 2)

Furthermore, it is important to determine if general education teachers believe they are prepared to meet the instructional needs of students in these categories and also whether they believe they are more prepared to handle one type of disability over another. This study measured quantitative data to address the degree to which general education teachers believed they are prepared to work with children/students with disabilities. If teachers did not feel prepared, qualitative data were gathered to understand what strategies could be used to help better prepare them. To get a general look at various types of disabilities, four disability categories were covered. The teachers were asked how prepared they were to work with children who have qualified for special education services in the areas of autism spectrum disorder (AUD), emotional disability (EmD), specific learning disability (SLD), and speech/language disorder (L/S). These four categories were chosen because they range from the fairly mild to the more severe forms of possible

disabilities that teachers may encounter in general education classrooms (Karten, 2008; Maanum, 2009).

The need for general education teachers to be prepared to work with children who exhibit varying abilities and needs has increased with the enactment of federal mandates such as IDEA (2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2004) (Brown, Welsh, Hill, & Cipko, 2008). IDEA (2004) requires children with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment, while NCLB significantly changed accountability standards for schools in that it mandated universal proficiency among students, including those with disabilities, by the year 2014. No Child Left Behind further expanded on the required accommodations for students with disabilities (Turner, 2003; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). “No Child Left Behind mandates increased expectations and accountability for all students, including those with disabilities, to access, participate in, and progress in the general curriculum (Pisha & Stahl, 2005, pp. 69-70).

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2010), in 2008-09, approximately 6.5 million children and youth were served under the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) or 13.2% of all children and youth between the ages of 3-21. Additionally, the aforementioned report also states during this same year Mississippi served 64,407 children between the ages of 3-21 who had disabilities. During the 2008-2009 school year, the state’s student enrollment was 491,194. Thus, approximately 13.1% of children in Mississippi were served through special education. The National Center for Education Statistics (2010) also stated that in the U.S., it was reported that approximately 58% of students with disabilities are outside the general education classroom less than 21% of the school day. These data reveal in some situations children/students with disabilities

receive approximately 79% of their instruction in the general education classroom as compared to other sources such as special education resource.

An increase in placement of children/students requiring special education services in the general education classroom has increased the demand for educators who are prepared to work with a variety of learners (Brown et al., 2008; Mungai & Thornburg, 2002). Grskovic and Trcinka (2011) explored what teachers needed in order to increase their comfort level in working with students with mild disabilities. The researchers discussed how federal and state initiatives to place children/students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment have increased the number of children/students with disabilities in the general education classroom. The authors state that teachers can expect to have diverse learners in their classrooms. Even though the numbers of children/students with disabilities in general education classes have increased, general educators continue to report not feeling prepared to teach the disabled population (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). These authors theorized this lack of preparedness may be due to the fact that, “many general education teachers in the work force today received their training prior to the gradual implementation of inclusion in the 1990’s and they may not have adequate professional development in that area” (2011, p. 95). Their study identified thirty-one “essential” standards that helped prepare these teachers to work with children/students with disabilities. These standards included instructional strategies, classroom management techniques, collaboration strategies and professional and ethical practices. Results suggested that educators need more, “knowledge of disabilities and more pre-service experience interacting with students with disabilities” (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011, p. 95).

The attitudes of teachers can also play an important role on their effectiveness in the classroom. Brady and Woolfson (2008) explored, “the relationship between teachers’ role, self-efficacy, attitudes towards people with disabled persons, teaching experience and training, on teachers’ attributions for children’s difficulties in learning” (p. 527).

“Teachers with a higher sense of teaching efficacy and those with more experiences of working with learners with additional support needs both attributed learners’ failure in class more to external factors” (Brady & Woolfson, 2008, p.538). Researchers also discovered that mainstream teachers were less optimistic about the abilities of children/students with special needs (Brady & Woolfson, 2008).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their preparedness to teach students with specific disabilities. This study assessed whether teachers believed they are more prepared to deal with students in one special education category than students in others. To analyze these variables, the following research questions were examined:

1. What are general education teachers’ perceptions of their capabilities to differentiate instruction for children with the following special education eligibilities: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability in the general education classroom?
2. Are there differences in general educators’ level of perceived preparedness to teach children/student with special needs based on the student’s eligibility category?

3. Are the perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, current grade assignment, the number of special education classes they took during their training, years of experience teaching, and time since last professional development in special education?
4. What conditions will increase general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with special needs learners?

The following related hypotheses were addressed in the study:

H₁: There are differences in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with special needs learners based on the children's eligibility category.

H₂: The perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers are related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes they took during their training, years of experience teaching, and most recently attended professional development in special education.

Delimitations

Persons who participated in this study included only elementary school teachers in districts located in the southern region of Mississippi. Participants had teacher certification from the Mississippi Department of Education. This study was limited to an examination of the participants' preparedness to teach children who met the Mississippi Department of Education eligibility requirements for the following selected areas of exceptionality: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability.

This study focused on perceptions of preparedness rather than more direct measures of teacher efficacy in teaching students with disabilities.

Assumptions

It was assumed that all respondents understood and followed the survey directions. It was also assumed that all participants answered the survey items completely and honestly. Finally, it was assumed that all respondents answered the survey items without fear of retribution for their participation or responses.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were utilized throughout this study and were defined for use in the context of this research.

Accommodations – Are changes in schools that are used to assist students in working around their disabilities. (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

Autism (AU) – Autism or autism spectrum disorder refers to a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interactions that adversely affects a child's educational performance (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p. 279).

Emotional Disability (EmD) – EmD exists when a student exhibits certain characteristics over a long period of time and/or to a marked degree, adversely affecting educational performance. EmD includes schizophrenia. The term does not refer to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an emotional disability. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p.285).

Inclusion – “Schools, centers of learning, and educational systems that are open to all children and that ensure that all children learn and participate” (Wright & Wright, 1999, p. 54).

Individualized education plan (IEP)– An IEP is a written statement, created by an IEP committee, for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in a meeting by the IEP team. (IDEA, 2004, n.d., para 1).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 – IDEA, originally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA), is legislation which regulates all special education services in the United States. This law requires all students with disabilities be provided an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Maanum, 2009; Winzer & Mazurek, 2002).

Language or Speech Impairment (L/S-A) – Is a communicative disorder such as stuttering, impaired articulation, language impairment, or a voice impairment that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. It can range from mild to profound. A communication disorder may be the primary disability or secondary to other disabilities (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p. 291).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – Placing a student in the least restrictive environment refers to assigning him/her to a setting that is the most normal and where he/she can have optimal interaction with his/her normally developing peers. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2002).

Local education agency (LEA) – LEA refers to the local school district.

Mainstreaming – The practice of placing students with disabilities in classrooms with their normally developing peers so that all students are exposed to and receive an adequate education. (Winzer & Mazurek, 2002).

Modification – A change in what is being taught to or expected from a student with disabilities (National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities, 2010).

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 – Federal legislation enacted to help close the achievement gap with accountability, flexibility, and choice. (U.S. Department of Education, 2011).

Self-efficacy Theory – A theory conceptualized by Albert Bandura, suggesting that our belief in our ability to succeed in certain situations assists us in that success. The concept plays a major role in Bandura's social learning theory which focuses on how personality is shaped by social experience and observational learning (Cherry, 2011).

Social Development Theory – A theory by L. S. Vygotsky that emphasizes the social nature of learning and the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in promoting learning (Lerner, Lowenthal & Egan, 2003, p.18).

Specific Learning Disability (SLD) – a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain function, dyslexia and developmental aphasia (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p. 301).

Justification

“In the United States, inclusion has come to mean the education of all children in the least restrictive environment to the greatest extent possible with non-handicapped peers” (Mungai & Thornburg, 2002, p. 44). How a teacher handles his/her inclusive classroom has the most immediate impact on the students’ success (Horne & Timmons, 2009; Mungai & Thornburg, 2002). The practice of integrating children/students with disabilities with non-handicapped peers has increased the responsibility of some general education teachers (Brown et al., 2008; Obiakor, Harris, Mutua, Rotatori, & Algozzine, 2012).

Research has shown that general education teachers may have some reservations when teaching diverse learners. Kamens, Loprete, and Slostad (2003) explored “the perceptions of practicing general education teachers related to their needs to successfully teach students with disabilities” (p. 20). These researchers wanted to determine what classroom teachers believed they needed to know to effectively teach children/students with special needs. The data revealed many concerns that general education teachers have when working with children/students with special needs. Some of the teachers’ perceptions include not being familiar with the specific disability of the child and how to work with him/her. The teachers’ needs were as follows: to know many ways to adapt the curriculum for the special child, to be better-armed with effective strategies, and to know alternative procedures if a problem develops (Kamens et al., 2003). The authors of this study also stressed the need for improved staff development and more special education classes in teacher preparation programs. Furthermore the authors stated that in most cases these teachers received a single course in special education while pursuing their degrees.

As a result of the data collected, the researchers suggested providing preservice teachers more opportunities to modify curriculum for special needs students. This would give them more practice in providing appropriate services to special needs children and help them be more comfortable (Kamens et al., 2003).

Conderman and Johnston-Rodriguez (2009) studied how beginning elementary and secondary special education and general education teachers perceived their new roles. This study measured teachers “level of preparedness and their perception of the importance of 20 skills related to inclusion and collaboration” in inclusion classrooms (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009, p. 236). The authors discovered that these beginning teachers believed that they were very prepared to deal with communicating with parents and families and being sensitive to their needs. They also believed that they were prepared to work with colleagues. However, in most cases, these teachers did not feel equipped to implement accommodations/modifications, nor did they believe they had the information they needed to plan for students with disabilities, or have the knowledge or time to provide individualized testing criteria for these students. When discussing their teacher-preparation program, the beginning teachers indicated that their, “preservice coursework and field experiences were insufficient preparation for collaborative activities in the real world of teaching” (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009, p. 240). The general education teachers who participated in this study expressed the need for a foundation in special education law during their training. Even in a collaborative setting, teachers did not always believe that they were prepared to work with children/students with special needs (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009).

A review of the literature revealed that in contemporary educational settings, the number of children/students with special needs enrolled in general education classrooms has increased (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). General education teachers are being asked to play a more involved role in the education of children/students who qualify for special education services (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). Although their role in the lives of more diverse learners has changed, teachers' preparedness according to some has not (Kamens et al., 2003). Research shows that more teachers believe that they are not prepared to adequately meet the needs of children/students with special education needs (Horne & Timmons, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012). For example, Kamens et al. (2003) noted "Although the practice of inclusion has increased over the last several decades, it appears that many general education teachers feel unprepared to teach an increasing number of children with disabilities" (p. 25).

The increasing number of children/students with special needs being placed in the general education classroom has revealed the need for general education teachers to be better prepared to teach a variety of learners. Although research has been conducted on aspects of how prepared general education teachers are to teach special learners, it has been limited on the effect of the eligibility category. This study featured specific eligibility exceptionalities in an effort to better reveal which exceptionalities present more challenges for teachers. The results of this study can be used by school districts to develop professional development programs in conjunction with their special education department to help prepare general education teachers to work with special needs students. The results of this study can be used by instructors in teacher preparation programs to develop more comprehensive and inclusive instruction in special education for preservice general

educators. This study can also be utilized by policy-makers when developing educational mandates that effect the classroom placement of students with disabilities.

Summary

The number of students receiving special education services in the general education classroom is increasing (Kamens et al., 2003). Research has shown that general education teachers can expect to play a more vital role in the education of special learners (Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). However, some experts believe there has not been sufficient change in the content of teacher preparation programs that address this responsibility (Brown et al., 2008). This lack of adequate preparation may cause many educators to believe they are ill-prepared to work with students who have special needs. The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their preparedness to teach students with specific special education needs. This study examined whether teachers believed that they are more prepared to deal with students in one special education category than students in other categories. Finally, if they did not feel prepared, qualitative data were gathered to understand what strategies could be used to help them better prepare.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In recent years, research has been conducted to explore the benefits and complications created by the inclusion of children/students receiving special education services in the general education classroom. With the role of many educators changing, researchers have sought to discover how these educators cope with teaching various types of learners. This chapter provides background information on special education inclusion, theories that support the idea of including children/students with special needs into the general education classroom, methods that school districts are implementing as federal mandates change, and the ways that teachers recognize their ability to teach children/students with special needs. This chapter also discusses the status of children with autism, speech/language disorders, specific learning disabilities and emotional disabilities who are being served in the general education classroom.

Background Information and Federal Mandates

“The hottest issue in special education during the 1980s and 1990s was where, not how, a student with disabilities should be taught- the schools and classrooms they should attend, not the instruction they should receive” (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999, p. 1). Placement of disabled students remains an important issue in special education. From the separate schools of the early 1900s to the push for full inclusion of today, where a child/student who qualifies for special education services receives his/her education is of great importance. The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 made the educational placement of disabled students controversial and confusing (Crockett, 1999; Crockett & Kaufman, 1999; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). The

Education for Handicapped Children Act which is currently titled the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), gives specific guidelines to ensure that children with disabilities receive a quality education. “The inclusion movement- which is now international- emerged in the 1970s and 1980s from the Regular Education Initiative and revisions of IDEA” (Mungai & Thornburg, 2002, p. 45). “Special Education law now demands that the general education classroom be looked at as the first placement option and least restrictive environment for students with disabilities” (Karten, 2005, p. 3). This approach to service is very different than the one used when special education began.

In colonial North America people with varying conditions such as blindness, deafness, unusual behaviors or a mental illness were habitually separated from the mainstream population (Osgood, 2002). During this time in history, it became common to place persons with disabilities in institutions for care. “By the early 1900s most states had at least one residential facility for the deaf, the blind, or the mentally disabled, and many had separate institutions for each of the three populations” (Osgood, 2002, p. 21). However, the creation of large public school systems posed a problem to the institutional care of disabled children. That problem was created by the existence of unknown or hidden disabilities with in some children. These children with unidentified disabilities found their way into the educational arena as public school systems became common in urban life (Osgood, 2002). Unfortunately, large class sizes and inadequate training made it difficult for educators to handle children with disabilities (Lerner et al., 2003; Osgood 2002). Teachers complained and called for the placement of students with disabilities outside the general education classroom (Osgood, 2002). These concerns prompted the, “establishment over the next several decades of a wide range of separate settings for

students who, it was believed, overtaxed the efficient operation of schools and classrooms” (Osgood, 2002, p. 24).

The notion of inclusion resulted from a federal district court ruling. In the case of *Pennsylvania v. Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children* in 1971, the court found that, “children diagnosed with mental retardation in Pennsylvania were entitled to a free public education and further stipulated that whenever possible they should be educated in regular classrooms rather than segregated from the general education population” (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008, p. 1462). This decree was expanded to include all children/students with disabilities in 1972 in *Mills v. Board of Education District of Columbia*. These court decisions were later followed by federal legislation such as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 and the first version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990.

“Over the past three decades, federal legislation, individual state requirements, and the Regular Education Initiative have prompted tremendous growth in the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom” (Brown et al., 2008, p. 2087). The U.S. Department of Education (2004), Office of Special Education Programs states:

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is a law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2004, para.1).

The EAHCA legislation of 1975, “paved the way for the mainstreaming of students with disabilities, requiring that they be placed in the least restrictive environment” (Brown et al., 2008, p. 2087). Mungai and Thornburg (2002) described two positions used by schools to justify inclusive classrooms for students, “either all students with disabilities have a right to go to school with their non-disabled peers, or all students with disabilities should go to regular school” (p. 44). However, either of these philosophies, if poorly supported and implemented, can cause difficulties for general education teachers. While IDEA (2004) set mandates for including students with disabilities in the regular classroom, it did not provide school districts with specific instructions. Even with governmental guidance, student placement continues to be difficult for schools (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) (2004) defines placement as, “the process whereby the specific placement option, setting, or facility in which a student’s IEP can be implemented is determined” (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004, p. 45). This simple language can be interpreted many different ways and is one of the reasons that student placement under IDEA (2004) is often a contentious topic. Placement decisions are made by the IEP team which includes school officials and parents. IDEA states that, “each local educational agency or state educational agency shall ensure that the parents of each child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions on educational placement of their child” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1414(f), 2004).

