

Inclusion of Students with Autism in General Education Classrooms

By

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### **Abstract**

As children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are increasingly educated within the general education classroom, teachers are becoming more involved in and responsible for educating themselves about ASD in order to understand how to meet the diverse learning needs of the students. This qualitative research study explores the insights and experiences of both an exemplary elementary teacher and a core resource teacher who have worked with students with ASD and investigates what they believe, do, and know about including the students in the classroom. The Pathognomonic-Interventionist interview was conducted along with additional open-ended questions included to gain further insight on teacher knowledge. Analysis of both the related literature and the collected data suggests that there is a relationship between teachers' beliefs and their teaching practices. Strategies that will help in including students with autism in the classroom are also discussed.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, inclusion, teacher beliefs, teacher practices

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

*“Teachers must model to students that the world is full of people with diverse abilities and needs, disabilities included. The way to model this is by accepting a student with autism into the classroom.” (Resource Teacher, 2012)*

Many educators face challenges in creating an inclusive environment for children with autism. The number of children with autism or autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in regular education classrooms has increased since 1990, possibly due in part to the creation of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for each child in special education (Fein & Dunn, 2007). As children with autism are increasingly educated within the general education classroom, teachers are becoming more involved in and responsible for educating themselves about autism in order to understand how to meet the diverse learning needs of the students.

### ***Background of Researcher***

I was not aware of the nature of autism until approximately five years ago when I accepted a position as an instructor therapist implementing intensive behavioral intervention to children with the disorder. I participated in several training workshops in order to learn the strategies associated with behavioral intervention and the characteristics of autism. Having the experience to conduct one-on-one therapy with students allowed me to work with children across the spectrum, with various learning needs and abilities. I learned the most effective teaching strategies that would suit the individualized learning goals for each student. The most imperative aspect that learned from this experience is that every student with autism is unique in their own way. It is up to the general classroom teachers to learn effective strategies to help students meet their individual needs and reach their full potential.

In my experiences in the classroom environment, one of the main issues I have observed is a verbal child with autism being excluded from participating in classroom activities or having their desk completely separated from other groups. The teacher may have thought that this student is simply not capable of learning how to behave appropriately. Just as the student with autism would feel like they do not belong, their peers would also view them as different which would reinforce the segregation in the classroom. I strongly believe that having a student with autism participate in classroom activities is essential in fostering a sense of community in the classroom. By including the children in day to day activities, they are exposed to the appropriate behavior of their peers which would positively influence the students with autism to behave in the same manner. Students who are not disabled would also learn what it means to accept and respect others for their differences, in and outside of the classroom.

### ***Purpose of Research Study***

The research question for this project is *what does an inclusive teacher believe, do, and know about teaching students with autism in the general education classroom?* By understanding teacher beliefs about who is responsible for meeting the needs of students with autism in the classroom, I hope to learn how teachers' beliefs influence their practice. Through learning and understanding about the strategies of inclusion, educators will be able to provide a valuable learning environment for all students. Furthermore, I hope to learn how their courses and experiences have prepared them to include students with autism in their classrooms.

The topic of including students with autism in the general classroom setting is important to the education community. Educators are often anxious to have students with

disabilities in their classrooms because many are unsure about how to effectively meet the students' needs. In order to achieve student success, educators should learn about the characteristics of autism and effective strategies for teaching and learning, as many traditional education techniques that are appropriate for other students are particularly ineffective for students with autism (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). The goal of this major research project is to examine exemplary inclusive practice and gain insights for my own developing pedagogy. I also hope to learn strategies that will help students with autism succeed in an integrated classroom environment with their peers.

Educators who have successfully included students with autism in the classroom will be selected for this study. Examples of interview questions that will be asked of these teachers are listed below:

1. What are your thoughts on including students with autism in the general education classroom?
2. What courses and/or experiences have you had to prepare you to include students with autism in your classroom?
3. What are the strategies you use to build inclusion in your classroom?
4. How has the inclusion of the student with autism in your classroom affected that student?
5. How has the inclusion of the student with autism in your classroom affected the other (non-disabled) students?

## **Chapter 2: Review of the literature: Issues, Theory and Research**

### *Characteristics of Autism*

Autism is known as a complex, lifelong neurological developmental disorder that affects 3 in every 1000 children and is diagnosed 4 times more in boys than in girls (Hundert, 2009). There is no identified cause of this disorder and no known means of preventing its onset. In general, the characteristics of autism fall into three core groups: impairment in social interaction, impairment in communication, and repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior (Hundert, 2009). It is imperative to understand that this disorder is highly heterogeneous and individual children vary in degree of severity from mild to severe for each group of characteristics.

Those with impaired social interaction are unable to use nonverbal behavior to regulate social communication, such as maintaining eye contact or using gestures. Along with this is difficulty in developing peer relationships, a lack of spontaneous seeking to share activities with others, and a lack of social and emotional reciprocity (Hundert, 2009). Impairment in communication includes delays in spoken language, the inability to initiate or sustain a conversation, stereotypic or repetitive use of language and the lack of social imitation (Hundert, 2009). The third core symptom of autism is repetitive and stereotyped behavior, which includes a preoccupation with stereotyped interests, adherence to nonfunctional routines and preoccupation with parts of objects (Hundert, 2009). Due to these impairments it is valuable to include the students with autism in a classroom with nondisabled peers as it is an opportunity for social skills development by observing and modeling peer behaviours.

***Inclusion***

The concept of *inclusion* implies that students with autism or special needs should be educated in the same environment as typically developing students with appropriate support services, instead of being segregated in special education classrooms (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). The terms *integration* or *mainstreaming* are different from inclusion, as those terms assume students have a special education setting as their home base and are only placed into the regular classroom when educators believe they can succeed in the activities taking place. The concept of inclusion means that students with special needs are placed in the regular classroom and this is considered their home base, not a placement that needs to be earned (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). This major research project will focus on the inclusion of students with autism and how they can successfully be included in the general education classroom, with appropriate support services.

***Benefits and Limitations of Inclusion***

There are differing viewpoints with regards to the inclusion of students with autism in the classroom. Many teachers and parents have strong ethical beliefs about the rights of children with developmental disabilities to be educated in a typical learning environment with their peers, as students with autism will be exposed to positive social models of normally developing students (Hundert, 2009). For example, students with autism will have the opportunity to interact with other students and practice their social skills, such as maintaining eye contact or conveying their thoughts and feelings. Despite their impairment in social skills, they are like all children who want to be around others and would benefit from developing meaningful friendships.

Research on inclusion has assessed the social outcomes of students with autism in a general classroom environment. Researchers have found that students with disabilities that are included in the classroom a) are more engaged in social interaction, b) provide and receive higher levels of social support, c) have larger friendship networks, and d) have developmentally advanced individual education plan (IEP) goals than students in segregated placements (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). I strongly believe that having students with autism interact with other students in a regular classroom will lead to an increase in their self-esteem as they feel the sense of belonging in the community. Moreover, typically developing students would gain a more accepting attitude towards the students with autism instead of placing a stigma on them for being in a segregated classroom. There have also been studies which have shown that students with autism generalized social behaviors better when they were educated in inclusive classroom environments rather than segregated environments (Mesibov & Shea, 1996). This suggests that they are more likely to demonstrate appropriate social behaviors outside of the classroom when they are educated in an inclusive setting.

Although there has been positive social affects for including students with autism in the general classroom, researchers have also found mixed results. In one study, included students with autism were considered the most popular in class as rated by their peers whereas in other classes, students were not as popular (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Those students who are not considered popular in the class are most likely the students with autism who are not generally included in the day-to-day activities in the classroom, as other students have not formed a relationship with them. Research has also shown that students with autism were more likely to be on the receiving rather than the giving end of

social interactions, which increased over the school year (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001).

These results show that there are variable outcomes to social behavior when students with autism are included in the classroom.

With regards to positive academic outcomes for inclusion, one study compared the language ability before and after language instruction for five children with autism in an inclusive preschool classroom and a segregated classroom (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Measures of language ability did not show significant differences, possibly supporting educational inclusion, since segregated educational settings have been supposed to provide the most intensive educational programs for students with disabilities (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Being educated in an inclusive classroom, students with autism have the opportunity to experience cooperative learning with their peers, as this is a crucial aspect in any education program that allows students to share ideas and learn from one another. A study evaluated cooperative learning groups during a fourth grade social studies class which included group activities for practicing key words and facts, a team activity, and a whole class wrap-up and review (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Students with autism showed improvements in test scores, increased academic achievement and increased duration of student interactions with their peers (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). These studies support the benefits of including students with autism in the classroom as cooperative learning increases both their academic success and social interaction with their peers.

