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Teachers' Perceptions of Strategies to Discipline Students with Disabilities

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Walden University

College of Education and Human Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Kedrah D. Knowlin-Anderson

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2023

Abstract

Teachers' Perceptions of Strategies to Discipline Students with Disabilities

by

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MA, Albany State University, 2010

BS, Albany State University, 2008

Project Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Education

Walden University

December 2023

Abstract

This qualitative case study involved addressing rates of general education elementary school teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience, who referred students with disabilities to the office for their behavior, which were twice as often as nondisabled students. Based on the conceptual framework of Weiner's Attribution Theory, teacher's lack knowledge of specific disabilities and strategies for modifying negative behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities, were evident in their disciplinary procedures. This qualitative case study involved examining elementary level general education teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience attitudes and perceptions regarding disciplining students with disabilities. Research questions that guided this study involved factors that may have impacted increases in referrals among students with disabilities as well as effectiveness of strategies that were used by teachers. Data were collected from 12 elementary general education teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience using in-depth structured interviews, behavioral documentation, and reflective journals to answer research questions. Through the use of an open coding system, findings indicated that general education teachers with 0 to 5 years of teaching experience, believed lack of teacher training was the main factor for the increase in behavior referrals. As a result of these findings, a 3-day professional development was created. Study results were used to address disproportionality of discipline referrals among students with disabilities. Social change may occur as more rural school districts in Southwest Georgia begin to implement training that focuses on providing strategies that will lead to a decrease in behaviors and an increase in student achievement on the elementary level.

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Dedication

I dedicate this study to the ones I love the most. To the people who have supported and encouraged me, through this entire process, – my family, my husband, parents, sister, and my babies - Bryston and Mariyah. I thank each of you for loving me and pushing me to be and do my best! Thank you for sacrificing with me while we were on this journey. I love you all and pray that I have made you proud.

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Section 1: The Problem

The Local Problem

This qualitative case study involved addressing the local problem of general education teachers' lack of knowledge about effective strategies for disciplining elementary school students with disabilities who received instruction in inclusive classrooms. For the past 3 years, in an elementary school in small school district in Southwest Georgia, there has been an 3%-5% increase in the number of elementary students with disabilities who received disciplinary referrals. According to G. Porter (personal communication, January 23, 2017), several of the school district's elementary teachers and administrators collaborated to identify factors contributing to the increasing number of disciplinary referrals among students with disabilities in grades 3-5. While enrollment of new students with disabilities into the school district and placement of new students into the special education program were considered, an analysis of empirical data indicated that these two factors had no impact on the increase in disciplinary referrals among students with disabilities in grades 3-5.

The increasing number of disciplinary referrals among students with disabilities might be due to behaviors directly related to their disabilities (Emerson, 2016; Santiago-Rosario et al., 2021). Students with disabilities often have trouble following rules, processing demands of their teachers, following simple day-to-day procedures, and staying focused on learning tasks. According to G. Porter (personal communication, January 23, 2017), elementary level general education teachers in this southwest Georgia district stated their perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities derive from

strenuous demands of the elementary school and local district in terms of how they should be disciplined in general education classrooms. Because some elementary level general education teachers may be unaware that certain behaviors are directly related to specific disabilities, they may punish students with disabilities more frequently, resulting in a higher percentage of discipline infractions among this populace of learners (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017).

Teachers and administrators in the elementary school located in the small rural Southwest Georgia school district used procedures such as behavior intervention plans to address behavior issues displayed by students with disabilities. However, these plans are ineffective in terms of decreasing disciplinary referrals that are reported yearly among third through fifth grade students with disabilities in this district. Lack of evidence may be associated with general education teachers not following the school district's disciplinary procedures for students with disabilities who have individualized education plans (IEPs) or behavior intervention plans (BIPs). What is still unknown is why was there a 3%- 5% increase in the number of behavioral referrals among third- through fifth-grade students with disabilities in this local elementary school located in Southwest Georgia school district. Therefore, investigating teachers' perceptions of strategies that were used to discipline students with disabilities may be essential for understanding why there has been an 3%- 5% increase in the number of elementary school students with disabilities who received disciplinary referrals. In addition, general education teachers' perceptions about this problem could aid in determining what additional professional

development offerings are needed to support them with effective strategies for disciplining students with disabilities.

