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Teachers' Perspectives of Autism Inclusion

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## **ABSTRACT**

The number of students being diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is rising, and with that comes a rise in the number of inclusive classrooms. Teachers from all ranges of experience and grade levels were interviewed about autism inclusion in their general education classroom to understand the rural teachers' perspectives about the effects of inclusive classrooms on children with autism and their peers. It was hypothesized that if children with autism are included into the inclusive classroom, they will experience benefits socially and academically. Teachers were asked about their feelings about inclusion and their level of preparation for having an inclusive classroom because research has shown that teachers who feel less prepared and less educated have more negative feelings about inclusion. Overall, the teachers reported several advantages for students with autism if it was their Least Restrictive Environment, as well as positive feelings about having inclusive classrooms.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1	
Introduction to Autism Inclusion .....	1
Are Teachers Prepared?.....	2
How do Teachers Feel About Their Preparation?.....	3
Why Have Inclusive Classrooms? .....	3
Chapter 2	
Method .....	4
Design.....	4
Participants.....	5
Procedures.....	6
Data Collection and Analysis.....	7
Reliability.....	7
Chapter 3	
Results.....	8
Q: When you had a student with autism in your classroom, what were some social skills you saw the student lacking? What were some skills that the student had?.....	8
Q: Were there any behavioral issues that the students exhibited? .....	8
Q: Did the student have struggles with certain academics over others? [OBJ].....	10
Q: How was the social interaction between students with autism and their peers without autism?.....	11
Q: What were some things that you think benefited the child as being a part of an inclusive classroom? [OBJ].....	13
Q: Do you feel that your teacher education program adequately Prepared you to work with students with autism? Have any of the professional development experiences you have had added to your confidence and working with children with autism? Would you participate in professional development related to working with children with autism if it were available? .....	15

Q: What were some things you have learned about autism that you did not know until you had a student with autism in your classroom? ..... 16

Q: Overall, how do you feel about including students with autism in the general education classrooms? ..... 17

Chapter 4 Discussion ..... 19

## **Chapter 1 Introduction to Autism Inclusion**

### **What is Inclusion?**

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disorder that is characterized by "significant qualitative impairments in social interactions and communication as well as restricted, repetitive and stereotypical patterns of behavior, interests, and activities" (Vakil et al., 2009, p.322). The National Center for Educational Statistics reports that in 2019-2020, 7.3 million children ages 3—21 years received special education services under IDEA. Of the children served, 803,000 were diagnosed with autism (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Soto-Chodiman et al. (2012) noted that there had been an increase in the number of students being diagnosed with ASD and those being included in inclusive classrooms. There are stereotypical views based on a lack of information about people with ASD that can lead to people being excluded from groups. People with ASD have such a range of needs and the community does not know how to effectively meet them (Roberts et al., 2011). The UN Declaration on Human Rights says that everyone has the right to be a part of their community (Roberts et al., 2011). With more knowledge and understanding about people with ASD, there will be less exclusion and more inclusion.

Students with autism should not be excluded from the general education classroom; rather, the resources needed to support their inclusion must be provided. Inclusion is not just putting a child with a disability into a general education classroom and expecting them to keep pace with their peers. To be successful inclusive classrooms, teacher need to collaborate with special education teachers, families, and other professionals to create meaningful learning environments (Vakil et al., 2009). Classrooms are inclusive when they have developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) that are suitable for the child, as well as offer effective services through special education (Vakil et al., 2009).

## **Are Teachers Prepared?**

Studies have shown that inclusion in the classroom can be beneficial for helping students with disabilities like ASD in many ways. Shade and Stewart (2001) found that the success of inclusive classrooms depends upon the teachers' attitudes. They determined that teachers often do not prefer inclusive classrooms because they do not feel adequately trained, but with the proper training, they change their minds (Shade & Stewart, 2001). Others have found numerous benefits to inclusive classrooms where the children are genuinely included and feel included. Therefore, teachers must know how to create an inclusive classroom where these students with ASD can thrive. Numerous social and functional skills benefit students who are a part of inclusive classrooms (Vakil et al., 2009). However, creating an environment that promotes inclusion is not easy (Roberts et al., 2011).