The most contentious aspect of placement is the least restrictive environment (LRE) provision. The IDEA (2004) specifically states:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated

with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 20 U.S.C 1412 (5) (B)).

This condition of the law has two parts. First, children/students with disabilities must receive their education in the general education classroom for the maximum amount of time that is appropriate for them. The second part states that children/students with disabilities cannot be removed from the general education classroom unless being in that setting will keep them from getting an adequate education (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). It can be difficult to find the most appropriate LRE for each child and a one size fits all approach may not work for every student. The U.S. Department of Education stated in the Letter to Estavan (1997) and the Letter to Trahan (1998) (as cited in Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004), these decisions should be individualized to each child based on their abilities and educational needs. The IDEA also lists some factors that should not be taken into consideration when making placement decisions. A student should not be placed in a particular setting based on their category of disability, availability of services, and availability of space or administrative convenience (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). Thus, making the placement decision based on the best interest of the child is the most appropriate thing to do.

“The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is a sweeping, comprehensive, and powerful law that is changing the way public school students are educated” (Yell,

Drasgow & Lowrey, 2005, p. 130). This includes the education of children/students with disabilities. No Child Left Behind sought to increase accountability for student achievement. It was written to ensure that students in all public schools achieved specific learning goals in safe and effective classrooms (Yell et al., 2005; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). “To increase student achievement, the law requires that school districts assume responsibility for all students reaching 100% proficiency levels on tests assessing reading and mathematics by the 2013-2014 academic year” (Yell et al., 2005, p. 131). Although the federal government has provided funding to public schools for many years, the authorization of NCLB somewhat changed the government’s role in education. Yell et al. (2005) explained;

The federal role has evolved, however, from one in which the government primarily provided federal assistance to the states to one in which the federal government is holding states accountable for improving learning outcomes and achievement of all students. (p. 130)

This evolution was made to improve the educational experience of public school students. The NCLB (2001) legislation includes mandates for children/students with disabilities. These students are expected to achieve standards for the grade in which they are currently enrolled (Elliott & Thurlow; 2003, Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 2001). The NCLB (2001) required that states enact assessments to measure student achievement, and required that children/students with disabilities also be assessed. Children/students with disabilities may be provided with accommodations, modifications, or alternate assessment as their IEP team deems appropriate (Yell et al., 2005; Hager & Slocum, 2002). “The regulations of NCLB give states flexibility to assess students with disabilities using alternate assessments

based on modified or alternate achievement standards” (Wakeman, Browder, Meier, & McColl, 2007, p. 144). Alternate assessments are used when a child/student with a disability is unable to participate in standard assessments. This is reserved for students who have a significant cognitive disability (SCD). This decision is made by the IEP team usually before standardized assessments begin in third grade (Wakeman et al., 2007).

“Title I of NCLB holds special education students and teachers to new and higher expectations, which equates to a significant addition to the value of education for these students” (Wakeman et al., 2007, p. 144). The U.S. Department of Education (2004) states that the purpose of Title I is to, “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments” (sec. 1001, para. 2). These new requirements have brought about new educational possibilities for children/students with disabilities (Hagar & Slocum, 2002; Quenemeon, Lehr, Thurlow, & Massanari, 2001). NCLB (2001) has become a driving force for reforms in general and in special education (Wakeman et al., 2007).

An Examination of Selected IDEA Rulings

These sections begin an exploration of the selected exceptionalities that are the focus of the current study. As was noted previously, this research addresses autism, specific learning disability, emotional disability, and speech/language disorders. These exceptionalities were chosen because they vary in severity and cover a broad range of disabilities.

Autism

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) defines autism as: 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 include engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental changes or changes in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences (sec 300.8(c) (1) (i) para. 5).

In 2012, the United States Centers for Disease Control (CDC) released the findings of a 2008 study which estimated approximately 1 in 88 children have autism. This number has increased from a 2005 estimation of 1 in 150 children. This simply means more children have been diagnosed as having some form of an autism spectrum disorder than in the past. A 2005 report by the United States Government Accountability Office estimated that the number of children served under IDEA (2004) diagnosed with autism increased by 500 percent within a decade (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2005). "Leo Kanner first identified autism in 1943, as a psycho-emotional disturbance of early childhood" (as cited in Horrocks et al., 2008, p. 1,463). Although there is still no known cause for autism it is recognized as a developmental neurobiological disorder that affects the central nervous system (Minshew & Williams, 2007). There is a wide range of characteristics and behaviors associated with autism spectrum disorders. Among other things, students with autism may demonstrate significant delays in language, socialization, and cognition (Horrocks et al., 2008; Minshew & Williams, 2007).

“As the number of children diagnosed with autism increases, there are more of these students in public schools recommended for placement in general education settings” (Horrocks et al., 2008, p. 1,463). With the push for full inclusion steadily gaining momentum in the U.S., it is no surprise that many children with autism are being placed in the general education classroom with teachers who do not feel prepared to fulfill the social, learning and behavioral needs (Marks et al., 2003). This study measured the degree to which general education teachers believe they are prepared to teach students with autism.

Speech-Language Disorders

Marshall, Ralph, and Palmer (2002) described a student with speech and language difficulties as follows:

A child with a ‘speech and language difficulty’ or a ‘communication difficulty’ may be described as one who does not communicate verbally as well as other children of the same age. For example, the child may have difficulties in: pronouncing sounds, saying (complete) sentences, using language in a socially appropriate way, understanding what other people say, and using their vocal cords (voice). However, this group does not include those children who experience difficulties in some situations because English is not their first/main language. (pp. 199-200)

There are many types of speech and language disorders. According to the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) (2012) a speech disorder exists when a person has difficulty with pronouncing speech sounds correctly. A language disorder describes difficulty expressing your thoughts through words or understanding what others say to you. In a general education classroom, not being able to effectively

communicate can pose a problem. Teachers may also have a difficult time dealing with children/students with speech-language disorders. A review of the literature revealed that “negative attitudes are often held about children with speech and language difficulties and that these attitudes may extend to attributes unrelated to their communication skills” (Marshall et al., 2002, p. 202). Lindsay and Dockerall (2002) listed three main hindrances to including students with speech and language disorders in the general education classroom. These were a lack of time, lack of resources and a lack of training. These hindrances were also found in previous research (Law et al., 2002; Lindsay, Dockerall, Letchford, & Mackie, 2002). Though these difficulties exist it is expected that speech and language impaired children will attend mainstream school and be included in the general education population (Dockerall et al., 2002).

A study by Sadler (2005) revealed that teachers who work with students with speech and language impairments overall have a positive attitude about children/students with this specific exceptionality. However, Sadler noted the teachers felt less prepared to work with the students because they had limited knowledge about the various speech and language disorders. These teachers reported having very little training in speech and language impairments, and lacking confidence in their ability to meet the special needs of these students. Sadler’s participants also mentioned not receiving a good foundation in normal speech and language development during their teacher training programs. Thus, their limited knowledge of normal development hindered their ability to recognize and work with disordered children. The teachers also reported having limited time to prepare and limited resources to use (Sadler, 2005).

This study examined the degree to which general educators believed they were prepared to work with children/students with speech and language impairments. It also measured whether teachers believe they are more prepared to teach such students than students with other disabilities. Speech-language disorders were one of the special education exceptionalities discussed in this study.

Emotional Disability

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) (2009) defines an emotional disability (EmD) as follows:

Emotional disability exists when a student exhibits one (1) or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and/or to a marked degree, adversely affecting educational performance:

An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory or health factors;

An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers;

Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances;

A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression; and/ or

A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Emotional Disability includes schizophrenia. The term does not refer to children who are socially maladjusted, unless it is determined that they have an Emotional Disability. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p. 285)

Children who suffer from an emotional disability can create a unique situation in the general education classroom. Research (Center, 1993; Fox & Gable, 2004; Kauffman, 2005) has shown that regular educators perceive children who display characteristics of emotional disability differently. These educators perceive, “aggressive students as having the greatest need for special services and in the most restrictive settings. Students the tendency to be anxious/withdrawn were seen as having the least need for services and in the least restrictive placements” (Center, 1993, p. 2). A review of the literature by Center revealed that general education teachers thought the behaviors of these children were disruptive in nature. As with other special education exceptionalities, it is believed that children/students with an EmD ruling should be educated in the most appropriate and least restrictive setting possible (Bullock & Gable, 2006). In many cases placing children/students with an EmD ruling in the general education classroom is the goal, but researchers have found that many children/students with an EmD ruling have a difficult time in inclusive classrooms (Johns & Guetzloe, 2004). These students are often viewed as trouble makers because of their disruptive behavior (Bullock & Gable, 2006). However, teachers expressed that dealing with students with behavioral and emotional disorders can be difficult and very rewarding (Bullock & Gable, 2006).

This study measured general education teachers’ perceptions of their preparedness to work with children/students with an EmD ruling. The study measured if the participants believed they are more prepared to work with these students than with others. The study determined if there is a relationship between this special education exceptionality and the others in this study.

Specific Learning Disability

The Mississippi Department of Education (2009) defines a specific learning disability (SLD) as:

A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations. Including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. Specific Learning Disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities of mental retardation, of emotional disability or of environmental, cultural differences, or economic disadvantage. (Mississippi Department of Education, 2009, p. 301).

Educational placement of children with learning disabilities (LD) is an issue that causes some debate (Andrews et al., 2000). There are researcher and practitioner perspectives that support placing students with LD in the general education classroom for most of the day (McLeskey et al., 2004). While including these students in the general education classroom is mandated by IDEA (2004, 1412), there are limited data available on how various states have moved toward their inclusion (McLeskey et al., 2004).

This study has broadened the available research by measuring the degree to which general education teachers believe they are prepared to teach children/students with an SLD ruling. As with the other exceptionalities identified for this study, the research measured general education teachers' perceptions of their preparedness to work with

children/students with an SLD ruling and compared these perceptions of their preparedness to teach students with other special education exceptionalities.

Theoretical Foundations

Social Development Learning Theory

The social development learning theory emphasizes how as social beings, humans learn, grow and develop from interacting with each other. “Our only concern is that there exist within the very nature of the educational process, within its psychological essence, the demand that there be as intimate a contact, and as close an interaction with life itself as might be wished for” (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 345). This quote helps to describe the social nature of learning. The social theory of learning describes the social aspects of how individuals learn.

“The social interactions between the child and others (parent, teacher, caregiver, and other family members) are a needed ingredient in learning” (Lerner et al., 2003, p.18). Published in 1962, The Social Development Theory developed by Lev Vygotsky “emphasizes the social nature of learning and the critical role that interpersonal relationships play in promoting learning”(as cited in Lerner et al., 2003, p. 18).

Vygotsky’s social theory of learning focuses on the zone of proximal development. “The zone of proximal development furnishes psychologists and educators with a tool through which the internal course of development can be understood. What a child can do with assistance today she will be able to do by herself tomorrow” (Vygotsky, 1978. p. 87). The zone of proximal development is a way to describe how children learn (Vygotsky, 1978). It separates what a child already knows from what he/she will learn in the future (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, this theory emphasizes the social nature of learning.

Vygotsky states, “human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them” (p. 88). Vygotsky believed that children could learn well beyond their individual capabilities by imitating the actions of others. Humans do not simply learn by their own actions or study; they learn from taking in information from those around them (Gindis, 1999; Vygotsky, 1978). The social aspects of learning may help children achieve more in some cases.

According to Gindis (1999), “Special education was the main empirical domain from which Vygotsky obtained data to support his general theoretical conceptions” (p. 334). Vygotsky believed that a child’s social environment can limit the course of his/her development and lead to the differences we see in persons with disabilities (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007; Gindis, 1999). For example, if children are only around disabled children, they can pick up habits and traits of other disabled children. It was theorized that children/students with disabilities need to learn and develop from normally developing peers so they are not socially disadvantaged (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007, p. 199). “In education, Vygotsky’s theory is viewed as a counterbalance to behaviorism, and more importantly, as an alternative to the influential concepts of Piaget” (Gindis, 1999, p. 333). Thus, Vygotsky thought of disabilities as a sociocultural phenomenon instead of a biological impairment (Gindis, 1999).

John-Steiner and Mahn (as cited in Dixon & Verenikina, 2007), describe the social development learning theory as, “co-construction of knowledge between the individual and social processes” (p. 198). The theory of personal constructivism was developed by Swiss cognitive psychologist Jean Piaget (1978) (as cited in Golding, 2011). In Piagetian personal constructivism, when a learner comes across new information, he/she will either

adapt/learn this new information or learn how to deal with it (Golding, 2011). Taking the social constructivists' approach to inclusion can be beneficial to general education teachers. Mallory and New (1994) (as cited by Bloom, Perlmutter, & Burrell, 1999) stated, "a constructivist perspective offers an alternative to the traditional behaviorist's perspective by recognizing classrooms and schools as social places where social context and social activity influence children's thoughts and actions" (p. 132). It is likely that embracing the social aspects of learning can make an inclusive classroom thrive. Bloom et al., (1999) stated:

Teachers who provide nurturing climates, communicate clear expectations, create a partnership with their students, and build self-worth may find the inclusion of special children an asset rather than a nightmare. Inclusive classrooms can provide a rich context for learning about diversity and taking care of each other. It is our responsibility as teachers to explore these possibilities and take advantage of the learning potential of social interaction. (p. 136)

"Vygotsky formulated a unique theoretical framework for the most comprehensive, inclusive, and humane practice for special education known in the 20th century" (Gindis, 1999, p. 339). The social development learning theory supports the idea that being included in the regular classroom is beneficial for children/students with disabilities. Special education uses the argument that there are not two categories of students, disabled and non-disabled. Instead with in the social developmental learning theory there is one cohesive student body and it is up to the educational system to meet all of their needs (Cole, 1999; Dixon & Verenikia, 2007; Gindis, 1999). As the educational system

develops, inclusion is likely to become more commonplace as part of the educational experience. In some places it is a routine approach to including children with special needs in the general curriculum. At this point it is important to make sure educators are prepared and ready to take on these new challenges.

Self- efficacy Theory

“Teachers operate collectively within an interactive social system rather than in isolation. The belief systems of staffs create school cultures that can have vitalizing or demoralizing effects on how well schools function as a social system” (Bandura, 1994, p. 78). The self-efficacy of teachers can play an important role in student performance. For this reason, it is important to examine theories pertaining to the self-efficacy of educators. The term self-efficacy comes from Albert Bandura’s social cognitive theory. The self-efficacy theory describes how individuals think, feel and motivate themselves to succeed (Bandura, 1994). This success is produced through the cognitive, motivational, affective and selection processes. Bandura theorized that “teachers with a high sense of efficacy about their teaching abilities can motivate their students and enhance their cognitive development” (p. 78). A strong sense of efficacy can increase self-motivation. In the field of education, a highly motivated teacher can motivate his/her students.

Research has shown that efficacious teachers serve the special needs of their students with disabilities well (Haverback & Parault, 2008; Lee, Patterson, & Vega, 2011; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007). These teachers make less special education referrals because they feel better able to handle their teaching situations (Haverbeck & Parault, 2008). A 2011 study by Gao and Mager demonstrated that for pre-service teachers, a higher

perceived sense of efficacy was positively associated with their attitudes towards inclusion and working with a diverse socio-economic group.

Pendergast, Garvis, and Keough (2011) stated:

Teacher self-efficacy is an important motivational construct that shapes teacher effectiveness in the classroom. Teachers with a high level of teacher self-efficacy have been shown to be more resilient in their teaching and likely to try harder to help all students to reach their potential. (p. 46)

Research has shown that highly efficacious teachers are very motivated and effective in teaching a variety of students (Gao & Mager, 2001; Haverback & Parault, 2008; Lee et al., 2011). As mentioned previously, these teachers believe they are in control of their classroom and better able to handle students with difficulties. Researchers found a link between various aspects of teachers' perceived self-efficacy and their ability to encourage performance in the classroom by their students (Wolters & Daugherty, 2007). A teacher with high self-efficacy may not find it difficult to work with disabled children in their classroom. They possess the confidence in themselves to know they can accomplish any goal (Gao & Mager, 2001; Lee et al., 2011; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007).