There are very few studies which have shown that the mere placement of students with autism in a general education classroom with typically developing children, by itself, will produce gains in social skills (Hundert, 2009). Research has been documented that

shows children with disabilities in general education classrooms tend to be academically behind their peers, pay less attention to the teacher, exhibit more disruptive behavior, are more demanding on teachers' time, and interact less often with their peers (Hundert, 2009). Despite these limitations educators must understand that for an inclusive classroom to succeed, they must learn and implement effective strategies that will support students with autism to reach their full academic and social potential. Students with autism may also require additional supports, such as an educational assistant that will help their inclusion in the classroom.

Many parents and educators often worry that inclusion will negatively affect the academic achievement of students without special needs since students with special needs require more attention and support (Demeris, Childs and Jordan, 2007). There has been literature that supports the notion that inclusive education not only benefits the student with autism, but also all students in the classroom. A study led by Demeris, Childs and Jordan (2007) researched the influence of students with special needs included in grade three classrooms on the large-scale achievement scores of students without special needs. This study is important as it is the largest Canadian study to date on the effect of inclusion, as oppose to similar studies which have had a small sample size (Demeris, Childs and Jordan, 2007). In order to investigate the link between the students with special needs in almost 2000 grade three classes and the achievement scores of their peers without special needs, the researchers analyzed data from the 1997-1998 Ontario provincial assessment while statistically controlling for differences among socio-economic status (SES) and overall class size. The findings indicated that there was a small and positive relationship among the number of students with special needs and the

achievement scores for reading, writing and mathematics. This implies that students without special needs did slightly better as the number of students with special needs in their classes increased (Demeris, Childs and Jordan, 2007). This finding is a contradiction to the belief that inclusion negatively affects other students' achievement in the classroom.

### ***Teacher Beliefs about their Roles with Students with Disabilities***

Schools that are considered to be effective in inclusion develop the *ecology of inclusion*, where they have access to several different supports and teaching strategies that may be effective for inclusion and student achievement (Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010). For educational systems to become more inclusive, we must understand teachers' beliefs about their roles in promoting learning in inclusive classrooms and how their beliefs relate to their practice (Jordan et al., 2010). In order to study this, the Supporting Effective Teaching (SET) model was used to understand the differences in beliefs that teachers hold about the nature of disability, where teachers hold a *pathognomonic* belief or an *interventionist* belief. According to Jordan et al., teachers who hold a pathognomonic perspective believe that the disability is internal which causes teachers to emphasize the label as the reason for underachievement, place blame on the student for their inability to improve and consequently spend little effort with the included student with a disability in comparison to the rest of the students. On the contrary, those who hold an interventionist perspective believe that the students' learning difficulties are due to the environment creating barriers to access. The teachers' responsibility is to create access to learning through accommodations and increase their efforts to ensure the success of their students with disabilities.

The instructional interaction styles with exceptional/at-risk students and normal achieving students were observed in a study of nine grade three teachers that held pathognomonic-interventionist beliefs (Jordan, Lindsay, & Stanovich, 1997). Those teachers who expressed pathognomonic beliefs, made less academic than non-academic statements, used instructional talk less with their exceptional/at-risk students which mainly involved behavior management, and during academic talk used only three elaborative interactions. However, the teachers with interventionist beliefs made more academic than non-academic statements, talked more to their exceptional/at-risk students which pertained to instruction, and used twenty-six elaborative interactions with their exceptional/at risk students during academic instruction (Jordan et al., 1997). These results show that teachers' beliefs about students with disabilities have a direct effect on their instruction. Teachers with interventionist beliefs have more time for instruction and elaborative interactions with students with disabilities as they spend less time managing their behavior. They are better able to match the understanding of the students to instruction and interact with them to assess their learning needs and progress (Jordan et al., 1997). Jordan et al conclude that in general, there needs to be a change in teachers' attitudes and beliefs about disability and responsibility in order for inclusion to be successful in the classroom.

### ***Relationships between Teachers and Students with Autism***

Children benefit from having a positive relationship with their teachers as this provides them with the motivation to succeed in their school work and a sense of belonging in the classroom community. Robertson, Chamberlain and Kasari (2003) examined the effect of children's behavior problems on student-teacher relationships. In

order to examine the influence of behavioral problems on teacher and student relationship, teachers were provided with the *Student-Teacher Relationship Scale* and the *SNAP-IV Rating Scale*. Robertson et al. found that student-teacher relationships are related to student behaviors as expected. For instance, students who exhibited hyperactivity/impulsivity and or opposition/defiance were rated as having a highly conflicted and dependent student-teacher relationship. This is important for teachers to understand as the relationship between student and teacher can affect the inclusion of a student with autism in the classroom. One of the goals of inclusion is to facilitate a positive interaction among typically developing students and students with autism. However if students are considered to have a conflicted and dependent relationship with their teacher, they tend to have a lower level of social inclusion in their class as rated by their peers (Robertson et al., 2003). Teachers must provide an environment where students with autism learn how to be independent and teachers know how to handle challenging behavior in order to build a positive relationship with the included students. Once typical students observe this positive relationship, they will be more willing to accept students with autism as part of their class community

One study looked at how the teachers' attitudes towards students with autism in the classroom can be grouped as *attachment*, *concern*, *indifference*, and *rejection* (de Boer, 2009). The teachers who identified students as the *attachment* students were considered hard working and teachers became committed to the success of those students. *Concern* students were given more personal attention on their academic progress from the teachers. The students who were considered to be *indifferent* were viewed as quiet and avoided social interaction; and the *rejection* students rarely received positive attention

from teachers due to the students' social, attitudinal, and behavioral problems. The study concluded that the educational experiences of the students are directly affected by the teachers' attitudes of attachment, concern, indifference or rejection students because it affected their willingness to include these students in the classroom environment (de Boer, 2009). Teachers who oppose inclusion need to be aware that their attitude toward students with autism influences their practice and their willingness to include these students as part of their classroom.

***Attitudes of Non-Disabled Students toward Students with Developmental Disabilities***

Staib and Peck (reported in deBoer, 2009) have investigated the attitudes of non-disabled students toward students with developmental disabilities such as autism and have identified five types of attitude and changes due to the inclusion of special needs students (de Boer, 2009). These changes were: 1) non-disabled students showed reduced fear of human differences and felt more comfortable about these differences; 2) growth in social cognition, as children learn to internalize positive social development as influenced by the social modeling of the educator; 3) improvement in self-concept; 4) development of personal principles as classmates learn about children with special needs and their abilities so that they can challenge stereotypical beliefs that others may have; and 5) formation of warm and caring friendships as teachers plan activities to create opportunities for integrated interaction. This study demonstrates that students began to appreciate and respect the diversity among them as a result of an inclusive classroom environment.

### ***Collaboration with Educational Assistants***

Through my experience, I have learned about the importance of ongoing communication and collaboration among the special educator and the general classroom educator. Together they help the child reach their full potential by observing the students, collect data, creating behavior and academic plans and modifying these plans according to the students' progress. Unfortunately it seems to me that many people believe that educational assistants should only focus on the child with autism and it is the job of the general educator to focus on the rest of the students in the classroom. One of the main issues facing children with autism is that they have a hard time generalizing skills, and this is not possible when they are only working one-on-one with the same person. Knoblock (1982) writes that some programs designate the educational assistant to spend their time exclusively with the special child; however he recommends that the educational assistant respond to the rest of the class to allow the teacher to spend time with the special child. Teachers need to build a strong relationship with the students with autism in order to help them reach their academic goals. In addition, the educational assistant should be a partner to the teacher with the whole class, facilitate interaction between the special child and their peers, and work with the special child in a small group with other students. If the educational assistant was involved in this manner, Knoblock states that they can help make the child feel that sense of belonging and reinforce functional behaviors rather than contribute to segregation.

### ***Effective Strategies for Facilitating the Inclusion of Students with Autism***

Before discussing effective strategies for helping students with autism succeed in an inclusive environment, it is important to understand that their level of functioning is

highly heterogeneous, so the level and intensity of supports needed for a student will depend on their functioning (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Furthermore, most of the research done on the inclusion of students with autism has been with young children, rather than middle school or high school. Therefore one cannot dedicate specific strategies based on the level of functioning or age, but strategies can be individually adjusted to meet the needs of specific students with autism in inclusive settings (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). This is why it is imperative to know the strengths and weaknesses of a student in order to implement strategies that will work for them.

#### *Increasing Peer Interaction*

As mentioned previously, forming a social relationship is very difficult for children with autism. They may lack in social skills such as self-control and knowledge of social rules, such as turn taking in a conversation. Students with autism often need to be taught peer interaction so that they learn to initiate and respond to peers under minimal adult involvement and generalize these skills to other peers and new situations (Hundert, 2009). Otherwise, if all peer interaction is occurring with an adult involved in some way, non-disabled students are not likely to continue to interact with students with autism when the teacher's involvement is removed. Furthermore, students with autism will not learn how to interact without the adult present.