Because of the benefits of inclusive classrooms and the rise in the number of students with ASD, teachers are expected to create inclusive classrooms but are given little to no guidance on doing that (Josilowski & Morris, 2019). Creating an authentic, inclusive classroom takes training to learn what environments are beneficial for these students. With more preparation and training, teachers may feel more prepared. Roberts et al. (2011) determined that although mainstream inclusion is often welcomed, training and resources are not always available to support educational personnel. If teachers are given the proper resources and courses about inclusion, they may feel more prepared and capable of running an inclusive classroom (Shade & Stewart, 2001). While some believe that an inclusive classroom's success is dependent on the teacher's attitude, Garrad et al. (2019) believe that the success of these classrooms depends on the strategies and methods utilized by the teacher as a result of professional development and training.

## **How do Teachers Feel About Their Preparation?**

As stated above, the success of an inclusive classroom can depend in part on the teacher's attitude (Shade & Stewart, 200; Garrad et al., 2019;). Those who feel more prepared and know appropriate ways to work with children with autism have more positive attitudes towards inclusive classrooms compared to less informed colleagues. Garrad et al. (2019) found that the teachers with the most effective inclusive classrooms had extensive experience and specialized training. If teachers are given the resources and training, they will likely be more open to inclusive classrooms because they feel more capable. In a 2001 study, teachers participated in a course about disabilities and were asked how they felt about inclusion after attending the class. After having the class, there was a significant positive change in these teachers' feelings about inclusion (Shade & Stewart, 2001). Therefore, when teachers feel prepared and knowledgeable about students with disabilities, they are more accepting and willing to have inclusive classrooms. Shade and Stewart (2001) believe successful inclusive classrooms depend on teacher preparation, their attitudes towards inclusion, and the opportunity to collaborate with other professionals. To have a truly inclusive classroom, the students must feel welcome and fully included in both social and academic activities, but a teacher's negative attitude towards inclusion can undermine the sense of belonging (Shade & Stewart, 2001). Even if the teachers have positive attitudes about social inclusion, there is not always the support, resources, or trainings available to make the environment inclusive (Garrad et al., 2019). Teachers need training to know the unique characteristics of individuals with ASD, be prepared to teach students with ASD, and get to know their individual students (Garrad et al., 2019)

## **Why Have Inclusive Classrooms?**

Students with ASD need to be included in the general education classroom community with their neurotypical peers. Vakil et al. (2009) state that inclusion allows students the opportunity to play with

their peers and learn from them, which prevents students from being limited by restrictive environments. In school settings, children learn from their teachers and their peers. Children in inclusive settings learn functional academic, social, and behavioral skills such as communication, cooperative and appropriate interactions, and independence (Vakil et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2011). Teachers need to create an environment to foster the development of these different skills and make students feel included and welcome. Teachers who have inclusive classrooms promote acceptance which can decrease the likelihood of bullying based on differences in students (Vakil et al., 2009). Alexandri, Papailiou, and Nikolaou (2017) believe that the teachers' efforts are crucial to creating an environment that promotes this climate; it does not happen without the teacher putting forth the effort. It is important that each student gets the same experience in their Least Restrictive Environment so that they can develop their skills and knowledge. Creating an environment like an inclusive classroom allows students with autism to reach their potential and grow and develop in their Least Restrictive Environment around their peers from whom they learn.

## **Chapter 2 Method**

### **Design**

This qualitative study involving interviews with teachers was conducted via zoom in the form of a question-and-answer interview. Interviews were the most appropriate form of research due to the uniqueness of each participant's answers. The questions were open-ended, which allowed the six



participants to share more details about their individual experiences without restraint. There were a series of eleven questions, with some going into more detail than others.

## **Participants**

The participants are all certified as primary school teachers (PK-6). All participants are general education teachers in a public, rural school. The participants all have had experience with students with autism in their classrooms. All six participants have taught at different schools in grades ranging from kindergarten to fifth grade, some in different districts. Participants were recruited through word of mouth, a social media call asking for volunteers, and a recruitment letter sent to the principals of schools in rural settings asking for teachers who fit the criteria.