The self-efficacy theory can be interpreted to include children with special education needs in the regular classroom. In this study Pendergrast et al. (2011) studied the perceived level of self-efficacy of preservice teachers early in their educational journey and then again at the end.

Summary

These two theories of learning align with the ideas that including children/students with special needs in the regular education classroom positively impacts their achievement,

but that this impact is likely to be influenced by the self-efficacy of the teacher. The social development theory reveals that learning in the general education setting gives children/students with special needs the opportunity to learn, in part, via social interaction with non-disabled peers in the instructional setting (Cole, 1999; Dixon & Verenikia, 2007; Gindis, 1999). This inclusive setting also gives them the opportunity to learn from the general and special education teachers. Bandura's social cognitive theory explores the idea that teachers with a higher sense of efficacy can motivate children/students with special needs to improve their achievement. This study used social development theory to explore how the perceptions of these regular education teachers impact the learning of their students with special needs self-efficacy to explore how a teacher's sense of capability affects their comfort level in working with these children/students with special needs. And finally, this study explored how a teacher's sense of efficacy and perceived preparedness affect their ability to work with children/students with special needs in the socially preferred inclusive setting.

Pertinent Literature and Professional Perspectives

The practice of educating children/students with special needs in the general education classroom with their normally developing peers has continued to increase over the past four decades and affects every aspect of the school community (Ainscow & César, 2006; Cook, Cameron, & Tankersley, 2007; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). Due to this continuous increase of children/students receiving special education services in the regular classroom, researchers have studied how prepared general educators are to teach in this setting (Cook et al., 2007; Forlin & Chambers, 2011). The role of the teacher has now become an important factor in the success or failure of these inclusive practices (Forlin &

Chambers, 2011; Forlin & Lian, 2008). The following discussion will highlight some studies that look at teacher preparation as it pertains to working with disabled students in the general education classroom.

Teacher Preparation

Research has shown that general education teachers received limited opportunities to study special education in their teacher preparation programs (Brown et al., 2008; Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). If teachers received any preparation to work with disabled students, it was usually from a single course requirement or survey (Kamens et al.; Welch 1996). Kamens, Loprete and Slostad found that these teachers wanted to know the classification of the child's disorder, receive suggestions of accommodations, and specific information about the individual child. An increased level of support from administration and colleagues is also needed (Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999; Kamens et al., 2003). Teachers often are not familiar with the specific disability of the child and how to work with him/her (Brown et al., 2008; Daane et al., 2000; Kamens et al., 2003). Certainly, teachers want to know techniques to adapt the curriculum for the special child, be better-armed with effective strategies, and know alternative procedures if problems develop (Kamens et al., 2003).

Some of these concerns can possibly be avoided with increased field experience during teacher preparation programs. Having meaningful field-based experiences can help prepare future teachers to work in a variety of settings and with various types of learners (Conderman, Morin, & Stephens, 2005; O'Shea, Hammite, Mainzer, & Crutchfield, 2000; Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). In many cases, student teachers are sent to

existing school cultures that may not represent effective practices and modern educational trends (Conderman et al., 2005; McIntyre, Byrd, & Foxx, 1996).

General education teachers need more training on how to accommodate students with disabilities as they deliver the curriculum (Daane et al., 2000). Administrators, general educators and special educators tend to believe that general education teachers lack skills in this area (Cook et al., 1999; Daane et al., 2000). Daane et al. (2000) asserted that:

Teacher education programs must do more to prepare general education teacher candidates for accommodating all types of students. This can only happen if they have had the opportunity to have quality fieldwork experiences where collaboration takes place, as well as adequate academic coursework in education. (p. 336)

Beginning teachers believe that they are very prepared to deal with communicating with parents and families and collaborating with colleagues (Brown et al., 2008). In most cases, however, these beginning teachers do not believe that they are prepared to implement accommodations/modifications for learners with special needs, nor do they believe they have information to plan for students with disabilities, or have the knowledge or time to provide individualized testing criteria for these students (Carter, Jackson, Marchant & Prater, 2009; Danne et.al 2000; Conderman & Johnston Rodriguez, 2009). When discussing their teacher-preparation programs, beginning teachers indicated that their, “preservice coursework and field experiences were insufficient” (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009, p. 240).

Researchers have also sought to determine if better collaborative practices can help teachers feel more comfortable when working with special needs students (Carter et al.,

2009). “Effective collaboration between special and general education teachers can facilitate the successful inclusion of students with disabilities who are in general education classrooms” (Carter et al. 2009, p. 60). Data show that the collaborative process between special education and general education helps general educators learn to work with colleagues and focus on the needs of students (Carter et al., 2009). One of the challenges that teachers find is scheduling time to meet with their partners (Carter et al., 2009). Although using a collaborative model is beneficial in some ways for teachers, it can also present even more problem. Collaboration, at times, can be problematic due to the difficulty of two adults working very closely together (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009; Snyder, Garriott, & Aylor, 2001).

Since studies have shown that general education teachers are not typically well prepared to accommodate students with disabilities (Daane et al., 2000), it is beneficial to examine how to increase the knowledge base of these teachers. The 2008 study by Brown et al. (2008) examined the effectiveness of embedding special education instruction into a teacher preparation assessment course. The researchers found that some general education teachers are apprehensive when it comes to modifying or adapting examinations to special learners (Brown et al., 2008). The researchers also found that a lack of training in the area of assessment can cause teachers to use accommodations in testing procedures that violate their own classroom standards. The Brown et al study was conducted by distributing participants enrolled in an undergraduate evaluation and measurement course into two groups. All participants were taught using one syllabus. The control group was taught the material from the syllabus by a professor with little special education experience. The experimental group was taught from the same syllabus but was given embedded instruction

on techniques to use with special learners. The professor of the experimental group had experience and special training in working with special learners. “Results of this study support the practice of embedding instruction regarding students with learning disabilities into the content of general education teacher preparation courses” (Brown et al., 2008, p. 2,091). Participants in the control group exhibited expanded knowledge of key terms in special education. Also, those receiving the instruction were able to create appropriate interventions for traditional examinations (Brown et al., 2008). Results also suggested that teacher candidates who received the special education instruction exhibited more confidence in working with a diverse population of students. An improvement in preservice teachers’ attitudes toward working with learning disabled students was also noted (Brown et al., 2008).

“General educators need to come to the public schools armed with a deep set of skills for students with exceptionalities learned not only by textbooks and coursework but by seasoned professionals in the field” (Kantor, 2011, p. 118). Kantor studied the degree to which a group of teachers believed that they were prepared to provide instruction to students in a mixed-ability classroom. Three themes were mentioned repeatedly by participants, “they are as follows: training for specific student populations, environmental support, and comfort in professional knowledge and abilities” (Kantor, 2011, p. 101).

Kantor also found the following:

Teachers must make numerous decisions each day based on what they believe will best support each individual child’s learning. Without confidence in ones’ ability to make these decisions, this profession could become extremely frustrating and overwhelming. It makes sense that

teachers would leave the field of education if they did have these feelings. I do believe that teacher preparation may play an important role in the ability to make decisions and as well as to be confident in them. (p. 106)

“General education teachers are assuming greater responsibility for the academic progress of students with special needs” (Nutter, 2011, p. iv). Nutter examined the relationship of knowledge base, skill levels, and attitudes of preservice teacher candidates towards students with disabilities. Nutter found that the candidates perceived that they have knowledge of laws pertaining to special education, but they were not confident in implementing the procedures in the classroom. This suggests that preservice teachers would benefit from more field experience and clinical practice to increase their comfort level of implementing these procedures in the classroom (Nutter, 2011).

“Initially the inclusion movement focused mainly on children with disabilities; it has in more recent years broadened in scope to encompass all students who may be marginalized due to any form of special education need” (Forlin, Loreman, Sharma & Earle, 2009, p. 196). For this reason, teacher preparation programs should ensure that new teachers are able to meet the needs of a more diverse clientele (Forlin et al., 2009). These programs cannot ignore the fact that inclusive education is here to stay (Forlin et al., 2009). Research has shown that, “closer contact with people with disabilities and involvement in teaching students with diverse needs has significant effect on improving attitudes towards inclusion” (Forlin et al., 2009, p. 206). It is the responsibility of these teacher preparation programs to produce graduates, “who have the appropriate knowledge, skills and attitudes together with the confidence to be more proactive in furthering inclusion” (Forlin et al., 2009, p. 207).

Revisiting the Study Foundations: Theories in Practice in the Classroom

“In a rich, caring classroom environment, children feel welcome and a part of the group. A strong community creates a sense of belonging and shared purpose where children learn to care for each other” (Bloom et al., 1999, pp. 132-133). A classroom is a community, shared by the teacher and all of his/her students. Vygotsky (1978) stated:

Indeed, can it be doubted that children learn speech from adults; or that, through asking questions and giving answers, children acquire a variety of information; or that, through imitating adults and through being instructed about how to act, children develop an entire repository of skills? Learning and development are interrelated from the child’s very first day of life (p. 84)

A classroom likely will not be socially rich if the teacher does not feel prepared to meet the needs of his/her students. Whether or not a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy impacts his/her students is an important question. Pendergast et al. (2011) asserted that “teacher self-efficacy is an important motivational construct that shapes teacher effectiveness in the classroom” (p. 46). Thus, it is likely that a highly motivated teacher will build a strong sense of community in the classroom and encourage his/her students to achieve. However, lack of knowledge on how to meet the needs of children/students with disabilities may hinder a teacher’s sense of self-efficacy which in turn may affect the classroom community, and student achievement.

A lack of support for administrators, colleagues, and parents can also negatively affect the school community. Children learn from every part of their environment, so having support from other educational stake holders is also important (Gindis, 1999;

Mahn, 1999). A supportive administrator can help improve a teacher's sense of self-efficacy by providing the guidance and help he/she needs (Haverback & Parault, 2008; Lee et al., 2010). Fellow teachers who have some experience in inclusive classrooms can assist by sharing knowledge and resources. And finally, an active parent can help by supporting the teacher and child.

Research has shown that the general education classroom can be a socially rich environment where a child/student with disabilities can learn (Cole, 1999; Dixon & Verenikia, 2007; Gindis, 1999). Moreover, a highly motivating, efficacious teacher (Haverback, & Parault, 2008, Pendergast et al., 2011), can create an appropriate environment where a child/student with special needs can learn. Combining these two theories to support practice is likely to create an effective inclusive classroom.

Autism in the Classroom

“Autism has been declared a national health emergency” (Dahle, 2003, p. 65). As stated earlier, a 2012 report from the CDC states that one in every 88 children will be diagnosed with autism. This number has steadily increased. With these increased numbers, there is a good chance that children/students with autism will be placed in general education classrooms with some frequency. Furthermore, Dahle (2003) noted “at these rates, in the next decade, autism could easily surpass mental retardation as the most common developmental disability facing this country” (p. 65).

Autism is a disorder that has a wide spectrum of characteristics. Students with this disorder possess varying ranges of abilities (Laushey, Heflin, Shippen, Alberto & Fredrick, 2009; Long, 2008). In the classroom environment, children with autism require additional support from teachers and staff (Horrocks et al., 2008; Stainback & Stainback, 1990). A

person who is not familiar with autism, “may assume there is no disability and the person is being ‘naughty’ when in reality they are reacting to stress or anxiety or are unable to communicate their needs effectively” (Kairaranga, 2004, p. 13). These children can have average skills in math and reading but are unable to write down their ideas or express their opinions effectively (Laushey et al., 2009; Long, 2008). They may be easily distracted and extremely sensitive to lights and sounds (Dahle, 2003; Darrow, 2009; Long, 2008).

Children/students with autistic students also find change and transition difficult (Laushey et al., 2009). It is hard for them to move from one area of the curriculum to another (Atwood, 1998). Using visual picture schedules and or timers can help with classroom transition (Kairaranga, 2004). Some of these students may require a one-on-one assistant or aide to help them throughout the day (Kairaranga, 2004). Unfortunately many districts do not have the funding to provide such services which leaves the classroom teacher without support.

With that in mind, it is important for teachers to know some ways to meet the needs of children/students with autism in the classroom. Studies have suggested that developing interventions that incorporate the child’s interest within the academic assignment can help decrease his/her disruptive behavior and increase cooperation (Hinton & Kern, 1999; Koegel, Singh, & Koegel, 2010, p. 1,057). Koegel et al. (2010) “incorporating motivational components in academic tasks resulted in faster completion rates” (p. 1,065). While many children/students with autism are highly intelligent, at times they lack the motivation needed to complete academic tasks (Koegel et al., 2010). Increasing their interest and motivation in academic work can help curve disruptive behaviors (Keogel et

al., 2010). Implementing these suggestions may help teachers deal with potential behavior problems in the classroom.

Language/speech Disorders in the classroom

“The prevalence of communication disorders (speech, language, and hearing) among school-age children continues to increase, making it imperative that the classroom teacher be able to identify children in need of services” (Sunderland, 2004, p. 209). A child’s performance in the classroom can be hindered by impaired communication skills. Although the majority of the child’s therapeutic services may be provided outside the classroom by a speech-language pathologist, it is still important for the classroom teacher to understand what can be done in the classroom to help the child succeed. Sunderland (2004) recommended that the classroom teacher, “consider his/her own rate of speech, length and complexity of sentences, number of directives given at one time, positive to negative reinforcement ratio, use of pre-corrects and voice” (p. 216). Sunderland also recommends that teachers provide multiple opportunities for the child to practice using good speech and language skills.

Children/students with communication disorders exhibit various difficulties in the classroom. “The language demands of the classroom are already quite high, and unfortunately, many school-age children have difficulty meeting these expectations” (Nippold, 2012, p. 118). Elementary school children with a diagnosed language disorder may have difficulty; reading words, comprehending what they have read, understanding vocabulary, and using syntax correctly (Nippold, 2012). Many of these children have social, academic and psychological issues that are associated with their communication disorder that teachers should be aware of (Thatcher, Fletcher, & Decker, 2008). Research

has shown that children/students with communication disorders may not be able to answer questions appropriately, have difficulty interacting with their peers and be unable to initiate conversation (Pufpaff, 2008).

The National Joint Committee for the Communicative Needs of Persons with Severe Disabilities, 1992 (as cited by Scherba de Valenzuela, 2002) defines communication as:

Any act by which one person gives to or receives from another person information about that person's needs, desires, perceptions, knowledge, or affective states. Communication may be intentional or unintentional, may involve conventional or unconventional signals, may take linguistic or nonlinguistic forms, and may occur through spoken or other modes. (p. 2)

“The critical role of communication in schools cannot be understated.

Communication skills are a necessity both in the academic and social atmosphere of the school environment” (Thatcher et al., 2008, p. 579). Research has shown that there is a strong association between speech and language skills and acquiring literacy skills (Thatcher et al. 2008; Weigel, Martin, & Bennett, 2006). Difficulties in speech and language may be manifested into difficulties with literacy (ASHA, 2012). If a child has a hard time understanding spoken language, they may also have a hard time understanding written language. A child with an articulation disorder may find phonics difficult since they both deal with letter sounds (ASHA, 2012). It is important for teachers to understand how these problems can manifest themselves in classroom work, as “communication is a vital skill needed not only for success in the school environment, but within society” (Thatcher et al., 2008, p. 580).

Children with Emotional Disabilities in the Classroom

It has been estimated that the number of children in school who suffer from diagnosable mental, emotional and behavioral disorders is between 12 and 22% (Adelman & Taylor, 2002). Disruptive behaviors can manifest themselves in various ways. Many children/students with EmD are either anxious/withdrawn or aggressive (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Center, 1993). They can be antisocial, or act out in a disruptive fashion (Bullock & Gable, 2006). “Because no one tolerates disruptive behavior, these students are viewed as ‘troublemakers’ and their behaviors are broadly considered unacceptable in the classroom” (Bullock & Gable, 2006, p. 9). Children/students with EmD can also be easily distractible and non-compliant (Bullock & Gable, 2006; Ducharme & Shecter, 2011). Bullock and Gable (2006) stated:

It is often difficult to actively engage these students in learning activities.

