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Educators' Perspectives on Coordination of Transition Programming for Early Childhood Students With ASD in Inclusive Settings

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Abstract

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MA, Walden University 2021

MA, Strayer University, 2014

BS, University of South Alabama, 2004

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Abstract

Coordination of special education prekindergarten (PK) to kindergarten (K) transition programming for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) represents significant changes for students within inclusive school environments. The problem addressed by this basic qualitative study involved barriers, challenges, supports, and successes in the coordination of transition programming from PK to K for students with ASD. This study addressed a gap in the literature on educators' perspectives on the coordination of transition programming. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory framed this study that explored the perspectives of 11 educators. Data were collected from semistructured digitally audio recorded interviews conducted with six PK and five K teacher volunteers who worked in inclusive classrooms in three public suburban schools located in the southern region of the United States. Data were analyzed using an inductive approach, including organizing data, coding, and finding patterns, categories, and themes to address the research question. Thematic analysis revealed six themes. Participants viewed coordination of transition programming as successful when there were (a) professional learning opportunities; (b) communication among stakeholders; (c) mutuality in relationships; (d) cycles of planning, implementing, and assessing; (e) team collaborations; and (f) accountability practices. Additional studies on special education transition programs are recommended. Findings of this study can promote positive social change by heightening awareness and providing a deeper understanding of the importance of coordination of transition programming for PK to K students with ASD, their families, and early childhood educators in inclusive settings.

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Dedication

I would like to give honor and praise to my God; I truly know that through you all things are possible.

To my trailblazing mother, Cheryl Franks, thank you for your everlasting love and support. Thank you for being my best friend and for encouraging me to continue to reach any desired goal in life. You have supported my professional accomplishments and have offered me endless advice over the years. I am forever grateful and blessed to have you as my mother.

To my beautiful daughter, X'zandria Dees, thank you for inspiring me to pursue my Ph.D. studies in the field of special education. As you are an award winning artist on the autism spectrum, I have learned so many wonderful things about the pure essence of life through your angelic presence.

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Special heartfelt thanks to my sisters Tamara and Tyra for their encouragement and motivation throughout my academic endeavors. I would like to extend an appreciation to my colleagues for providing a supportive network of collaboration for shared passions, visions, and goals. Thank you all for your support and contributions towards the completion of my academic journey.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The topic of this study is the coordination of transition programing for children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) from prekindergarten (PK) into kindergarten (K). In this basic qualitative research study, I explored educators' perspectives on coordination of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. This study was needed because transition from PK to K is an important milestone for children with ASD and their family members, educators, and service providers who are involved in the education and care of children with ASD. The Education Commission of the States (2020) began reviewing the PK-K transition practices of schools and programs that serve children with disabilities in 2020 because academic disparities in children's learning can occur during their early years of development. Researchers have suggested that negative outcomes may be associated for children with ASD who are transitioning to a new school environment when there is a lack of coordination (Greenburg et al., 2020). However, few studies have examined the coordination of transitioning programming for children with ASD based on their transitional needs, the benefits they receive, or the specific programming support given for both children and families during the PK-K transition process (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). The potential for positive social change exists if study results are used to assist educators, parents, and service providers in understanding the coordination of transitioning services for children with ASD and the support needed to ensure that children with ASD have a smooth and successful transition between their PK to K special education services between settings. In Chapter 1, I discuss the background of the study

and present the problem addressed by this study and its purpose. I discuss the conceptual framework that guided the study, the nature and significance of the study, define key terms, and provide my assumptions, scope and delimitations, and limitations of the study.

Background of the Study

In 2004, the reauthorized version of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was established by President George W. Bush (Yell et al., 2021). Children birth through age 2 with qualifying disabilities receive early intervention services in programs for infants and toddlers under the IDEA Part C if they have been identified as having ASD on their third birthday (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). When the child is diagnosed with ASD, they may be eligible to receive special education and related services in their local school districts under IDEA Part B (U.S. Department of Education, 2022a). When children with ASD are transitioning from PK to K, IDEA sets specific guidelines that aid in decreasing the stress levels of those involved in the transition process by ensuring that the child's special education programming will not be interrupted during the transition process.

In 2021, 7.2 million students between the ages of 3 and 21 received special education services under IDEA to support their academic challenges (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), many of whom had been diagnosed with ASD during their early childhood years. The IDEA serves individuals within the age range of 3 to 21. The population of individuals served through IDEA are autism at a rate of 11%, developmental delays at 7%, intellectual disabilities at 6%, and emotional disturbances at 5% to assist students with their academic needs (National Center for Education Statistics,

2022). Therefore, children with ASD may qualify to receive special education services under multiple disabilities outlined within the IDEA guidelines.

The transition from PK to traditional schooling in K is an important time in the lives of children, their families, and the professionals who work to meet the needs of children with ASD. During the transitional period from PK to K, children will experience a uniquely different environment from their homes and early educational settings (Puccioni et al., 2020). Educators are essential in building strong linkages between the home and school settings during this time. Transition support practices are essential for children with ASD because they will have unforeseen challenges as they navigate changes throughout school (Fontil et al., 2019). Successful PK-K transition programming requires collaboration across multiple distinct systems that serve PK and K students (Cook et al., 2019; Fontil et al., 2019).

The PK-K transition for students with ASD has also presented challenges for some families as their child enters K (Fontil et al., 2019). Fontil et al. (2019) identified K teachers' levels of engagement in transition programming as being the leading barrier that negatively influenced supportive practices for students and their families as students with disabilities transitioned from PK to K. Purtell et al. (2020) recommended further studies that explore supports that families of children with ASD need during the transition process due to the challenges faced by children and family members. Educators have reported that approximately 50% of children with ASD experienced moderate to poor transition programming success levels (Fontil et al., 2019). As a result of unsuccessful transitions between PK and K for students with ASD, their classroom instruction and

ability to work independently have been affected (Fontil et al., 2019). Early childhood educators who work with children transitioning programming for children moving from PK to K have expressed a concern that they are more concerned with children with ASD entering elementary schools (entry into K is entry into elementary school), when they are compared to children that are diagnosed with other neurodevelopmental disabilities (Fontil et al., 2019).

The Education Commission of the States (2020) identified two transition practices for schools or programs to consider in creating a smooth transition. First, there must be a seamless transition from PK-K for students identified with special needs. Second, schools or programs serving children with ASD must help the child and family move smoothly and successfully from one learning setting to another. Schools and programs must align the basic pedagogical components of early learning in PK to create continuous learning and teaching experiences in K that support children with disabilities (Efthymia, 2018).

According to the Education Commission of the States (2020), school districts in the United States handle transition programming differently, and coordination begins at the state department level. There are 23 states within the United States that have specific policies in place to guide PK-K transition programming (Education Commission of the States, 2020). Seventeen states in the United States have established PK-K guidance for addressing family engagement during transition programming that involves statutes and policy regulations (Education Commission of the States, 2020). The U.S. Department of Education provides technical assistance to state supported transitioning programs (Early Childhood Technical Center, 2018).

This study is needed because coordination of PK-K transitioning programming for children with ASD represents significant elements of change for children regarding their stability, consistency, and predictability over time within a new school environment (see Greenburg et al., 2020). The successful transition into K relies on the student's readiness to attend school and the teachers' readiness to support the student's academic needs (Sulek et al., 2019). School readiness will incorporate skill sets that include following instructions, working independently, and attending to tasks as the students prepare to transition to their educational setting (Sulek et al., 2019). If a child with ASD does not receive the appropriate transition support, their challenges may become severe and lead to a lifetime of negative consequences (Singh & Anekar, 2018). This study addressed a gap in the literature on PK to K programming for children with ASD.

Problem Statement

The research problem addressed in this basic qualitative study was that there was a gap in the literature about educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. Despite the importance of PK-K transition programming, there exists a gap in the literature on PK-K transitions and transitioning programming at PK-K levels of early education, and researchers have recommended that more studies are needed (Cook et al., 2019; Greenburg et al., 2020; McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021; Purtell et al., 2020). Purtell et al. (2020) noted that there is limited information about coordination between providers of early intervention services for the transition process from the transitioning school site to the receiving school. In addition, urban and rural school districts offer PK-K transition

programming for students with ASD (Mitchell, 2021). Suburban school districts are often overlooked; therefore, urban and rural school districts have acquired more research involving academics (Mitchell, 2021). Limited research has focused on collaborations across multiple distinct systems and barriers associated with making PK- K transition programs successful for positive child outcomes (Cook et al., 2019; Greenburg et al., 2020). Cook et al. (2019) found that limited research has focused on how early childhood leaders and teachers in PK programs and elementary school personnel coordinate their transition programs with one another. Moreover, few studies have examined the transitional needs of children with ASD from PK to K or the challenges, difficulties, or benefits involved in receiving specific supports during the transition process; therefore, researchers have suggested the need for further research (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021; Purtell et al., 2020).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. The study took place in three suburban school districts located in the southern United States on campuses that serve both PK and K students. For the study, the term "educators" referred to PK teachers and K teachers who work in inclusive settings serving children with ASD in their classrooms. In this study, I explored the coordination of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings by PK-K teachers. Entrance into K is considered a key transition that students experience,

and it has lasting consequences for their academic development (Purtell et al., 2020). Therefore, more research is needed on this topic.

Research Question

One research question guided this study to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings:

Research question (RQ): What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings?

Conceptual Framework

The theories and concepts that grounded this study included Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory, which has been widely used in research studies to support various levels of education and development. Bronfenbrenner (2006) emphasized how environmental events are the most immediate and potent factors to consider because they influence a person's development and engagement with activities. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory was used to identify the influence of social environments on human development. Ecological systems theory has been used to capture the multifaceted processes and results within educational settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). The ecological transition shifts involve a change in a role, which may include the behaviors and expectations with positions in society.

Bronfenbrenner's (2006) ecological systems theory identified the child at the center of a series of systems that influence their growth and development. The ecological

theory has five dimensions: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem system involves any professionals who provide support to the child and family (Predescu et al., 2018). The educators are important and are critical to the child's development in the microsystem. The microsystem level represents the supportive structure for the child that includes the child's family and educators who directly support the child and family unit (Predescu et al., 2018). Predescu et al. (2018) suggested that the mesosystem encompasses the interrelationships and influences between the microsystem and exosystem.

According to Predescu et al. (2018), the exosystem includes the society, such as government, political, economic, laws, and educational systems. Social ideologies and cultural values are identified in the microsystem (Predescu et al., 2018). Predescu et al. noted that environmental changes, including historical events and life transitions, occur in the chronosystem. The ecological systems outline developmental outcomes between individuals and their ecological contexts over time (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Regarding the child's transition from PK to K, the interrelationships among educators, parents, and the student occur in the microsystem and mesosystem. The exosystem includes any policies or procedures established by school officials to assist in the preschool transition process for students with ASD. The macrosystem involves external factors influencing the families' social ideologies and cultural norms. The range of ecologically oriented system theories involving school transition has commonly used the ecological and dynamic model of transition to explain linkages among the child, home environment, school setting, and neighborhood factors (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998).

The conceptual framework provides a narrative for the key factors, variables, and constraints and identified presumed relationships among them (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Miles and Huberman (1994) suggested that a conceptual framework is an approach that focuses and sets boundaries for a research study. The design of the conceptual framework illustrated the relevant variables and identified conceptual distinctions concerning the educators' perspectives.

Nature of the Study

The research method used for this study was a basic qualitative study. I used semistructured interviews for data collection. Basic qualitative research is used to obtain participants' experiences in their own words and the meanings they attributed to their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Qualitative research uses interpretive techniques to describe, decode, and translate the meaning of the occurring phenomena in the social world (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). A basic qualitative study was appropriate for this study because it explored the phenomenon of interest from the participants' viewpoint (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

Data were collected during semistructured interviews from participants employed in a suburban school district in the southern region of the United States. Semistructured interviews allowed me, as the researcher, to gain participants' subjective reconstruction of their experiences (see Seidman, 2015). The semistructured interview questions were open ended, probing questions (see Appendix A). Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data and assisted in identifying codes and constructing themes from the participant responses. According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis has been

widely used to identify, analyze, and report patterns within a data collection. Raw data collected from the participants were transcribed and coded to determine codes, patterns, categories, and emerging themes. Thematic coding was used for this basic qualitative study to identify recurring themes in the qualitative study. Therefore, the thematic coding process integrated emergent themes and refined themes obtained during data collection (see Khalil, 2014). I interpreted the meaning of the participants' responses (see Khalil, 2014). There was no discrepant information; however, it would have been reported if discrepant data had been identified from participants.

Definitions

Key concepts of the study are listed below to help the reader understand the frame of reference in which the terms were used.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): ASD is a neurological disorder that affects a child's communication skills and behavior (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). The signs and symptoms of ASD will often start to appear at age 2 in the child (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, (2022).

Family-school partnership: A family-school partnership includes district leaders, school staff, and families working together to create healthier communities and to identify any challenges to family engagement and the child's health (Almalky et al., 2020).

Inclusive setting: An inclusive setting is an environment where students with disabilities are taught in a general education classroom (Walker et al., 2021). According

to Walker et al. (2021), the students identified with disabilities are provided with support and services in the general education classroom.

*Individualized education program (IEP)**:*** The IEP creates an opportunity for education stakeholders to collaborate and implement best practices to help improve the educational outcome for students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The IEP is designed to meet the unique learning needs of a student who is identified with a qualified disability. An IEP is required for a student to receive special education services (Chandroo et al., 2018).

Least restrictive environment: The least restrictive environment is a mandated policy regarding federal and state laws that support students with disabilities in receiving an education to the maximum extent appropriate (Disability Rights California, 2021). Students with special education services should not be removed from general education classes unless their needs cannot be met or achieved satisfactorily (Disability Rights California, 2021).