Alex. Alex teaches third grade at a magnet STEM school in a rural community in Pennsylvania. He has been teaching for four years and has had students with autism in his classes. He teaches mainly English Language Arts.

Bree. Bree taught in an autism class that later converted to an inclusive classroom in rural New England. Bree herself was recently identified with autism as an adult. She has been teaching kindergarten for four years.

Cameron. Cameron is a fourth-grade teacher at a public elementary school in a rural community in Pennsylvania. She has been teaching for twelve years and has had one or two students with autism in her inclusive class every year. She teaches primarily English Language Arts.

Denise. Denise teaches fifth grade at a public school in a small rural town in Virginia. She has been teaching for 13 years. She has had several students with autism in her class every year. She teaches primarily math.

Elizabeth. Elizabeth teaches first grade at an elementary school in a small rural community in rural Pennsylvania. She has been teaching for 21 years. She has had one student identified prior to first

grade and several students who were identified after being in her class. She teaches all content at the first-grade level.

Farrah. Farrah teaches second grade in an elementary school in a rural community in Pennsylvania. She has been teaching for 28 years and has had a student with autism nearly every year. She teaches all content areas of the second-grade curriculum.

### **Procedures**

The participants were each asked a series of eleven questions about their experiences with having students with autism included in their inclusive classroom. Interviews lasted from 20-40 minutes. The eleven questions follow:

1. What grade do you teach?
2. How long have you been teaching?
3. Have you had a lot of experience with having students with autism in your classroom?
4. When you had a student with autism in your classroom, what were some social skills you saw the student lacking?
  - a. What were some skills that the student had?
5. Were there any behavioral issues that the students exhibited?
6. Did the student have struggles with certain academics over others?
7. How was the social interaction between the students and their peers?
8. What were some things that you think benefited the child as being a part of an inclusive classroom?
  - a. Behavioral?
  - b. Academically?
  - c. Socially?

9. Do you feel that your teacher education program adequately Prepared you to work with students with autism? Have any of the professional development experiences you have had added to your confidence and working with children with autism? Would you participate in professional development related to working with children with autism if it were available?
10. What were some things you have learned about autism that you did not know until you had a student with autism in your classroom?
11. Overall, how do you feel about including students with autism in inclusive classrooms?

The participants were given the option to not answer any questions they felt uncomfortable answering.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

These interviews were conducted via zoom, with the participants consenting to be recorded. The recordings were available to the primary investigator for analysis. Each participant's response was analyzed for similarities and differences in experiences with each participant. The analysis focused on similarities and differences in the participant responses rather than exact observations.

### **Reliability**

All participants were asked the same questions in the same order and were able to answer the questions to whatever extent they wanted. There was no prompting, so the responses were authentic and in the words of the participants.

### Chapter 3 Results

Throughout the interviews, the participants were asked open-ended questions based on their own personal experiences. Each participant's responses were unique to their individual experiences as they all teach different grade levels and have had different experiences.

#### **Q: When you had a student with autism in your classroom, what were some social skills you saw the student lacking? What were some skills that the student had?**

Four teachers (Denise, Elizabeth, Farrah, and Bree) stated that their students preferred doing things on their own, did not need cooperative play, or know how to ask others to play. Farrah has seen that her students chose one specific friend for interaction. Alex also has a student who has one friend, and that's who she wants to be around all of the time.

Cameron noted that students with autism have an issue with communicating with their peers and have a hard time picking up on the sarcasm of other students. Bree mentioned that her students do not know how to ask for help. Farrah reported that her student with autism preferred talking with adults and had a hard time focusing as he tends to go "into his own world." However, two participants (Alex and Elizabeth) noted that sometimes students with autism are very social and fit in well.

#### **Q: Were there any behavioral issues that the students exhibited?**

Bree and Alex mentioned how the behavior issues depended on the child. Alex discussed a child who was obsessed with asking what time it was, but that was the only student who had this obsession. This happened during Alex's first year, and it was so consistent that he started tallying every time the student asked what time it was. One day, there were 500 tallies, and it was only halfway through the day.