Many of these students appear to be unmotivated, passive, and disinterested in their schooling, whereas others may seem over anxious, phobic, or social isolates. (p. 9)

These behaviors can make classroom management difficult. “Managing student’s inappropriate behaviors is a time-consuming task that reduces the amount of time teachers spend on teaching and the amount of time student spend on academic tasks” (Matheson & Shriver, 2005, p. 202). Research has suggested that children who exhibit a compliance rate of less than 40% are not benefiting from instructional opportunities and time (Rhodes, Jenson, & Reavis, 1993).

“Dealing with student problem behavior is one of the most pressing concerns facing educators in the classroom” (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011, p. 257). Research has

shown that teachers do not feel adequately trained to manage this difficult behavior (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011; Rhodes et al., 1993). Ducharme and Shecter (2011) found:

The training that teachers receive before entering the classroom often does not adequately prepare them for the behavioral challenges they are likely to face. As a result, teachers may experience low self-efficacy in their efforts to manage student behavior. Reactive approaches are the most commonly used by teachers for dealing with problem responses and these strategies may result in short-term reductions of problem behavior, but often at the cost of long-term child well-being. (p. 270)

Effective classroom management is very successful in fostering student compliance (Fox & Gable, 2004; Zabel, Kaff, & Teagarden, 2011). Previous research has demonstrated positive correlations between well-managed classrooms and student engagement in academic tasks (Matheson & Shriver, 2005). With good classroom management a teacher may be able to avoid some disruptive behaviors and encourage productive behaviors.

Specific Learning Disabled Children in the Classroom

The characteristics of persons with a learning disability vary from person to person. However, a common aspect is that they can have a normal or above normal intelligence (Cass, 2010; Nielson, 2009). Maanum (2009) defined a specific learning disability as a disorder that:

Is manifested by interference with acquisition, organization, storage, retrieval, manipulation, or expression of information and inhibits the ability of the individual to learn at an adequate rate when provided with the usual

developmental opportunities and instruction from a regular school environment. (p. 95)

Maanum (2009) further explained that this reduced learning rate is found in one or more of the following areas: oral expression, listening comprehension, mathematical calculation, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, and written expression. In the past a student was required to exhibit a discrepancy between his/her intelligence and academic performance to qualify for services under the category of specific learning disabled, but it is not the case now (Karten, 2008; Maanum, 2009). Children/students with specific learning disability are children who can learn, but learn differently. When being compared to their normally developing peers, children/students with a learning disability show difficulty with planning, organizing and revising written words (Cass, 2010; De La Paz, 2007; Graham & Harris, 2003). Research has shown that how a child with a learning disability is taught is as important as what they are taught (Grumbine & Alden, 2006; Hughes, 2011). Children/students with a learning disability are expected to acquire information from various modalities, store the information to enhance understanding, and demonstrate the knowledge they have acquired (Hughes, 2011). This can be difficult for them. Using specific learning strategies can help them learn, understand and remember information better. Researchers have found that using task specific strategies that are well-designed, effective and efficient can help increase a child's independence in learning (Graham & Harris, 2003; Hughes, 2011). "An effective strategy is a priceless tool in a teacher's toolbox" (Cass, 2010, p. 66).

One such strategy is the EmPOWER strategy. EmPOWER was developed by Bonnie Singer and Anthony Bashir in 2004, (as cited in Cass, 2010). The acronym stands

for: evaluate, make a plan, organize, work, evaluate, and re-work. This strategy has steps and prompts to help children/students with SLD improve their writing skills (Cass, 2010).

Using these steps may help a student organize and complete his/her work successfully.

A student with a learning disability needs to learn how to study and organize school work before he/she is able to learn content (Gersten, Schiller, & Vaughn, 2000; Swanson, Haskyn, & Lee, 1999). Some useful classroom accommodations maybe: to provide audio tapes of presentations, reduce the number of items on a page or line, allow the child to give verbal instead of written responses, give preferential seating, provide special test preparation, and provide an outline of the day's activities on the board.

Summary

“Difference is not an exception... but something that happens in the natural course of things” (Stiker, 1997, p. 12). Disabled children are a natural part of the educational arena. Their needs should be considered just as those of any other students. Federal mandates such as IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2001) state that these children should be educated with their normal-aged peers as much as appropriate, and are expected to achieve as any other student. Banglieri and Knopf (2004) theorized:

Because so many in our society buy into difference as impairment, (i.e., they construct difference as negative), the normalizing discourse and resulting social structures create barriers to access for individuals with differences and frequency prohibit them from active participation in the communities in which they reside. (p. 525)

These communities include their school community. As Vygotsky (1978) theorized, learning has a strong social aspect. Children with disabilities should be allowed

to learn within their school community just like everyone else. As discussed earlier each disability category has its own characteristics and criteria. This gives general education teachers more information to take in, process, and prepare for. Pertinent research has shown that the role of the general education teacher is changing (Brown et al., 2008; Grskovic & Trzcinka, 2011). However, some experts believe there has not been sufficient change in the content of teacher preparation programs that addresses this responsibility (Brown et al., 2008). From the time they are teacher candidates, teachers should develop a positive attitude and the confidence needed to teach a diverse group of students (Brown et al., 2008; Forlin et al., 2009; Silverman, 2007). In today's society, schools are being blamed for not embracing inclusion, but it is, in part, the responsibility of teacher preparation programs to ensure educators are ready to teach in inclusive classrooms (Forlin et al., 2009). It is also the responsibility of school districts to provide professional development for teachers that will prepare them to (Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004) work in an inclusive setting.

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their preparedness to teach students with specific special education needs. This study focused on the special education exceptionalities of autism, language/speech disorder, specific learning disability, and an emotional disability. This study determined if there is a relationship between the level of teacher preparedness and the special education disability category. Finally, the study allowed the opportunity for teachers to offer suggestions for strategies to better help them prepare.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Chapter III outlines the research design and methods that were used in this study. The following section explains the research questions, hypotheses, independent and dependent variables. Chapter III also describes the study participants, instrumentation, study procedures and the analytical methods that were used.

Research Design

The purpose of this study was to determine whether general education teachers in elementary schools believed they are prepared to teach children/students with specific special education exceptionalities in the regular education classroom. A multiple method quasi-experimental design was used in this study. The researcher obtained quantitative and qualitative data to answer the research questions. Data were obtained from a questionnaire completed by third, fourth, and fifth grade general education teachers. The questionnaire gave the participants four vignettes that described behaviors and characteristics noted in four specific special education exceptionalities (autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability and an emotional disability). The participants answered responded to items about their degree of perceived preparedness to work with the child described in each vignette. Participants also had an opportunity to answer an open-ended question that solicited their perspectives on conditions that would make them more confident in teaching children with special needs.

Research Questions/Hypotheses

Discovering the degree to which general education teachers perceive that they are prepared to teach in an inclusive classroom yielded valuable information. The results of

this study can be used by school districts to increase the number and subject matter of professional development workshops used to improve teacher preparedness. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered. The following research questions and hypotheses were addressed in this study.

1. What are general education teachers' perceptions of planning differentiated instruction for children/students with the following special education eligibilities: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability and emotional disability in the general education classroom?
2. Are there differences in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with special needs learners based on the children/students' eligibility category?
3. Are the perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, current grade assignment years of experience teaching, and time since last professional development in special education?
4. What conditions will increase general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with special needs learners?

The following related hypotheses were addressed in the study:

H₁: There are differences in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with children/students with special needs based on the students' eligibility category.

H₂: The perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers are related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, years of experience teaching, and most recently attended professional development in special education.

Participants in the Study

After obtaining approval from superintendents in participating districts and from the Instructional Review Board of the University of Southern Mississippi, the researcher conducted the study. Elementary schools were identified in each participating district. A sample letter to the superintendents and the related consent form are attached as Appendix A. These districts and schools were chosen because of the convenience of their geographical location. Furthermore these districts are reflective of the socio-economic and racial/ethnic diversity of the state of Mississippi. According to the U. S. Census Bureau (2010); the state of Mississippi has had a population increase. Of the counties served by these school districts, only one had a significant loss in population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010). The Hispanic/Latino population in the state has also grown slightly. While this study does not address socio-economic and racial/ethnic factors as variables, it is useful to note the degree to which the pertinent region is generally representative of the rest of the state.

One hundred-ninety instruments were distributed to schools by the researcher. Third, fourth and fifth grade teachers were asked to participate in this study. Of this number, 52 individuals returned completed instruments, for a response rate of 27.3%. The instruments were hand-delivered and mailed to school principals by the researcher.

Principals were asked to distribute the instruments to general education teachers in their schools. Principals were asked not to distribute surveys to special education teachers at their school. For the purpose of this study, the data on perceived preparedness to teach students with selected disabilities came exclusively from general education teachers. All third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers in each of the participating schools were asked to participate.

Informed consent was obtained from study participants. The adult consent form is attached as Appendix B. This document explained that study participation was strictly voluntary and confidential. Although some demographic information was obtained, no identifying information was needed or obtained. Demographic information included gender, level of education, current teaching grade/position (school placement was not identified), years of experience teaching, and participation in professional development. Demographic information such as years of experience was used in the statistical analysis of the data, but personal identifying information was not used or reported.

Instrumentation

This study utilized a mixed-method survey instrument that yielded quantitative and qualitative data. An original instrument entitled the General Educators' Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE) was utilized to obtain data for this study; it is attached as Appendix C. This instrument was designed by the researcher because there was not one available that followed a vignette/scenario format.

Research has shown that using vignettes and narratives in research has been done in education and the social sciences for many years (Hughes & Huby, 2002). These vignettes or hypothetical scenarios are described as partial descriptions of life or situations to which

the subject is invited to respond to (Brauer et al., 2009; Finch, 1987). Researchers have found several benefits to using the vignette approach. First, while it tells a story, a vignette can be developed so that it is consistent with the research topic (Kayser-Jones & Koenig, 1994; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). Vignettes are also relaxing and interesting during the data collection process (Kayser-Jones & Koenig, 1994; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). Lastly, vignettes can help obtain information beyond the informant's current situation (Kayser-Jones & Koenig, 1994; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). Furthermore, Brauer et al. (2009) noted "vignettes can be used in multiple contexts, with a range of professions and/or community members, to elicit opinions, attitudes or preferences for action" (p. 1,943). Brauer and colleagues also found that this type of study design merits consideration and should be further developed.

Though there are many benefits to using a vignette design for research, Schoenberg and Ravdal (2000) describe some drawbacks. These authors noted "data collection and analysis revealed three shortcomings of the vignette approach, including: (1) problems related to response; (2) challenges of analysis; and (3) shortcomings inherent in hypothetical scenarios" (p. 70). Another difficulty with this type of research design is the fact that informants can interpret the vignette in a different way than intended and the researcher can interpret the informants' responses in various ways (Finch, 1987; Morse, 1998; Schoenberg & Ravdal, 2000). To minimize these concerns researcher sought out assistance from the panel of experts to insure the vignettes were appropriate for the chosen grades and were easy to understand.

The instrument for this study was divided into three sections. Part I asked for demographic information; the participants responded to items about their current teaching

assignment, level of education, years of experience, number of hours in special education taken, and when they had their most recent professional development in special education. This section covered Research Question 3 of this study. Part II contained the vignettes and Likert scale items. There was one vignette for each exceptionality identified for this study. Vignette 1 discussed a specific learning disability. Vignette 2 represented a child/student with a language/speech disorder. Vignette 3 discussed autism, and Vignette 4 discussed an emotional disability. The vignettes described characteristics and abilities, related to each exceptionality that may be observed in the classroom. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to answer six items on a Likert scale of 1-6, with 1 equating to strongly disagree, and 6 equating to strongly agree. The six items were similar from vignette to vignette, but modified slightly from in order to be specific with respect to each exceptionality. One of the items, Item 6, was reversed in polarity. Part II of the instrument provided data used to analyze Research Questions 1 and 2. Part III asked open-ended questions pertaining to educational experiences in special education, what teachers needed from special education personnel to better prepare them, and which of the four exceptionalities they believed they were most prepared and least prepared to handle. Part III yielded data to answer Research Question 4.

The instrument was validated by means of an expert panel review. The panel of experts was formed to ensure that the case study vignettes provided descriptions of students that were consistent with MDE requirements for each special education category used. The form used by the panel of experts is included as Appendix D. Panel members were various professionals with knowledge of special education requirements and characteristics.

Once the panel of experts completed its review, the instrument was edited and finalized. Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, a pilot study was conducted to ensure the reliability of the instrument. Twelve teachers were asked to participate in the pilot study. These teachers were from schools outside of the schools participating in the full study. All data obtained from the pilot study were analyzed by using the statistical program SPSS. The Cronbach's alpha was used to test the reliability of the instrument. The test disclosed a reliability of greater than .900 for all four vignettes. The results of Cronbach's alpha test of reliability are further discussed in Table 1.

Table 1

Cronbach's alpha for Pilot Study and Dissertation

Cronbach's alpha	Pilot Study	Dissertation
Vignette 1	.933	.906
Vignette 2	.958	.936
Vignette 3	.967	.926
Vignette 4	.973	.937

Cronbach's alpha was used during the formal study to assess the reliability and internal consistency of the vignettes and Likert scale items. This test of coefficient reliability was performed on all four vignette/item sets to determine how adequately it measured a single concept. In order to be considered acceptable the Cronbach alpha result must 0.70 or greater. As shown in Table 1 the test disclosed reliabilities of greater than .900 during the pilot study and did so subsequently during the dissertation study.

Procedures

The study was conducted by using the following procedures. The researcher hand delivered and/or mailed the questionnaires to the participating schools. The principals of these schools distributed the surveys to the teacher participants. The completed surveys were mailed to the researcher in a stamped envelope. Electronic surveys were also available but were not requested. A letter was attached to each survey that provided information and requested participation in the study (Appendix E). The letter explained that participation was voluntary and completely confidential. It also advised participants that filling out the survey implied consent to participate and that there would be no negative consequences if they choose not to participate. Paper surveys were to be kept in a locked file cabinet by the researcher for no more than one year. After that period they were to be destroyed. The survey information was not shared with any persons other than the researcher's dissertation advisors. Upon completion, a summary of the findings were to be shared with school districts that requested it. Once all data were collected, the results were analyzed in Chapter IV and discussed in Chapter V.

Analysis

Descriptive, differential and correlational statistics were used to analyze collected data. The researcher computed frequencies, standard deviations, and means for the data collected, including demographic data. The demographic data were in turn used in the analysis of Research Question 3. This demographic information included: level of education, the number of special education classes participants took during their training, years of experience teaching, and the amount of professional development in special education that they have attended.

Descriptive statistics were computed for participant responses to each of the 6 items in the vignette subscales. The original, unreversed mean for Item 6 in each exceptionality subscale, which was reversed in polarity, was reported first. The reversed means were used in the calculation of the total subscale means and in the analyses associated with the hypotheses. In addition to other applications, these data provided information to answer Research Question 1, which relied purely on descriptive analyses. The researcher also determined whether there were differences among the levels of perceived preparedness from one exceptionality to another to gain further information for Hypothesis 1 by comparing the means of the Likert scale items for each exceptionality. A one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was calculated to compare the means of the variables. A prediction regression was used to analyze the level of perceived preparedness to work with each specified exceptionality. These tests yielded data to answer Research Question 2 and test Hypothesis 1.

A multiple regression and Pearson's product-moment correlation (r) statistics were used to determine if there was a relationship between the level of perceived preparedness and the selected background characteristics, which included level of education, current grade assignment, years of experience, number of special education classes taken, and the occurrence of their last professional development. The multiple regression was run for each exceptionality: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability and emotional disability. This test yielded information to answer Research Question 3 and test Hypothesis 2. For this study the p -value was .05. The data were analyzed in SPSS to obtain answers to the proposed research questions.

Results from the open-ended questions in Part III were analyzed using thematic code development and/or grounded theory (Crestwell, 2009). This technique, originally developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), uses a set of systematic steps. For the first stage of coding, the researcher generated categories or themes from the information provided by open coding. Next, the researcher used axial coding to generate categories from these themes and compared the relationships of the coded data (Crestwell, 2009). This information was used to answer Research Question 4.