Rationale

Maintaining order in the classroom is essential to providing a safe learning environment for teachers and students (Bruster, 2014; Golann, 2018; Konishi et al., 2022). This qualitative case study involved addressing the local problem of general education teachers' lack of knowledge about effective strategies for disciplining elementary school students with disabilities who receive instruction in inclusive classrooms. Each year, professional development offerings are provided for elementary general education teachers employed in this school district in Southwest Georgia. During professional development sessions and through a series of informal discussions, elementary general education teachers have expressed that the school district's professional development offerings do not include sufficient information about effective strategies for modifying negative behaviors of students with disabilities (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017). Instead, professional development offerings relating to students with disabilities have focused on modifying curriculum content. General education teachers on the elementary level have also been provided with information from students' IEPs and BIPs, which include strategies for using positive behavior incentives and responses to intervention (RTIs). Still, discipline infractions among elementary students with disabilities continue to increase, indicating that some teachers struggle to understand how certain negative behaviors are associated with disabilities and how they can be addressed (Chow et al., 2020). G. Porter (personal

communication, January 23, 2017) stated due to insufficient professional development offerings involving disciplining students with disabilities, many general education teachers on the elementary level could not identify behaviors related to specific disabilities and instead relied on their professional judgment to address behavioral challenges.

By providing professional development for elementary general education teachers that focus on negative behaviors associated with specific disabilities and strategies, addressing disruptive behaviors may be instrumental in terms of lowering the number of elementary school students with disabilities in the school district who receive discipline referrals each year (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017). In addition, professional development may give elementary general education teachers insights regarding how and why some negative behaviors among students with disabilities should be handled compared to how they should be addressed among students who have not been diagnosed with disabilities (Dignath et al., 2022; Peacock, 2016). Finally, investigating general education elementary teachers' perceptions of modifying negative behavioral actions of students with disabilities and strategies that may be used to discipline this populace of students may assist school district administrators with improving procedures for handling disruptive behavior issues.

This qualitative case study was used to understand elementary level general education teachers' knowledge of disciplinary actions and behavioral strategies for students with disabilities in grades 3-5. The study was also used to understand elementary general education teachers' perceptions of why there has been an 3%- 5% increase in

disciplinary referrals for elementary school students with disabilities. In addition, qualitative interviews were used to understand elementary general education teachers' perceptions of effective discipline procedures and strategies that were used to curtail negative behaviors of students with disabilities. Finally, data collected from the study were used to develop a project that addressed the local problem through professional development.

Definitions of Terms

Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP): A written action plan that is used to manage a student's behavior through positive reinforcement, interventions, and various types of support (Mauro, 2020).

Disability: A physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities (Pulrang, 2019).

Discipline: Procedures that are used to maintain a safe and orderly learning environment through broad prevention measures, targeted interventions, and the development of self-discipline (National Center on Safe Supportive Learning Environments, 2023).

Elementary school: An educational facility where primary age students receive educational instruction from classroom teachers for academic achievement.

Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE): All children with an IEP are entitled to a FAPE that includes children eligible for special education between the ages of 3 and 21. Special education and related services that make up a FAPE are provided to children who

are identified with disabilities and have an IEP, which are provided at no cost to parents (Georgia Department of Education, 2019).

Functional Behavioral Assessment: An evaluation tool that is used to identify problem behaviors and develop interventions to improve or eliminate those behaviors (Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, 2019).

Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) of 2004: A bill signed by President George W. Bush to mandate changes that ensured all students with disabilities had access to a FAPE that emphasized special education services that met their individual needs (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2016).

Individual Education Plan: A document created by a team of stakeholders detailing how a student with disabilities will be educated (Dodge, 2018).

Inclusion: Engaging students with disabilities in general education classrooms with their peers who have not been diagnosed with disabilities (Grieco, 2019).

Professional development: Learning that results in changes to teachers' instructional practices and develops into improvements in terms of student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017).

Student with Disabilities: A child who is mentally disabled or has a hearing, speech, visual, orthopedic, language, or other health impairment, or a severe emotional disturbance, autism, traumatic brain injury, or specific learning disability, and requires special education and related services as a result of these conditions (U.S. Department of Education, 2018).

Teacher Perceptions: The insight by which a teacher interprets behaviors and interactions with a student across a period of development (Hajovsky et al., 2020; Pas & Bradshaw, 2014).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it contributed to research on elementary general education teachers' knowledge about effective strategies for disciplining elementary school students with disabilities. Findings from this study also contributed to the field of education and advanced knowledge of elementary general education teachers who provide instruction to students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. Data during this study were used to improve teachers' understanding of discipline procedures that were used for students with disabilities and why there continues to be an increase in the number of elementary school students with disabilities who received disciplinary referrals. As a result of participating in this study, general education teachers at the elementary school site received information that gave them more understanding about how certain negative behaviors are associated with some disabilities and how they can be appropriately addressed in the classroom before sending students to the office for discipline.