Alex addressed this by putting a digital clock on his desk. He also had one student who had a hard time when she was not allowed to be with her only friend, and she would have a meltdown. Bree talked about how behaviors depend on their ability to communicate, such as not having a way to tell you when they get frustrated. They will throw things to show they are done or do things that are not appropriate. Bree said, "they're frustrated and do not have a way to tell you they're frustrated, so the more communication skills, whether that's natural or taught, the less of the behaviors." Farrah noticed students did well with positive reinforcement, which increases appropriate behaviors rather than punishment.

Denise also noticed that her students do not respond well to saying no to them. She finds it is better to redirect them rather than tell them they are doing something wrong. Denise said it is important to know what students need to prevent these behaviors. She has students who simply need to go for walks, or to go in the hallway for a few minutes to remove themselves from the stimulating environment. Some students get overwhelmed with the amount of information, so they need to have the information broken down for them. This is something she does to prevent behavior issues. Farrah also commented that she had students that could not go to assemblies because they were overstimulating, but she determined that this is more of a sensory issue, not behavior. These students were given headphones during assemblies to help them. Other students needed aides with strategies to prevent behavior issues. Elizabeth found a common behavior was not being able to stop something in the middle when time got cut short. She related this to routines and how it's not good to change routines, but it cannot be helped sometimes, especially in elementary classrooms.

On a more extreme level, Elizabeth had a student that would run out of the classroom when he could not or did not want to do something. He would run, and she would not be able to leave the room because she had 19 other kids in her room, so she would have to call the office, and they would make an announcement to find the child. He would sometimes get aggressive with whoever was trying to stop him. He broke a staff member's nose because of his aggression. She mentioned how difficult it was for

teachers because it was unexpected, but also for their other students who were scared in those situations. She believed that this was not his Least Restrictive Environment because it was too stimulating, and that was his way of escaping because it was not the right environment for him at the time. The following year, he was placed in an autism support classroom and later reported to Elizabeth that he missed his friends, but it was much better for him there. He had found his Least Restrictive Environment.

### **Q: Did the student have struggles with certain academics over others?**

Regarding the students' academic struggles, 4 participants (Alex, Farrah, Cameron, and Denise) reported no pattern or specific academic content that students with autism struggle with. Alex noted that students often lacked patience and had a hard time adjusting to a change in routines. Farrah and Cameron both noted how they have students who have difficulty staying focused and doing what they are supposed to do. Cameron mentioned that this could be because of other factors, but overall, students do better in smaller group settings because they can focus better. Cameron also said that one student she has this year does better working at a table rather than her desk, which is a factor for that student. Farrah commented that her student would not work unless someone were right there with him, continuously reminding him to work.

Alex commented that his student this year struggles with reading and writing, but his student last year had no issues at all. They did not even need to be pulled for small groups. Cameron said what seems to be more common is that most students read fiction, but her students with autism read more nonfiction. She noted that fiction goes into a character's feelings, point of view, and why things are happening, and nonfiction is factual, which is easier to process and more comfortable for them to read. Cameron said that, with nonfiction, they do not have to pick up on a different feeling; it requires no inferring. She thinks that her students with autism struggle with reading beyond the text. Farrah noticed that students do well with concrete concepts. She talked about how her student right now can read well

but have a hard time retelling and comprehending. She also commented that math is, for the most part, concrete, and they can use manipulatives, so she has not seen an issue there. Denise has seen that the students do well depending on their interests and who the teacher is. Students can have very accommodating teachers or those who just do the minimum of what the IEP requires. Denise thinks if teachers take time to get to know what their students need, they will be more successful. She thinks she does a good job of making these connections with her students because she does not want students to have meltdowns and struggle in her class. Alex also said it depends on the instruction the students received the previous year and their personal interests. Bree and Elizabeth noticed patterns in their students related to fine motor skills. Bree noted that her students struggle with grasping skills like zipping up a jacket and writing. She said most of the students in her class diagnosed with autism performed at a higher level than their peers in academic areas. Some kindergarten students with autism could read at a second-grade level and count much higher than their peers. Elizabeth also mentioned that almost all of the students she had with autism hated writing and other fine motor skills. Elizabeth suggested this might have been just holding the pencil because she commented that fine motor movements and planning are difficult for students with autism. She did not know if it was the physical aspect of writing or the planning that had to happen in their brain to be able to create the sentence. She saw a trend that her students with autism were stronger in reading and weaker in math.