Special education services and supports: Student outcomes are improved when the student has access to the necessary infrastructure to assist administrators, teachers, and families within the school setting. Special education services are where students with special needs receive education to address their differences while integrating them among their peers (Benitez Ojeda & Carugno, 2021). In addition, special education services are designed for instruction at no cost to the parents, and the services address the unique needs of a child with a qualifying disability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022).

Transition practices: Activities that will support families in identifying the students' goals for participation in K are referred to as transition practices (Purtell et al., 2020). Transition practices may include participating in small group discussions concerning K expectations and encouraging students to interact with unfamiliar adults within the school setting (Purtell et al., 2020).

Assumptions

I had several assumptions in this study that I present in this section. I assumed that the volunteer participants met the participation criteria requirements, which included the following: (a) PK and K teachers who have had experience involving coordination of transition programming for students with ASD and (b) PK and K teachers who were willing to participate in a Zoom virtual platform or telephone interview. I assumed the volunteer participants provided honest, accurate, and factual responses during their interviews. I assumed that the educators selected for the study understood the significance of this study.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope of this study was limited to PK-K teachers from three public suburban schools with PK and K transition programming located on the same campus for students with ASD in inclusive settings in the southern United States. The study focused on the perspectives of PK and K teachers and did not include the perspectives of other educational stakeholders within the suburban school districts. This study did not cover PK-K teachers in rural or urban school districts. Districts that have transition programming on separate campuses or do not offer inclusive settings for children in PK

and K were excluded from this study. This study was limited to PK-K teachers from three inclusive suburban public schools. Findings of the study provided insight into the challenges and successes involving the preschool transition process for children with ASD. Mitchell (2021) found that there is a growing body of research that has examined urban and rural schools and that suburban school districts are often overlooked for research studies. This study addressed the gap in the literature on educators' perspectives on coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive suburban settings. Findings of this study are limited to PK-K teachers in three inclusive suburban schools that offer transition programming for children with ASD and do not extend beyond these teachers or schools; therefore, findings are limited in transferability.

The conceptual framework was based on Bronfenbrenner's (2006) ecological system theory. According to Bronfenbrenner and Morris (1998) a range of systems are involved in the school transition process that affects transitioning child and their family between PK and K. The ecological systems theory helped to explain various links between the child, the child's home environment, and the child's school setting where coordination of PK-K transition programming takes place.

Limitations

The study had several limitations due to the global pandemic labeled as COVID-19. In March 2021, 23% of educators declared that they intended to either leave or retire from their position because of the pandemic (Zamarro et al., 2022). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommended practicing social distancing and avoiding

poorly ventilated indoor spaces to help prevent the spread of COVID19 (as cited in Kapalamula et al., 2022). Thus, I conducted semistructured interviews through a virtual platform called Zoom due to COVID-19 restrictions. The semistructured interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes, and the semistructured interviews were digitally recorded through Zoom. I could have held strong preconceptions based on my current and previous experiences as a parent and advocate for a child with ASD. To reduce influences due to my bias, I took steps to remain objective in the study. I followed an interview protocol and accurately transcribed the participants' responses. Ravitch and Carl (2021) recommended that researchers use a reflective journal to help them researchers monitor their biases. Therefore, I used a reflective journal to reflect on the participants' responses throughout the interview process.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because the results of the qualitative research have the potential to contribute to a body of literature that may increase levels of awareness, research, and best practices in coordination of the school transition programming process for children with ASD, their families, and the professionals who work with children with ASD. Educational stakeholders may use the study to extend further their knowledge of evidence-based transition practices within school districts for young children with ASD. The study may guide educational stakeholders in implementing structural changes for the coordination of transition programming within school districts as it relates to identifying specific challenges, barriers, or successes in facilitating positive transition programming for children with ASD. Systematic changes in the policies and procedures can promote

positive social changes for children with ASD. Identifying the challenges or successes with school transitions may result in the development of adopting policies and procedures to help improve the school transition process for educators and children with ASD. The study's findings may assist public schools with training and professional development initiatives that will be essential in ensuring a positive school transition for children with ASD.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. The following elements of the study addressed throughout Chapter 1 included background information, conceptual framework, nature of the study, research assumptions, the scope and delimitations, limitations of the research, and the overall significance of the study. In Chapter 1, I provided information involving the perceived effectiveness of the coordination for the suburban schools' transition programming for students with ASD. Throughout Chapter 1 of this basic qualitative study, I explored the various policies of the IDEA regarding special education services. I also included an explanation of the research study and stated the problem that was investigated. In Chapter 2, I provide a current review of literature related to the PK transition to K for children with ASD.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I describe transition practices and the outcomes of parent and teacher collaboration involving students with ASD. The school transition process is a pivotal milestone for families and educational stakeholders. Therefore, a child's educational journey may profoundly influence their level of achieving the desired academic success in a classroom. Educators are essential in providing the structural support and accommodations to assist a child in meeting the local school districts' state-mandated objectives.

Additionally, parental involvement has been noted as positively influencing the child and other individuals involved with the child's educational experience. Throughout the years, students with autism have transitioned to primary schooling and have made great strides in their academic and social development. Chapter 2 closes with a summary narrating various aspects of the literature review.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases were used for the study: ERIC, SAGE Journals, Education Source, Walden Library ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The following search terms were used for the study: *preschool transition, transition planning, teacher collaboration, school readiness, inclusive practices, professional development, teacher self-efficacy, school partnerships, early intervention, ASD, Individuals with Education Disability Act, Individualized Education Program,* and *active involvement for students with ASD.*

Literature Review

The literature review for this study consisted of peer-reviewed articles and seminal articles from the databases. Most articles selected for the literature review were written within the past 5 years. The literature also consisted of a few seminal peer-reviewed articles that were used to explore the context of the study further. A limited amount of literature examined the coordination of PK-K transition programming for students with ASD and the specific needs of children and families (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). As a result, I cross referenced educational literature relevant to the study. In this portion of Chapter 2, I review the current gap in the literature regarding the school transition process for students with autism. The review of literature begins with the conceptual framework, history of school transitions, preschool transition, transition planning, teacher collaboration, school readiness, inclusive practices, teacher self-efficacy, school partnerships, early intervention, ASD, IDEA, IEP, and active involvement for students with ASD.

Conceptual Framework

According to Maxwell (2013), the conceptual framework includes a system of assumptions, concepts, expectations, theories, and beliefs that support and inform the research study. The characterization of qualitative research should incorporate elements of flexibility rather than fixed designs, which promotes a reflexive process for the participants (Maxwell, 2013). A conceptual framework provides an interpretative approach to social reality. Qualitative research methods are an adequate tool for investigating a complex phenomenon (Jabareen, 2009).

The concept of Bronfenbrenner involved evaluating the developing person and their interaction in the environment (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Bronfenbrenner defined ecological transition as a shift in a role or setting that occurs throughout an individual's life span (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). An ecological transition may include entering preschool or primary school (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of mutual accommodation and the changing properties of the immediate settings (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). The presence of the relation in both directions establishes minimal conditions for the existence of a dyad (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). A dyad exists whenever two individuals start paying attention to one another's activities (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). The dyad is essential in development because it constitutes a critical context that serves as the foundation of the microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 2006).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory views child development as a complex relationship system. The complex nature of the relationships affects multiple levels of the environment, which incorporates the immediate settings of the family, school, cultural values, laws, and customs (Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Bronfenbrenner (2006) emphasized the importance of evaluating the interaction of the larger environment in the development of the child. Bronfenbrenner divided the individual's territory into five di□erent systems. The five different systems of the ecological theory are microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. The microsystem is the most influential component of the ecological systems theory.

However, the microsystem is the most immediate environmental setting because it includes the developing child, family, and the school environment.

Review of the Literature

Autism Spectrum Disorder

ASD is a lifelong neurodevelopmental disability where individuals display communication and social skills deficits. The number of children diagnosed with autism in the United States is 1 in 54 for children who are 8 years old, and ASD is steadily increasing within various communities (Knopf, 2018). ASD symptoms are detected and diagnosed during children's early developmental stages, and children with ASD are eligible for early care and education as infants, toddlers, and preschoolers. Individuals diagnosed with ASD have complex care needs that may require integrated services, such as health promotion, personalized care, and rehabilitation services, which are not limited to the educational and social sectors (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019).

ASD is categorized into three levels, and the categories of ASD are determined by the person's ability to communicate with others, transition to new situations, and manage their daily routine. A child on the autism spectrum may be diagnosed with ASD Level 1, ASD Level 2, or ASD Level 3, depending on the child's strengths and limitations. ASD Level 1 is defined as high functioning ASD, where there is minimal support, and the person can speak in complete sentences (Gilmore, 2019). Children diagnosed with ASD Level 1 may be unable to transition from one activity to another within the classroom setting. ASD Level 2 is considered a broad autism phenotype where symptoms are mild. The child may have communication issues and find it difficult to change their focus

(Gilmore, 2019). For example, a child with ASD Level 2 may become extremely upset as they transition to leaving their classroom setting. ASD Level 3 is labeled as severe autism, where the child will require additional support for daily living skills (Gilmore, 2019).

Additionally, within ASD Level 3, the child's communication ability is limited, and the person will often engage in repetitive behaviors. A child with ASD Level 3 may indefinitely require a caregiver's assistance and support. Identifying each level of ASD has been instrumental for educators and families in determining the types of support and services needed for children on the various levels.

School Transition Programming

The earliest school transition programming experienced by children in the United States is formal school transitioning, where children enter K from PK (Purtell et al., 2020). The bridging of two different stages of education, defined as preschool and elementary school environments, is important and essential to a child's positive educational journey (Wilder & Lillvist, 2018). The U.S. Department of Education provides opportunities for state and local districts to define their best practices for school transitions and coordination efforts to assist in development and planning (U.S. Department of Education Office of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2017).

The transition programming process usually begins with planning and occurs during an IEP) meeting (Chandroo et al., 2018). The IEP meeting is an essential aspect of a much larger and more complex process, including a series of coordinated activities for the child (Chandroo et al., 2018). Although there is a growing acceptance of inclusive

education policy for students with ASD, the effective inclusion of children with autism in classroom settings continues to be misunderstood (Johora et al., 2021).

Longitudinal research has indicated that children who do not enter K with the basic competencies involving behavior regulations are at an increased risk for behavioral and adjustment challenges (Stormshak et al., 2021). Children on the autism spectrum may have pervasive challenges with their language, communication, and social skills, which will affect the presence and quality of their engagement with peers and relationships (Olsen et al., 2019). Teaching practices and strategies have been used to support the inclusion of children with ASD and are identified as a key gap in education, presenting challenges to the child's education (Olsen et al., 2019).

Purtell et al. (2020) suggested that a successful school transition will have lasting consequences for the child. Purtell et al. examined the K transition practices for students with ASD. Purtell et al. used a qualitative study with personnel from 11 school districts and 10 additional vital educational stakeholders. Purtell et al. revealed the importance of developing positive relationships between children, teachers, and their parents are critical for fostering transition.

Transitioning to a new school is often challenging for children with ASD (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). The school transition process has become an important issue for school districts due to the prevalence of students diagnosed with ASD (Larcombe et al., 2019). The availability and cost of resources for early intervention services are considered higher compared to treating other mental health disorders in educational settings (Larcombe et al., 2019). Therefore, early intervention services are

essential for a student with autism; the services equip the child for their transition to K (Larcombe et al., 2019).

The best practice for achieving a positive school transition includes promoting and increasing communication and collaboration with early childhood settings, K, and home environments (Fontil et al., 2019). Therefore, the alignment and coordination of special education services are beneficial in ensuring that the child's needs are met during the school transition to families (Fontil et al., 2019).

PK teachers can support families and children, resulting in a successful transition to K (Puccioni et al., 2020). However, PK teachers can utilize the transition practices that support parental involvement in the school transition (Puccioni et al., 2020). Parents are considered primary influencers of their child's early learning during the PK to K transition, and it is vital to understand their engagement during that time (Sheridan et al., 2020). Parent engagement practices are likely influenced by the contexts within which parent-child and parent-teacher interactions occur. This level of support provided by the PK teachers has been beneficial in creating linkages between early care settings and formal schooling settings (Puccioni et al., 2020).

Teachers in the primary school setting have reported having inadequate learning resources available to support the academic needs of students with ASD (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). In addition, McGhee Hassrick et al. (2021) identified the most useful strategies and best practices needed to help students adjust to a new school environment. The students have a positive school transition by using individualizing

transition supports, clarifying the transition process, and fostering communication between the school and home (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021).

Research has further indicated that children with ASD have challenges transitioning from PK-K; however, this may be attributed to the differences between the two educational settings (Yamauchi, 2020). Most elementary teachers saw differences in preschool and elementary schools (Yamauchi, 2020). The elementary teachers viewed education as focusing on academic domains, and the preschool promoted family engagement (Yamauchi, 2020). By engaging in joint activities, PK-K could learn more about each other's educational institutions (Yamauchi, 2020). Early childhood initiatives have been developed to promote collaboration among educational leaders, teachers, practitioners, and parents to establish positive student outcomes (Yamauchi, 2020). The successful coordination among PK-K teachers can help to lay the groundwork for a child to have a positive school experience (Atchison & Pompelia, 2018). However, if the school transition does not go well, the child can be turned off towards learning at an early age (Atchison & Pompelia, 2018).

Inclusive Classroom Environment

An inclusive school system supports every student with a qualifying disability by providing an appropriate education with the necessary support in a general education setting (Sahli Lozano et al., 2022). The inclusive classroom environment serves all children in the general classroom full-time, where support and services are provided to students with disabilities (Walker et al., 2021). The goals of an inclusive classroom environment are to ensure that the child's educational needs are met according to the

mandated guidelines recommended by the IDEA. According to the IDEA, children with disabilities should be educated to the maximum appropriate in public and private institutions among children who are nondisabled (Disability Rights California, 2021). Removing a child with disabilities from the general education classroom is based on the severity of the disability (Disability Rights California, 2021). The IDEA mandates that students are required to be provided with accommodations to meet their unique learning needs in an inclusive setting. The child's IEP provides specific details involving the learning needs and accommodations needed for the child to receive an appropriate education. The special education services are referred to as related services, including speech, occupational, and physical therapy.