Findings from this study also provided elementary general education teachers with specific research-based strategies that can be used to address disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities, which may be instrumental in terms of lowering the number of elementary school students with disabilities who receive discipline referrals each year. Findings included valuable information that elementary general education teachers and

administrators can use to foster and maintain positive and orderly classroom environments and school climates. Study results also informed elementary general education teachers and administrators about why students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive discipline referrals and out-of-school suspensions compared to their nondisabled peers. Elementary level administrators may use findings to determine future professional development offerings for general education teachers within their schools.

College professors in the field of education may use results to better inform preservice teachers about effective positive strategies for modifying negative behavior of some students with disabilities. School district administrators may also use results to improve discipline policies and procedures. Finally, results also provide the school district's discipline committee with vital information that can ultimately decrease the number of disciplinary referrals that were reported at the site and in the school district.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

RQ1: What are elementary general education teachers' perceptions of factors that lead to increasing numbers of discipline referrals among students with disabilities?

RQ2: How do general education teachers educating students with disabilities describe effectiveness of behavior strategies they use to decrease disciplinary referrals?

RQ3: How can the school district improve general educator training to address the large number of behavioral referrals for students with disabilities in grades 3-5?

Review of the Literature

In this literature review, peer-reviewed journal articles, published books, and scholarly publications were primarily used. I used the following key words: *conceptual framework, Weiner's attribution theory, student behaviors, discipline and students with disabilities, IDEA, disproportionality, behavior strategies, teacher perceptions, and student management*. The following databases were used: Education Research Complete, ERIC, ProQuest, SAGE Journals, Walden Library, and Google Scholar. Literature related to the study was organized into the following subtopics: (a) conceptual framework, (b) discipline and students with disabilities, (c) strategies for managing behaviors among students with disabilities, and (d) teacher perceptions of students, student management, and discipline.

Conceptual Framework

Weiner's attribution theory served as the conceptual framework for this study. This theory is based on the idea that people perceive behaviors of themselves or others by connecting specific attributes such as traits, abilities, or feelings to displayed behaviors (Moskowitz et al., 2021; Wang & Hall, 2018; Weiner, 1985). The concept of attribution is essential in terms of interactions between teachers and their students. When teachers observe certain behaviors in their students, they may associate them with previous actions, experiences, or emotions within themselves (Frenzel et al., 2021; Wagner & Ruch, 2015).

General and special education teachers tend to network with other teachers in the same school, school district, or even surrounding school districts. Teachers collaborate,

especially at the end or beginning of the school year, to discuss upcoming students who receive services from the special education department. In these meetings, they also share important information, such as different strategies to help specific students inside the classroom and any behavioral concerns (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017). Many times, teachers report their issues and emotional aspects of dealing with previous behaviors of students with disabilities with other teachers (Danner, 2023). For new teachers, receiving background information about specific student incidents where negative or intolerable behaviors were exhibited, such as physical or verbal aggression, sends signals to new teachers, which places them on guard and ready to address the student's behavior before having met the student.

Each school year, elementary level general education teachers within this Southwest Georgia district are offered different types of professional development opportunities involving teaching content-related skills to students with disabilities. However, they rarely provide professional development on disciplining students with disabilities (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017). Due to lack of training centered on discipline and students with disabilities, many elementary general education teachers rely on special education teachers to address disciplinary issues. In the absence of special education teachers, elementary general education teachers are inclined toward using discipline referrals to remove students from classrooms (O'Connor et al., 2016; Shurtteff, 2020). Weiner's attribution theory was chosen because it provides a framework for understanding the lens through which some elementary general education teachers address negative behaviors of elementary school students with disabilities.

Discipline and Students with Disabilities

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was signed into law. The Act stated all children with disabilities must be granted the opportunity to receive a FAPE (Cortiella & Horowitz, 2014; IDEA, 2023). Until the late 1800s, the majority of public schools throughout American history only provided services to students with disabilities at the discretion of local school districts, which resulted in minimal educational outcomes (Department of Education, 2023; Ramey, 2015). After the unfair treatment of students with disabilities, legislation and litigation began to shape how students with disabilities would be educated. Although laws were set to protect students with disabilities, states such as Florida, Colorado and New York, were involved in cases in which many students with disabilities were not receiving the FAPE to which they were entitled (Hott et al., 2021; Russo, 2019).