**Q: How was the social interaction between students with autism and their peers without autism?**

Elizabeth tried to be proactive by intentionally talking about how each student is different when it was obvious there was a student with different needs than others. She used kid-friendly words and talked about situations using analogies like if someone scrapes their knee, they get a band-aid, but a student who bumps his head does not get a band aid; they need an ice pack. She always said her job as the teacher was

to give everyone what they needed. She will also say things like not everyone's brains work the same way and use more specific examples of what her student with autism will do. She tells her students they need to be patient with their classmates because it is just how their brains work. Because she tries to be proactive, she thinks this is why her students are more accepting. She thinks six-year-olds are very forgiving and helpful, but as they get older, it gets easier for them to make fun of others for being different.

Bree's experience is different. The peers in Bree's class were meant to be peer models to show peers how to behave and communicate. These models even used communication devices, so students could communicate with one another, which was the main focus in her classroom. These students will socialize with all peers because they have the communication means to do so. Alex thinks the social interaction will be different depending on the school. His school hardly sees any bullying, and, like Bree and Elizabeth, he does not see an issue with students interacting with their peers with autism. He said in his class, the students get along and do not look at each other as different. He has not taught anywhere else, so he does not know what it is like at other schools, but all students get along well at his school. He mentioned times when he has seen students being left out, and the other students will make an effort to include them, and he said it is beautiful and wonderful to see. Farrah and Cameron noticed that some students struggle with social interaction because of communication challenges. Farrah has seen that students without autism do not interact as much with those with autism. She thinks the kids would try to include them, but because they do not talk a lot, it is harder for the peers to keep a conversation going, so they just move on. For that reason, they tend to get left doing their own thing because if they are not going to have conversations and answer questions. Farrah says they are inclusive for the most part, just that the students with autism do not always reciprocate the conversation. Cameron sees that students with autism do not always pick up on social cues, which causes a social disconnect. Cameron has some students who are funny in their own way, and their peers accept them for that quirkiness. Some students,



she says, cannot see that they are autistic in terms of socializing with peers. Some students can socialize well on the playground, but they cannot socialize in the classroom.

Cameron thinks if the students have a good support system at home, they blend in better in school. She mentions that it has to do with genetics and the environment. Similarly to Farrah, Denise has seen that her students with autism do not attempt to interact. They are not likely to make the first move with their peers. She thinks they are awkward in social settings. She has seen that these students will interact with their peers in smaller settings, but as soon as you get into larger groups, they shut down and do not interact. Some of her students with autism are looked at differently because of how they participate in class. If they are awkward in class, they are being looked at and treated differently. Denise was the only participant to mention that the students in her class look at their peers with autism as being different and treating them differently.

**Q: What were some things that you think benefited the child as being a part of an inclusive classroom?**

Participants were then asked about the benefits of inclusive classrooms to students diagnosed with ASD. Bree believes the inclusive classroom is beneficial because students do great when pulled out or given specialized instruction and in the room. Sometimes she notices that the transition back is hard for the student, so Bree would prefer their instruction to be in the classroom in a quiet area. Bree says that if the student's Least Restrictive Environment is the general education classroom, then that is where the students should be getting the support. Denise also thinks the children benefit from being in the inclusive classroom, especially if it is their Least Restrictive Environment.

Elizabeth, Farrah, Alex, and Denise all have seen that the students benefit in a social aspect from being included in the classroom. They believe that they receive quality social interaction because they can watch their peers and learn from them. They can learn to work together and play