When a student with a disability is placed in a general education classroom, the teachers play an important role in facilitating inclusion practices to foster equal access to the classroom curriculum. The adoption of inclusive practices for students with ASD has not been embraced in several school districts; therefore, there is a need for improvement regarding professional development as it relates to inclusive practices (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). Educators with extensive teaching experience teaching children with ASD have more negative attitudes towards providing an inclusive classroom (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). A teacher's level of self-efficacy is a direct correlation to their alignment with their endorsed perspectives; however, their views can positively or negatively influence their ability to work with students that require additional assistance (Van Mieghem et al., 2020).

In addition, cooperative learning has been used for students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Cooperative learning involves helping students with disabilities; however, this is accomplished when nondisabled peers assist the students with disabilities. There are also other strategies to assist students with severe disabilities. For example, the student may be assigned a paraprofessional teaching assistant; this individual will be listed on the student's IEP for additional support. The paraprofessional teacher assistant's role may include delivering individualized instruction, monitoring behaviors, maintaining levels of safety, and assisting the child with daily living supports (Gregori et al., 2021).

An alternative method in inclusive classroom settings is the pull-out/push-in model, which involves educating students in the least restrictive environment. The push-out model is where the students leave the general classroom to work with other students with similar abilities or interests (Fernandez & Hynes, 2016). The push-in model is where students are formed into small groups based on their academic skills within the general classroom setting. The general education teacher and the special education teacher collaborate to modify and accommodate assignments that meet the guidelines outlined in the student's IEP. The classroom instruction during the push-in and pull-out model may include academic programming or related services such as speech, occupational, and physical therapy.

Policy and Procedural Mandates

An individual with a disability can be defined as a physical or mental impairment limiting an individual's daily activities. During the 1970s, approximately 4.5 million

children were denied an adequate education before legislation enacted equal educational opportunities for special education children (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). Legislature set forth mandates, decisions, and laws to enhance educational opportunities for students with disabilities. There were various approaches and strategic guidelines when educating a student with a disability. The following policies implemented by the IDEA, ADA, and Section 504 have proven to be very beneficial in the school environment.

The IDEA is a law that ensures free and appropriate education for eligible children with qualifying disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). IDEA governs how states provide early intervention services and special education services to more than 7.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, and children with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). The provisions of the IDEA included elements pertaining to hiring educators that are highly qualified to teach within their school district. A highly qualified teacher is someone who has obtained state certification as a special education teacher within their specific state or has passed the special education teacher licensing examination. Teacher quality will influence student achievement; however, many school districts struggle with recruiting teachers that are considered highly qualified. Most school districts offer alternative routes to assist teachers in becoming highly certified to teach within their field.

The Americans with Disability Act (ADA) was established in 1990, a civil rights law that requires public and private sectors to provide educational opportunities, extracurricular activities, and facilities with mandates to be open and accessible to all

students (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b). The ADA provides protections to individuals with disabilities. The policy has been used to guarantee equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities involving but not limited to public accommodations and state and local government agencies and students (U.S. Department of Education, 2022b).

The Section 504 Plan is a civil rights law that does not allow discrimination against individuals with disabilities students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021a). Section 504 will ensure that a child with a disability has equal access to education. Section 504 will not require a public school to provide an individualized educational plan (IEP). The IEP is developed by a team of educational professionals and parents to meet a child's direct educational goals and needs throughout the school year. Under Section 504, fewer procedural safeguards are available to the child with a disability and the child's parents than under IDEA students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021a).

School professional that identifies a student with characteristics of a disability between the ages of 3 and 21 will request that the student is evaluated in all areas related to the suspected disability. If the student meets the eligibility requirements for a qualifying disability, then the educational providers will devise an IEP. The IEP will support the child’s academic needs, provide transitional support, and address specific accommodations that may be needed within the school environment.

Teacher and Parent Collaboration

The primary goal of involving parents as partners in school is to help improve parent-teacher communication about evidence-based school practices (Azad et al., 2018).

Teachers and parents who display various levels of miscommunication may hinder their relationships and negatively influence the student's educational growth and development. As a result, family-professional partnership (FPP) was developed in various school districts to assist teachers and families in working together to meet student needs (Francis et al., 2021). Teachers and parents of children with special educational needs will benefit from fostering a practical home–school involvement that builds successful partnerships (Correia et al., 2021).

Chaidi and Drigas (2020) explored parental involvement, early intervention, and long term academic outcomes for children. Chaidi and Drigas emphasized parent training to promote a high quality of life for the family. The primary purpose of parent training was to educate families about developing a relationship between educators and therapists (Chaidi & Drigas, 2020). However, Chaidi and Drigas indicated that teachers and parents saw the intervention model as positive because it provided knowledge of best practices related to their roles. School directors of preschool programs alluded to the fact that time, energy, and systemic partnerships are why teachers and leaders engage in meaningful collaborations for successful transitioning programs between different school systems (Cook et al., 2019).

Parent-teacher communication was associated with changes in some of the children's outcomes (Azad et al., 2018). The teaching pedagogy and best practices were evaluated to understand the level of communication between teachers and parents (Azad et al., 2018). The teachers and parents recognized improvements in child outcomes after attending a meeting that addressed school partnerships (Azad et al., 2018). The role of

communication in consultations targeted and highlighted the importance of establishing a family and school partnerships for children with autism (Azad et al., 2018).

The level of parental involvement in schools and the perceived challenges for K teachers (Preston et al., 2019) were evaluated to assess if there were any barriers. Preston et al. (2019) indicated that the lack of educator time and unproductive school policies were the most challenging factors for K teachers. Preston et al. (2019) believed a more effective way to enrich parent involvement, will be done through promoting parent-teacher trust. Research has suggested that a parent's trust in teachers and the school environment is linked to the amount and the type of involvement that parent will have with the school environment (Preston et al., 2019).

Parents may experience adjustment difficulties; however, the challenges of adjusting may have a negative influence on the child's adjustment to the new educational setting (Tao et al., 2019). Some parents of children with ASD may suffer from disallowed grief; it has various characteristics that differentiate it from other types of grief. However, disallowed grief has been dismissed by the society surrounding the bereaved. The manifestation of disallowed grief is denied to the parents, where they may not feel valued, and even blame may be placed upon the bereaved; however, this has prevented them from receiving social support from their environment (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019). In addition, disallowed grief has characteristics, which make it impossible for some families to complete their grieving process because their grieving process may never end (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019). The child's development of successive and losses are experienced so that each developmental milestone is not reached; however, the parents

may display emotions of loss, frustration, and injustice (Bravo-Benítez et al., 2019). During the 2000's parental burnout emerged, where the exhaustion and worry levels of parents caring for children with acute and chronic health conditions increased (Lebert-Charron et al., 2018). Therefore, the impending challenges associated with parental burnout and disallowed grief felt by some parents may cause significant challenges in establishing relationships and fostering levels of trust in the new school environment.

Some teachers become annoyed when they must work directly with parents and label the parents as over-involved helicopter parents who lack confidence in the child's teacher (Preston et al., 2019). In addition, over-involved helicopter parents may regularly question the teacher's classroom instruction and lack confidence in the child's teacher (Preston et al., 2019). By promoting higher levels of parental involvement, some teachers have expressed their concerns about losing their professional autonomy (Preston et al., 2019). Although the teachers acknowledge the importance of having parental involvement, they also deprioritized the parent's support due to a lack of resources and time (Preston et al., 2019). School policies and procedures incorporate mandates that decrease the open-door policy for parents (Preston et al., 2019). Some teachers find it challenging to promote an open-door approach for a parent due to adhering to rules that help provide a secure and safe environment for all children (Preston et al., 2019). Teachers who embrace the notion of family vibrancy through welcoming and celebrating family diversity are essential to nurturing the educational success of the child and their families (Preston et al., 2019).

Professional Development and Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy refers to an individual's judgments regarding their capabilities to meet environmental demands (Carrington et al., 2020). Therefore, self efficacy is an individual's set of beliefs that will determine how well they can execute a plan of action within prospective situations (Carrington et al., 2020). The academic progression of children diagnosed with ASD is lower than those of their peers (Van Der Steen et al., 2020). A teacher's beliefs may potentially hinder their use of evidence-based school practices for students with ASD (Basckin et al., 2021). Children with ASD have presented some challenges for teachers because no single autistic child appears to have the same characteristics (Wynn, 2018). Training methods and preparations are important for the education of children with ASD (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020). Teachers may benefit from developing professional learning communities; however, the collaborative efforts from educators will help improve the learning outcomes for students with ASD (Accardo & Finnegan, 2019). It is recommended that teachers use flexible strategies that will assist in engaging and supporting the needs of children on the autism spectrum (Carrington et al., 2020). A critical factor influencing a child's educational outcomes is the teachers' ability to intervene across students (Love et al., 2019).

Across the U.S., there has been a severe shortage of special education teachers, which has been recognized at the state and federal levels (Monnin et al., 2021). Furthermore, the status of global pandemic COVID-19 has heavily intensified the shortage of special education teachers. Monnin et al. (2021) discussed that legislative policies had given recruiters alternative routes towards recruiting teachers due to the

teacher shortage. Monnin et al. noted that candidates who are recruited through this process may not have a traditional educational background to fulfill the high needs of various teaching areas.

The unique strengths of each child with ASD are significantly different; however, it indicates the child's academic progression as it relates to comorbid factors and best practices (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020). It is recommended that teachers become knowledgeable in their content domain and pedagogical delivery; however, they must be able to work effectively with the students they find most challenging (Love et al., 2019). Teachers may represent different levels of self-efficacy involving the relation to the individual child with autism; however, these implications are important because they provide insight into the various factors that may contribute to a teacher's subjective experiences involving a child with autism (Guo et al., 2021). Teachers have reported being dissatisfied with their training and feel underprepared to manage the behavioral and learning needs of students with autism (Davidson et al., 2021). There is a need to explore effective school-based practices delivered by teachers to ensure adequate preparation for children with ASD. In addition, enhancing the teachers' self-efficacy may reduce stress levels, burnout, and turnover (Davidson et al., 2021). Teachers have openly reported being favorable toward the inclusion of students with disability; however, they also fear what the disability will represent for their teaching practices (Jury et al., 2021). Zabeli et al. (2020) evaluated how PK teachers perceived inclusive education in a system undergoing transition. PK teachers do not fully understand best practices for facilitating an environment conducive to inclusive education (Zabeli et al., 2020). Preschools need

sufficient resources to assist in identifying children with potential ASD symptoms; however, this approach will be essential for early identification and early intervention services (Leung et al., 2019). Therefore, Zabeli et al. (2020) have indicated that inclusive education is an integral factor to consider for the development of children in early childhood. Zabeli et al. (2020) discovered that PK teachers lacked the skills and knowledge to use appropriate teaching methods for children with special needs. In addition, Zabeli et al. (2020) discussed the importance of establishing an inclusive education during the early years; however, this will lay the secured foundations for the following stages of education (Zabeli et al., 2020). Scholars have considered education in early childhood to be a fundamental and integral component in a child's future development (Zabeli et al., 2020). The number of students with ASD is increasing; therefore, school systems may benefit from cost-effective evidence-based practices in addressing the unique learning needs of children diagnosed with ASD.

School Readiness

The primary school environment is structured with explicit goals of instruction involving literacy, socialization, and numeracy and is increasingly focused on the child's academic progression (Parent et al., 2019). School readiness skills will extend beyond academic skills; however, it may include working independently, following directions, and regulating emotions (Sulek et al., 2021). Although there is no uniform definition regarding school readiness, the notion of fostering school readiness has been a concern for families, policymakers, and educators (Hustedt et al., 2017). During the K transition, it is critical to identify which characteristics and skills are developing during that time

(Mashburn et al., 2018). During the five-seven-year transition, children with ASD may experience major developmental milestones across domains such as social emotional, cognitive, and self-regulation (Mashburn et al., 2018).

Children with ASD may struggle academically due to functioning difficulties such as challenges involving their attention span, working memory, and impulsivity (Mashburn et al., 2018)). In addition, children with ASD may also experience difficulties initiating specific tasks and have mental flexibility challenges (Mashburn et al., 2018). In contrast to primary school environments, most preschool settings are designed to enhance a child's social and cognitive development by introducing a comprehensive set of educational services that focus on health and nutrition (Duncan & Magnuson, 2013). Preschool programs are not only effective in promoting school readiness, but it is also helpful in easing the transition from PK to K (Greenburg et al., 2020). Students with ASD in preschool settings were observed; however, their time was spent being unengaged or engaged alone with various objects where the classroom staff rarely provided teaching opportunities (Dynia et al., 2020).

School readiness is a complex concept for many school districts and is often influenced by cultural beliefs (Larcombe et al., 2019). Earlier conceptualizations of school readiness were described as a maturational perspective concerning the child being ready to attend school (Larcombe et al., 2019). School readiness was indicated by identifying if a child can independently control their behavior and emotions (Larcombe et al., 2019). School districts have made efforts to promote successful transitions to K for

preschoolers, but the plans vary dramatically across school districts, counties, and states (Hart et al., 2019).

Hart et al. (2019) evaluated a summer treatment program for kindergarteners with specific initiatives needed to help improve school readiness and K outcomes. The study conducted by Hart et al. (2019) used a qualitative method of research which included 45 PK teachers, investigating if intervention treatment doses are effective in improving the K year. Hart et al. (2019) found preliminary evidence that intervention treatment doses significantly improved school readiness skills for students preparing to enter K.

Larcombe et al. (2019) explored parent and therapist perspectives on school readiness and factors contributing to a positive mainstream school experience. Larcombe et al. (2019) used the qualitative method, which included parents of children that have a child diagnosed with autism. School readiness depends on various school factors and social skills, which are the most important factors for the student (Larcombe et al., 2019). The child's academic experience was primarily related to the teacher's and the paraprofessional's attitudes, where the study highlighted a need for additional training and support (Larcombe et al., 2019). Students with ASD will benefit from early intervention, school-aged intervention programs, and the need for collaborative practice for a positive mainstream school experience (Larcombe et al., 2019).