Summary

“The enrollment of young children and students with disabilities in regular classes has been one of the most significant pedagogical challenges for education systems” (Dixon & Verenikina, 2007, p. 192). It is clear that educators should be more knowledgeable about disabilities, collaboration with other professionals, and the special needs of their students (Hamil, Jantzen, & Bargerhuff, 1999). For this reason, this study utilized a researcher-developed instrument, General Educators’ Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE), to measure how prepared general educators were to work with special needs students. The information obtained from this study demonstrated that educators do not feel prepared to teach special needs students in the general education classroom. This study also addressed participants’ recommendations for steps that can be taken by school districts and teacher preparation programs to help prepare them to better meet the instructional needs of students with disabilities.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Many benefits and complications have been created by the increased inclusion of children/students receiving special education services in the general education classroom. The purpose of this study was to measure general education teachers perceptions' of their ability to effectively teach children/students with specific special education rulings in the general education classroom. This study focused on the special education exceptionalities of autism, language/speech disorder, specific learning disability, and emotionally disability. The study measured the relationship between the level of teacher preparedness and the special education disability category. Lastly, the study provided respondents with the opportunity to offer explanations of which exceptionalities they believe they are the most and least prepared to work with. This chapter describes the results of the study and includes both quantitative and qualitative information.

Quantitative Results

The research design for this study of teacher perceptions of working with children/students with special education needs in the general education classroom was a multiple method, quasi-experimental design. The instrument yielded quantitative and qualitative information. An original instrument entitled the General Educators' Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE) was utilized for this study. The instrument used a vignette/scenario format and was divided into three sections. Part I addressed items about demographic information. Part II contained four vignettes, one for each exceptionality and Likert scale items. Part III contained open-ended questions used to

further assess teacher preparedness. Parts I and II yielded quantitative data while Part III yielded qualitative data.

Descriptive statistics and one-way repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) were used to compare whether the level of teacher preparedness differed based on the special education exceptionality of students. These analyses were used to answer Research Questions 1 and 2 and test Hypothesis 1, which was associated with Research Question 1. The study used a prediction regression to analyze the level of perceived preparedness with each exceptionality. A multiple regression and Pearson's product moment correlation (r) statistic was used to determine if there was a relationship between the level of perceived preparedness and the particular exceptionality. The multiple regressions were run for each exceptionality: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability. These tests provided information to answer Research Question 3 and test the related hypothesis, Hypothesis 2. For this study the p -value was .05. The quantitative results for this study are as follows:

Demographic Items

Five superintendents gave the researcher permission to contact principals and conduct study research. One hundred-ninety surveys were distributed among 20 schools through 3 of the five original districts. Two districts did not have any principals respond to the request for participation. Of the 190 distributed surveys 52 (27.3%) of the teachers returned the completed surveys. All respondents were female. Of those who completed the survey, the majority had a bachelor's degree or master's degree. Only 1 respondent had a specialist's degree. The participants consisted of a fairly equal distribution of third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers, although there was a slightly higher percentage of fifth

grade teachers than of the other two grades. The largest proportion of respondents in terms of experience was the group with one to five years of experience (34.6%). The frequencies and percentages for gender, education level, current grade level teaching and years of experience are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Teacher Demographic Frequencies and Percentages

Variable	Frequency	Percent
Gender		
Female	52	100.0
Education Level		
Bachelor	28	53.8
Master	23	44.2
Specialist	1	1.9
Grade Level		
3 rd	19	36.5
4 th	13	25.0
5 th	20	38.5
Years of Experience		
1-5	18	34.6
6-10	10	19.2
11-15	13	25.0

Table 2 (continued).

Variable	Frequency	Percent
16-20	3	5.8
21+	8	15.4

The 52 respondents reported various levels of special education classes taken during their teacher training. The largest proportion of respondents in terms of number of hours of special education classes taken was the group with over 12 hours or four or more classes (25%). On the other hand, a large proportion took either one special education class (23.1%) or none at all (21.2). It is interesting to note that a large number reported having no special education classes during their training. The frequencies and percentages of hours of special education classes taken during teacher training are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

Frequencies and Percentages of Special Education Classes Taken

Hours taken	Frequency	Percent
None	11	21.2
3 (1 class)	12	23.1
6 (2 classes)	10	19.2
9 (3 classes)	6	11.5
12+(4 or more classes)	13	25.0

To further assess the level of preparedness of respondents to work with children/students with special needs, the teachers were asked how recently they had

professional development training in the area of special education. The largest proportion of respondents in terms of having recently attended professional development in the area of special education was the group having attended professional development within the past year (38.5%). On the other hand, a large proportion (28.8%) reported no special education professional development. A small number reported attending professional development training within the past four to five years or longer. Frequencies of professional development are listed in Table 4.

Table 4
Frequencies for Professional Development

Years since last professional development	Frequency	Percent
None	15	28.8
Past year	20	38.5
1-3	9	17.3
4-5	2	3.8
5+	6	11.5

Quantitative: Descriptive Statistics

Descriptive statistics were computed in order to discern the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their abilities to work with children/students with special needs in the general education classroom. Each of four exceptionalities within which students might be classified was presented to the respondents in the form of a short vignette/scenario. The vignette presented some characteristics that could be exhibited by the student in the classroom based on the specific ruling. This study focused on autism,

speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability. The vignettes described strengths and weaknesses that could be displayed by a child/student who might qualify for the particular exceptionality.

There was one vignette for each exceptionality identified for this study. Vignette 1 discussed a specific learning disability. Vignette 2 represented a child/student with a language/speech disorder. Vignette 3 discussed autism, and Vignette 4 discussed an emotional disability. After reading the vignette, participants were asked to answer six different items on a Likert scale of 1-6, with 1 equating to strongly disagree, and 6 equating to strongly agree. These items were repeated for each vignette. The means and standard deviations were calculated for each item in each vignette. Item 6 for each exceptionality was reversed in polarity. The original, unreversed mean for Item 6 in each exceptionality subscale, which was reversed in polarity, was reported first. The reversed means were used in the calculation of the total subscale means and in the analyses associated with the hypotheses.

The total mean for Vignette 1, specific learning disability ($M=4.23$) was the highest mean among the totals for the four vignettes. The mean for Vignette 2, language/speech disorder ($M=3.87$), Vignette 3, autism ($M=3.66$), and Vignette 4, and emotional disability ($M=3.67$) were lower and were very similar. The total means and standard deviations for the four vignettes can be found in Table 5.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Vignettes (N = 52)

Exceptionality	Mean	SD
Specific Learning Disability	4.23	1.15
Speech/Language Disorder	3.87	1.29
Autism	3.66	1.43
Emotional Disability	3.67	1.33

Note. Likert Scale 1= Strongly Disagree 6= Strongly Agree

There were six items following each vignette. The six items were similar from vignette to vignette, but tailored where necessary for each exceptionality. The items were designed to measure whether the teacher believed that he/she was prepared to teach the student, prepared to address the student's educational needs, able to make modifications to the curriculum, make accommodations in the classroom, plan differentiated instruction, and if having a child with a particular ruling in the classroom made him/her feel less prepared to teach the child. The descriptive statistics for each item are further profiled in Table 6.

Columns 2 and 3 of Table 6 profile means and standard deviations for the items related to specific learning disability. Item 3, which reads as follows, "I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student" had the highest mean (M= 4.56) . Item 6, which reads as follow, "Having a child with a specific learning disabled ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child," had the lowest mean (2.83). However, it should be noted that Item 6 was reversed in polarity. The item

with the lowest mean that was not reversed was Item 2, which reads as follows: “I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student,” (M = 4.00).

Column 4 and 5 of Table 6, profile means and standard deviations for the items related to speech/language disorder. Item 3, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student,” had the highest mean (M=3.94). Similarly, Item 5, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this child,” had the same mean (M =3.94). Item 6, which reads as follows, “Having a child with a language/speech disorder in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child,” had the lowest mean (2.85). However, it should be noted that item 6 was reversed in polarity. The item with the lowest mean that was not reversed was Item 2, which reads as follows,” I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student,” (M = 3.65)

Column 6 and 7 of Table 6 profile the means and standard deviations for items related to autism. Item 1, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to teach this student in my class,” had the highest mean (M = 3.67). Similarly, Item 3, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student,” had the same mean (M = 3.67). Item 6, which reads as follows, “Having a child with an autism ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child,” had the lowest mean (M= 3.19). However, Item 6 was reversed in polarity. The item with the lowest mean that was not reversed was Item 2, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student,” (M=3.58).

Column 8 and 9 of Table 6 profile the means and standard deviations for items related to emotional disability. Item 5, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to plan

differentiated instruction for this child,” had the highest mean ($M = 3.79$). Item 6, which reads as follows, “Having a child with an emotional disability ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child,” had the lowest mean ($M = 3.31$). However, Item 6 was reversed in polarity. The item with the lowest mean that was not reversed was Item 2, which reads as follows, “I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student,” ($M = 3.58$).

Table 6

Descriptive Statistics for Vignette Items (N=52)

Question	Specific Learning Disability		Speech/Language Disorder		Autism		Emotional Disability	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
1. I am prepared to teach this student in my class	4.04	1.46	3.71	1.42	3.67	1.70	3.63	1.47
2. I am prepared to address the special education needs of this student	4.00	1.37	3.65	1.45	3.58	1.59	3.56	1.54
3. I am prepared to make modify the general curriculum	4.56	1.23	3.94	1.39	3.67	1.63	3.69	1.54
4. I am prepared to make accommodations to the classroom	4.21	1.30	3.83	1.54	3.65	1.68	3.69	1.62

Table 6 (continued).

Question	Specific Learning Disability		Speech/Language Disorder		Autism		Emotional Disability	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
5. I am prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this student.	4.40	1.32	3.94	1.50	3.60	1.68	3.79	1.36
6. I am less prepared to teach this child due to the exceptionality	2.83	1.67	2.85	1.60	3.19	1.78	3.31	1.64
Total	4.23	1.15	3.87	1.29	3.66	1.43	3.67	1.33

Note. Item 6 for each exceptionality was reversed in polarity. The original means for this item are reported in the row to the right of the item. These means were reversed in the calculation of the total means in the bottom row

Research Question and Hypothesis Results

Four research questions and two hypotheses were examined and answered in this study. Research Question 1 was worded as follows: What are general education teachers' perceptions of planning differentiated instruction for children/students with the following special education eligibilities: autism, speech language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability? This question required the analysis of descriptive statistics only. Item 5 in each vignette in Part II of the instrument, reads as follows, "I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this student," and addressed this research question. While a statistical comparison of these means was not conducted, the exceptionality with the highest mean on the scale of 1-6 was specific learning disability (M

= 4.40). The exceptionality with the lowest mean was autism (M = 3.60). The means and standard deviations for Item 5 are profiled in Table 7.

Table 7

Descriptive Statistics for Differentiated Instruction

Exceptionality	Mean	Standard Deviation
Specific Learning Disability	4.40	1.32
Speech/Language Disorder	3.94	1.50
Autism	3.60	1.68
Emotional Disorder	3.79	1.36

Hypothesis 1 was associated with Research Question 2 and stated as follows: there are differences in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with children/students with disabilities based on the students' eligibility category. The hypothesis compares how educators' perceive working with a child/student with one of the four specified special education exceptionalities. A repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to test Hypothesis 1. This test confirmed that there are differences in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with children/students with disabilities based on the eligibility category as indicated by the Multivariate F-test, $F(3,49)=6.77, p = .001$. This hypothesis, therefore, was accepted. Of the four exceptionalities, the exceptionality of specific learning disabled, which had the highest mean (M = 4.23) showed the most significant difference. The total means of the other three exceptionalities were relatively equal and the difference were less significant indicating similar perceptions

among the participants regarding their ability to teach children/students with autism, speech/language disorder, and emotional disability rulings.

Hypothesis 2 was stated as follows: The perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers are related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, years of experience teaching, and how recently they attended professional development in special education. A multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference in the level of perceived preparedness for each exceptionality based on the selected background characteristics. For specific learning disability, the model summary reported an R^2 of 0.185, indicating that the variability explained by the model was approximately 18%. Since the F is the average amount of variability and is used to test the statistical significance of the model, the ANOVA table indicates that the regression was not statistically significant with $F(5, 46) = 2.095, p = .083$. These results are shown in Table 8. The data explain that there is not a significant relationship between the dependent variable, specific learning disability, and the specified background characteristics. Of the five chosen background characteristics, hours of special education classes taken were the most statistically significant. This means that the number of hours taken in special education classes would have the most influence on the level of perceived preparedness if the relationship was significant.

Table 8

Coefficients of Specific Learning Disability

Variables	Unstandardized Coefficients B	Standardized Coefficients Beta	Sig.
(Constant)	3.58		.000
Education Level	.328	.154	.331
Grade Level	-.225	-.171	.232
Years of Experience	.175	.215	.200
SPED Classes	.153	.199	.196
Prof. Development	-.117	-.128	.401

Note. Dependent Variable: Specific Learning Disability

The analysis of Hypothesis 2 continued with this exceptionality of a speech/language disorder. The model summary reported an R^2 of 0.261 for the selected background characteristics, indicating that the variability explained by the model was 26%. Since the F is the average amount of variability and is used to test the statistical significance of the model, the ANOVA table indicates that the regression was statistically significant with $F(5, 46) = 3.253, p = .013$. These results are shown in Table 9. The data explain that there is a statistically significant relationship between the dependent variable, a speech/language disorder and the specified background characteristics. Of the five background characteristics tested, grade level and hours of special education classes were the most statistically significant. This means that the grade level taught by the teacher and

hours of special education training received had the most influence on the level of perceived preparedness.

Table 9

Coefficients of Speech/Language Disorder

Variables	Unstandardized	Standardized	Sig.
	Coefficients	Coefficients	
	B	Beta	
(Constant)	3.868		.000
Education Level	-0.12	-.005	.973
Grade Level	-.466	-.315	.023
Years of Experience	.054	.060	.707
SPED Classes	.338	.390	.010
Prof. Development	-.075	-0.73	.617

Note. Dependent Variable: Speech/Language Disorder

To further test Hypothesis 2, autism was analyzed. The model summary reported an R^2 of .249, indicating that the variability explained by the model was 24.9%. Since the F is the average amount of variability and is used to test the statistical significance of the model, the ANOVA table indicates that the regression was significant with $F(5, 46) = 3.045, p = .019$. These results are shown in Table 10. The data explain that there is a significant relationship between the dependent variable, autism, and the specified background characteristics. The most significant characteristics were the number of special education classes taken and professional development. This means that hours of

special education training and how recently the teacher attended professional development in special education may have the most influence on the level of perceived preparedness.

Table 10

Coefficients of Autism

Variables	Unstandardized	Standardized	Sig.
	Coefficients	Coefficients	
	B	Beta	
(Constant)	4.372		6.214
Education Level	-.245	-.093	.543
Grade Level	-.376	-.229	.097
Years of Experience	.133	.131	.413
SPED Classes	.337	.351	.020
Prof. Development	-.396	-.348	.021

Note. Dependent Variable: Autism

The analysis of Hypothesis 2 concluded with the analysis associated with the exceptionality of emotional disability. The model summary reported an R^2 of .180, indicating that the variability explained by the model was 18%. Since the F is the average amount of variability and is used to test the statistical significance of the model, the ANOVA table indicates that the regression was not statistically significant with $F(5, 46) = 2.019, p = .094$. These results are displayed in Table 11. The data explain that there is not a significant relationship between the dependent variable, autism, and the specified background characteristics. The most significant background characteristic was

professional development. However the model shows us that these particular background characteristics do not influence teachers' level of perceived preparedness when working with a child/student with an emotional disability.

Table 11

Coefficients of Emotional Disability

Variables	Unstandardized	Standardized	Sig.
	Coefficients	Coefficients	
	B	Beta	
(Constant)	4.732		.000
Education Level	.212	.086	.588
Grade Level	-.384	-.252	.082
Years of Experience	.040	.043	.797
SPED Classes	.102	.114	.457
Prof. Development	-.432	-.408	.010

Note. Dependent Variable: Emotional Disability

Qualitative Data Analysis

Part III of the GEPIE asked four open-ended questions to elicit responses about participants' level of pre-service special education training, needs from special education personnel, and thoughts on which of the four exceptionalities they believe that they are the most and least prepared to handle. The qualitative responses in this study addressed Research Question 4 regarding the conditions that general educators perceive would help

to increase their level of preparedness to work with children/students with special needs. This qualitative section was added to provide a deeper analysis of conditions that have promoted the educators to perceive the degree to which they are prepared to work with children/students with special needs.