together. Even if the students are not reciprocating, or it is a forced interaction, like group work, they are still exposed to how their peers interact and are given multiple opportunities to find someone to talk to. Elizabeth, Alex, and Cameron noticed behavioral benefits of being in the inclusive classroom as well. Elizabeth and Cameron think that their students can see appropriate behaviors being modeled. Students will also give cues about what students should or should not be doing. Elizabeth has seen students will even cue friends not to do things they are not supposed to, like rolling on the carpet. Elizabeth also mentions that if the group does not typically follow directions, the student with autism will learn that, too. Alex said that the other students would learn to be more accepting and aware of different disabilities. Elizabeth and Cameron mentioned that their academic performance depends on the students and whether the classroom meets their needs. Elizabeth, Cameron, and Alex all discussed how important it is for them to be pulled, just like any other student, if they are so weak in an academic area that they cannot make meaning of the classroom instruction. Denise mentioned that just because they are autistic does not mean they are not on grade level, so they can stay in the classroom and get the same instruction as their peers. Cameron said there is a spectrum for autism and a spectrum for learning, and students can be academically gifted and be on the autism spectrum. Elizabeth agrees and says those on or above grade level should be in the general education classroom. Alex thinks that the students do not feel left out if they are getting the same content, from the same teacher, in the same room like every other student in their grade. Farrah has not had to modify a lot of the work, so her students get the same work as their peers, which she thinks is beneficial for them.

**Q: Do you feel that your teacher education program adequately Prepared you to work with students with autism? Have any of the professional development experiences you have had added to your confidence and working with children with autism? Would you participate in professional development related to working with children with autism if it were available?**

All six participants claimed that they did not feel prepared for teaching students with autism in their classrooms. When Bree went into her first classroom with nonverbal students, she did not know what to do. She received instruction on assistive technology during her teacher preparation program, but she had to do more research to understand how to help her students. Reaching out to others and individual research helped Bree understand more. Farrah also does not remember being very prepared, especially in the more severe cases. She said many of her students have needed a lot of accommodations, so she learned from the other professionals in her school. Alex talked about how each student is different, so you cannot prepare a lot for each student. Alex thinks it is important to figure out what each student needs. Alex said there really is no answer to knowing what to do. He believes you learn as you go, and he is still learning. Likewise, Cameron felt that teachers learn most by working with their students because they are different every year. She said once teachers get through college, they are dropped into the profession, and they must remember who needs what, and it can be overwhelming. She thinks teachers learn more through experience than anything else. Elizabeth and Denise both recalled only having one three-credit course offered. For Elizabeth, it was optional because, at that time, classrooms were not inclusive. There was no integration between neurotypical students and students with disabilities. Like the other participants, she learned most of what she knows from her experience. Denise also commented on learning everything from experience and the research she did on her own to prepare herself to handle the needs of her students.

Farrah, Cameron, and Denise all said they would participate in professional development courses if offered, but they are not offered these courses. Cameron and Elizabeth noted that a lot of their professional development is data and research. Elizabeth commented that she and other teachers would

prefer to hear from people who have had experience, but that is not what she sees at her professional development courses. Bree said that she would take courses, but it depends on who offers them because, like Elizabeth, she wants it from someone who knows or has the experience, not just reciting data. Elizabeth and Bree both have had more information about autism. Elizabeth has had more professional development courses because she has sought them out. Elizabeth has a son with autism, so she took these courses to help her son, but she can use the information learned in her classroom. Bree also knows more about autism because she was diagnosed with autism later in her life as an adult, so she did her own research and reached out to others for help.

**Q: What were some things you have learned about autism that you did not know until you had a student with autism in your classroom?**

Each participant learned something different. Bree learned that she was autistic after working with students with autism. This made Bree realize teachers have to know their students and their needs so they can be supported how they need to be. Bree related it to her life and how growing up, she was getting in trouble in school, but she was not diagnosed until she was older, so some students in teachers' classes may not be diagnosed, and some may never get diagnosed. She learned to always keep in mind that students may have needs the teacher may not know about. Elizabeth learned that students with autism have and use more metacognition than people realize. These students think about their actions, and even though they might not know what is going on during a meltdown, they have metacognitive awareness afterward. They know what happened, and are aware of how they looked, felt, and reacted. She also realized that all students she knows of have sensory issues; some may be the feeling of things touching them, noises, lights, or other visuals. It is hard to block out some of that sensory output.