As a child prepares for school entry, it is paramount to understand the perspectives of readiness through the parents' and early intervention service providers' perspectives (Larcombe et al., 2019). Parents have been overwhelmed with school placement decisions and often worried about their child's well-being (McGhee Hassrick

et al., 2021). Parents and early intervention providers may disagree with priorities set by schools; however, it is important to understand where parents diverge and converge (Larcombe et al., 2019). The school's readiness for a student is indicated by the family support of the child's school transition, emphasizing educators advancing academic achievement for all children (Larcombe et al., 2019). A parent's perception of what school readiness entails is taken from their expectations of school, which shapes how they prepare their children for K (Miao, 2018). Regarding school readiness, the family and home environments were among the strongest predictors of positive student outcomes (Larcombe et al., 2019).

Transition Practices

Children with ASD who move from an early education program into an elementary school may encounter a critical transition; however, both educational systems are governed by different policies, philosophies, and regulations (Cook et al., 2019). A child with ASD requires interventions that support collaboration between the child's family, school environment, and community healthcare providers commonly referred to as the team-around-the-child (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). When a child's education is disrupted because of the school transition, the team may experience high turnover rates. Key support team members from the pretransition school may exit, and new members come into the post, which changes the context (McGhee Hassrick et al., 2021). PK teachers can support families and children with their transition to K by utilizing transition practices that involve the parents' commentary. This process of parental involvement will help create linkages between the preschool and formal schooling settings (Puccioni et al.,

2020). The lack of communication among PK-K teachers has delayed the transition process (Efthymia, 2018).

Transition practices can help support a child and their family's adjustment to a new educational environment that will lead to positive outcomes for the child (Sands & Meadan, 2021). In addition, transition practices are essential for building positive relationships between families and school faculty members (Sands & Meadan, 2021). An increasing level of communication among preschool and K educators may lead to a positive school transition for K students and parents (Vitiello et al., 2020). Transition practices aligned with instructional guidelines and behavior management beliefs may result in a higher teacher-rated curriculum once a child enters K (Vitiello et al., 2020).

Kumar (2020) found many constraints surrounding the curriculum for students with ASD, involving space and time for students with ASD, which can make the school transition challenging. The space and attention span constraints of students with ASD often make the transitioning process nearly impossible for many students who need special accommodations in the informal education setting (Kumar, 2020). Researchers have placed categories around various transition practices implemented for the school transition, referred to as high intensity, low intensity, and formal transition practices. (Sands & Meadan, 2021). The high-intensity practices will include home visits, phone calls, and planned meetings (Sands & Meadan, 2021). Transition practices that use low-intensity practices will provide handouts and general information meetings for families (Sands & Meadan, 2021). Lastly, formal transition practices are routinely conducted depending on local and state policies, including school open houses or conferences

(Sands & Meadan, 2021). Transition strategies that use differentiated instruction to support children's transition to K will facilitate program continuity (Sands & Meadan, 2021). The complex nature of a child with ASD will present significant difficulties with the transition process; however, targeted transition strategies may mitigate identifiable challenges associated with the school transition (Chen et al., 2020). School districts may offer some transitional support; however, state policy procedures and regulations will guide the district's efforts.

K transition practices can potentially increase parent-initiated school involvement, which may improve social interactions and academic progression (Miao, 2018). The collaboration of transition practices and strategies will facilitate an environment conducive to providing a positive experience for young children and their families during the school transition (Miao, 2018).

Social Emotional Learning Interventions

Social and emotional learning interventions provided in early childhood education and intervention programs will help to improve the child's social and emotional development (Blewitt et al., 2019). Children diagnosed with ASD typically demonstrate superior social communication skills, chronic irritability, and attention deficit (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). These challenges have hindered their academic progress despite intensive educational, behavioral, and medical interventions (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). In addition, children with ASD will experience impairment in social communication; however, social communication is the most prominent deficit in ASD. Most children with ASD typically display reoriented patterns of social interaction among

their peers and adults (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). There has been little progress regarding developing a pharmacological intervention to improve this social communication; however, behavioral therapies are being used to help improve their social skills (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). Researchers suggested that social interactions can be taught to children with ASD, and they can learn to demonstrate these interactions in various environments (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018).

Regarding social communication deficits, 88% of children with ASD display irritability in the form of aggression, problematic behavior, and self-injury (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). However, irritability in children with ASD has been associated with an increased risk of experiencing depression and anxiety. The underlying cause associated with irritability in children with ASD has not been fully elucidated; however, the child's level of emotional regulation may play a central role (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). Several strategies may be used to decrease the levels of irritability, such as providing structure and improving the child's compliance with their daily activities. For example, augmented reality which are digital tools that have been studied as being effective in enhancing the educational experience for students with ASD. The augmented reality tools can monitor and assess cognitive processes and regulate social behaviors of the child can monitor and evaluate cognitive processes and regulate child's social behaviors. (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018). However, augmented reality technology has the utility to help improve ASD symptoms related to their attention span and socio-emotional functioning (Vahabzadeh et al., 2018).

Technology-based assistive tools are beneficial in addressing the educational and therapeutic needs of children with ASD. In addition, these technological advances can empower educators and school districts to decrease educator stress and burnout in school settings. Technology's effective use can change how teachers educate students by offering teachers effective methods to reach different types of learners. Technology can assess student understanding through multiple means. Augmentative programs can make teaching more meaningful and engaging for students. The increased use of technology in classrooms will benefit classroom instruction because it allows students to develop an increased level of inclination regarding learning in the classroom. Developing technology-based lessons usually involves many subtasks that require assistance from the teacher or even students that can master specific computer skills.

Cognitive Development Resources

There is a growing demand for special education resources for children diagnosed with ASD. Children with ASD in the United States will receive education services under the IDEA under the classification of autism (Kim et al., 2018). The number of children requiring support under the IDEA with the classification of autism is increasing; however, there is limited information available regarding their academic profiles. The academic profiles of the children with ASD may provide information involving their cognitive skills, language impairments, and behavioral features that are related to academic development (Kim et al., 2018). Although, some studies have suggested that some children with ASD will display significant gaps in achievement and cognitive levels (Kim et al., 2018). Children with ASD may have underachieving performance because of

their cognitive abilities (Roberts & Webster, 2020). However, a child with ASD may have challenges in specific areas while performing well in other areas (Roberts & Webster, 2020). A child with ASD may not have the capability of exhibiting their academic achievement commensurate with their cognitive abilities due to the characteristics of ASD (Kim et al., 2018). A cross sectional study suggested that cognitive and language abilities were linked to academic outcomes for children diagnosed with ASD (Kim et al., 2018). Identifying patterns of academic achievement and class placement is vital for children with ASD to provide the necessary accommodations and continuity within the school setting.

ASD is a neurodevelopmental disorder where students may display deficits in communication and social interactions routines (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2022). Students with ASD may exhibit repetitive speech and movement, local levels of interest, and rigid adherence to daily routines (American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, 2022).

About high function ASD, the individual may have an intelligence quotient (IQ) of 70 or above, and individuals with moderate or severe intellectual disabilities will have an IQ score of less than 70 (Alvares et al., 2019). Children with ASD consistently display poorer adaptive functional skills compared with typically developing peers or even individuals with other developmental conditions (Alvares et al., 2019). However, previous studies have suggested a large discrepancy between the IQ and functional abilities of children with ASD who do not have an intellectual disability (Alvares et al., 2019). The level of support given to a child with ASD is partly based on assessing their

cognitive functioning. However, intervention decisions are best supported by focusing on the disability's impairments and symptoms in the child's everyday life (Alvares et al., 2019). As children with ASD get older, they tend to fall further behind their peers (Alvares et al., 2019). The use of IQ assessments for adaptive functioning has resulted in the belief that functioning levels may remain stable over time (Alvares et al., 2019). There has been limited systematic investigation into the adaptive functioning profiles of children with ASD across their lifespans (Alvares et al., 2019). Adaptive behavior assessments will be beneficial over time for a child with ASD; however, the information will provide structural support for developing potential goals to support academic achievement.

Professional Learning Communities

Administrators are vital players in introducing professional development and professional learning forums into school structures that promote a learning culture that promotes collaborative learning for students with ASD (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). The term professional learning community (PLC) has become commonplace for many school systems. Professional learning communities involving teaching and learning are a core organizational feature in the field of special education to promote professional development (Schechter & Feldman, 2019). A professional learning community is a group of people that continually share their teaching practices with students in a reflective, collaborative, and inclusive way to promote academic achievement. School districts that function as a PLC will embrace high levels of academic achievement for all students. To accomplish the goals of a PLC, the members will create a clear and

compelling vision of what the school must become to help students achieve academic progression. Effective school-based professional learning communities will gradually shift the focus toward developing an environment conducive to receiving an appropriate education.

A PLC is typically composed of teachers, administrators, and support staff that routinely participate within the school environment. A professional learning community will be an ongoing process to develop a school culture that implements strong teacher leaderships emphasizing school improvement efforts. The developmental stages of the PLCs will focus on the following attributes of organizational arrangements: supportive leadership, shared leadership, collective creativity, shared values, supportive conditions, and shared personal practice. A school's curriculum should reflect the goals of the school and the needs of its students. Developing a school curriculum with other staff members allows teachers to have ongoing, meaningful conversation about ideas within their field. This approach will help teachers to understand how their students learn and allow teachers to improve their teaching pedagogy.

Professional learning communities are extended to community members and students as needed. Participation in PLC's has helped teachers enhance their leadership skills, with an emphasis placed on high-performing collaborative team members that focus on improving student learning. Educators of PLCs are committed to collaborating with colleagues to discover inquiry and action research to achieve higher academic results for all students.

Early Intervention Services

A high-quality early intervention program is an important component that provides supportive and inclusive early childhood education, and it is crucial for children with ASD (Maich et al., 2019). Early intervention services are typically intensive therapeutic approaches where evidence-based practices occur in clinical, home, or educational settings (Maich et al., 2019). However, early intervention services are facilitated by clinicians and supported by educators (Maich et al., 2019). The funding for early intervention services is provided by jurisdictional governments, family members, or non-profit community agencies (Maich et al., 2019). All participants involved with a child's early intervention program will gain trained staff that will have the capability of nurturing and scaffolding the child's academic skills. Although, some professionals within the field of education have emphasized that the needs of children with ASD are not being met, due to extended waitlist for receiving early intervention services.

Individuals with ASD have difficulties in expressive and receptive language and communication. Most individuals with ASD have difficulties with social interaction and behavior, but the extent and type may vary considerably. Some individuals may be viewed as withdrawn while others may appear overly active. Children with ASD have challenges with inattention and will show resistance to change. They often respond to sensory stimuli in an atypical manner such as hand flapping, rocking, and spinning. There are no two people with autism that share the same common features, but it is important to know the knowledge of their specific interest, abilities, and personalities.

Families that are navigating early intervention services may encounter challenges that will hinder their efforts such as their race, colonialism, socio-economic class, and migration may affect professional supports during the early years (Thompson et al., 2020). There is a lack of awareness among some parents, as it relates securing early childhood intervention services (Thompson et al., 2020). Therefore, parents have described early intervention services, as being desirable and effective and very difficult to obtain (Thompson et al., 2020). The earliest years of a child's life are critical, and these formative years lay the foundation for learning and holistic development (Singh & Anekar, 2018). There has been a shortage of healthcare providers available to evaluate children with potential characteristics that portray ASD; however, this has led to delays in diagnosis and early intervention treatment plans (Neupane, 2020). Early intervention programs can have a significant influence on a child's academic and social development, and it may help families avoid costly therapies in the future (Neupane, 2020). Family navigation is an important tool to use for reducing systemic inequalities in the early identification (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020). The process of family navigation may include physicians, counselors, and teachers that assist families with seeking early intervention treatments (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020). Some children with ASD, have failed to receive indicated referrals for evaluation purposes, which has reportedly caused a delay in locating early intervention programs (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020). Early intervention programs have been beneficial in preparing children with autism for the preschool setting and the entry unto K.

Early Childhood Level School Leadership

A comprehensive approach is needed to develop the capacity of school leaders and staff members through establishing autism-friendly cultures with evidence-based strategies, which will help improve outcomes for children with ASD (Roberts & Webster, 2020). School leadership can be defined as a process by which teachers influence their colleagues and other members of the school community to improve teaching and learning practices for everyone. School leadership roles often refers to the principal, teacher, or director of a curriculum or even district level school officials.

Teachers may serve leadership roles either formally or informally within the school environment. Teachers can become leaders in their schools by being respectful to their peers, approachable, continuous learner, improve educational practices, and utilize group skills by colleagues. A teacher leadership role will support all initiatives devoted to promoting school transformation. School transformation is an educational reform used by educators to target specific elements in the educational system. However, school reforms initiatives will attempt to make changes throughout the school system, which will target district-wide or even statewide reforms. As a result, new forms of leadership are intended to influence all students and staff members in the school. A key challenge for schools is providing a child-centered pedagogy that can effectively educate all children, including the students with serious disadvantages and disabilities (Roberts & Webster, 2020). School reforms will vary widely in design and

purpose; however, a consistent educational philosophy will aim at achieving common objectives.

Summary and Conclusions

In Chapter 2, I completed an exhaustive review of the literature. I provided a discussion about challenges, barriers, or successes relating to the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. I included the benefits of school districts providing an environment conducive to each child's unique learning style. The integral components of establishing strong partnerships among school district staff members, which are essential in the child's academic and social growth within a new school environment, were presented. According to the literature review in Chapter 2, various individuals need to be consulted during the coordination of transition programming to ensure that the child will have a successful school transition. In Chapter 3, I describe the methodology used to explore the study as it relates to the coordination of PK-K transition programming for children with ASD.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. This basic qualitative study was used to identify the perceptions of the participants based on their daily experiences working with the students and their families. In Chapter 3, I report the research methodology followed for this basic qualitative study by providing details about the research design and rationale, the role of the researcher, levels of trustworthiness, and ethical procedures. I conclude Chapter 3 with a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

The following RQ was used for this basic qualitative study:

RQ: What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings?