One strategy to teach interactive play is through the use of picture activity schedules, where pictures are taken for teaching steps of playing with a particular activity, such as a puzzle (Hundert, 2009). This way, students with autism can refer to the schedule to help them complete the activity appropriately. It is important to select an activity that is not time consuming, is interesting both to their peers and to the student

with autism, involves turn taking, and has a clear beginning and end so that the child will know when the activity has ended (Hundert, 2009). This will keep all students engaged in the activity and teach all students turn taking skills. Environmental arrangements to promote peer interaction, such as pairing students with and without autism and designing interactive play such as dressing up, are important (Hundert, 2009). Furthermore, children with developmental disabilities exhibit increasing levels of play when they are with typically developing children than with other children who have developmental disabilities (Hundert, 2009).

As the goal of inclusion is to encourage independence of students with autism in the classroom, an approach to achieving this goal is to utilize typically developing peers to support the academic and social functioning of the students to reduce the need of adult attention. Peer-mediated strategies involve typically developing peers, such as peer mentors, tutors, or recess buddies to teach students with autism social skills (Fein & Dunn, 2007). I believe that getting peers involved is a good strategy to teach students with autism to behave in a manner that resembles their peers and can also result in their peers having a more accepting attitude towards students with autism. There has been research which shows that peer-mediated approaches are most effective when peers are supervised and taught ways to interact with the student with autism rather than being told to just play with them (Fein & Dunn, 2007). Having a peer-tutor work with the student with autism in academic tasks will allow the peer tutor to provide assistance, instruction and feedback.

Implementing peer-tutoring has been shown to produce increases in on-task behavior, math performance, and social interactions of children with autism in inclusive

classrooms (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). Students can also benefit from having a peer mentor, as they engage the student with autism in play and conversations with others, model appropriate social behavior, and reinforce social rules and problem solving through reminders or discussions (Fein & Dunn, 2007). It is important for educators to know that they should not designate the same person to be a peer-tutor or mentor, as the student with autism will not learn to generalize their social skills with other peers or situations. For this reason, educators should provide social skills training for the entire class so that all can learn how to interact appropriately with each other.

In support of a class wide approach as a strategy for peer interaction, one study implemented an intervention in a first grade classroom where the entire class was taught how to initiate interaction, give and receive compliments, helping others, including others in activities, sharing and taking turns for ten minutes, four times a week (Hundert, 2009). Once social skills training was complete after three weeks, researchers observed children socially interacting during free-play in which those that were interacting received stars as reinforcement. The results showed that both the children with autism and their peers were engaged in social interaction for a longer duration throughout and following training (Hundert, 2009). This demonstrates that not only can students with autism benefit from social skills training; the entire class can benefit as well which will avoid any stigma placed on children with autism receiving intervention alone.

### *Teaching Self-Management*

Many children with autism are known to have difficulty with self-managing their behavior. Self-management intervention teaches a child to a) discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate behaviors, b) evaluate their own behavior, c) monitor their

behavior over time, and d) reinforce their behavior when specific criteria are met (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). If students with autism are taught self-management skills in the classroom, they can function more independently without the reliance on a teacher or educational assistant. In a study that analyzed the influence of self-management intervention on students with autism in an integrated preschool classroom, results showed a significant improvement in the students' behavior and independent working skills, in which gains were maintained after intervention had stopped (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). This finding is very promising to achieve successful inclusion of students with autism in the classroom. An example of a self-management strategy is to have a student with autism keep track of the number of times they remembered to raise their hand prior to speaking and the number of times that they did not. The students can be taught to reinforce themselves with a sticker to add to a chart, where a certain number of stickers can be traded in for a reward such as doing a favorite activity in their free time.

Knowing how to implement self-management strategies is important for an educator to understand in order to teach a student with autism how to function appropriately in the classroom. In addition, self-management promotes independence in the classroom as it shifts responsibility for managing behavior from the teacher to the student, which allows the teacher to focus on instruction (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). If students gain this independence, it will give them a sense of belonging to the classroom community and provides them with the opportunity to engage in activities with their peers without the stigma of having a one-on-one aide. Self management has also been utilized for improving social skills and reducing disruptive behavior (Harrower & Dunlap,

2001). It is important for teachers to help their students gain confidence in their abilities which will ultimately keep them motivated and create a positive learning environment.

*Antecedent Procedures (Priming, Prompt Delivery, Picture Schedules)*

Antecedent procedures are strategies that would be implemented before the student with autism participates in a required task. The strategies of priming, prompting, and the use of picture schedules are used to prevent the occurrence of challenging stereotypical behaviors and will also help students cope with the task (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001).

The term *priming* can be thought of as pre-practice, where students preview information or activities that they are likely to have difficulty with before they engage in the activity with the class (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). For instance, if a student has a difficult time during circle activities where the teacher reads a story to the class, the story can be read to the student individually before the student experiences the story with the class. The priming strategy is imperative in facilitating the inclusion of students with autism since it links individualized instruction with classroom group activities (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). This also provides students with autism the opportunity to practice their social skills while interacting with their peers.

Prompting strategies are a way to elicit an appropriate response in a targeted academic or behavioral activity, as students with autism may not respond to the instructions delivered in a general education classroom (Harrower & Dunlap, 2001). It is important for facilitating the inclusion of students with autism, especially to encourage participation in group lessons. If there is an educational assistant in the classroom, they should be positioned behind the student with autism so that they do not distract the

student from focusing on the classroom teacher or other students (Hundert, 2009). The educational assistant should use graduated guidance to deliver prompts and reinforce the students for responding. As the student with autism begins to participate well, the prompting can gradually be faded out until the student can respond independently. For example, educational assistants can prompt the student to attend to the teacher by briefly cupping their hands on either side of the student's face to direct the student's gaze to the teacher, which the prompt can later be reduced by placing only one hand at the side of the student's face and eventually the student will attend independently (Hundert, 2009). However, it is also important for the teacher to prompt and reinforce the student with autism as much as possible so that the student learns to respond to the teacher as well.

Picture schedules are created to inform the student with autism about what to expect on a regular school day and the type of activities they will be doing. Since transitioning from one activity to another is difficult for some students with autism, picture schedules can provide them with a cue on what the next activity will be. It is an effective strategy to promote the independent engagement and performance of classroom activities and decreasing dependence on an educational assistant or teacher (Bryan & Gast, 2000). A study evaluated the effectiveness of a picture-activity schedule in teaching students with autism on how to engage in on-task and on-schedule behaviors (Bryan & Gast, 2000). The results revealed that a) students with autism quickly learned the mechanics of the picture-activity schedule via graduated guidance which was faded, b) independently showed high levels of sustained on-task and on-schedule behaviors with the picture book alone; and c) their performance generalized to new activities (Bryan & Gast, 2000). Therefore, using a picture schedule can teach the student with autism to

become a more independent learner in the classroom which will provide the student with more confidence in their abilities and more opportunity to interact with their peers.

### **Chapter 3: Methodology**

This research study on the inclusion of students with autism into the general education classroom was conducted by collecting and reviewing literature in the field and by carrying out interviews with two exemplary teachers. Interviewees were selected from varied backgrounds that work or previously worked in different areas of the city. The information gathered from interviews reflects beliefs, practices, experiences and insights of teachers who have included students with autism in schools in the Greater Toronto Area. Data were collected from the interviews and were coded according to themes identified in the data and in the existing literature on inclusion.

#### ***Participants***

In order to develop my research and collect data on what teachers believe, do and know about including students with autism in their classrooms, it was essential to find participants who practiced strategies to build inclusion and who could provide me with information on what they did for the student with autism in their classroom. Through my interviews with my participants, I gained data regarding teacher practice and beliefs towards inclusion, various strategies used to build inclusion, and how inclusion has affected the students with autism and other students in the classroom. The participants were selected based on the following criteria:

- a) They must be teachers/core resource teachers (preferably at the Primary/Junior level) who are willing to speak about their experiences;
- b) They must currently have experience including students with autism in their classrooms, or must have had experience including students with autism recently or in the past.

Two teachers who had experience including students with autism in the general education classroom were chosen to be interviewed for this research study. One of my participants is a grade 8 female teacher who teaches in a Catholic elementary school in the greater Toronto area. She has been teaching for 12 years. The reason I selected this teacher is because I have worked with her as an instructor therapist at a developmental center doing applied behavioral analysis (ABA) therapy with children who have autism. I have observed her work with children whose needs varied across the autism spectrum. I knew that as a teacher in a school setting, she would be very knowledgeable about inclusion and would be able to draw upon a wealth of experiences. When asked to consider this research study, she was happy to participate and readily agreed. The second participant was selected based on a referral from an instructor at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. This participant was a core resource teacher for over 12 years in the greater Toronto area. She has a child with Down Syndrome and is knowledgeable on educating students with special needs. I chose this participant because I wanted to draw upon her experiences in what she has observed in inclusive classrooms and how her personal connection with a disability has influenced her practice.