Farrah learned that visuals are very important for students with autism. Having a visual schedule for the day on the board is beneficial for these students. She also learned that some students do not need any major accommodation, more redirections than anything. She does not have to change and modify everything as she expected. Alex learned that he could not control everything. Some students with autism get set in their ways, and teachers cannot change their minds, so teachers cannot control whether their students meltdown. He also learned patience is important. Teachers should not just discipline when things go unexpectedly, so teachers need to have patience and think about why the students are acting that way before reacting. Students also will have characteristics that are different from every other student, so teachers have to have patience to figure out how to help the student. This is something that Alex learned, and he said it helped keep him from reacting and getting upset himself. Cameron learned that it is harder for students with autism to pick up on social cues. She said we do not think about how much we read others' faces, but it is very tough for students with autism. She also commented that her students with autism have had many gastrointestinal issues and get sick a lot. She also learned that it is a misconception that students with autism do not like to be touched, but she said it depends on the students. Some love to be comforted and hugged, and others do not like being touched. Denise learned that even though several students have the same diagnosis, they are all completely different. When she has a student with autism in her class, she knows she needs to figure out what works for them and what does not. She realized how important it is to know each student to help them be successful.

**Q: Overall, how do you feel about including students with autism in the general education classrooms?**

All teachers think the inclusive classroom is beneficial. Elizabeth, Alex, and Cameron believed that the inclusive classroom is beneficial for the students with autism and their peers as they

learn to be accepting of others' differences. Bree, Elizabeth, Farrah, Cameron, and Denise all think that the inclusive room is beneficial, but it is important to consider the needs of the students and whether they are ready or not. As Bree and Elizabeth mention, some students are thrown in full time but should be progressively working to be in the room full time. Students' individual needs have to be considered because if they are not ready to be in a stimulating environment, as Elizabeth says, they should not be in an inclusive classroom full time. Farrah thinks if they are in the inclusive classroom and struggle with sensory processing issues, they should have an aide to support them. Denise agrees that students should not be limited by pulling them out, but they need a plan for when they are overstimulated or need a break. Elizabeth says students need to be with peers because they will need to be able to interact with others in their lives, so excluding them now could be detrimental to them. Cameron also mentioned that including them early is important. Many children are pulled out of class for supplemental instruction during the early grades, so having a child with autism taken out for a brief period would not seem unusual to their peers. Inclusion does not mean that they cannot get the needed individualized instruction.

## Chapter 4 Discussion

Based on participant responses, the primary social limitations focus on communication and interactions with peers, but this does not apply to all students. Although less common, some students with autism are very sociable and can communicate well with others. Challenges in communication and social skills vary widely across individuals with autism.

Likewise, the behavior issues for students with autism are quite different and dependent upon the student ranging from mild behaviors relating to focus to acting out with more aggression. Teachers need to be aware of the needs of their students, as some of the participants were. Sometimes, simplifying requests can affect how students process what they are to do instead of getting overwhelmed. Sometimes, students need a break from the over-stimulating environment. Other students need more intensive interventions to prevent them from getting aggressive or having meltdowns. When teachers know the needs of their students and carefully observe their behaviors, they can often intervene effectively, minimizing student distress and associated behaviors. Four teachers were able to find ways to prevent their students from having behavior issues in the classroom. Some prevention techniques were simple, like letting students move seats or giving them a clock or headphones. These prevention techniques helped students discontinue certain problematic behaviors.

Like any student, academic struggles are dependent on the student. It was noted that all students are different in their academic challenges, whether diagnosed with autism or not. Students have different interests that they may enjoy more than others. There is no trend showing that students with autism will struggle with any particular subject. It depends on their abilities and interests rather than anything else.

Based on the responses, as students get older, their acceptance of others and by others seems to go down. As students get older, they become more observant and judgmental about their peers' differences. For the most part, there were not many situations where students were treated poorly, but they were looked at differently. Students tend to try to include students with autism, but it depends on the

students and how they respond to know whether they will interact with their peers. Like academic struggles, socialization can be a struggle for some students, but it is just dependent on the students and how well they can communicate with others and socialize with their peers.

Participants mentioned that it is important to know the students' Least Restrictive Environment. If it is a general education classroom, there are many benefits for students with autism. There are benefits socially because they are seeing social interaction, behaviorally as they can see what is acceptable behaviors by their peers, and academically because they are getting the same instruction as their peers. Even if the students are below average in their academics, being pulled for small groups is not uncommon, so they are not seen as being different, rather, they are going for more specialized help with a content area with other peers in their class. Being in the general education classroom peers gives them opportunities to grow in all of those areas.