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. Volunteer participants taught in suburban schools that served PK and K students on the same campus in the southern United States. The RQ asked PK-K teachers to discuss their perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. I sought to understand factors that may influence coordination of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD and their

families. To address the RQ in this study, the specific research design included a basic or generic qualitative design.

Merriam (2002) suggested that generic studies are used to understand how people interpret, construct, or make meaning. Generic studies are social constructivist, theoretically interpretive studies that focus on "(a) how people interpret their experiences, (b) how they construct their worlds, and (c) what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 23). I conducted semistructured interviews with the participants of the study. The semistructured interview questions (Appendix A) included questions and prompts regarding educators' perspectives of PK to K transition programming in inclusive settings for children with ASD. Semistructured interviews were the most appropriate approach for a basic qualitative study because they allowed me, as a researcher, to learn about the phenomenon. I acquired information from participants directly involved with transitioning programming and could respond to the RQ. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of culture and context throughout the process of knowledge construction. A thematic analysis was used to identify patterns of meaning within the qualitative data collection. The qualitative study included interviews conducted through a virtual web-based platform identified as Zoom.

For the planned research design, I recruited 11 educators for semistructured interview protocol from three public suburban schools with PK and K programs on the same campus located in the southern United States. Qualitative sample sizes are purposive and tend to be small; however, this sample size provided rich-textured information that was beneficial (see Vasileiou et al., 2018). My role as the researcher

included recruiting participants, conducting semistructured interviews, and organizing the data from the semistructured interviews. Thematic coding was used to identify recurring themes in the qualitative study. The coding process allowed me to immerse myself in the data collection (see Khalil, 2014). During the thematic coding process, I integrated any emergent themes and refined themes obtained during data collection (see Khalil, 2014). In addition, the coding process promoted thematic integration, which allowed me to be reflective regarding the data collection (see Khalil, 2014).

As I debriefed the participants, they were informed that their information would remain confidential. The information from the data collection has been securely stored in my home office and will remain there for a 5-year period, per Walden University protocol. I will properly dispose of the data after 5 years. Participants of the study received a 2-page summary of findings from this qualitative study through email correspondence.

Role of the Researcher

My role as the researcher of this study involved designing and conducting the study (see Flick, 2018). I included elements that developed a broader understanding of the PK-K transition processes for students with ASD. The study took place in three suburban inclusive public schools located in the southern region of the United States, where I explored educators' perspectives of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. My current position did not influence the study. I am not employed as an educator for any school district in a suburban region of the southern United States, nor do I have any personal or professional affiliations with

educators who participated in this study. My role as the researcher involved communicating with educators in southern suburban regions of the United States.

My position as the interviewer for the study involved meeting with the participants to conduct semistructured interviews regarding the preschool transition for students with ASD. As the interviewer, I transcribed the participants' responses in the qualitative study. The transcribed information was given to the participants to ensure the accuracy of their responses as a member checking process. The participants received a copy of the interview summaries for member checking through email correspondence. Manual coding was used to assist in identifying thematic analysis of the participants' responses (see Medelyan, 2022). Educators of the study received monetary incentives for their participation in the study. The participants received an Amazon gift card in the amount of $10.00. The participants received a 2-page summary detailing the study's findings through email correspondence. They were asked to contact me if they saw any discrepancies in the findings.

Methodology

This research study was conducted through a basic qualitative study where interviews were used to obtain data from participants of the study (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). Qualitative research is a holistic and inductive method that follows an iterative process in which understanding for the scientific community is accomplished by making new significant distinctions to the phenomenon being studied (Aspers & Corte, 2019). Social constructivism involves human interests, which is important for research purposes where knowledge is constructed through social interaction. According to social

constructivists, the reality of incorporating qualitative research is a subjective creation; however, there is no single reality.

Participant Selection Logic

I recruited 11 educators (six PK teachers and five K teachers) as participants to gain their perspectives involving the coordination of transition programming. The educators' perceptions were contributory to studying the phenomenon. The sampling strategy for this study included educators who were employed in three schools within a suburban school district in the southern region of the United States, where the teachers had experience working with the coordination of transition programming for children with ASD. Participants were selected through purposeful sampling to recruit 10 to 12 educators to meet data saturation (see Saunders et al., 2018). In general, if a population is considered homogeneous and the phenomenon is narrow, then the aim for the sample size should be approximately 10 (Sigmond, 2016). Purposeful sampling was used to recruit the participants for the study. Criterion sampling identified any participants excluded from the study due to their inability to contribute to the phenomenon being studied (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The study's criteria ensured that all participants selected for the study had shared experiences (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The process of using purposive sampling affirmed that the participants were selected due to their potential for contribution and knowledge of the phenomenon being studied. The participation criteria requirements included the following: (a) PK and K teachers who had an experience involving transition programming for students with ASD and (b) PK and K teachers would participate in a Zoom virtual platform or telephone interview.

The recruitment processes included accessing public websites and directories where educators' emails were made accessible to the public. Participants were contacted via email to ascertain their interest in the study. An invitation letter was emailed to the educators explaining the study's intent along with informed consent. The email correspondence included information about the study, such as the purpose, problem statement, and significance. In addition, the invitation letter included direct information about the time and location of the semistructured interview.

A process of simple random sampling was used to select the participants. Simple random sampling meant I selected participants entirely by chance, and each participant had an equal chance of being selected for the study (see Bhardwaj, 2019). The random sampling process included utilizing a random number generator designed in Microsoft Excel Software. The random number generator assisted me in randomly picking a subset of the population who would be participating in the study. After identifying the participants, they received the informed consent form via email. Once participants expressed their interest in participating in this qualitative research, I contacted them by telephone or email to ensure that each participants met the criteria.

The semistructured interviews were recorded and transcribed for the data analysis. A Zoom virtual platform was used to conduct the semistructured interviews. The strategy for analyzing the qualitative data involved reading transcripts multiple times, looking for repetitions of terms and phrases recognized as patterns, collapsing them into categories, and identifying themes aligned with the study. The participants' responses from the semistructured interview were analyzed for the data collection.

Semistructured interviews lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Data saturation for this study was met when the participants gave enough information to indicate that the study could be replicated. In addition, data saturation for the study was reported when the data collection yielded similar results with confirmation of emerging themes and conclusions (see Saunders et al., 2018). The semistructured interviews were used for the data collection and were digitally recorded by the interviewer. The interview questions included prompts that were developed for the participants, and the questions were formulated using the RQ design involving the basic qualitative study (see Appendix A).

The participants received interview questions that promoted an open-ended dialogue about their experiences with the study. The interview questions were developed to meet the participants' understanding of their role in children with ASD. Participants had the opportunity to engage in discussion and openly express their perceptions. The interview process allowed participants to provide a narrative concerning their experiences. The validity of an instrument is the notion that the chosen instrument can quantify and measure its intended purpose. The study's validity was established by the degree to which the semistructured interviews captured and accurately measured the study. The moral and ethical issues that may influence cross cultural issues were acknowledged and addressed through participants giving their informed written consent for participation in the research. The data collection took place online through Zoom. In particular, the semistructured interviews allowed participants to provide detailed descriptions of their personal and professional experiences concerning transition

programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings located in suburban schools that served PK and K students on the same campus in the southern United States. This was a qualitative study.

Instrumentation

Semistructured interviews were used for the data collection. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and coded for data analysis. Participants' words in narrating their stories were a microcosm of their consciousness (see Vygotsky, 1987). An individual's consciousness provides perplexing social and educational issues based on people's concrete experiences (Seidman, 2015). Content validity of the data instrument was established through the participation of an expert panel of early childhood intervention specialists, per the Walden University Institutional Review Board protocol.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

To obtain access to communicate with potential participants, I completed the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval process. The IRB approval process is required before the researcher starts the recruitment process of participants, data access, and data collection of the study (Sheridan et al., 2020). After permission was granted by Walden University IRB, I presented the participants with an invitation letter and informed consent form. The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, procedures for collecting data, participants' confidentiality guidelines, and the benefits of the study.

As the researcher, I conducted one semistructured interview for each participant selected for the case study. The semistructured interviews lasted approximately 45 to 60

minutes to achieve data saturation. The interviews took place using the Zoom virtual platform or via telephone. The participants' responses during the semistructured interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded for the data collection. The recruitment process did provide enough participants within the same school district in the suburban region of the United States. For the data collection, I recruited participants from three elementary schools to assist in locating 10 to 12 educators for the study. The suburban schools selected for the study had PK and K transitioning programming for students with ASD.

As I debriefed the participants, they were informed that their information would remain confidential. The participants were told that their information and participation in the study would remain secure. The data collection will remain in a secure and confidential location for 5 years. However, the data collection will be disposed of after 5 years. The participants were provided with my contact information if they had any questions or concerns regarding the case study.

Data Analysis Plan

The data analysis for this study involved an accumulation of open-ended data, where general questions were asked and developed with information supplied by the study participants (see Creswell, 2009). In addition, Creswell (2009) explained a nonsequential interactive process for analyzing data. The data analysis was an ongoing process that included continual reflection on the information gathered from the participants (see Creswell, 2009). The strategy for analyzing the qualitative data involved reading transcripts and transcribing the information from the semistructured interviews.

Manual coding was used to organize the participant responses and code the data (see Medelyan, 2022). Patterns appeared in the data, and codes were collapsed and organized into categories. The patterns and categories revealed in the participants' data remained consistent as the analysis continued. In reference to patterns in the data, I looked for emergence of encompassing themes. This process included combining and grouping the associated patterns into themes. In addition, the responses from the participants were placed with the appropriate corresponding patterns. The distinguished patterns assisted in clarifying the themes. As each theme was developed, I composed a detailed analysis to describe the purport of each theme. Lastly, I interpreted the meaning of each participant's responses to each interview question (see Khalil, 2014). There were no discrepant data found in this study; however, if discrepant data had been identified from participants, they would have been reported. All data collected from participants will remain confidential. The information from the data collection will be stored and discarded after a period of 5 years following Walden University's protocol.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Credibility

The credibility of the study is an important factor to consider. The data collection analysis should reflect the participants' views under the investigation (Closa, 2021). Regarding creditability, it is critical to invest sufficient time in the process to become more familiar with the context and setting to acquire rich data (Korstjens & Moser, 2017).

Transferability

Transferability of the qualitative study is the degree to which the results of the study can be transferred to other settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). In reference to transferability, a thick description of the study will give readers a conventional understanding of the research; however, a thick description will allow them to compare instances within the research study. In addition, a thick description will provide the background information needed to identify meanings and intentions aligned with social interactions. Transferability is subjected to the data collection of the participants' experiences and behaviors and its ability to become meaningful to others (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Transferability was accomplished for this study by providing a detailed data analysis that allows other researchers to review the details of the study to support additional research.

Dependability

Dependability is a notion of transparency and describing the steps involved within the research from the beginning to the end (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The study's dependability accurately depicts the study's findings over time, interpretation, and recommendations of the data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). To ensure the dependability of the qualitative study, the participants were given access to their responses. The participants were also informed that their names will be labeled as pseudonyms to maintain their privacy and confidentiality of the study.

Confirmability

Confirmability for the qualitative study involves the level to which the research study could be confirmed through other researchers (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The confirmability of the study consists of the neutrality of the data is presented clearly and concisely (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Regarding confirmability, there was a limitation added to the study regarding the method for recruiting participants from three schools located in one suburban district in the southern region of the United States.

Ethical Procedures

The researcher is responsible for ensuring that participants of the study are not harmed, their privacy and confidentiality are maintained, and informed consent is given for their participation (Levitt et al., 2017). Researchers are responsible for adhering to non-maleficence and beneficence when conducting a study (Varkey, 2021). The beneficence involves improving and benefiting the individual of the study (Varkey, 2021). The elements of non-maleficence include not causing any harm to the participants of the study (Varkey, 2021). I have provided a detailed recruitment protocol pertaining to enlisting participants for the study.

To obtain access to communicate with potential participants, I completed Walden University IRB approval process. The IRB is required before the researcher starts the recruitment process of participants, data access, and data collection of the study (Sheridan et al., 2020). Walden University IRB has served as the gatekeeper of my research, ensuring that the ethical procedures are adhered to for the study. The approval number assigned by IRB to conduct research was 05-09-22-066752. After permission was

granted by Walden University IRB, I presented the participants with an invitation letter and a consent form. The invitation letter included the purpose of the study, procedures for collecting data, participants' confidentiality guidelines, and the benefits of the study. The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, procedures for collecting data, participants' confidentiality guidelines, and the benefits of the study. The participants were informed that their information and participation in the study would remain secure and confidential. The data collection will remain in a secure and confidential location for five years. However, the data collection will be disposed of after 5 years.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. In Chapter 3, I provided information regarding the methodology of this basic qualitative study with interviews. I included elements of the research design and rationale, the data analysis plan, and the participant recruitment and selection procedures. Issues involving trustworthiness were described and outlined for the study's credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. I presented strategies to ensure confidentiality and ethical practices were adhered to throughout the study. Chapter 4 provides the findings of this study that resulted from the analysis and interpretation of data collected from volunteer participants via an interview protocol.

Chapter 4: Results

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. The process of purposeful sampling was used to recruit PK-K teachers in the southern region of the United States who were able to contribute to the phenomenon being studied (see Palinkas et al., 2015). The RQ for this basic qualitative study was designed to explore the participants' perspectives. The RQ was as follows: What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? In Chapter 4**,** I present the research setting, data collection and analysis processes, evidence of trustworthiness, study results, and a chapter summary.