### *Measure*

The Pathognomonic-Interventionist (P-I) interview (Jordan & Stanovich, 2003 & Jordan & Stanovich, 2004) was adapted to relate to teachers of students with autism, and used to collect data from two teachers on their interactions with a specific student whom they had taught in their class. The students discussed must be identified with having autism, experienced difficulty in the classroom and were not reaching his or her potential. The interview questions were adapted from the interviews conducted by Stanovich &

Jordan (1998) in their own studies of what teachers believe, do and know about inclusion (see Appendix A for interview questions). The P-I interview was scored along a dimension of beliefs ranging from pathognomonic (P) to interventionist (I). This interview has been reported in many studies, with good internal construct validity and reliability among scorers (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). Inter-rater reliability among raters independently scoring the transcripts of interviews was reported by Jordan et al. (1997) to be .88 and by McGee (2001) to be .91. Glenn (2007) reported that among a sample of 33 teachers, the P-I scores ranged from 1.40 to 3.00, with an average score of 2.46. These scores are consistent with other samples using the P-I measure (McGee, 2004). There are two subscales of the P-I rating, which are *teacher responsibility*, the view that the teacher is primarily responsible for developing opportunities to learn, and *teacher attribution*, whether the teacher ascribes learning difficulties to the student and family or current opportunity to learn (Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010). The correlations between the total P-I score and teacher responsibility subscale is .66 and between teacher attribution is .55 (Jordan, Glenn & McGhie-Richmond, 2010). Questions were added to cover the teachers' knowledge of autism and their described practices. I also introduced the interview by focusing the teachers on their current or past students with autism that they have included in their classrooms.

### ***Procedure***

The primary means of data collection was through interviews to gather information about teacher practices, beliefs, and knowledge related to the inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom. The main goal of the interviews was to gain an inside perspective on how beliefs about inclusion and knowledge about

teaching students with autism influences teacher practice and to gain an understanding of the kinds of strategies that are used to build inclusion. The additional questions for the interview were developed with the support of my research supervisor and focus group. The results were coded according to central themes that will be explored in chapters 4 and 5 which will then be compared to the insights that were discovered through related literature.

The P-I interview was conducted at a time negotiated by the participant and myself, at a location of each participant's choice. Each interview was comprised of the same 13 semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix A). Each interview was approximately 30 minutes in length and was tape recorded to facilitate transcription. The participants reflected on a student who was designated as having autism and whom the participant had academic concerns for. During the interview process, I asked the participants to reflect upon what they chose to do and the reasons for their actions when working with the particular student. The participants' reasoning was significant to understanding their beliefs and the teacher's role in the classroom with students with autism.

### *Analysis*

Following the interviews, I transcribed the data and read each interview several times in order to identify themes and patterns. I analyzed the data to identify the teachers' views of disability by closely examining their actions and reasoning for their actions. The SET Project Pathognomonic-Interventionist Interview Scoring form (Stanovich & Jordan, 1998) was used to code most of the questions in the interview data. By using this form, I was able to score the teachers' responses in different categories and

assign an overall rating for attribution and responsibility (see Appendix B for Interview Scoring Form). After the teachers were rated in the categories, I observed the data for patterns across the scores and analyzed what the data indicated about the teachers' beliefs about disability. Highly relevant information was noted in addition to connections to literature and my research questions.

### ***Limitations***

There are some limitations in regards to this research process. In selecting two participants, my sample size is small with limited information to analyze and draw conclusions. However, given the goal of the research, which is to examine exemplary practice and gain insights for my own developing pedagogy, this case study approach is suitable. The goal of this research is not to discover findings that are generalizable across all educators or all classroom environments, but to give me the opportunity to relate the information I found to data that has been collected by other researchers in the past. Another limitation is that my research and the literature cited focuses on the elementary school system. A larger sample size would be required to make more substantive conclusions centered on the secondary system.

I am also aware that my research questions were limited. However, given the demands on my time and the goals of my research, I believe the 13 questions I chose were consistent with what I aimed to acquire from my research study. Through conducting this study, I aimed to gain an understanding into what teachers believe, do and know about including students with autism in the classroom, in addition to enhancing my research skills. The skill to develop strong interview questions, to effectively

interview research participants, to analyze data and relate it to the literature are the skills I have acquired through this research process.

### ***Ethical Review Procedures***

Prior to the interview, research participants were provided with letters of informed consent in which they were required to read and sign if they agreed to participate in the interview (See Appendix C for consent form). One copy of this consent was provided to the participant, and the second copy was kept for the records of this study. The research participants were also provided with information regarding the purpose of this study and the nature of confidentiality in an effort to ensure their comfort and willingness to partake in the interview process.

Before beginning each interview, I reviewed my research topic with the participant and reminded them that if they did not feel comfortable commenting on a certain question, they could refrain from doing so. Additionally, I mentioned that they have the option to review or revise their answers or change their mind about the use of their data at any point in the research process. The procedures that were followed as specified in the consent forms were conducted without any changes throughout the course of the research process.

In order to keep the anonymity of the participants, the use of pseudonyms were used for individuals and institutions. My research supervisor has reviewed all results prior to being finalized, of which each participant has been made aware of and has given consent.

## Chapter 4: Findings

The findings from this study emerged from interviews conducted with experienced teachers who have included students with autism in the classroom successfully. This chapter will provide an overview of what was discovered through coding the Pathognomonic-Interventionist (P-I) interview and through additional open-ended questions.

### *Results of Coding the Pathognomonic-Interventionist Interview*

**1. Entry Phase.** My first participant, Vanessa who is the grade 8 teacher, scored 9 out of 9 points on the first section of the Pathognomonic-Interventionist (P-I) scoring form, indicating an interventionist perspective. When she first found out that she was going to have Peter, a student with autism in her classroom, the first record that was checked was the student's Ontario Student Record (OSR) to become more familiar with him. Additionally, she took it a step further and actively investigated the characteristics of the incoming student. She explains, "I spoke to the grade 7 teacher who taught Peter the previous year to learn about his strengths and weaknesses, the types of problems she faced in the classroom before and how she handled it, how his parents were supporting him, the type of communication that best worked for Peter, the type of teaching strategies she found useful when she taught him." Vanessa also discussed how through conducting assessments and by taking anecdotal notes, she was able to discover Peter's strengths and weaknesses which helps her in planning and making modified assessments for each subject she teaches. In order to establish the grade level Peter was functioning at, Vanessa relied on her assessments, the educational resource teacher's observations, the principal, and IEP data. She describes that in the beginning of the school year, she took the time to

get to know Peter on a personal level by having him complete 'All about Me' activities. She valued the relationship they had which also helped her in planning as she tailored many lessons to meet his interests.

My second interviewer, Lydia who is a resource teacher, also scored 9 points in the first section of the P-I scoring form. When she first learned about the incoming students with autism, she stressed that meeting the parents is the most important. She explains, "Get their perspective and find out where they are coming from, what they are looking for, what their expectations are, because they know their child best." Lydia discussed how important it is for teachers to learn what is in the students' OSR and not make their own opinions, as the data that is included is meant to be used to uncover information that is useful for instructional planning and adaptation. She also ensures that she talks with the students' previous teachers and inquires about the students' functional levels, instructional strategies that worked and did not work, and their general first hand experiences.

**2. Programming.** In the second section of the P-I scoring form, Vanessa scored 13 out of 15 possible points in relation to programming. She has a strong sense of the social needs of Peter and actively integrates him through group activities, class routines, and modelling acceptance and caring. She discusses how the typical students in the class have embraced Peter as part of their classroom. She explains, "By having the students aware of the disorder, they have treated him much more nicely and are willing to help him with his learning in the classroom. The students are great in assisting Peter to feel included in every subject." Vanessa also describes how important it is for Peter to be a part of a group setting, as this allows him to practice social skills such as turn taking and listening

skills that many students with autism lack. In order to help Peter achieve his learning goals, she uses many visuals to help him conceptualize his learning, especially in mathematics since this is how he learns best. Additionally, she allows for extra time to complete assessments and allows him to sit closer to her when he feels like he requires extra assistance. Vanessa discusses how essential a simple conversation with Peter is to monitor how he is doing. She explains, “By talking with him one on one, I know what he understands and what he doesn’t so I can help him achieve his learning goal for the day.”

Lydia scored 14 out of 15 possible points in the programming section of the P-I interview, indicating a strong interventionist belief. She strongly believes that in order for the students with autism to succeed, everything should be individualized to suit their needs and motivation. Lydia explains, “[The use of] choice boards and updating the choices as the kid’s interests change is important. You need to always use reinforcers that really mean something to the kid.” Lydia understands that providing the student with choice is an essential accommodation for the students with autism to maintain their motivation. She discusses how the most exemplary teachers she has seen use visual, auditory, and tactile instructional strategies and uses multiple intelligences for planning their lessons. This builds a variety of opportunities for the students to learn through instructional and responding alternatives. She states, “It benefits all kids, so it will benefit the kid with autism as well.” Environmental accommodations were also discussed, as careful placement of where the students sit in the classroom and who they were near is an important aspect for learning. She strongly believes that having the students with autism sit with the rest of the class is best, instead of in the back corner of the classroom with the educational assistant, as often as the case. Lydia believes that by having the students sit

with the rest of the class, they will feel a sense of belonging in the class community, which shows that the social needs of the student is important to her.