General education teachers are not prepared to teach students with autism in their classrooms. Teachers cannot understand what it is like having a student with autism in their class if they are just given facts and data. If teachers do not have experience with these students, they will not know how to handle those situations. The situations also are always different because every student is different, so it is not always something teachers can prepare for or will master. Through professional development and personal research, teachers can continue to learn new ways to support their students.

Depending on the teacher and their prior knowledge, everyone will learn something new from their experience. Every participant learned something different because every child is different, and every year the teacher is going to learn something new based on the children in their classroom. This goes back to the fact that having experience with students is the most meaningful way to learn, and you will never stop learning new things and seeing new patterns in students with autism.

All students are not ready for the inclusive room if it is overstimulating; therefore, not the Least Restrictive Environment. Students' needs must be considered before inclusion. For those who can



be successful in the inclusive environment, these teachers believe that inclusive classrooms are beneficial for them because they get social interaction and academic skills to prepare them to be successful members of the community in the real world.

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## **ACADEMIC VITA**

# **MAKENNA R. BETAR**

### **EDUCATION**

The Pennsylvania State University  
Bachelor of Science, Elementary and Early Childhood Education May 2022  
Schreyer Honors College

### **CERTIFICATIONS**

Pennsylvania Pre K-4 Instructional 1 Certificate, May 2022

### **STUDENT TEACHING AND FIELD EXPERIENCE**

Myers Elementary School, Bellwood, PA

#### **Student Teacher, Grade 3**

**January 2022-May 2022**

- Instruct, model, and support up to 20 students at a time
- Write lesson plans in language arts, science, math, and social studies
- Design and instruct a unit in science about fossils using inquiry-based instruction
- Utilize a balanced literacy framework including shared reading, guided reading, interactive read aloud, writing workshop, and foundations instruction to improve students' reading and writing abilities
- Prepare formative and summative assessments to evaluate students' performance and progress towards meeting national, state, district, and classroom objectives
- Provide group math interventions for students with low ability focusing on learning styles
- Differentiated instruction within language arts, math, and science
- Integrate technology such as seesaw, and PowerPoint to increase students' engagement
- Participate in teacher meetings and in-service meetings
- Facilitate a parent engagement night for Read Across America
- Weekly communication with families via seesaw and weekly newsletters
- Monthly communication with families via monthly newsletters
- Part of a collaborative team of colleagues to facilitate Read Across America events
- Implement an individual positive behavior plan using eye stickers to award students who are seen doing positive behavior
- Implement a class positive behavior plan with tallies to help students win a class reward

#### **Pre student Teacher, Grade 3**

**August 2021 - December 2021**

- Instructed lessons in math, language arts, and social studies
- Attended and participated in team meetings and parent teacher conferences

### **COMPUTER SKILLS**

iPads, seesaw, infinite campus, Kahoot, IXL, Epic, Wonders, Big Ideas Math, Ed Puzzle, LessonPix

### **COLLEGE ACTIVITIES**

Pennsylvania State Education Association Member  
Kappa Delta Pi Honors Society Member  
Orientation Leaders Member

Alpha Lambda Delta Honors Society Member

### **PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

- Team collaboration for presentation of professional development about Autism inclusion in the classroom
- Attended in-service Professional Development courses on the science of reading, dyslexia, and ECRI (Phonics instruction)
- Completed professional development courses through NSTA (national science teaching association)
- Completed professional development courses about AAC (Alternative and Augmentative Communication) devices
- Attended a professional development seminar about phonemic and phonological awareness
- Attended numerous seminars on blended learning

### **VOLUNTEER WORK**

- Volunteered at the local library to read children's books about snow, and do related activities through SPSEA
- Volunteered at a local church to do a trunk or treat to give local children coloring pages and Halloween treats

### **HONORS**

- CWC First Year Award
- S&N Sheetz Trustee Scholarship
- PA State Grant
- Federal Pell Grant
- Society Of Dist. Alum Trustee
- S K A Family Honors Scholarship
- Penn State Academic Grant
- Foor Jr. Trustee Scholarship Schreyer
- Honors Award Altoona