Setting

The setting for this basic qualitative study occurred in three suburban school districts in the southern region of the United States. Semistructured interviews were conducted and recorded through the Zoom platform. All participants selected for the research study met the criteria, and each had experience working with transition programming for students with ASD. Interviews with participants were completed in one session that lasted between 45 and 60 minutes on Zoom.

Demographics

After receiving approval from Walden University's IRB, I reached out to potential participants. I recruited a pool of 73 participants for the study. A total of 16 volunteers expressed their interest in being interviewed for this research study; however, only 11

volunteers met the criteria for the study. Sigmond (2016) indicated that the sample size of approximately 10 participants is appropriate if the population is considered homogeneous and the phenomenon is narrow. The primary focus of this research study was to understand the perspectives of educators who have experience working with students with autism as they transition from PK to K in inclusive settings. The 11 participants were educators in the southern region of the United States and had experience working with students with transition programming for students with ASD. The participants' experience in working with students with ASD ranged from 1 to 5 years within their school district.

The target population of participants included recruitment from publicly available websites, which listed educators' email addresses that are made accessible to the public. The research criteria for the study included the following: (a) PK and K teachers who had experience involving transition programming for students with ASD and (b) PK and K teachers who would participate in a Zoom virtual platform or telephone interview. The 11 participants included six PK teachers and five K teachers. The selected participants received the informed consent form and interview questions via email before attending the interview. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym with alphanumeric codes T1 through T11 to replace names and maintain confidentiality for the research study. Table 1 shows the research study demographics.

Table 1

Research Study Demographics

Pseudonyms	Degree level	Years of classroom experience	Grade level
T1	Master's degree	11	PK
T2	Master's degree	8	PK
T3	Bachelor's degree	7	PK
T4	Bachelor's degree	4	PK
T5	Bachelor's degree	13	PK
T6	Master's degree	14	PK
T7	Master's degree	11	K
T8	Master's degree	26	K
T9	Master's degree	9	K
T10	Master's degree	7	K
T11	Master's degree	6	K

Data Collection

The data collection process started once I received approval to conduct research from Walden University IRB. The approval number assigned by IRB to conduct research was 05-09-22-066752. The purposeful sampling process was used to recruit PK and K teachers who worked in inclusive classrooms in three public suburban schools in the southern region of the United States. In addition, with IRB approval, I established communication with the educators by using publicly available websites, which gave me access to PK and K teachers' email addresses.

The potential volunteers for the research study were sent an invitation email to ascertain their interest in the study. The volunteers who expressed their interest in the study via email were required to meet the participant criteria for the study. The research criteria for the study included the following: (a) PK and K teachers with experience involving transition programming for students with ASD and (b) PK and K teachers willing to participate in a Zoom virtual platform or telephone interview. The volunteers were screened to determine if they met the criteria for the study via email or phone call. After the selected participants were identified to move forward in their participation in this research study, they received the informed consent and interview questions via email. Participants were then scheduled for an interview after reviewing and agreeing to the informed consent form by replying to my email with the statement "I consent."

When the volunteers provided their consent to participate in the research study, the coordination of interviews was conducted via email. The study volunteers were

scheduled to attend an audio recorded one-on-one Zoom virtual interview, or audio recorded phone interview if the volunteers could not access Zoom. The participants participated in a semistructured interview lasting 45 to 60 minutes. Volunteers were provided with 10 interview questions as outlined in the interview protocol. I followed the protocol outlined (see Appendix A) for the interview process. After the completion of each interview, the data collection was transcribed. I transcribed all data and used manual coding to begin the analysis of my data. I debriefed the volunteers of this research study and gave them information involving the next steps in the process. Volunteers participated in the member checking process, which is where they were given a one-page summary detailing summaries of study findings. Data collected were sent to volunteers via email, and they were given 7 days to review the summary and provide input. All volunteers in this study reported that there were no additional edits or changes needed regarding their responses during the member checking process. After the volunteers completed the member checking process, they received a $10.00 Amazon gift card via email. The computer laptop used for this study was password protected, and I am the only person with the password to ensure security protocols for this study. No unusual circumstances or discrepant cases were encountered; however, if there had been any unusual encounters, the circumstances would have been disclosed and discussed accordingly.

Data Analysis

As the researcher of the study, I used the following steps in my data analysis: transcribe the participants' responses, organize the data collection, code the data

collection, generate themes, and report the findings of the study (see Creswell, 2009). About transcribing the data analysis, I used manual coding to notate the participants' responses from the interview. After completing each participant interview, I transcribed data presented by study participants. The transcription of each participant's responses gave me a clearer understanding of their perspectives regarding transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. To ensure confidentiality for this research study, I was cautious to ensure that no identifiable information was included in the data concerning the participants. The transcripts were assigned alphanumeric codes to adhere to confidentiality protocols for this research study. The participants' responses were summarized, and the next step in the data analysis was the process of coding the data. Open coding allowed me, as the researcher, to identify distinct concepts and analyze themes for categorization (see Williams & Moser, 1970). In addition, open coding can approach thematic fragments identified during data collection in an organized and systematic manner (Williams & Moser, 1970). Open coding involved highlighting words and phrases that were repeated multiple times and were similar and became a pattern; I used the same color and identified patterns in the data.

Thematic analysis was used to identify codes and patterns and allow themes in data to emerge (Saldaña, 2021). Table 2 displays examples of the second cycle of coding and themes that emerged. From my original 200 plus codes, I collapsed codes because of repeated words, phrases, and use of synonyms. Therefore, six themes emerged, and no discrepant cases were identified. The data were consistent with the themes across a continuum from barriers, challenges, supports, and successes.

After reviewing the codes and collapsing similar codes that were repeated and close in meaning, I identified patterns and categories in the data. Themes emerged during data analysis and were identified and named. In responding to the interview questions, which were guided by the one RQ of this study, participants focused on six themes: (a) professional learning opportunities; (b) communication among stakeholders; (c) mutuality in relationships; (d) cycles of planning, implementing, and assessing; (e) team collaborations; and (f) accountability practices. Table 2 shows examples of patterns and categories for this research study.

Table 2

Examples of Patterns and Categories

Patterns and categories from open codes	Themes
Professional learning: No transition training offered; ongoing professional development needed, intervention specialist could train, service providers, once a year training is/is not offered, teachers will benefit from trainings, school districts offer trainers, training/professional transition practices; training on specific strategies for ASD development-reduce noise, -reduce lights, -provide toys for sensor, -provide items they prefer such as special blankets to keep them calm	1. Professional learning opportunities
Communication – Translations needed for various populations; Need different types of communication for program; Good communication facilitates all paperwork; Training needed on working with different cultures; Spanish for teachers would be helpful; families language barriers; Some families value work of teacher in early intervention; Values-great support from parents -information provided only by parents, strong Parental Involvement, Parental Engagement, Parental Empowerment	2. Communication among stakeholders
Mutuality of care, trust, respect - Parent information empowers teachers-will the child fit in the new classroom, -well-being and safety, -when to start introducing sight words for reading, -assimilate with peers	3. Mutuality in relationships
Cycles of planning -no mandated policies, teachers devise plan accordingly to meet the needs, -teacher collaboration School District Support,- children introduced to early intervention services would have a better chance of transitioning	4. Cycles of planning, implementing, and assessing
Team collaborations - Plan for transitions; create transition plan in place prior to students entering kindergarten-if a child is not in the program, then it will take a year before special education services usually takes place Babies Can't Wait Program	5. Team collaborations
Accountability – Need family/community liaison; no prior feedback usually given they are just placed in the classroom, and the teacher must figure it out. -diagnosis has not been given, but the children show traits and characteristics; need follow through for services -early detection through pediatrician-with diagnosis special education services will be introduced in PK	6. Accountability practices

Evidence of Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of this research study encompassed elements of reliability, objectivity, internal validity, and external validity (see Merriam & Tisdell, 2017). The aspects of determining the trustworthiness of this study were explored through examining the degree of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

The process of member checking was used in this research to ensure credibility. The member checking process provided the participants with a one-page summary that sent via email, which included the responses from their interview. The process of member checking allowed the participants to review their responses and check for accuracy with a time frame of completion within 7 days. The credibility of research is established through discovering the true perspectives of the participant's reality within the research study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2017).

Transferability

Transferability of the qualitative study is the degree in which the results of the study having the ability to be transferred to other settings with other respondents (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Therefore, it has been recommended that thick description of the research study assists in providing the audience with a conventional understanding of the research study (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). Transferability was accomplished for this research study because of the detailed data analysis provided for this research study. In addition, the data analysis can assist other researchers as they review the details of the study.

Dependability

The dependability of the study accurately depicts the study's findings over time, interpretation, and recommendations of the data analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). The strategy needed to ensure dependability is referred to as an audit trail. As the researcher, I used a reflective journal to highlight and capture any notations, changes, or emergence of the findings involving data management.

Confirmability

The confirmability of the study involves the neutrality of the data being presenting clearly and concisely (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). To ensure confirmability of the study I made no assumptions relating to the data analysis. I ensured that data collection was analyzed and reported accurately. There is a detailed data analysis included in this research study that accurately portrays the responses from the participants.

Study Results

In this basic qualitative study, I explored PK and K educators' perspectives on coordination of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. The interview protocol allowed me to obtain detailed responses from participants in the study. In this section of the research study, I discuss the findings from 11 participants. Results of the study address the study's RQ. The RQ for this basic qualitative study was designed to attain an understanding of the educators' perspectives. The RQ was as follows: What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early

childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? Interview questions were guided by the conceptual framework, and participants' responses followed a continuum ranging from educators' perceived barriers, to challenges, to supports, and to successes in coordination of transitioning program for PK-K students with ASD. Following bioecological systems theory, educators related barriers, challenges, supports, and successes to family members of students with ASD, the school setting, the community, and systems beyond (see Bronfenbrenner, 2006). Educators suggested that barriers, challenges, supports, and successes in coordination of transitioning programing were influenced by cultural values, customs, and practices of the families, members of the school communities, community members at large, the state, and the nation. Educators also referred to IDEA, ADA, and federal laws that are in place to protect the rights of students with ASD.

To answer the RQ, educators in this study expressed their perspectives of challenges, barriers, supports, or successes related to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. Participants' perspectives were that PK-K transition programming was successful when the following supports were in place: (a) professional learning opportunities; (b) communication among stakeholders; (c) mutuality in relationships; (d) cycles of planning, implementing, and assessing; (e) team collaborations; and (f) accountability practices. Conversely, there were barriers and challenges to coordination of PK-K transition programming when schools did not have or promote the following: (a) professional learning opportunities; (b) communication among stakeholders; (c) mutuality in relationships; (d) cycles of

planning, implementing, and assessing; (e) team collaborations; and (f) accountability practices.

Theme 1: Professional Learning Opportunities

Participants of the study shared that professional learning opportunities are needed by everyone connected to the student with ASD. I chose stakeholders because it is an all-encompassing term referring to individuals in the home, school, and community environments who are part of the systems that affect each student's development. All educational stakeholders need professional learning, so they can address the best interests of the student, which in this study involves educators' perspectives on coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. T9 expressed, "My school does not offer any additional training or workshops associated with special needs." In addition, T11 stated, "The school does not offer any additional training or workshops for students' special needs." The participant's perspectives regarding ongoing professional learning were highlighted as a critical component towards empowering stakeholders' coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings.

I evaluated the responses for training and professional development to explore if they were provided to the teachers to ensure that they are trained to use best practices for school transition programming. The participants expressed that their schools had no training or professional development workshops to assist with transition programming for students with ASD. Participant T10 stated, after reviewing these interview questions, "I would like to know why my school does not offer ongoing teacher development and

training so that we can provide more assistance to the students." In addition to training and professional development, participant T3 reported, "The staff at my school is expected to develop our own strategies. No trainings are being offered to us to help support students with autism."

Theme 2: Communication Among Stakeholders

Participants of the study shared their views that communication is key to understanding and that communication should occur, so everyone is informed about the transition process for PK-K students. Communication should be written and oral, and translations should be available for families who speak a home language other than English. Again, I chose the term stakeholders because it is an all-encompassing term referring to individuals in the home, school, and community environments who are part of the systems that affect each student's development. All educational stakeholders need prior information about the student regarding their level of ASD to support the coordination of transition programming. As a result, the educational stakeholders can address the best interests of the student, which in this study involves educators' perspectives on coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. T9 stated,

> The teachers would talk about ways to help improve the students' academic and social skills informally throughout the school year. We would learn more about the students' needs during meetings. The students usually have a better experience when we plan and work together to prepare for the student.

Regarding communication among the stakeholders, the participants identified it as an effective approach towards developing a level of trust while educators explore the most appropriate educational setting for the student.

Many of the participants expressed that there were cultural differences that influenced academics and social interaction among the students in the classroom environment. The participants stated that challenges were encountered while working with families from various backgrounds. T4 stated,

> In my classroom, there are minimal cultural differences regarding autism. Some African Americans have mixed views; where some African Americans are accepting and willing to provide parental involvement, and others are in denial. About the Hispanic population, there is a language barrier related to parental support in transitioning. Caucasian families do not usually hesitate to provide parental support as needed.

Some participants expressed their views that language barriers directly influenced academic support and parental involvement among the educational stakeholders in the school district. Participant T6 stated, “There was an occasion when a child in my classroom spoke limited English, and the parents did not speak English. Therefore, it was tough to communicate with the family**.”** The importance of communication was expressed throughout the interview process. Some teachers expressed the view that they would like to become more fluent and would like training on working with translation program for home to school communication. Participants expressed the view that if

everyone can understand, the transitioning process will not be difficult for the families and the teachers. Participant T1 stated,

> The majority of the student population is Hispanic and Latino students. The parents of the students are very hands on. The parents coddle and praise the child, which can result in handicapping the child. I would like to be able to explain how important it is for the child to learn to do some things for himself. It comes down to training and parent education.