Monitoring progress was always done consistently, as Lydia referred back to the students' IEP throughout the term. She takes this time to meet with the core teacher to assess achieved goals and next steps. Lydia values the use of the students' IEP to help her individualize achievement criteria and plan accordingly, she explains, "I always try to encourage teachers to have that IEP with them and write all over it and make notes continuously. It is a good tool, which would keep them on track." Lydia strongly valued monitoring students' progress and made sure other teachers did this on an ongoing basis.

**3-5. Collaboration with staff, assistants, and parents.** With reference to collaboration with staff, Vanessa scored 6 out of 6 possible points. She values her partnership with the educational resource teacher to discuss how her student is progressing and consistently planned with her. Vanessa discussed how they assess Peter's strengths and weaknesses, accepts input from the resource teacher on what teaching techniques work and what techniques should be changed, and discuss next steps to ensure they share common expectations. She explains, "I find this very useful because I am able to teach according to Peter's needs. Once I find out what he is excelling at and what he is having difficulty with, I directly communicate all this information with the ERT (educational resource teacher) and his parents." As a core resource teacher, Lydia highly values collaboration with staff, scoring 6 out of 6 possible points. She believes that the students benefit from everybody being involved and many teachers found her as a source of advice and support. In terms of tracking the students' progress, she believes that the classroom teacher should be responsible for tracking progress. However, she mentioned that as the

core resource teacher, she was constantly taking on this responsibility as teachers did not monitor progress as often as they should. Lydia sees her role as supporting the classroom teacher rather than taking control, which highlights an interventionist stance.

Vanessa's discussion of collaboration with the Educational Assistant (EA) received a score of 5 out of 6 possible points. It seemed as though the relationship between herself and the EA was mainly collaborative. She explains that when Peter feels as though he requires extra assistance, she allows him to sit beside her while the EA circulates around the room helping other students. Furthermore, she explains, "I also use the EA to assist me if I am unavailable or working with another student, for example the EA would sit next to Peter and help him with his questions. I think it is important for him to have both myself and the EA to work with him and with other students. This way, the other students don't stigmatize him for having the EA around consistently." Based on this statement, it appears that Vanessa views herself as primarily responsible for instruction, engaging in on-going planning and implementation in collaboration with the EA. She did not emphasize that she meets with the EA on a regular basis; however she did mention that she monitors Peter's progress through anecdotal notes and reports the information to the EA, resource teacher, and the his parents.

Lydia's conversation on collaboration with EA's, scored 5 out of 6 possible points. Lydia strongly believes that the teacher is responsible for telling the EA what should be done in the classroom. She explains, "It's up to the classroom teacher what they want the EA to do. One of the things that I like to see, which I saw mostly in the junior grades, is for the teacher to hand over the class to the EA so that the teacher can work with the students with autism because it's hard to find time to get to know that

student. Other than that, their role is to take instruction from the classroom teacher.”

Lydia also describes how having an EA in the classroom is very useful for the teacher, as many teachers need the reassurance that they were not going to be alone with the student. When describing the behaviour of a particular student, she describes, “The EA would be there to try to avoid the behaviours, deal with them when they do come up, to take the students out when they needed it. For the most part, the EAs are very useful for the student with autism but not all the time because the kids and the teachers get too dependent on them. It is too easy to fall into the mind frame that ‘I don’t have to deal with so and so, because he’s got the EA’.” Although she believes that the teacher is responsible for instructing the EA on what to do in the classroom, it is clear that she values collaboration and finding a balance so that both the teacher and the EA work with the student.

With reference to collaboration with parents, Vanessa scored 5 out of 6 possible points. She has a strong belief that parental involvement has an impact on Peter’s success and respects their role as a co-partner in supporting learning. She describes, “I meet with his parents on a regular basis. I’ve told them that they are welcome to contact me anytime or come into the classroom at any time. I think his parents see that they have the responsibility in working with me to help him attain his learning goals.” Vanessa also discusses how she sends homework home that Peter can do with his parents, which keeps the parents informed on what is being taught in the classroom. She has also shared with the parents some strategies that can be used in the natural environment to help their child generalize skills outside the classroom. She explains “In the grocery store, he can help [his parents] count the change which will help him in his attaining his math goal.” It is

evident that Vanessa believes the parents are part of the team and contacts them frequently. Based on our discussion, it appears that she sees herself as responsible for informing parents through notes sent home when Peter's performance is notable. However, Vanessa did not emphasize the importance of inviting the parents to participate in decision making with regards to programming.

Lydia's discussion on collaboration with parents led to a score of 6 out of 6 possible points. Her meetings with the parents were frequent and were not only initiated when the students' performance was notable. Lydia works with the students' parents closely and as much as possible. She describes, "They are the key to the whole thing. You have to start right from the beginning to develop good relationships with the parents." She discussed how important it is to have a strong relationship with the parents in order to prevent misunderstanding and ensure that the teacher and parents had the same expectations for the student. She describes, "Coming to an agreement with what we are going to focus on for the next couple of weeks and knowing we can't practice everything at the same time. Having a goal set in place that we are all working on until the goal is accomplished is important." Lydia clearly involves the parents in decision making to support the students' learning. She ensures that engaging in dialogue with the parents is not only for the purpose of informing them on student progress. She explains, "At the end of the day, I'd approach the parent and say 'guess what so and so did today' rather than a having a formal meeting...the purpose would have been to try to keep the parents positive, because a lot of them are discouraged and don't see a lot of hope. It would be to give positive feedback about their kid and building the kid up in the parents' eyes." Based

on our discussion, it is clear that Lydia genuinely values parental involvement and their role in supporting the students' success.

Considering all the scores on the P-I scoring form, Vanessa scored 4 out of 5 possible points on her overall rating of primary attribution and overall rating of responsibility. In regards to attribution, Vanessa associated Peter's difficulties to the classroom environment and instruction as she modifies work to meet his needs and aims to learn about his interests in order to help her in planning lessons. However, Vanessa does not entirely attribute Peter's difficulties to the classroom environment or instruction as she discussed how parents have the responsibility in working with her to help Peter attain his learning goals. Vanessa's overall rating of responsibility score reflects her efforts to understand Peter's difficulties and how they influence other aspects of learning. Nevertheless, she also emphasized the EA's role in providing extra assistance and the overdependence of the student on the EA.

Lydia received a score of 5 out of 5 possible points in relation to overall rating of attribution as she strongly believes that teachers can help students with autism meet their learning goals by individualizing assessment and reinforcement. With regards to overall rating of responsibility, Lydia scored 4 out of 5 possible points as she relied on the parents to be a part of the students' learning and having a goal set in place that parents would work on at home that is consistent with what was being taught in school.

### *Results of Open-Ended Questions*

**1. Perspectives about Inclusion for Students with Autism.** Through conversations with Vanessa and Lydia, I learned that they have similar perspectives on the topic of inclusion. Vanessa believes that students with autism should be included in the general education

classroom because this provides them with the opportunity to develop socially among their peers. She explains, “By including these students, they will feel a sense of belonging in the classroom community and be exposed to social modeling from their typical peers.”

Lydia held her beliefs about inclusion before she had experience with students with autism. Throughout her experiences she has seen inclusion work successfully which confirmed her philosophy. Lydia explains, “What teachers believe in is the key to the whole thing. If they believe it, it doesn’t matter what they know they can figure out what to do. If they believe the kid should be there, they will make it happen.” To Lydia, it did not matter how experienced teachers are in special education, as she believed that inclusion can be a success if teachers are willing and make the effort to learn to do so.

**2. Impact on Student with Autism and other Students.** There were several aspects that were raised when discussing how inclusion impacts the student with autism and other students in the classroom. Vanessa mentioned how other students learn to be more sensitive to the needs of others. She explains, “Typical students become humbled and realize that everyone is different with different needs and this is okay.” With an accepting classroom community, Peter feels a sense of belonging. Vanessa also discusses how inclusion has allowed him to benefit from collaborative learning, as he is given the opportunity to have a voice and share his opinions. She describes, “I think Peter benefits socially a lot more being in my classroom as oppose to a segregated classroom. The friendships he has developed [with the other students] mean a lot to him.”

Lydia had similar notions when discussing the impacts of inclusion. To describe the impact inclusion has on the students with autism, she shared the following anecdote: “In the school I worked at, they brought in this dance instructor for the grade 7 and 8

students, and we had a boy and a girl with autism. All the kids loved it, including the two students. I'd defy anyone to go into that gym and pick out the students with autism. There was no way. You never would have known. At their graduation, I told the DJ to put on a rhumba, which was a dance they learned. He put it on and all the kids went into their partners and started to do their dance, which absolutely included these two students with autism. So emotionally, socially, spiritually, the benefits were there."