Forty-seven of the fifty-two total respondents (90% of survey respondents, and 25% of the original sample) answered the questions in Part III of the instrument. A separate protocol was used to analyze the qualitative data. All responses were recorded according to the question number. Once recorded, the responses were analyzed for similar themes. The responses were then categorized by theme. The themes were then compared. The qualitative data from the respondents are reported below.

Question 1, which read as follows, “Did your teacher preparation program prepare you to work with special education students? If not, what would you do to the program to better prepare you?” asked about teacher preparation program experience. A total of 35 (74% of survey respondents) individuals answered no, 11 (23%) answered yes, and 1 (2%) respondent answered not applicable to Question 1 of Part III.

The first major theme found in the responses to Question 1 in Part III indicated that respondents wanted more special education classes as part of their teacher certification and classroom training experiences. The largest percentage of respondents believed that one class of general special education wasn't enough. Most respondents reported taking at least one special education class during their pre-service training. One respondent stated, “No, I had little to no training on how to teach or deal with special education students. It would have helped if I understood what to expect from SPED students.” Another respondent stated, “The class I took prepared me to a certain extent. It did not, however,

prepare me for severe special education rulings. Most of my knowledge has come from experience over the years.”

Another major theme disclosed the respondents’ need for more practical experiences. Respondents asked for “more classroom experience,” “real life experiences,” “observations of special education teachers implementing modifications,” and adding “real life scenarios to the training.” One participant stated, “I would add a ‘lab’ with real-life special education students. It should be required”. Another respondent stated, “Personal experience trained me. More training in ‘realistic’ situations would be beneficial.

Question 2, which reads as follows, “What can special education personnel do to help you be more prepared to teach special education students in your classroom?,” asked about what teachers need from special education personnel. A large portion of the responses centered around having collaboration (32% of respondents), practical assistance (49%), more help and practical for the classroom (19%). In the area of collaboration, respondents appeared to be describing a team approach that general education and special education teachers should employ when working with children/students with special needs. One respondent stated, “Collaboration between regular education teachers and special education teachers is vital to the success of students.” Another respondent expressed, “Have meetings with regular ed [sic] teacher. Give examples/ideas that would work in the regular ed [sic] classroom. This collaboration would also include working closely with the general education teacher during teacher planning to share specific ideas on modifications.”

With regard to practical assistance, teachers asked for several things. They wanted to be educated on specific methods that would yield results when working with

children/students with disabilities. For example, they would like for special education personnel to provide ideas, strategies, and resources that are child-specific. One respondent stated, “In addition to handing us an IEP to follow, give us information about the child’s problem, previous strategies that have worked, and explain their own ideas of how to best serve the child.” Another respondent recommended that districts, “Offer more teaching materials tailored to the specific disability.” Lastly, another respondent explained what is working in her district; she said “I feel that within our school we have an open door policy with our educators in the SPED department. So this helps us greatly. They are constantly giving us new ideas”.

Question 3, which reads as follows, “Of the four disabilities discussed in this study (autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability), which special education exceptionality do you believe that you are the most prepared to deal with? Why do you believe this?” asked about perceived preparedness. The majority of the individuals, (57% of respondents), expressed that they were most comfortable with working with a child/student who had a specific learning disability. Of the four exceptionalities, they believed that they had the most experience serving children/students with this difficulty. For example, one respondent said, “I am amply prepared for differentiating instruction according to students’ needs/styles. Learning styles was thoroughly addressed in my classes.” Another respondent stated, “SLD because there are certain areas to address.” Another respondent said that, “Most general education teachers have plenty of experience and knowledge for the specific learning disabled. The other three present more diverse problems than most teachers have the resources to be able to integrate into a regular classroom”. With regard to the other three exceptionalities, the

same number of respondents, 10 (21%), stated they were comfortable with children/students who have an emotional disability and a speech/language disorder. Very few respondents stated they believe they are prepared to work with a child/student who has been given an autism ruling.

Question 4, which reads as follows, “Of the four disabilities discussed in this study (autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability), which special education exceptionality do you believe that you are the least prepared to deal with? Why do you believe this?” also dealt with perceived levels of preparedness. The largest proportion of individuals, 20 (42% of respondents), stated they that they are least prepared to work with a child/student with an autism ruling and a child with an emotional disability. The respondents’ statements about their uneasiness regarding autism centered on responses like “no experience,” “no training,” and “no understanding of the disorder.” Though most of the reasons given appeared to relate to a lack of training or experience; some respondents seemed to express apprehension based on stereotypes or pre-conceived notions regarding autism. For example, one respondent stated, “I am least prepared to deal with autism. I do not understand this exceptionality and I think that this exceptionality would be the most disruptive.” Another teacher responded by saying, “Autism. My classroom has many activities that are loud, transitions frequently – this is not good when the autistic child doesn’t like noise of change.”

The respondents seemed to express trepidation regarding dealing with children/students who have an emotional disability. Like autism, the respondents’ uneasiness with working with children/students with an emotional disability seemed to stem from a lack of experience and training. Some teachers also expressed apprehension

associated with handling classroom disruptions. One teacher stated, “Emotionally disturbed because these children can be so unpredictable.” Another respondent expressed, “Possibly emotionally disturbed. Moods and actions change so quickly.” And yet another one stated, “EMD – their actions/behaviors are so unpredictable that our classroom could go from on task and productive to complete chaos in seconds.” The frequencies of the qualitative data are listed in Table 12 below.

Table 12

Frequency of the Qualitative Responses of the Study (N=47)

Question	Response/themes	Number of Responses
1. Did your teacher preparation program prepare you to work with special education students?	No	35
	Yes	11
	Not Applicable	1
2. What can special education personnel do to help you be more prepared to teach special education students in your classroom?	Collaboration	15
	Practical Assistance	22
	More time/teachers	10
3. Of the four disabilities discussed in this study, which special education exceptionality do you believe that you are the most prepared to deal with?	SLD	27
	EMD	10
	S/L	10
	AU	5

Table 12 (continued).

Question	Response /themes	Number of Responses
4. Of the four disabilities discussed in this study, which special education exceptionality do you believe that you are the least prepared to deal with?	AU	20
	EMD	20
	S/L	5
	SLD	4

Note: On questions 3 & 4 some of the respondents listed two exceptionalities.

Summary

The purpose of this research study was to measure general education teachers' perceptions of teaching children/students with specific special education exceptionalities in the general education classroom. This study used a multiple method, quasi-experimental design. An original instrument was designed and utilized in this study. The instrument yielded quantitative and qualitative data. The data indicated that there are differences in the levels of perceived preparedness to work with children/students with disabilities based on the students' eligibility category. Specific learning disability was the most statistically significant special education exceptionality. The data also showed that selected background characteristics are statistically related to the level of perceived preparedness for teaching children/students with a speech/language disorder and autism. The data also revealed that there is not a statistically significant relationship between the selected background characteristics and perceived levels of preparedness to teach a child/student with specific learning disability and an emotional disability. Chapter V provides a discussion of these results.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this study was to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their preparedness to teach children/students with specific special education needs. Specifically, this study examined perceptions associated with four specific special education exceptionalities: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability. Third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers from South Mississippi were asked to complete a mixed methods survey instrument entitled the General Educators' Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE). The instrument yielded quantitative and qualitative data used for this study. This chapter presents a summary of the procedures and findings, a discussion of the results and recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Summary of Procedures

The data gathered from this research were obtained from 52 survey instruments completed by third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers from school districts in South Mississippi. Once the instrument was developed, an expert panel was organized to review and validate the instrument. After permission was granted by five school districts to conduct the research study, approval was sought and granted by the University of Southern Mississippi's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB approval letter is attached as Appendix F. Prior to beginning the study, the researcher sent a letter of request to conduct research school principals (Appendix G). Of the five districts whose superintendents granted initial permission, two districts had no principal response, so, a total of three school districts participated in the final study. A pilot study was conducted to obtain data

to test the reliability of the instrument. These data were analyzed using the Cronbach's alpha test of coefficient reliability. The test disclosed reliabilities of greater than .900 during the pilot study and did so again in the subsequent dissertation study.

The instruments were hand-delivered by the researcher or mailed to the participating schools through the United States Postal Service in the middle of November and December, 2012. The instruments were collected in December, 2012 and January, 2013. All participants returned their completed instruments in the self-addressed, stamped envelopes provided by the researcher. As the instruments were received, the researcher numbered each survey. The quantitative data were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The qualitative data were recorded in a Microsoft Word document to be analyzed. The study was a mixed-methods quasi-experimental study that provided quantitative and qualitative data. Data were compiled and analyzed by the researcher. The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, a one-way repeated measures ANOVA and a multiple regression. The qualitative data were categorized into themes and analyzed using Grounded Theory techniques.

Major Findings

The data from this study provided interesting information, including findings related to the items in the demographic sub-section of the instrument. All respondents were female. The majority of the respondents had a bachelor's or master's degree. The respondents consisted of a fairly equal distribution of third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers. The majority of the respondents (53.8%) reported having 1-10 years of experience, and the classification with the largest proportion (34.6%) of respondents was that in which teachers reported being in their first five years of teaching. Respondents were asked to identify the

amount of time since their last professional development in special education. The classification that the largest proportion (38.5%) of the study respondents selected was the one in which they indicated that they had attended a special education-related professional development within the past year. However, 28.8% said they had received no professional development in special education, and 15.3% indicated that their last training dated back four or more years.

The classification in which the largest proportion (25%) of respondents reported teacher preparation course taking patterns related to special education was that which indicated 12 hours (four classes) or more of special education coursework. Over 40% of respondents had either no special education coursework, or only three hours (one class). While 23% of respondents gave a positive answer to Question 1 in Part III of the instrument, which asked, "Did your teacher preparation program prepare you to work with special education students?" The majority of the individuals (74%) stated that they were not prepared to work with children/students with special needs. It is of interest to note that two respondents reported that they had previously taught in special education but were now teaching general education classes.

The study results included descriptive statistics for participant responses regarding their perceptions of their readiness to teach students/children with special needs. Research Question 1 asked: What are general education teachers' perceptions of planning differentiated instruction for children/students with the following special education eligibilities: autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability and emotional disability in the general education classroom? Question 5 of the Likert scale items associated with each vignette asked the respondents to rate their level of preparedness to

plan differentiated instruction. The means for the four exceptionalities range from 3.60 - 4.23. Specific learning disability had the highest mean ($M = 4.23$), suggesting that teachers believe they are more prepared to plan differentiated instruction for children/student with this exceptionality. The other exceptionalities received lower ratings that resulted in fairly comparable mean scores.

The data revealed ambivalence about teacher perceptions of their preparedness to work with children with disabilities. The highest total subscale mean was that for specific learning disability ($M = 4.23$). This mean demonstrates a moderate level of confidence from the respondents. The lowest mean was that for autism ($M = 3.66$), and the mean for emotional disability was slightly higher ($M = 3.67$). The total mean for speech/language disorder was ($M = 3.87$). These scores are just above the midpoint of the scale, which suggests that these teachers were largely uncertain regarding their level of preparedness to work with students with these rulings.

Descriptive statistics from individual items in the subscales yielded additional insight into the perspectives of teachers. The study results showed that the uncertainty that respondents indicated in the subscale totals for the four exceptionalities is likewise reflected in the means for the related items. Item 1, which reads as follows: "I am well prepared to teach this student in my class," addressed whether teachers are prepared to teach children/students with special needs in the general education classroom. The means for the four exceptionalities range from 3.63 - 4.04. Specific learning disability ($M = 4.04$) had the highest mean, while emotional disability ($M = 3.63$).

Item 2, which reads as follows: "I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student" addressed whether the teacher could meet the special

needs of the profiled student. The means for the four exceptionalities ranged from 3.56 – 4.00. Specific learning disability had the highest mean ($M = 4.00$), while emotional disability (3.56) had the lowest. It of interest to note that Item 2 yielded the lowest unreversed mean score of all items. This would suggest consistent uncertainty in how teachers perceive their abilities to address specific student needs.

Item 3 reads, “I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student addresses the perceptions of making curriculum modifications. The means of the four exceptionalities range from 3.67- 4.56. Specific learning disability ($M = 4.56$) had the highest mean, while autism ($M = 3.67$) had the lowest.

Item 4 reads, “I am well prepared to make accommodations in the classroom for this student,” and refers to making appropriate accommodations to the classroom for children/students with disabilities. The means for the four exceptionalities ranged from 3.65 - 4.21. Specific learning disability ($M = 4.21$) had the highest mean, while autism ($M = 3.65$) had the lowest. These data suggest that teachers are uncertain about their ability to make appropriate accommodations for students with disabilities.

Item 5 reads, “I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this student,” and addresses the need for differentiated instruction for students with disabilities. The mean scores for the four exceptionalities range from 3.60 - 4.40. Specific learning disability ($M = 4.40$) had the highest mean, while autism (3.60) had the lowest mean.

Item 6, which reads, “Having a child with this exceptionality ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this student,” was a unique item in that it was reversed in polarity. Such items help to prevent item set. The original means were reported, and then reversed for calculation of subscale total means and for use in

hypothesis analyses. The means for the four exceptionalities ranged from 2.83 - 3.31. Emotional disability ($M = 3.31$) had the highest mean, while specific learning disability ($M = 2.83$) had the lowest mean. Since this question was reversed in polarity the mean scores suggest that these teachers disagreed slightly that they are not prepared to teach a student with a specific learning disability or speech/language disorder because of the disability, but were somewhat uncertain about their preparedness to teach a student with autism or an emotional disability in light of the exceptionality.

Findings associated with the hypotheses also proved to be interesting. Research Question 2 asked: Are there differences in the general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with special needs learners based on the children/students' eligibility category? For the related hypothesis (H_1), a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted to answer this question. The test revealed that there is a difference in the level of perceived preparedness based on the eligibility category of students. Of the four exceptionalities specific learning disability showed the most significant difference, with teachers perceiving that they are better prepared to address the needs of students with this exceptionality than those of students in the other three exceptionality categories. The means for the other three exceptionalities were relatively equal and less significant, indicating similar perceptions among the participants regarding their ability to teach children with autism, speech/language disorder, and emotional disability.

Research Question 3 asked: Are the perceptions of the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, years of experience teaching, and recent attendance of professional development

in special education? For the related hypothesis (H_2), a multiple regression was used. The dependent variables, which were the four special education exceptionalities, were analyzed in conjunction with the independent variables, which were the selected background characteristics, to determine if there were significant relationships. Two of the four exceptionalities were found to have a statistically significant relationship with the background characteristics.

The level of perceived preparedness to teach a child/student with a speech/language disorder, or autism can be influenced by one or more of the chosen background characteristics. In contrast, the level of perceived preparedness to teach a child/student with a specific learning disability or an emotional disability is not significantly influenced by the background characteristics analyzed in this study. For a speech/language disorder, the grade that the teacher is teaching and hours of special education classes taken had the most influence on level of perceived preparedness. For autism, hours of special education training and how recently the teacher attended professional development in special education had the most influence on level of perceived preparedness. There was not a significant relationship between the background characteristics and specific learning disability and emotional disability. Of the background characteristics examined, professional development had the greatest influence on teaching a child/student with a specific learning disability or a child/student with an emotional disability.

In the qualitative phase of the study, the teachers' responses communicated important messages. When asked if their teacher training programs prepared them to work with children/students with special education needs, the largest proportion of the respondents answered no. Respondents expressed a need for more special education

courses during their training and, asked for more practical experiences related to teaching students with special needs. Respondents suggested observations of special education teachers, or student teaching experiences that include children/students with special needs in order to help increase teachers' exposure to the special education population.

Regarding how special education personnel can help teachers become better prepared to work with children/students with special education needs, respondents stated that they need more collaboration, and practical assistance. Respondents believed that collaboration between general education and special education teachers is a vital component to student success. For practical assistance, the regular education teachers asked that special education personnel provide ideas, materials and other resources that will help yield positive results with students.