Educators in this study emphasized the importance of increasing the students' level of independence. They expressed their views that students need to learn specific strategies to ensure they are utilizing their skills to the best of their abilities. The students' transition may yield positive results if parents and teachers work together to understand the importance of developing strategies to enhance skills for independence during school transitions. T10 reported, "Some parents use a more hands-on approach to their child's education. Some families' want the teacher to take care of all the student's needs, and they do not offer direct support to help their child transition." Some families are more responsive to their child's academic needs, participant T5 explained, "I have noticed that (some families) are more willing to help their child when compared to other groups where there are language barriers."

Theme 3: Mutuality in Relationships

Participants of the study shared their views that regard, empathy, care, and concern for students and families, and members of a student's inclusion team, facilitates understanding among all those involved in the transition process for PK-K students. With

mutuality, relationships with others in support of the student are more likely to occur. Again, I chose stakeholders because it is an all encompassing term referring to individuals in the home, school, and community environments, who are part of the systems that affect each student's development. Mutuality involves valuing others and respecting and enhancing the growth of the other person and considering the wellbeing of others.

T11 reported, "I learned the importance of developing a relationship with my parents because they have the ability to clearly tell me about their child's needs." The participants emphasized the value and importance of having direct access to stakeholders because it helps in providing e a positive school transition. They learn the process, so they receive guidance on what the process is all about.

The participants discussed the concerns reported by the parents. Participant T4 stated, "There is a mixed level of support among my parents, but I have noticed that some parents are concerned about their child's safety when the child is nonverbal." Participant T4, reported that parents are unsure about the child's safety in a new environment. Participant T4 worked with family members to reassure them that their child will be provided the best care. Participant T5, reported a similar view to participant T4. In addition, participant T5 described,

> The parents come to me and tell me that they are worried about their child's safety. What should I expect in a new environment? I am with their child all day long, and it is important to establish a relationship with the parent: it is paramount where they fill comfortable asking you anything under the sun.

Participant T10 stated, “My parents are usually concerned with whether or not their child is going to assimilate with their peers” in the classroom environment. The parental concerns were reported by the educators, and they are working on strategies to decrease those levels of concerns through working closely with the families. The educators reported that this can be accomplished by establishing a level of rapport and trust with the families.

Theme 4: Cycles of Planning, Implementing, and Assessing

Participants of the study shared the need for a structure to follow for planning for transition programming, implementing the transition programming, and assessing the transition programming. The cycle repeats itself and assessing the transition programming leads to improvements during the next planning phase. Planning, implementing, and assessing provide the structure needed to address the best interests of the student, which in this study involves educators’ perspectives on coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. Participant T9 described,

> The students on the autism spectrum like to follow a daily routine. I try to create a classroom, where the students know what to expect. The students struggle with difficulties transitioning to different activities in class. If they do not have an environment that offers stability, then they may feel uncomfortable in that setting.

Most of the participants felt that the students would thrive in an environment that has a routine, that is designed to meet the students’ unique needs. As noted, by the participants

the students display different academic and social needs; therefore, it is best to identify which strategies are appropriate for the child.

PK-K Special Education Transition Practices

Transition practices are followed to assist the teachers, students, and families with the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD through implementing specific strategies aligned to meet their unique learning goals. Most of the participants were able to provide transition practices for their students. Participant T2 explained, “I like to use pictures, symbols, and music to help my students transition.” In addition, to strategies used for transition practices participant T3 stated, “I would use items that will make them comfortable, for example one student likes to have a specific blanket at school” Another approach that was evaluated for utilizing transition practices, Participant T4 expressed, “My school offers summer programs to help the students transition to kindergarten.” Participant T8, utilizes another approach to help the students transition. Participant T8 reported, “It is important to understand the child’s limits and your ability to provide calming techniques to calm the child down as needed”

Positive School Entrance

Participants indicated that the school transition and entrance into a new classroom environment are milestones that children with ASD encounter. They expressed the view that school transition is a process that may influence the effectiveness of academic and social supports throughout the school year. Some of the participants reported data concerning feedback given prior to a student entering a classroom setting. T3 stated,

> As the child enters the classroom there was no prior information given to help assist the teachers in helping the students. The parents gave me information about what was going on with the child. I would have to just ask the parents for help and do my own research.

Participant T3's was not provided prior information involving strategies or guidelines to follow to help assist students in the classroom setting. The next participant that has reported challenges with school entrance and the introduction to a new setting was participant T10. Participant T10 reported,

> There was no information provided to me prior to the student entering my classroom. I was told by the special education department that I was going to have a child with autism in my classroom, and that was it. I was nervous about it because I did not have any training on the professional level. The information about the child only came from the parent. I did attend a short brief training for one full day in a special education classroom. Some students come to kindergarten because PreK is not required. They have been with their parents up into they walk into the kindergarten classroom, so me and my assistant, just learn by doing**.**

The interview response from participant T8 represented other participants' views that emphasis is placed on school entrance into a new environment. T8 stated, "I did not have any knowledge about the child's learning needs before the student would come into my classroom, and I would usually talk to my parents."

Theme 5: Team Collaborations

Participants of the study shared that the importance of collaboration by everyone is needed to support intervention teams, families, and provide services for those who are connected to the student with ASD. Multi tiered collaboration makes it possible to address the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. Participant T8 stated, "Teachers and parents worked together to help the child have a successful transition." In addition, to collaboration among everyone Participant T9 explained, "The teachers would talk about different ways to help improve the students' academic and social skills informally throughout the school year." The participants suggested that it is critical to have all educational stakeholders involved in the child's transition programming. A collaborative effort from everyone may yield positive results for children.

Participants provided responses relating to the importance of parents' having conversations with their child's physicians to ascertain if the child is meeting their developmental milestones. The participants expressed their concerns involving pediatricians and early intervention. Participant T7 explained,

> It is important for parents to talk to their pediatrician to see if their child needs to be tested for early intervention services. It is better for the child to have special education services in place in PreK and when they enter kindergarten, then they will have the necessary supports in place. Otherwise, when they enter kindergarten, they may have to wait at least one year before special education services are assigned to them.

The educators emphasized the importance of parents communicating with their child's pediatrician concerning growth and developmental milestones. In reference to pediatric supports participant T11 reported,

> If the student is given early intervention services through early detection the students may experience a positive school transition. The students will have a more positive experience when they enter kindergarten. This referral for early intervention services must come from the pediatrician**.**

There are also similar perspectives shared from participant T6 regarding pediatricians and early detection. T6 expressed, "It would make a great difference for students if doctors would identify the children earlier, so that they can receive services from state funded programs."

Theme 6: Accountability Practices

Participants of the study shared that everyone is accountable for maintaining ethical care and practices to address the transition programming needs for the student with ASD. I chose stakeholders because it is an all encompassing term referring to individuals in the home, school, community, state, and national environments, who are part of the systems that effect each student's development. Transition programming involves federal laws protecting the rights of each student in special education. All stakeholders are accountable for doing their part in addressing the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD, which in this study involves educators' perspectives on coordination of PK-K transition programming in inclusive settings. Participant T8 stated, "The school does not have any mandated policies and procedures in

place for the teachers to follow to ensure that families are provided with a positive school transition." Participant T2 expressed, "We come up with our own plan to help the students whenever we can." The participants responded through providing perspectives into the challenges, presented for students with ASD. The barriers discussed by the participants was essential in providing further insight into the educators' experiences with transition programming in inclusive settings.

School District Support for Teachers

The educators were presented with questions to assist in determining the level of support provided by the school district. The participants reported that the school district did not have any mandated policies in place to assist students with the school transition. As a result, the participants of the study reported that they did not have any direct plan to follow to assist with the coordination of transition programming. The teachers expressed, their concern with the school district because they felt that they were underprepared to assist the families with the coordination of transition programming for ASD students in inclusive settings.

Parental Involvement and Support

Parental involvement was discussed with the participants to provide insight into the levels of communication involved in the schools. Most of the participants provided detailed responses concerning parental involvement. T2 reported, "I have always received positive feedback from parents regarding their involvement in my school, and it was the highlight of working with students with autism."

Regarding the level of parental supports T6 stated, “My school has a great level of supports coming from the parents.” The parents have been “helpful to me and the students.” There was additional information provided regarding parental support from participant T7. Participant T7 disclosed, “I have experienced a great level of support from my parents. They are available to answer any questions that I may have about their child.” After further reviewing the transcripts, participant T10 described, “The parents at my school provide guidance, structure, and support for their child, and it helps to make the transition process easier for everyone.”

There are additional participants that have not had a positive experience involving parental involvement within their schools. T4 explained, “The level of support from parents is mixed, I have some parents that are supportive. Then I have some parents that will not pick up their phone to speak with me about their child.” Participant T1 reported,

> There is a lack of support for my students, there was an occasion where a parent never showed any interest in their child’s academics. As noted from the participants, having the ability to have an open dialogue with the parents will be beneficial in helping the teachers clearly understand how to assist the students through the school transition.

Summary

Chapter 4 included detailed about this basic qualitative study which included the setting, demographics, data collection, data analysis, evidence of trustworthiness, and results of the study. Chapter 5 will provide the interpretation of the findings, limitations of the study, recommendations, implications, and the conclusion of the study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative research was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. The data collection from the study included semistructured interviews from participants who are employed in a suburban school district in a southern region of the United States. The RQ focused on exploring educators' perspectives on coordination of transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. Participants of this study reported challenges associated with coordination of planning for a positive PK-K transition for students with ASD. The primary challenges to coordination of transition programming that were reported by most participants were the lack of training for teachers and lack of support from the school district. Participants of this study emphasized the value of having supportive parents to collaborate with concerning the academic and emotional supports needed for the child to be successful in the new classroom environment. As confirmed by participants of this study, having a supportive school district that guides coordination of transition programming for their youngest students is essential to successful inclusive schools.

The literature acquired from current studies suggested that school districts are continually striving to promote successful transitions for preschoolers to K settings, but the plans vary dramatically across school districts, counties, and states (Education Commission of the States, 2020; Hart et al., 2019). The finding by Hart et al. (2019) were confirmed by this study, as there were variations in transition programming for PK-K programs serving children with ASD in inclusive settings.

Interpretation of Findings

My interpretation of findings was based on thematic analysis of data collected from educators who had experiences with coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. Educators identified experiences that they perceived to be beneficial for coordination of school transition programming for students with ASD. In the following section, I present themes identified through the process of thematic analysis regarding barriers, challenges, supports, and successes of coordination of transition programming. When professional learning opportunities; communication among stakeholders; mutuality in relationships; a cycle for planning, implementing, and assessing; and team collaboration exist, participants viewed coordination of transition programming as successful. Conversely, if these supports were not in place, coordination of transition planning met with challenges and barriers to success. The study findings indicated that educators' perspectives revealed that they were faced with barriers and challenges in their quest to coordinate PK-K transition programming for early childhood students in inclusive settings.

Theme 1: Professional Learning Opportunities

Regarding the development of additional training and professional development for the educators, most of the participants shared their experiences in detail. The participants reported that they would benefit from having professional development training to assist teachers in preparing families for the school transition. A participant reported that there was professional learning offered once a year, and there is a recommendation to have additional training for educators. Educators mentioned they are

dissatisfied with their level of training, and they feel underprepared to manage the behavioral and learning needs for students with autism, which aligned with the findings of Davidson et al. (2021). According to Davidson et al., professional development provides a platform for educators to collaborate on best practices for students. The importance of professional development and professional learning communities by Schechter and Feldman (2019) was stressed by participants in my study.

Theme 2: Communication Among Stakeholders

The participants in the study that expressed concerns around cultural differences. There were noticeable differences reported that would significantly hinder the school transition process. The participants reported that there were occasions where they would have students with parents who did not speak the English language. The language barrier presented concerns for everyone involved in the school transition process. As reported by the participants, some families were provided with translators to assist families who were unable to speak the English language. The educators would work together whenever they would have a student or parent who did not speak the English language. As a result, educators communicated with other colleagues and stakeholders in the school community who spoke other languages to help translate for the families. The Hispanic parents took great pride in ensuring that their child's academic and social needs were met. Participant T1 reported, "Hispanic parents unknowingly cause the child to regress, for example they may tie their child's shoelaces every morning." It was recommended by the participants to help the students increase their level of independence through allowing them to try to work on specific skills or make goals to identify time frames of progression for the

activities. Larcombe et al. (2019) discussed how the school transition is a complex concept for many school districts, and it is a difficult process for the student if there is limited communication among educational stakeholders.

Theme 3: Mutuality in Relationships

The participants elaborated in detail about the parents' perspectives. The parents had concerns associated with the child's well-being, safety, assimilation, and having the ability to blend in with their peers. One participant reported that the parents were concerned about when is it recommended to start teaching their child sight words so they could begin the process of reading. Preston et al. (2019) explained how parents' level of concerns would decrease when the family has established trust with staff members. Most of the participants acknowledged that building a relationship with the parents was critical in helping the educators discover the students' needs during the school transition.

Theme 4: Cycles of Planning, Implementing, and Assessing

PK-K Special Education Transition Practices

Transition programming requires the collaborative strategies from educational stakeholders. In reference to transition practices, the participants provided detailed information involving transition practices. The participants discussed the techniques that they use in the classroom environment. For example, the participants responded with strategies used in the classroom such as playing with small toys, reducing the noise level, petting small animals, playing music, and using calming techniques for the students. It was also mentioned by a participant that having the students in a classroom with a smaller number of students is an effective approach towards improving the school

transition. Vitiello et al. (2020) discussed how the alignment of transition practices is related to instructional guidelines and behavior management beliefs, which may influence a child's entrance into K. The previous literature did not discuss the detailed practices that were used in the classroom environment to assist in providing a positive school transition. The participants provided responses that offered details about their classroom practices, which were supportive in helping the students with their school transition. In addition, McGhee Hassrick et al. (2021) examined the importance of developing strategies to support the coordination of transitioning programming for children with ASD based on their transitional needs.