Based on our conversation, it was clear that Lydia strongly supports inclusion as she believes the students would not have been given this kind of opportunity in a segregated class, as they had the model of their peers. She also mentioned the impact inclusion has on other students, as they see the students with autism as part of their classroom, not someone who stands out. Lydia explains, "When they are running the Toronto Star one day, they are going to be hiring these students with autism to work with them, because they're going to know that they can do it. Yes, they may need to make some accommodations, but the small steps change the world...they will realize that [people with autism] are just the same as they are." Lydia emphasized that teachers must model to students that the world is full of people with diverse abilities and needs, disabilities included, and the way to model this is by accepting a student with autism into the classroom.

**3. Preparation for Inclusion.** Based on her past experience as an instructor therapist at a center that specializes in applied behavioral analysis (ABA) for students with autism, Vanessa acquired how to effectively assess basic academic skills and deal with behavior that students exert in the classroom. Additionally, she received her additional qualification in special education, where she learned how to teach and plan for students

with autism in order to help them excel in their learning. Her volunteer experience in several classrooms has provided her with the opportunity to work with students across the autism spectrum and observe how teachers handle behaviors and meet varying needs.

With regards to what prepared Lydia for including students with autism, she explains, “My belief system was formed much more from my own personal experiences than from any course that I took that was offered...when it’s for your own kid, then it’s for everybody else’s kid, too.” Lydia has a daughter with Down syndrome, which is mainly what has prepared her for inclusion. She took several courses and formed an Integration Action Group with other parents of children with disabilities. She explains, “We all saw the light and this is what we wanted for our kids. We wanted them to be included and to be fully functioning members of society and not to have segregation.” Based on our conversation, it was clear that Lydia’s personal experience was the most influential factor in her support of inclusion in schools.

**4. Strategies for Inclusion.** The questions that were asked pertaining to the strategies the teachers use to build inclusion in their classroom focused on how to increase peer interaction, how to manage behavior, and antecedent procedures that are used to help the students succeed in the classroom. In order to increase peer interaction, Vanessa believes that the student with autism should be included in every aspect of teaching. She describes, “In teaching a science lesson, I try to incorporate Peter in the discussion. When demonstrating an experiment, I would have him come to the front and help conduct the experiment with me.” With this approach, Vanessa hopes that other students will perceive Peter as a valuable member of the classroom and will learn to respect him.

Vanessa has also educated the other students in the classroom about autism. She believes that this has led the other students to treat Peter more nicely and increase their efforts to include him in group activities. To manage behavior, Vanessa uses a token board for the entire class, where each student receives a star for “good work” or demonstrating random acts of kindness. At the end of each week, those tokens are exchanged for a privilege, such as free time at the computer station. By using a token board for the whole class rather than only for Peter, Vanessa aims to treat all students the same in hopes that the student will not feel as though he is different from his peers. This teaches all students to manage their own behavior which is a method that has worked well in her classroom.

An important aspect was raised in relation to reinforcement for behavior. Vanessa mentioned how one of Peter’s weaknesses is shouting out during lessons. She describes, “When he was quiet and attending to the lesson, I would commend him for staying quiet and listening. I gave social praise when he exhibited good behavior because by doing so, he will more likely exhibit this good behavior in future lessons. I want him to see that I am noticing his good behavior.” She feels as though many teachers give too much attention when students are misbehaving. By noticing and directly rewarding students for their good behavior, they are more likely to behave appropriately throughout the day.

In order to increase peer interaction, Lydia arranged recess groups so that the students would always have somebody to interact with. Furthermore, she explains, “We carefully selected group work in the classroom, but did not overuse those very helpful students so they wouldn’t feel that the whole onus was on them.” This allowed the students with autism to practice their social skills and interactive play among their typical

peers. Additionally, Lydia emphasized that recognizing the students' strengths is a key strategy for building inclusion. In our conversation, she described a teacher who had a student with autism who was able to read well, however lacked comprehension skills. Lydia explains, "She would play to his strengths, that's the strategy. So if she needed a volunteer to read, she would pick him and the rest of the class would be amazed at how well he read. When it came to asking comprehension questions, she wouldn't ask him." Lydia also discusses that modifying work in a way that does not make them look too different from the rest of the class will allow the student to feel a sense of belonging in the classroom.

Lydia's view on strategies for managing behavior differed from Vanessa's reward system technique. Lydia discussed how many reward systems that were implemented in the classroom did not work. She explains, "I think the main problem with reward systems is that kids want instant gratification. They don't want to know that if they are good all week they'll get a reward on Friday, and we recognized that." Based on observations in the classroom, Lydia discovered that through the use of a visual schedule and breaking 'work time' into shorter time spans kept the student on task and decreased misbehavior as reinforcement occurred more often.

With regards to antecedent procedures for preventing misbehavior, she emphasized that teachers should avoid situations which they know would cause the student to misbehave. Lydia discusses, "The most helpful for the kids was just getting the tone right from the minute they enter the building. Whether it meant somebody they knew and loved greeting them at the door and walking them to the classroom." If there were instances where the student was too upset, Lydia advises that they be taken to a

‘calming room’ where there are toys and other items that are familiar and interesting.

When the student is in a calm state, they can return to their classroom and any negative attention from the other students will be avoided.

**5. Advice to Teachers.** Lydia was asked to provide advice to other teachers who are attempting to include students with autism in the classroom. Although this was not a question that was asked of Vanessa, I felt as though this was a significant question that seemed natural to ask my second interviewee given her personal experience with a disability in her family. When asked to respond, Lydia emphasized, “Don’t get hung up on the ‘autism’, see the person, and don’t look at the label. Get to know the person and don’t ever think of them as autistic.” This response clearly defines an interventionist perspective, as she looks past the label and focuses on the student as a person with different needs. Lydia also advised to talk to other people who have had experience including students and what has worked well for them. However she stressed not to try a certain strategy that the teacher strongly believes will not work for their student, as all children with autism are different in their own way. Lastly, she encouraged teachers to stay true to their beliefs, even though they may not have school wide support. Lydia explains, “It’s not always impossible if you don’t have that support, I’ve seen teachers in public school that have the inclusive belief system and they keep that child in their classroom. It’s simply the right thing to do.”

## Chapter 5: Discussion

### *Reflection on P-I interview*

Based on the P-I interview with Vanessa, a classroom teacher, and Lydia, a core resource teacher, it is clear that both participants hold beliefs that reflect interventionist views of disability. They expressed this belief through their explanations of their actions within the classroom and their efforts to spend time with the students.

Both participants demonstrated their responsibility in getting to know the students' learning strengths and weaknesses. They emphasized the importance of reading the OSR, talking with previous teachers, and to the parents to find out more information about the student's needs in order to help plan for instruction. This relates to the literature by Jordan et al. (1997) which discusses how teachers with interventionist beliefs are more willing and better able to match the understanding of the students to instruction and interact with them to assess their needs and progress.

Interventionist beliefs that disability is not a fixed and defining characteristic of a learner was emphasized by both participants, as they believed that students can learn given the appropriate instructional accommodations. Vanessa discussed how taking anecdotal notes helps her in making modified assessments for Peter and she took the time to get to know him on a personal level so that she could tailor her lessons to meet his interests. Lydia mentioned how the most exemplary teachers individualize choice and reinforcement to suit the student's needs and motivation. It is clear that both participants believe that they have the responsibility to learn more about the student and what motivates them in order to help them learn in the classroom. Getting to know the student and make personal connections with them is how they help their students with autism

achieve. The responsibility of the teacher to work with students with disabilities was further discussed by Lydia in how she explains that the most exemplary teachers use various instructional strategies to meet the needs of students. Vanessa also incorporates a variety of opportunities for the students to learn through instructional and responding alternatives. Both participants value flexibility in teaching and assessment in order to help their students achieve curriculum expectations. This emphasizes their interventionist perspectives, as their actions demonstrate their belief that students with disabilities can learn if the curriculum and learning environment is accessible.

Collaborating with staff, assistants and parents to share common expectations and increase opportunities for the students with disabilities to achieve is valued by both Vanessa and Lydia, which reinforces their interventionist perspectives. Vanessa discussed how talking with the resource teacher on effective and ineffective teaching techniques is useful as this helps her to teach according to Peter's needs. Lydia mentioned how the students benefit from all involved and many teachers find her as a source of advice and support. This shows her willingness to work with the classroom teacher in order to benefit the students with autism.

With regards to working with educational assistants, both participants emphasized the importance of the teacher to work with the students with autism so that other students do not stigmatize the student with having a one-on-one aid at all times. This notion relates to Knoblock's (1982) article, as he states that one of the main issues facing children with autism is that they have a hard time generalizing skills when they are only working with the same person. If the teacher spends time with the student with autism, they can help the student feel that sense of belonging and reach their academic goals.