When asked which of the four target exceptionalities that they were most prepared to handle, the majority of the respondents believed they were most prepared to teach a child/student with a specific learning disability. Respondents expressed that they had the most experience serving children/students with this exceptionality. It was mentioned that teachers are taught how to vary instruction to address different learning styles. One respondent, whose quote is representative of the comments of others, stated, "Specific learning disabled. Once a specific disability is known, differentiated instruction and accommodations can be made and put into practice, and the child is more likely to grow and develop." For the respondents, autism, speech/language disorder, and emotional disability presented more challenges than a specific learning disability.

When asked which of the four target exceptionalities they believed they were the least prepared to handle, the majority of the respondents chose autism and an emotional

disability. The respondents expressed uneasiness about these disabilities based on a lack of experience, training, and understanding of the disorders. With regard to autism, some the respondents expressed apprehension based on stereotypes and pre-conceived notions about the disorder. Regarding a child/student with an emotional disability, some respondents believed they were unprepared to handle possible classroom disruptions. A representative response went as follows: “Emotionally disturbed or autism because behavior can change so quickly and interrupt the other students.” Another respondent stated, “Possibly emotionally disturbed, moods and actions change so quickly.”

To summarize, the respondents to this study supported the notion that general education teachers do not believe they are well prepared to teach children/students with specific special education needs. There also is a statistically significant relationship between the level of perceived preparedness and the special education exceptionality. Data showed that there is a significant relationship between background characteristics and the level of perceived preparedness for addressing specific exceptionalities. Of the four exceptionalities targeted in this study, the respondents perceived they are most prepared and to teach a child/student with a specific learning disability in the general education classroom. Teachers’ level of perceived preparedness is not strong, but fairly equal when it comes to teaching children/students with a speech/language disorder, autism, or an emotional disability. The majority of the respondents expressed the need for more classes and hands-on experience with the special education population during their teacher training. Furthermore, they would like more collaboration and practical assistance from special education personnel to help them better prepare to work with children/students with special needs in the classroom.

Discussion

Many of the findings of this study are consistent with previous research. The responses to the quantitative items from the survey instrument indicated that, in general, these teachers do not believe that they are well prepared to teach children/students with special needs in the general education classroom. Such findings are consistent with those of authors like Conderman and Johnson-Rodriguez (2009) and Grskovic and Trzcinska (2001). The subscale total means revealed that teachers are uncertain about their preparedness to work with children and students with disabilities, though teachers are slightly more comfortable working with children/students with specific learning disabilities. The means for speech/language disorder, autism, and emotional disability are all slightly above the scale midpoint and were fairly similar, and revealed a level of uncertainty among teachers for working with children/students across exceptionalities.

Responses from the qualitative portion of the study also revealed uncertainty from teachers regarding their perceived preparedness. Responses from Item 1 from the qualitative portion of this study revealed that teachers do not feel prepared to teach children/student with special education needs. One respondent, whose comments are reflective of others, stated, "I don't feel like I was given enough background on the different rulings. Also, I think we should be taught strategies for handling special education issues like we are taught strategies for teaching curriculum."

In both the quantitative and qualitative elements of the present study, respondents revealed fairly limited exposure to special education in their teacher preparation experiences. Teacher education programs to assign the responsibility of preparing teacher candidates to work with children/student with special needs to the universities' special

education programs (Jobling & Moni, 2004; Winter, 2006). In many cases teacher candidates frequently take one course in special education (Kamens et al., 2003; Welch, 1996). This course often provides a, “cursory overview of disabilities” (Kamens et al., 2003, p. 20). Many of the respondents in the present study expressed that they received limited opportunity to study special education in their teacher preparation programs. In the present study, a significant proportion (21.2%) of respondents reported not taking a special education class. A similar proportion (23.1%) of respondents took only three hours (one class) in special education. The responses to Item 1 in the qualitative portion of the study reinforced these findings. One respondent said, “My training did not adequately prepare me to teach inclusion students. I was only required to take one sped class in college.” Another respondent stated, “I would definitely have benefited from more special education classes, especially in the area of autism. I was taught how to identify a disability, but never taught how to handle it in the classroom.” Another respondent suggested increasing coursework and practical experience, “I think all regular education students should have to take several classes concerning special education. I would also suggest student teaching for a complete school year half in the regular classroom and half in the special education classroom.”

Research has shown that general education teachers may have some reservations when teaching learners with special needs. Kamens et al. (2003) found that teachers in their study wanted to know the special classification or the disability of a child assigned to them, receive suggestions of accommodations, and specific information about the individual child. The same could be said of respondents in the present study. Qualitative data revealed that 80% of study participants, when asked which exceptionality they are

least prepared to address, mentioned autism and emotional disability. One respondent stated, “I feel I am least prepared to teach students that are autistic and emotionally disturbed because I struggle in that area.” Another respondent said, “I am the least prepared to work with a student who is emotionally disabled. I would not know what to expect each day the student arrives at school and will need various strategies to deal with mood changes.” With regard to a child/student with autism, one respondent simply said, “Autism, don’t [sic] know enough about it.”

Respondents in the present study expressed the need for more training and practical experience in the area of special education. This is consistent with extant literature. In previous studies, research has shown that participants wanted to know the classification of the child’s disorder, receive suggestions of accommodations, and specific information about the individual child (Cook et al., 1999; Kamens et al., 2003). General education teachers need more training on how to accommodate students with disabilities as they deliver the curriculum (Daane et al., 2000). Concerning training and practical experiences, respondents mentioned observing and collaborating with special education personnel. One respondent stated, “Personnel should offer more workshops that goes [sic] in depth about the needs of a student in special education.” Item 2 in Part II of the instrument, which reads as follows: “I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student,” had the lowest mean of the Likert items across all exceptionalities. This supports the idea that more training is needed for these teachers. In their qualitative responses, participants recommended training on how to modify the curriculum, how to make appropriate accommodations in the classroom, and how to implement specific instructional strategies. Another respondent, in describing what was needed from special education

personnel when being assigned responsibility for a child with special needs, stated, “in addition to handing us an IEP to follow, give us information about the child’s problem, previous strategies that have worked, and explain their own ideas of how to best serve the child.” Data from the study showed the teachers believe, albeit moderately, that they are prepared to teach a child/student with a specific learning disability. However, they are more uncertain with regard to the other three exceptionalities.

Teachers also indicated the need for support in working with special needs learners. Respondents specified the need for specific materials and for ideas and resources that are appropriate and will help increase student achievement. Item 2 in the qualitative phase, which reads as follows, “What can special education personnel do to help you be more prepared to teach special education students in your classroom?” resulted in the responses that expressed the need for support from special education personnel. One participant stated, “Share specific modifications with general education teachers. Work closely with general education teachers during planning.” Another respondent stated, “Provide materials when needed. Provide extra personnel when needed. Meet with teachers during the year instead of just talking to them when there are problems.” These concerns are consistent with available literature. Research shows that general education teachers asked for increased levels of support from administrators and colleagues (Brown et al., 2008; Cook et al., 1999; Daane et al., 2000).

In Chapter II of this study, the social development learning and self-efficacy theories were discussed. The social development learning theory emphasizes how as social beings, humans learn, grow and develop from interacting with each other. The self-efficacy theory describes how individuals think, feel and motivate themselves to succeed

(Bandura, 1994). Previous research has shown that efficacious teachers are better equipped to handle difficult situations and make less special education referrals (Haverback & Parault, 2008; Lee et al., 2001; Wolters & Daugherty, 2007). This theoretical framework emphasizes the importance of having teachers prepared to teach a variety of learners. Many of the respondents of this study stated they were not prepared to handle certain special education exceptionalities because they were not trained or were unfamiliar with the aspects of the disorder. Not being prepared to teach a child/student may affect the teacher's level of self-efficacy. If teachers are not trained or well prepared, they may not believe that they can be as effective. A teacher with a lower sense of self-efficacy may not be able to create the rich social learning environment that is so important for learning.

Limitations

There were some factors that limited the findings of this study. Participants were limited to the geographic region of South Mississippi; the reader should be appropriately cautious about generalizing conclusions to other geographic regions. This geographic limitation was exacerbated by the non-participation of two districts from which permission to conduct the study had originally been received.

The number of responses, while sufficient to produce usable results, was not as high as the researcher desired. A larger number of responses might have made a difference in some of the findings, particularly when comparing the exceptionalities with selected background characteristics. This study was also limited by the exploration of perceptions of teacher from just three grade levels. Finally, there were no male respondents among

those who participated in the main study. While it is not clear that this would skew results, it would be useful to have a more representative sample.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

An increase in placement of children/students requiring special education services in the general education classroom continues to increase the demand for educators who are prepared to teach various learners (Brown et al., 2008; Mungai & Thornburg, 2002). Federal mandates such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2004) require that children/students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment and meet accountability standards like their peers (Pisha & Stahl, 2005; Turner, 2003; Yell & Katsiyannis, 2004). Research has shown that the manner in which a teacher handles his/her inclusive classroom has the most immediate impact on the student's success (Horne & Timmons, 2009; Obiakor et al., 2012). In light of these policies and the continued push toward full inclusion, it is incumbent upon the education system to equip general education teachers for effective practice.

It is apparent from the results this study that teachers need better preparation in special education. Such a conclusion is consistent with extant literature. As study respondents stated, more instructional time and practical experience is needed in these programs. Preservice teachers would benefit from observing special education teachers and classes during student teaching. They would also benefit from learning how to make accommodations to the classroom and modifications to the curriculum for their students from special education personnel.

A more in-depth look into specific disabilities would benefit teachers. Respondents in this study mentioned not being prepared to teach students with autism and emotional disabilities due to a lack of understanding of the disorders. Respondents also mentioned apprehension about teaching children/students with these exceptionalities because of preconceived notions and stereotypes. Affording teachers the opportunity to learn specific information about various disorders might help alleviate some of this apprehension. Teachers would also benefit from information about the particular disability and appropriate modifications for the specific disability. As one respondent mentioned, her special education class in college, “gave me a general understanding, but not a deep knowledge.” A deeper knowledge might help teachers feel better equipped to plan for children/students with disabilities.

An increase in professional development is also needed. Data showed that there is a significant relationship between how recently a teacher attended professional development in special education and his/her level of perceived preparedness to work with special education students. While 38.5% of the respondents of this study reported attending a special education professional development within the past year, it is important to remember that 28.8% reported having never received such training. If these teachers do not receive an adequate amount of special education courses during their training, they will certainly need some professional development once they begin their careers. School districts should consider providing additional workshops on different special education exceptionalities; such professional development should be delivered in a manner consistent with optimal training practices and should equip teachers with ideas and strategies that can be used in the classroom.

An increase in collaboration between special education personnel and the general education teacher is needed. As the above mentioned respondent stated, teachers need more than just an IEP to follow. They need ideas and strategies that work. They need to be given materials and resources that are appropriate for the individual child/student. They also need assistance with modifying assignments and exams to the student's ability.

The mainstreaming of children/students with special needs in general education classrooms can be very beneficial to the student; it is also arguable that the general population of students benefits from such inclusion. But, if they are to benefit, and if they are to get what they need educationally, the system has to undergird teachers with the preparation, training, and support for effective practice. Otherwise, what is effective and moral policy on behalf of such students becomes something far less in practice. It cheats kids and it cheats the teachers who serve them. In other words, when teachers are not well prepared to teach children/students with disabilities, no one wins.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following recommendations for future research would benefit the level of perceived preparedness for general education teachers:

1. Future research is recommended in the area of teacher perceptions of working with children/students with special needs. It would be beneficial to expand the research area to obtain levels of teacher preparedness throughout the state and country.
2. Future research should include a larger and more representative group of respondents.

3. Future research in this area should explore other grade levels. It would be useful to measure the perceived levels of preparedness among teachers in lower and higher grade levels.
4. Research that examines the preparedness of teachers to address other special education exceptionalities should be conducted. Since there are a total of thirteen exceptionalities it would be of interest to know the degree to which teachers believe that they are prepared to work with children/students with other special education needs.
5. In an effort to gain a broader perspective on how inclusion affects educators as a whole, future research should include special education personnel. It would be of interest to compare the levels of preparedness of general education and special education teachers. Such research might also examine the perspectives of special education colleagues to effectively deliver instruction to children with special needs.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine the degree to which general education teachers in elementary schools believe that they are prepared to teach children/students with specific special education exceptionalities in the general education classroom. Data were gathered on the level of perceived preparedness of teachers to work with children/student who are eligible to receive services in the areas of autism, speech/language disorder, specific learning disability, and emotional disability.

The study involved a multiple method quasi-experimental design that yielded quantitative and qualitative data. The study used an original instrument entitled the

General Educators Preparedness for Inclusive Education (GEPIE). The instrument used a vignette/scenario design to assess level of perceived preparedness. Third, fourth, and fifth grade teachers in the Southern region of Mississippi were asked to participate in the study. An original instrument was developed because there was not one available that followed the vignette/scenario format.

For the quantitative phase, study data showed that general education teachers appear to be largely uncertain about their preparedness to meet the needs of students with special needs. In addition, there was a difference in general educators' level of perceived preparedness to work with children/students with disabilities based on the child/student's eligibility category; educators perceived that they were better prepared to address the educational needs of students with specific learning disabilities than those who were in one of the other three disability classifications. Furthermore, data revealed that the level of perceived preparedness of general education teachers is related to selected background characteristics that include: level of education, the number of special education classes taken during their training, years of experience and the amount of professional development in special education that they have attended.

For the qualitative phase, study data revealed that educators do not believe they are prepared to teach children/students with special education needs in the general education classroom. Respondents indicated the need for more special education classes during their teacher preparation experiences; such preparation should include more practical hand-on experiences. Furthermore, respondents expressed the need for more collaboration with special education personnel and assistance with resources, materials, and making modifications/accommodations in the classroom. Of the four exceptionalities addresses in

this study, teachers perceived they are most prepared to serve children/students with specific learning disabilities and least prepared to serve children/students with autism and emotional disabilities.

The study also included recommendations for further research on the levels of perceived preparedness of general education teachers to teach children/students with special needs. Other recommendations also included suggested changes in policy and practice. It was the researcher's goal to expand the available data on the perceptions of general education teachers relative to their preparedness for working with children/students with disabilities in the general education classroom. It is hoped that this study furthers that aim.

APPENDIX A

SUPERINTENDENT'S PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH LETTER

Date:
Name of Superintendent
Name of School District
Address

Dear Superintendent _____:

My name is Kimberly Fisher and I am a Speech-Language Pathologist with Harrison County. I am also enrolled in the Educational Leadership doctoral program at the University of Southern Mississippi. I have completed my course work and will be conducting research to complete the requirements for my dissertation very soon. The topic I have chosen is *teacher perceptions of working with children with specific special education exceptionalities in the regular education classroom*. The study will focus on how prepared regular education teachers' believe they are to work with children who have been found eligible to receive special education services for autism, speech/language services, specific learning disability and emotional disability within the general education classroom. I am requesting permission to contact teachers in your district. This study will measure the level of perceived preparedness of teachers working in grades 3-5.

While collecting the data, I will ask participants to read short case study vignettes. The participants will be asked questions pertaining to their perceived preparedness to work with the child described in the vignette. There will also be space provided for the participants to express their ideas on what will help them feel more prepared to work with children with disabilities. The instrument should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. With your consent, the studies will be distributed to teachers during a regular faculty meeting or online. Any identifying information will be kept confidential.

As the inclusion of special education students increases, the roles and responsibilities of general educators changes. The results of this study will provide information on what teachers need to be prepared and successful in teaching children with disabilities. Once the study is complete, I will be very happy to share the findings with interested persons in your district.

If you grant me permission to conduct this research with teachers in your district please copy and paste the content of the enclosed consent form to your district letterhead, sign it, and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope. You may also fax it to 228-832-8991.

If you have any question please feel free to contact me via email kim.fisher11@gmail.com or telephone 228-806-1066. My committee chair is Dr. Michael Ward who can be contacted at mike.ward@usm.edu.