Positive School Entrance

The participants of the study were very concerned about the students being placed in a new classroom environment, where the educators did not have any prior knowledge about the students. The participants reported the need to have a transition plan in place for the students. The educators expressed that they were uncomfortable with not knowing what to expect from the student and how to provide the most appropriate accommodations to meet the child's learning needs. The participants reported that they must devise their own transition programming strategies and change it accordingly depending on the students' needs in the classroom. Stormshak et al. (2021) indicated that children who do not enter K with the basic competencies involving behavior regulations are at an increased risk for behavioral and adjustment challenges. Most of the participants reported that they had to develop best practices and strategies for the students to assist in providing guidance towards the coordination of transition programming for students with

ASD in inclusive settings. They participants of the study suggested that they would have a stronger level of self efficacy for the coordination of transition programming if they were provided with support through their school district.

Theme 5: Team Collaborations

The participants expressed concerns for parent and pediatric engagement. The participants felt that early detection is critical to help assist the students in PK with special education services. Children diagnosed with ASD are eligible to receive early intervention services in PK classroom settings. The special education services recommended by early intervention programs will transfer over into K classroom setting. The early intervention services are essential in developing transition programing for the student; however, some children with ASD have not received referrals for ASD evaluation purposes (DiGuiseppi et al., 2020). In addition, if a child does not have early intervention services, then they have to wait approximately 1 year before special education services begin in K. Regarding the family navigation process, DiGuiseppi et al. (2020) suggested it may include physicians, counselors, and teachers who assist families with seeking early intervention treatments through early identification of ASD. Early intervention programs have been beneficial in preparing children for the school transition. The participants explained that parents should establish a rapport with their child's pediatrician to help identify if the child has any characteristics associated with ASD.

Theme 6: Accountability Practices

School District Supports for Teachers

The participants shared their concerns involving support from the school district. The participants reported that there are no policies or guidelines to help support families with the school transition. Jury et al. (2021) expressed that educator openly discussed being favorable towards the inclusion of students with disability; however, they also have fears about what the disability will represent for their teaching practices. Most of the participants communicated various levels of frustration associated with transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings because they did not receive any support from their school districts regarding instructional protocols.

Parental Involvement and Support

Parental involvement was a critical factor to consider for a positive school transition. Most of the participants communicated those contributory factors that parental involvement presents to the school transition. The participants reported that prior to a student entering their classroom, the only knowledge provided comes from the parents. According to Puccioni et al. (2020), parental involvement assists in creating linkages between the preschool settings and the formal schooling setting. The participants explained that the parents provided them with valuable information regarding the child's ability to adapt to a new school environment.

Limitations of the Study

The first limitation to trustworthiness in this study, addressed in Chapter 1, was the recruitment of enough participants during the global pandemic, COVID19. I recruited

11 educators to provide their perspectives involving the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. In addition, when a population is considered homogeneous and the phenomenon is narrow, the aim for the sample size should be approximately 10 (Sigmond, 2016). Semistructured interviews were given to the participants, which lasted for approximately 45 to 60 minutes. Data saturation for this study was met when there was enough information given by the participants indicating the study could be replicated for further research. The data saturation for this study was reported when the data collection yielded similar results with confirmation of emerging themes and conclusions (see Saunders et al., 2018).

The second limitation to trustworthiness in this study, addressed in Chapter 1, was my ability as the researcher to remain unbiased to the study due to my disclosure of having a child diagnosed with ASD and my advocacy for students with ASD. To reduce any potential biases towards this study, I remained objective to the study and followed the interview protocol and accurately reported the participant responses. Ravitch and Carl (2021) suggested that researchers should use a reflective journal to help the researchers monitor their biases towards their research study. Thus, throughout the course of this research study, I used a reflective journal to reflect on the participants responses for the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings.

Recommendations

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore the perspectives of educators involving the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. The participants for the study were selected from suburban schools in

one region in the United States; due to the narrow selection of participants, the study could be expanded to include other regions throughout the United States. Purtell et al. (2020) noted that there is limited information about coordination between providers of early intervention services for the transition process from the transitioning school site to the receiving school. Additionally, Cook et al. (2019) and Greenburg et al. (2020) suggested that there is limited research available that focused on collaborations across multiple distinct systems and barriers associated with making PK to K transition programs successful for positive child outcomes. The research study revealed that the educators were faced with many challenges while coordinating transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. Participants of the study viewed the coordination of transition programming as being successful when there are professional learning opportunities, communication, mutuality in relationships, and accountability among educational stakeholders. The participants of this research study provided insight into the challenges and successes involved with the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. The participants overwhelmingly suggested the importance of having the school district provide mandated policies and guidelines to adhere to for students to experience a positive school transition. This research study indicated that there is a lack in communication among educational stakeholders. Based on the findings presented in this research study, I recommend exploring the perspectives of the parents regarding the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. Parents would have the opportunity to share their perspectives about their experiences as their child prepares for

the school transition. An additional recommendation is to explore early detection of ASD for children. Early detection of ASD can allow the student to receive special education services from early intervention providers in the PK school environment. Participant T7 stated, "If early intervention services are not in place during prekindergarten, then the student may have to wait a year before special education services start for kindergarten."

Therefore, the transfer of special education services from PK-K is essential in assisting education stakeholders in providing a positive school transition for students. This current study reviewed the perspectives of educators, and I identified the challenges and successes involved with the coordination of transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. The following recommendation from this study is based on the limitations and strengths of the research study.

Implications

The results of my study have several implications regarding social change; therefore, I have introduced proposed recommendations that will promote positive social change. The results of the study indicated that the educators did encounter challenges while coordinating transition programming for students with ASD in inclusive settings. As a result, the participants were able to overcome the challenges through finding alternative strategies to support the students with ASD through increasing the level of communication among parents, attend additional trainings associated with autism, and implement transition practices to help students with the school transition.

This research study will provide a contribution towards literature involving school transition practices for students with ASD in inclusive settings. The participants of the

study had the ability to express their challenges and successes accompanied with transition programming for students with ASD. This research study provided a platform for educators to express their perspectives regarding their classroom environment. The data collection from this research study will be beneficial in helping education stakeholders determine, which strategies are critical to use towards implementing a positive school transition.

The potential for positive social change implications may derive from the contribution of knowledge obtained from this research study, which identified challenges associated with the school transition for students with ASD. The first proposed solution that would promote positive social change would be for school districts to implement ongoing training and professional development, which would encompass training modules associated with school transition for students with ASD. Van Mieghem et al. (2020) discussed how inclusive practices for students with ASD have not been embraced in several school districts; therefore, there is a need for improvement regarding professional development as it relates to inclusive practices. The educators also need to have professional development that will give them a stronger level of self efficacy when a child with autism enters their classroom setting. A teacher's level of self efficacy is a direct correlation of their alignment with their endorsed perspectives. As a result, an educators' views have the capability of positively or negatively influencing their ability to work with students that require additional assistance (Van Mieghem et al., 2020). It is important for the teacher to feel confident in her classroom and can confidently implement strategies that would help improve the school transition for students with

ASD. In addition, professional development will allow the educators to expand and deepen their level of understanding. The professional development and training workshop will also allow the teachers to collaborate, share experiences, and discuss best practices that have worked for them in their classroom setting. Accardo and Finnegan (2019) suggested educators may benefit from developing professional learning communities; therefore, the collaborative efforts from the educators will help improve the learning outcomes for students with ASD. The participants of the study reported that they are doing their best to meet the students' academic needs, but they need additional assistance from their school district.

The second proposed solution that would promote positive social change would include utilizing culturally responsive teaching training. The educators' reported that were cultural differences in the manner, in which the families and the teachers collaborated. Culturally responsive teaching will help assist in bridging the gap, and it will help the teacher understand any cultural nuances. The importance of communication and parental involvement are critical towards the academic growth and development of the child.

The third proposed solution that would promote positive social change would be for the schools to obtain translators to assist families that are limited on speaking the English language. The translator will have the ability to communicate to the parents in an effective manner, where they are able to comprehend all aspects of the school transition. This process will have the potential to help guide everyone into making the best decisions to support the child as they transition into a new environment. Regarding the proposed

solutions, these steps will help facilitate an environment that will assist in providing positive social change for educators and families in making the school transition. The information from the study will provide educators with strategies that they can use in their classroom daily to foster an environment that is conducive to implementing best practices for school transitions. This research study can be used to inform education stakeholders with ongoing professional development to enhance self-efficacy skills. As a result, this study may bring positive social change to educational settings through highlighting autism awareness for children needing academic supports.

Conclusions

The purpose of this basic qualitative study with interviews was to explore educators' perspectives on the coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings. My focus was on gaining perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, and successes from 6 PK and 5 K teachers who had experience working with the coordination of transition programming in three suburban schools located in the southern region of the United States. Findings of this study addresses a gap in the literature. Participants viewed coordination of transition programming as successful when there were (a) professional learning opportunities, (b) communication among stakeholders, (c) mutuality in relationships, (d) cycles of planning, implementing, and assessing, (e) team collaborations, and (f) systems of accountability.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Describe your current role in education.

2. Tell me about your experience and knowledge concerning ASD.

3. Describe your experiences in working with families through the PK-K school transition.

4. Explain what strategies will ensure a positive school entrance into kindergarten for a student with ASD.

5. Describe your current practices and policies that are used by your school district to support families with preschool transition.

- How often are these practices implemented, and or the practices mandated by the school districts?

6. Describe the parents' level of support in assisting their child through the preschool transition process towards the entrance of kindergarten.

- Did the parents have any specific concerns involving the PK-K transition?

7. Does your school have a partnership with any community-based organization that supports autism awareness, involving academic growth and development for families in the community.

8. Describe your experience involving any cultural differences or beliefs, that has influenced the PK-K school transition.

- Describe a positive experience that you have had, with the preschool transition to kindergarten for students with ASD.

9. Describe the level of communication among the PK-K teachers involving the preschool transition.

- Did anyone provide you with information concerning the child's specific level of needs or accommodations needed for learning.

9. Describe if there are any training or professional development offered or required for educators as they assist students through the school transition.

- If training or professional development was offered to the educators, was it beneficial in transitioning the students into an inclusive classroom setting?

10. Is there anything else that you would like to add to your interview?

Appendix B: Alignment of RQ and Interview Questions (IQ)

RQ: What are educators' perspectives of perceived challenges, barriers, or successes relating to transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings?

Conceptual Framework: Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System		
Research Question Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System	**PK Teacher Interview Questions**	**K Teacher Interview Questions**
RQ1: What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to coordination of PK-K transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? **Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System: Microsystem**	**IQ1**: Describe your current role in education, and how many years have you been working with students with autism? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ2:** Tell me about your experience and knowledge concerning ASD? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ3**: Describe your experiences in working with families through the PK-K school transition? Prompt: I heard you say… **IQ4:** Describe the parents' level of support in assisting their child through the preschool transition process towards the entrance of kindergarten? Prompt: Were there any specific concerns… **IQ5:** Were there any specific concerns that the parents had involving the PK-K transition? Prompt: Talk to me about…	**IQ1**: Describe your current role in education, and how many years have you been working with students with autism? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ2:** Tell me about your experience and knowledge concerning ASD? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ3:** Describe your experiences in working with families through the PK-K school transition? Prompt: I heard you say… **IQ4:** Describe the parents' level of support in assisting their child through the preschool transition process towards the entrance of kindergarten? Prompt: Were there any specific concerns… **IQ5:** Were there any specific concerns that the parents had involving the PK-K transition? Prompt: Talk to me about…

RQ1 What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? **Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System: Mesosystem**	**IQ6:** Explain what strategies will ensure a positive school entrance into kindergarten for a student with ASD. Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ7:** Describe your current practices and policies that are used by your school district to support families with preschool transitions? • How often are these practices implemented, and or the practices mandated by the school districts? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ8:** Describe the level of communication among the PK-K teachers involving the preschool transition? Prompt: You mentioned… **IQ9:** Did anyone provide you with information concerning the child's specific level of needs or accommodations needed for learning? You mentioned… **IQ10:** Describe if there are any training or professional development offered or required for educators as they assist students through the school transition? Prompt: Discuss more details about…	**IQ6**: Explain what strategies will ensure a positive school entrance into kindergarten for a student with ASD. Prompt: Talk to me about **IQ7:** Describe your current practices and policies that are used by your school district to support families with preschool transitions? • How often are these practices implemented, and or the practices mandated by the school districts? Prompt: Talk to me about… **IQ8:** Describe the level of communication among the PK-K teachers involving the preschool transition? Prompt: You mentioned… **IQ9:** Did anyone provide you with information concerning the child's specific level of needs or accommodations needed for learning? You mentioned… **IQ10:** Describe if there are any training or professional development offered or required for educators as they assist students through the school transition? Prompt: Discuss more details about…
RQ1 What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or	**IQ11:** Does your school have a partnership with any community-based	**IQ11:** Does your school have a partnership with any community-based

successes relating to transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? **Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System: Exosystem**	organization that supports autism awareness, involving academic growth and development for families in the community? Prompt: Talk to me about…	organization that supports autism awareness, involving academic growth and development for families in the community? Prompt: Talk to me about…
RQ1 What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? **Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System: Macrosystems**	**IQ12:** Describe your experience involving any cultural differences or beliefs, that has influenced the PK-K school transition? Prompt: Describe a time…	**IQ12:** Describe your experience involving any cultural differences or beliefs, that has influenced the PK-K school transition? Prompt: Describe a time…
RQ1 What are educators' perspectives on challenges, barriers, supports, or successes relating to transition programming for early childhood students with ASD in inclusive settings? **Urie Bronfenbrenner Ecological Theory System: Chronosystem**	**IQ13:** If training or professional development was offered to the educators was it beneficial in transitioning the students into an inclusive classroom setting? Prompt: Talk to me about… • Is there anything else that you would like to add to your interview?	**IQ13:** If training or professional development was offered to the educators was it beneficial in transitioning the students into an inclusive classroom setting? Prompt: Talk to me about… • Is there anything else that you would like to add to your interview?