The interventionist belief of disability is further evident in Lydia and Vanessa's view of parental involvement as having a strong impact on the students' success. Vanessa discussed how parents understand that they have the responsibility in working with her to help Peter achieve his learning goals. She mentioned that she meets with his parents on a regular basis which further demonstrates her efforts to involve parents in meaningful ways. Lydia mentioned how she aims to have a strong relationship with the parents in order to prevent misunderstandings and ensure that both the teacher and parents had the same expectations. The actions of both participants indicate that they respect the parents' role as a co-partner in supporting the students' learning.

The results of the P-I interview highlights Vanessa and Lydia's interventionist beliefs as they emphasize their responsibility in ensuring the success of their students. Both participants attribute disability as not being fixed in that the students can be reached through the appropriate instruction and classroom environment.

### ***Reflection on Open-Ended Questions***

Based on the results of this study, it is clear that teacher belief about inclusion has a strong impact on teacher practice. Both Vanessa and Lydia strongly believe that students with autism should be included in the classroom as this provides them with opportunity to develop socially among their peers and would not have the model of their peers if they were in a segregated classroom. This perspective relates to the literature by Hundert (2009), which discusses how many teachers and parents have strong ethical beliefs about the rights of children with developmental disabilities to be educated in a typical learning environment with their peers, as students with autism will be exposed to positive social models of normally developing students.

The discussion on the impact that inclusion has on the students in the classroom was in line with the findings in the literature. Vanessa and Lydia demonstrated that by modeling acceptance of a student with autism in the classroom, other students in the class will learn to be more sensitive to the needs of others and respect difference. Both participants mentioned how others have included the student with autism in activities and discussions. Additionally, the other students formed meaningful friendships with the students with autism. This relates to the article by de Boer (2009) that examined changes in attitude and behavior of typical students due to the inclusion of special needs students. For instance, one of the changes in attitude that was described which relates to the findings of this study is that typical students showed reduced fear of human differences and felt more comfortable about these differences. This demonstrates that students learned to not only appreciate differences among them, but similarities as well. As Lydia mentioned, the other students began to perceive the students with autism as a part of their classroom, not a student who stood out.

With regards to the impact of inclusion on the student with autism, both participants emphasized the benefits of collaborative learning. Vanessa mentioned how this has allowed Peter to have a voice and share his opinions, as Lydia described how the students benefited emotionally as well as socially. This relates to the findings of Harrower and Dunlap (2001) which explains how students with autism show increased duration of student interaction with peers, as they are provided with more opportunities to practice collaborative learning in an inclusive classroom.

Based on their past and personal experiences, Vanessa and Lydia were well prepared to include students with disabilities in their classroom. Vanessa mentioned how

applied behavioral analysis (ABA) training has taught her how to assess basic academic skills and manage behavior. Taking the special education course has assisted her to accommodate for students with disabilities and plan to meet the students' needs. Lydia discussed how her inclusive beliefs were formed based on her personal experiences, as she has a daughter with Down syndrome and wanted for her to be educated with non-disabled peers. Lydia's personal connection with a disability is parallel to the finding by Jordan (2010), who discovered that teachers who have family members with disabilities are more interventionist and inclusive. Her strong interventionist view is also evident as she mentions that inclusion can be successful if teachers are willing and make the effort to learn to do so, regardless of how experienced they are in special education.

In our conversation relating to the strategies for inclusion, Vanessa incorporates Peter in every aspect of teaching either when demonstrating experiments or through class discussions. In this approach, Peter's on task behavior is increased and reduces opportunities for misbehavior. This relates to Jordan et al.'s (1997) finding that teachers with interventionist beliefs have more time for instruction as they spend less time managing behavior. Similarly, Lydia discussed how using a visual schedule to break down work into shorter time spans helps to keep the students on task and decreases misbehavior in the classroom. The effectiveness of a visual schedule is also supported in the literature by Bryan and Gast (2000) in which they found that students with autism independently showed high levels of sustained on-task and on-schedule behaviors with the visual and this generalized to new activities.

In order to increase peer interaction, Lydia mentioned how students were carefully selected to work with the students with autism to help support their academic

and social functioning and reduce the need of adult attention. This strategy relates to Fein and Dunn's (1997) article which discussed mediated strategies that involve typical peers, such as peer mentors, tutors, or recess buddies to teach students with autism. Although it was not questioned whether these students were taught how to interact with the student with autism, Fein and Dunn suggest that peer-mediated approaches are most effective when peers are supervised and taught. Lydia also mentioned that teachers should practice modifying the students' work in a way that does not make them look too different from the rest of the class. This is an important aspect, as ensuring instruction is universally accessible will help the students with autism feel included in the classroom.

### ***Implications and Recommendations***

Based on the data collected and conclusions that were drawn from this research project, there are several implications for teacher practice. This study demonstrated the importance of teachers being responsible for their students to help them succeed. When teachers learn that there will be a student with a disability in their class, it is their responsibility to actively investigate the characteristics of this student and avoid making their own preconceived opinions. Rather than viewing the student as "autistic" or "disabled", teachers must look past the label and understand that behaviors that the student may exert are symptoms of the disability.

Teachers have the responsibility of understanding the needs of the students and working to meet their individual needs in order for inclusion to be successful. This means that teachers must spend time to get to know their students on a personal level, understanding their interests, strengths and weaknesses in order to help incorporate individualized goals and objectives in planning for classroom instruction. The inclusive

teacher must be prepared to be persistent in their beliefs and continue to implement various strategies to help the student until a strategy is deemed effective. However, every student with autism is unique in their own way and it is the teacher's responsibility to learn what is best for the individual student. The most important aspect of teaching a student with autism is to provide the students with opportunities to achieve success, by breaking down tasks and immediately reinforcing the students for appropriate behavior.

Although the teacher is responsible for meeting the needs of the students, other individuals within and outside of the school should be involved in planning and implementing programs for the student with autism. Teachers should reach out to previous teachers, resource consultants, educational assistants, parents/guardians, and the students themselves in order for the student to succeed in and outside the classroom environment.

Not only are there implications for teacher practice, there are implications for the education of teacher candidates and their professional development. Throughout my experience in teacher education, personal beliefs about disability were not discussed as often as it should be with regards to curriculum planning, behavior management, assessment, and other practice teaching topics. By discussing the various belief systems that teachers hold, candidates will begin to develop their own belief system and recognize how their beliefs can shape their interactions with students. Teacher candidates should reflect on their beliefs and actions throughout their practice. Reflecting on what is done in the classroom, the reason as to why it was done, and thinking about the effectiveness of their actions will help teachers create the best learning environment for all students.

***Further Study***

As previously stated, the goal of this research project was to examine exemplary practice and gain insights for my own developing pedagogy. My goal was not to discover findings that are generalizable across all educators or all classroom environments, but to give me the opportunity to relate the information I found to data that has been collected by other researchers in the past. The findings of this study have demonstrated that there are similarities that exist within the literature. As this study has focused on the elementary level, further research on inclusion in the secondary level would be valuable. It must be recognized that, due to a small sample size, the findings of this study cannot be viewed as being representative of other educators or other classroom settings that include students with autism. A further study would require more participants so that stronger correlations and conclusions can be made regarding the relationship between teacher beliefs and practices.

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### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What are your thoughts on including students with autism in the general education classroom?
2. How has inclusion of the student autism in your classroom affected you as a teacher and a person?
3. What challenges do the students with autism have in the school?
4. What courses or experiences have you had to prepare you to include your students with autism in the classroom?
5. What are the strategies you use to build inclusion in your classroom?
  - What strategies do you put in place to increase peer interaction between student with ASD and typical students?
  - How do you teach the student with autism with ASD to manage their own behaviour?
  - What antecedent procedures do you put in place (i.e. Priming, prompt delivery, picture schedules)?
6. What is (student A)'s background? Tell me a bit about him or her. How is he/she currently doing?
- 7a. Tell me what happened when (student A) first came to your attention.
  - What records did you check?
  - What steps did you take to learn about him/her?
  - Did you actively seek to familiarize yourself with him/her?
  - Assessment – did you request/conduct any?
  - How did you establish what entry point in the curriculum he/she was at?
  - With whom did you confer? – Parents, resource, previous teacher? – How many times? When?
  - What did you hope to find out?
  - Was that what you expected?
  - What did you decide to do?
- 7b. Did you do anything special for this student in your program?
  - What did you try? – Why did you do that?
  - How did you deal with curriculum expectations?
  - Did you do instructional accommodations? – What did you hope he/she would achieve?
  - What do you think are the kinds of accommodations that (student A) needs?
  - Did you accommodate for other areas? – (i.e. Social needs?)
- 7c. How do you keep track of (student A)'s progress?
  - Do you do anything to keep track of his/her individual progress? Why do you do that? - For what purpose? How often?
  - Do you monitor progress on the IEP? - Who else is involved?