Thank you in advance for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly G. Fisher
 Doctoral Candidate, University of Southern Mississippi
 Enclosure
 Cc: Dr. Michael Ward, Committee Chair

**SUPERINTENDENTS' PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH:
 CONSENT FORM**

As superintendent of _____ District, I give Kimberly Fisher permission to conduct educational research in the district during the ----- semester of the 20-- - 20-- school year.

This research will be conducted determine teachers' perceptions of working with children with specific special education exceptionalities. Permission is granted to distribute survey instruments to teachers within the specified school district. I understand that participation in this study is voluntary. All responses will be kept confidential. No individuals will be identified in any of the reports.

Superintendent's Signature

Date

APPENDIX B

ADULT CONSENT FOR RESEARCH FORM

**University of Southern Mississippi
118 College Drive #5147
Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
(601) 266-6820**

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Date:

Title of Study: Teachers' Perceptions of Working with Children with Specific Special Education Exceptionalities in the Regular Education Classroom

Researcher: Kimberly Fisher (228)806-1066

Email Address: kim.fisher11@gmail.com

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Mike Ward

What are some general things you should know about this research study?

You are being asked to participate in a doctoral research study. Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and you have the right to decline participation. If you decline to participate or decide to withdraw from participation at any time there will be no penalty.

This type of research study is designed to gain new knowledge about a particular topic. The information gained from this study will be used to benefit current and future educators. However, please be aware that research of this sort may not provide direct benefit to you as an individual and there are sometimes risks associated with participation in research. In this instance, the risks are very minimal and are described in a subsequent section of this document.

Details about this study are discussed in detail below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about your participation in this study. If you have any concerns or questions please feel free to contact the researcher, listed above.

What is the purpose of this study?

The purpose of this study is to determine *teacher perceptions of working with children with specific special education exceptionalities in the regular education classroom*. The study will focus on the degree to which regular education teachers' believe they are prepared to work with children who are eligible to receive education services for autism, speech/language services, specific learning disability and emotional disability within the general education classroom. For this study information is needed from 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers

How many people will take part in this study?

If you decide to participate in this research, you will be one of approximately 200 participants in the study.

How long will your participation in this study last?

You will be asked to complete a survey instrument that should take no more than 20 minutes to complete. You may request a report of my findings at the conclusion of this study by emailing me at kim.fisher11@gmail.com.

What will happen if you take part in the study?

You will be asked to complete the survey instrument. A completed, returned survey instrument will serve as consent for your anonymous participation in this study. Upon completing the survey, please return it in the pre-stamped, addressed envelope provided with the instrument. The researcher will maintain confidentiality of your responses by storing all returned instruments in a locked cabinet through the duration of the study. The survey instruments will be shredded upon completion of this project.

What are the possible benefits of participating in this study?

The benefits of this study are related to the information it will provide to practitioners, administrators, higher education teacher preparation instructors, and other researchers. The purpose of this study is to analyze the perceptions of general education teachers regarding their preparedness to teach students with specific special education needs. This study will also examine teacher perceptions regarding the extent to which their preparation and training have prepared them to work with learners who have special needs. Finally, the study will invite teachers' recommendations for improving preparation and training. The information can be used by school districts and teacher preparation programs to determine steps that can be taken to better prepare educators to work with a variety of learners.

What are the possible risks or discomfort involved with being in this study?

Risks associated with this study are minimal. The risks are that participants may not feel comfortable answering questions about how prepared they feel to work with special education students, or that their responses might prompt negative consequences. To alleviate these concerns, the researcher will ensure that their participation is anonymous and confidential. The data collected will be kept strictly confidential in a locked cabinet in the researcher's home. Only the researcher and the committee members will have access to the responses. All surveys collected for this study will be destroyed by shredder after one year.

How will your privacy be protected?

Participants will not provide any personal information on the survey instrument. Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. The collected surveys will be placed in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher and committee members will view the actual surveys. The surveys will be shredded after one year.

What if you have questions about this study?

You have the right to ask any questions you may have about this study. Please feel free to contact the researcher listed at the beginning of this document to get answers to your questions.

What if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

This study has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee. This committee ensures that all research fits the federal guidelines for involving human subjects. Any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-001, (601)266.6820.

APPENDIX C

GENERAL EDUCATORS' PREPAREDNESS FOR INCLUSIVE EDUCATION

Part I

Demographic Information

(Please darken the circle that best reflects your demographics and teaching experience)

<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is your gender? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Male <input type="radio"/> Female 2. What is your level of education? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> Bachelors' <input type="radio"/> Masters' <input type="radio"/> Specialist <input type="radio"/> Doctorate 3. What grade do you currently teach? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> 3rd <input type="radio"/> 4th <input type="radio"/> 5th 4. How long have you taught? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> 1-5 years <input type="radio"/> 6-10 years <input type="radio"/> 11-15 years <input type="radio"/> 16-20 years <input type="radio"/> 21 + years 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. How many hours of special education courses did you take during your teacher training? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> None <input type="radio"/> 3 hours (1class) <input type="radio"/> 6 hours (2 classes) <input type="radio"/> 9 hours (3 classes) <input type="radio"/> 12+ hours (4 or more classes) 6. How recently have you attended professional development training in the area of special education? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="radio"/> To date, I have not attended professional development training in special education. <input type="radio"/> Within the past year <input type="radio"/> Within the past 2-3 years <input type="radio"/> Within the past 4-5 years <input type="radio"/> Over 5 years ago
---	---

Part II

The following vignettes represent children who may be students in your classroom.

Each vignette describes their current special education disability category and some the strengths and weaknesses they exhibit in the classroom and during the evaluation process.

Please read the vignette and respond to the questions that follow each.

Vignette 1

Austin is a student in the Sky Blue School district who recently received a special education ruling in the area of Specific Learning Disabled. During testing, Austin received an overall achievement standard score of 70. He presents with delays in reading, reading comprehension, written expression, and math problem solving. In the classroom he has difficulty understanding new ideas, organizing his thoughts, and using oral grammar correctly. He also exhibits difficulty with finding the correct word to say due to having a limited vocabulary. When answering questions, it is difficult for him to express his thoughts cohesively. Austin has trouble telling a story, comprehending a story he has read or maintaining the topic of a conversation. In math he is able to work simple problems, but has difficulty understanding the language aspects of mathematics.

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. I am well prepared to teach this student in my class. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 2. I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 3. I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 4. I am prepared to make and recommend accommodations in the classroom for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 5. I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 6. Having a child with a Specific Learning Disabled ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |

Vignette 2

Madeline is a student in the Red Apple School district. She was recently diagnosed with a Language/Speech disorder with difficulties in both articulation and language. Due to her severe articulation disorder, Madeline's speech is very difficult to understand if the listener does not know the topic of conversation due to her severe articulation disorder. She also exhibits a limited vocabulary. She shows weaknesses in understanding basic concepts (size and number), using appropriate sentence structure, using appropriate expressions of greeting/farewell, and describing common objects. Madeline also exhibits difficulty with: identifying personal information, identifying more/less/most, identifying ordinals (first, next, last), describing common objects, using social/ functional language, and using appropriate sentence structure.

- | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. I am well prepared to teach this student in my class. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 2. I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 3. I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 4. I am prepared to make and recommend accommodations in the classroom for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 5. I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 6. Having a child with a Language/Speech disorder in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |

Vignette 3

Christopher is a student at Orange Pumpkin Elementary School who was recently given a special education ruling in the area of Autism. During a comprehensive assessment at the beginning of the school year, Christopher received an Autism Index score of 97 on the Gilliam Autism Rating Scale. This score placed him in the “Likely to have Autism” category. He exhibits significant delays in the areas of expressive and receptive language. He is extremely sensitive to bright light, loud noises and being seated close to a classmate. When he is over stimulated he begins to clap loudly and pace the room. He has difficulty transitioning from one activity to another because he has difficulty with change. Chris enjoys reading and loves mathematics. He has a hard time completing assignments because writing is difficult for him.

- | | | | |
|---|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. I am well prepared to teach this student in my class. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 2. I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 3. I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 4. I am prepared to make and recommend accommodations in the classroom for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 5. I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 6. Having a child with an Autism ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |

Vignette 4

Kenny is a new student who re-located to the Yellow Sun School District. He came to his new school with a special education eligibility ruling in the area of Emotionally Disabled. Kenny's 3.0 GPA fell to below a 2.0 in a short amount of time. He is easily distracted in class and is frequently off task. Kenny gets frustrated very easily and frequently disrupts the class. He insults his classmates and was involved in three separate altercations with students within a one month period. He exhibits oppositional, noncompliant and negative behavior toward teachers and other adults. Kenny appears irritated for most of the day and experiences extreme mood changes frequently. He has a vivid imagination and is only engaged when working on the computer.

- | | | | |
|--|----------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| 1. I am well prepared to teach this student in my class. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 2. I am well prepared to address the special education needs of this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 3. I am well prepared to make modifications to the general curriculum for this student. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 4. I am prepared to make and recommend accommodations in the classroom for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 5. I am well prepared to plan differentiated instruction for this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |
| 6. Having a child with an Emotional Disability ruling in my class makes me feel less prepared to teach this child. | Strongly
Disagree | 1 2 3 4 5 6 | Strongly
Agree |

APPENDIX D

EXPERT PANEL REVIEW FORM

Thank you for agreeing to review my instrument. Please read each vignette and set of questions. I tried to take characteristics of each exceptionality and describe them in ways that would be observed in a general education classroom. The exceptionalities this research is focusing on is autism, speech/language, specific learning disabled and emotionally disabled. Please review the instrument and let me know if the described case study is accurate to the disability. If there is information I need to add or subtract please let me know by writing a short description below. Thank you again for your time and assistance. Feel free to add any additional information. Please answer yes or no to the question, and provide any additional information for question 3.

Reviewers Credentials

Vignette 1 – SLD

1. Does this case history represent a child with an SLD ruling? _____
2. Would it be easy for non SPED personnel to understand? _____
3. Any suggestions on things to add or subtract? Please share them on the space below.

Vignette 1 – Speech/Language

1. Does this case history represent a child with a speech/language ruling? _____
2. Would it be easy for non SPED personnel to understand? _____
3. Any suggestions on things to add or subtract? Please share them on the space below.

Vignette 3 – Autism

1. Does this case history represent a child with an autism ruling? _____
2. Would it be easy for non SPED personnel to understand? _____
3. Any suggestions on things to add or subtract? Please share them on the space below.

Vignette 4 – Emotionally Disabled

1. Does this vignette represent a child with an emotional disability ruling? _____
2. Would it be easy for non SPED personnel to understand? _____
3. Any suggestions on things to add or subtract? Please share them on the space below.

APPENDIX E

LETTER TO ACCOMPANY SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Dear Participant,

I am conducting research on teacher perceptions of working with children with specific special education exceptionalities in the regular education classroom. The study will focus on the degree to which regular education teachers' believe they are prepared work with children who are eligible to receive education services for autism, speech/language services, specific learning disability and emotional disability within the general education classroom. For this study information is needed from 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade teachers.

Please take a few moments to complete the enclosed survey. It should take no longer than 20 minutes to complete. The instrument is divided into three parts. Part I seeks pertinent demographic information. Part II contains vignettes/scenarios and Likert scale questions. There is one vignette for each exceptionality identified for this study. After reading the vignette, please respond to the six items below the vignette. These items are on a Likert scale of 1-6, with 1 equating to strongly disagree, and 6 equating to strongly agree. Part III asks open-ended questions pertaining to your educational experiences in special education, what you need from special education personnel to better prepare you, and your thoughts about the exceptionalities that believe you are the most and least prepared to address.

The data collected from the surveys will be compiled and analyzed. All responses will be anonymous and confidential. Please do not write you name on the survey instrument. As the researcher, I sincerely appreciate your participation; your completed survey will serve as your consent to participate. However, your participation is voluntary and you have the right to decline participation. If you decide to withdraw from participation at any time there will be no penalty.

This research study has been reviewed and approved by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that all research fits the federal guidelines for involving human subjects. Any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant should be directed to the Chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-001, (601)266.6820.

Should you have any questions please contact: Kimberly Fisher, email: kim.fisher11@gmail.com. This research is beings conducted under the supervision of Dr. Mike Ward with the University of Southern Mississippi, email: mike.ward@usm.edu, Dr. Ward's phone number is (601) 266.5832.

Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Fisher

Doctoral Candidate, USM

APPENDIX F

IRB APPROVAL



INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
118 College Drive #5147 | Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001
Phone: 601.266.6820 | Fax: 601.266.4377 | www.usm.edu/irb

NOTICE OF COMMITTEE ACTION

The project has been reviewed by The University of Southern Mississippi Institutional Review Board in accordance with Federal Drug Administration regulations (21 CFR 26, 111), Department of Health and Human Services (45 CFR Part 46), and university guidelines to ensure adherence to the following criteria:

- The risks to subjects are minimized.
- The risks to subjects are reasonable in relation to the anticipated benefits.
- The selection of subjects is equitable.
- Informed consent is adequate and appropriately documented.
- Where appropriate, the research plan makes adequate provisions for monitoring the data collected to ensure the safety of the subjects.
- Where appropriate, there are adequate provisions to protect the privacy of subjects and to maintain the confidentiality of all data.
- Appropriate additional safeguards have been included to protect vulnerable subjects.
- Any unanticipated, serious, or continuing problems encountered regarding risks to subjects must be reported immediately, but not later than 10 days following the event. This should be reported to the IRB Office via the "Adverse Effect Report Form".
- If approved, the maximum period of approval is limited to twelve months.
Projects that exceed this period must submit an application for renewal or continuation.

PROTOCOL NUMBER: 12110605
PROJECT TITLE: Teacher Perceptions of Working with Children with Specific Special Education Exceptionalities in the Regular Education Classroom
PROJECT TYPE: Dissertation
RESEARCHER/S: Kimberly G. Fisher
COLLEGE/DIVISION: College of Education & Psychology
DEPARTMENT: Educational Leadership & School Counseling
FUNDING AGENCY: N/A
IRB COMMITTEE ACTION: Expedited Review Approval
PERIOD OF PROJECT APPROVAL: 11/13/2012 to 11/12/2013

Lawrence A. Hosman, Ph.D.
Institutional Review Board Chair

APPENDIX G

PRINCIPALS' AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH: LETTER

Date:
 Name of School
 Address

Dear Principal:

I am Kimberly Fisher, a doctoral candidate at The University of Southern Mississippi. I am currently conducting research to complete my dissertation. The topic I have chosen is *teacher perceptions of working with children with specific special education exceptionalities in the regular education classroom*. The study will focus on how prepared regular education teachers' believe they are to work with children who have been found eligible to receive special education services for autism, speech/language services, specific learning disability and emotional disability within the general education classroom. I have received permission from you superintendent to conduct my research in your district. At this time, I'm requesting your permission to have teachers at your school to complete this survey. This study will measure the level of perceived preparedness of teachers working in grades 3-5. Participation is voluntary and confidential. Completing the survey should take no more than 20 minutes.

This project has been reviewed by the Human Subjects Protection Review Committee, which ensures that research projects involving human subjects follow federal regulations. Any questions or concerns about the rights of research participants should be directed to the chair of the Institutional Review Board, The University of Southern Mississippi, 118 College Drive #5147, Hattiesburg, MS 39406-0001, 601-266-6820.

With your permission, I can come present the surveys to teachers during a faculty meeting, provide a link to the survey online, or bring it directly to you for distribution. All hand completed surveys can be returned via mail in a self-addressed, stamp envelope I will provide.

If you consent to participate in this research, please sign and date the enclosed consent form and return it in the self-addressed, stamped envelope or via email at kim.fisher11@gmail.com

As the inclusion of special education students increases, the roles and responsibilities of general educators has changed. The results of this study will provide information on what teachers need to be prepared and successful in teaching children with disabilities. Once the study is complete, I will be very happy to share the findings with interested persons in your district.

Thank you for your time and consideration. If you have any question please feel free to contact me via email kim.fisher11@gmail.com or telephone 228-806-1066. My committee chair is Dr. Michael Ward who can be contacted at mike.ward@usm.edu.

Sincerely,

Kimberly G. Fisher
 Doctoral Candidate, University of Southern Mississippi
 Enclosure Cc: Dr. Michael Ward, Committee Chair

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