8a. Do you work with any other teachers on staff? – resource (SERTs) principal

*-How does that happen? – fit with program?*

*-Why do you do that? – can you explain how it works?*

*-How useful did you find this for (Student A)? – For you – as a source of advice?*

*Support?*

*-Who keeps track of the IEP part of Student A's progress?*

*-Who else do you work with?*

8b. Do you work with an EA for (student A)?

*-How does that happen? – fit with program?*

*-Why do you do that? – can you explain how it works?*

*-How useful is this for your work with student A?*

*-What else do you do?*

9. How do you work with (Student A)'s parents (guardians, family)?

*-When did you meet the initially? – For what purpose?*

*-Did you or the parent initiate the meeting?*

*-How often do you meet them now? - For what purposes?*

*-Who initiates these meetings?*

*-What do you see as the parents' responsibility in working with you? Why do you think that is so?*

10. How has the inclusion of the student with autism in your classroom affected that student?

11. How has the inclusion of the student with autism in your classroom affected the other (non-disabled) students?

12. What advice would you offer to others who are attempting to include students with autism in general education classes?

13. Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about how inclusion services to students with autism works in your school?

## Appendix B: The Pathognomonic-Interventionist Interview Scoring Form

Codeable units are one of three types of statements:

1. Attributes to self or others characteristics such as attitude, ability, motivation, as causes to explain behaviours, achievement, learning difficulties etc.
2. Judgement statements about a student's characteristics
3. Rationalization statements about teacher's actions including reasons and explanations for the actions ('because' statements or equivalent).

Overall rating of Primary Attribution.

1. Teacher attributes cause of student's difficulties to characteristics internal to the student (ability, motivation, IQ, disability, designation/label)
- 2.
3. Teacher attributes student's difficulties to parental, cultural, second language and other exogenous factors.
- 4.
5. Teacher attributes student's difficulties to previous and/or current school and instructional factors and lack of opportunity to learn

Overall rating of Responsibility.

1. Teacher uses child's exceptionality designation to justify own non-involvement and exemption from responsibility.
- 2.
3. Teacher accommodates student but limits it to activities associated with child's designation, not to needed functional objectives (e.g. accommodates time to learn, 'lowers expectations')
- 4.
5. Teacher describes efforts to understand child's disability/difficulties and how they influence other aspects of learning. Justification/explanations of interventions seen as being own responsibility in order to meet broad set of individual student needs.

### I. ENTRY PHASE

1. Information about individual student:

Teacher's priority for finding out about new student with a disability:

1. Teacher does not familiarize him/herself with the characteristics of the incoming student upon entry to the class
2. Teacher reads/examines information routinely delivered to him/her (e.g. IEP, summary of information from previous grade)
3. Teacher actively investigates characteristics of incoming student (e.g. OSR, IEP, Previous teachers, parents, resource teacher)

2. Formal assessment

1. Teacher understands purpose of formal assessment (psycho-educational, normative) to be to *confirm* student's disability category

2. Teacher vacillates between understanding assessment as confirmatory of deficit and as instructionally useful
  3. Teacher expects formal assessments to uncover information that is useful for instructional planning and adaptation (e.g. learning characteristics and preferences, entry-level skills)
3. Grade level vs. functional level
1. Teacher does not identify individual student's entry point for learning but uses curriculum expectations set for the grade level
  2. Teacher relies on information in the OSR or IEP information or regularly scheduled board-wide tests to identify student's entry point for learning (grade level identifiers)
  3. Teacher relies on own and resource teacher's informal assessments and individual observations with formal assessment and IEP data to identify student's entry point for learning

Subscore for Section 1 =

## **II PROGRAMMING.**

### 1. Goals and Objectives

1. Teacher does not use individual goals and objectives in planning and implementing classroom instruction for the student.
2. Teacher occasionally but not systematically refers to individualized goals and objectives in relation to classroom instruction for this student
3. Teacher is systematic in incorporating individualized goals and objectives in planning for and implementing classroom instruction for this student

### 2. Social needs.

1. Teacher is not aware of the social/friendship needs of the student and does not do anything to assist the student to integrate socially in the class
2. Teacher is aware of the student's social needs but does not act to integrate the student socially in the class
3. Teacher believes that the social needs of the student are important and acts to integrate the student socially (e.g. arranging buddies, co-operative group roles, modelling acceptance and caring, including student in class routines and activities)

### 3. Accommodations.

1. Teacher understands instructional accommodations to mean "lowering expectations" (reducing quantity of work, lowering performance standards). In the case of modified objectives, teacher expects others will implement them (E.A., parents, resource or Special Education teacher)
2. Teacher makes accommodations for the student which lower expectations but provides opportunities to work beyond the expectations

3. Teacher understands accommodations to mean maintaining curriculum expectations, and builds a variety of opportunities to learn through instructional and responding alternatives, supplemental technology, etc.
4. Monitoring progress.
  1. Teacher judges student performance in relation to grade-level criteria set for total class, or grade level criteria set for modified program
  2. Teacher judges student performance by compromising between grade-level expectations and student's efforts to meet them
  3. Teacher judges student performance in terms of individualized achievement criteria designed in tandem with the student's IEP.
5. Formal vs. Regular reporting.
  1. Teacher believes that student's progress need only be reviewed at formal reporting times (e.g. when required to report to parents, report cards etc.)
  2. Teacher believes in ongoing monitoring of student progress, but does not do so systematically (too little time, too many to track, anecdotal records not kept up)
  3. Teacher believes that student progress needs to be regularly monitored and has a variety of ways of doing so (anecdotal records, check sheets, individual notes and communications with others)

Subscore for Section 2 =

### **III COLLABORATION WITH STAFF.**

1. Individual vs. collaboration with Resource teacher, colleagues.
  1. Teacher sees resource/special education (if student part-time in class) teacher as primarily responsible for working directly with student. Teacher does not integrate own program with others'.
  2. Teacher values collaboration with resource/Special Education teacher as useful and informative but does not integrate own program and expectations for this student with others
  3. Teacher values collaboration, uses it to share common expectations, use resources to increase opportunity for student to achieve in class.
2. Tracking progress.
  1. Teacher assumes resource teacher and/or others are keeping track of student's progress in their respective pieces of the student's program.
  2. Teacher assumes resource teacher and/or others are keeping track of student's progress in their respective pieces of the student's program, and that checking in with each other is needed occasionally.
  3. Teacher values frequent conferencing and planning with resource and other teachers and expects that resource will support student learning objectives in the classroom (e.g. pre-teaching vocabulary, concepts, scribing, helping with accommodations)

Subscore for Section 3 =

**IV. COLLABORATION WITH ASSISTANTS.** (E.A.s, volunteers, student teachers)

1. Planning and implementation.

1. Teacher views EA as primarily responsible for planning and implementing accommodations and learning objectives
2. Teacher views guiding the EA as important in designing and implementing instruction, but then leaves EA to implement.
3. Teacher views self as primarily responsible for instruction, engaging in ongoing planning, and implementation with EA.

2. Monitoring.

1. Teacher views EA as primarily responsible for monitoring student's progress, assumes that he/she will keep track and update program as needed. Checks in at formal reporting times.
2. Teacher views guiding the EA as important but expects EA to monitor progress and work independently, checking in as needed.
3. Teacher expects to meet EA regularly, receive progress report and guide further development of intervention based on student progress.

Subscore for Section 4 =

**V. COLLABORATION WITH PARENTS.**

1. Parental roles

1. Teacher does not appear to respect parent's knowledge and role in supporting the child's learning.(e.g. sees parents as part of the problem, interfering or neglectful, having nothing to contribute).
2. Teacher values the parents' role but seldom or inconsistently draws upon it.
3. Teacher respects parent's role as a co-partner in supporting child's learning. Teacher believes that parents are part of the team and contacts them frequently.

2. Parental responsibility.

1. Teacher does not see self as responsible for involving parents beyond required reporting duties (report card times, getting signature on IEP).
2. Teacher sees self as responsible for informing parents through notes home, in student agenda, e-mails, etc. when student's performance is notable.
3. Teacher believes he/she has the responsibility to involve parents in meaningful ways that relate to the student's progress (invitations to participate in decision making, frequent meetings in school and by phone).

Subscore for Section 5 =

**TOTAL SCORE:**

**Appendix C: Letter of Participation and Consent**

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the inclusion of students with autism in the general education classroom for the purposes of investigating an educational topic as a major assignment for our program. I think that your knowledge and experience will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Jackie Eldridge. My research supervisor is Dr. Anne Jordan. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 minute interview that will be tape-recorded. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your office or workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my assignment work will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data has been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will share with you a copy of my notes to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Rana Chaaya  
416- 910- 6700  
rana.chaaya@utoronto.ca

Instructor's Name: Dr. Jackie Eldridge  
Email address: jackie.eldridge@utoronto.ca  
Phone number: 647-994-6562

Research Supervisor's Name: Dr. Anne Jordan  
Email address: anne.jordan@utoronto.ca  
Consent Form

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I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Rana Chaaya and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Name (printed): \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_