Many students with intellectual disabilities missed several days of school due to suspensions and expulsions (Coco, 2023; Losen, 2015; Washburn, 2018). Many students with disabilities were negatively disciplined due to minor infractions that might have been due to some underlying issues. These behaviors may have directly been related to students' disabilities in that the behaviors may have been a manifestation of the student's disability (Leung-Gagné et al., 2022; Skiba et al., 2014). Government agencies such as the Office of Civil Rights began to acknowledge a steady increase in students with disabilities being removed from school compared to nondisabled students (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2019).

After several amendments to the original document P. L. 94-142, known as the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act of 1975, IDEA 1990, 1997, and 2004 were developed and then amended to guarantee fair and appropriate educational opportunities for students with disabilities. However, earlier provisions listed in IDEA became debatable due to the level of subjectivity that came when teachers' and administrators were able to place their terms on the decision-making processes for suspending and expelling students with disabilities (Green et al., 2018; Hardy & Woodcock, 2015; Hartwig & Ruesch, 2000). Therefore, in 2004, IDEA was amended to include new requirements for disciplining students with disabilities. New requirements were implemented to reduce negative reinforcement to address unwanted behaviors in students with disabilities and incorporate more positive solutions (U. S. Department of Education, 2018; 2023).

Students with disabilities are disciplined more frequently than their nondisabled peers who exhibit the same negative behaviors (Chitiyo et al., 2020; Losen et al., 2014; Perkes, 2018). Disproportionality in student discipline had been widely analyzed as far back as the 1970s. Students with disabilities typically represented to 11% of the total population within school districts but can account for over half of all disciplinary actions (Harry & Klinger, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In addition, students with documented disabilities are 11 times more likely to be suspended when compared with students with undocumented disabilities (McElderry & Cheng, 2014; Nowicki, 2018; Welsh, 2022). In 50% or less of America's school districts, students with

disabilities are more likely to be suspended by a factor of two to one compared to their nondisabled peers (Van Dyke et al., 2022).

Exclusionary discipline is disproportionately applied to students with disabilities as compared to students who do not have disabilities (Fisher et al., 2020; Nowicki, 2018; Sullivan et al., 2014). Students with disabilities who are served under IDEA 2004 are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension as their non-disabled peers (Whitford et al., 2019). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2018), during the 2015-16 school year, students with disabilities accounted for more than 12% of the student population. However, they accounted for 48% of referrals to law enforcement or school-related arrests. Additionally, during this period, 26% of students with disabilities received one or more out-of-school suspensions, and 24% were expelled for the entire year.

In general, schools continue to lessen their dependence on out-of-school suspension. Schools suspended fewer kids on average across all racial and ethnic groups regardless of handicap status (Okonofua et al., 2022). However, out-of-school suspension continued to be a prevalent practice: 2.5 million students were suspended during the 2017-2018 school year, resulting in pupils missing more than 11 million days of instruction due to out-of-school suspensions (Losen & Martinez, 2020). Additionally, progress toward schools decreasing their dependence on out-of-school suspensions was gradual and unequal. While schools were reducing their use of out-of-school suspensions, they still suspended more than twice as many Black children as Hispanic or White students and more than twice as many students with disabilities as their classmates

without impairments (Okonofua et al., 2022). In addition, specific student groups have been overrepresented in disciplinary referrals, such as boys, Black students, and students with disabilities (Welsh, 2022; Whitford et al., 2016). Gage et al. (2019) found there had been higher rates of suspensions and expulsions among students with disabilities, especially among those students with disabilities who are of Black descent.

Although suspensions among kindergarten through 12th grade Black students have declined from 2011 to 2018, they still remain relatively higher than for Hispanic and White students (Ryberg et al., 2021). During the 2017-18 academic year, both Black students and students with disabilities in elementary and secondary schools in the U. S. were routinely suspended at a rate that was double that of White and Hispanic students, and disabled students were more than twice as likely as nondisabled students (Ryberg et al., 2021). Despite a reduction in suspensions across all categories, the percentage of Black pupils who were suspended remained high compared to their counterparts from other racial or ethnic groups who attended the same schools (Ryberg et al., 2021). Disproportionality in terms of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsion among Black students demonstrates the need for more effective disciplinary methods.

Suspensions and expulsions among students with disabilities, especially those with emotional/behavioral disorders, continue to increase yearly (Hurwitz et al., 2021; Samuels, 2018). For some teachers, addressing behaviors associated with students' disabilities is challenging. Negative behaviors such as being out of the seat, yelling in class, throwing temper tantrums, swearing, screaming, and refusing to follow instructions may appear to be deliberate or defiant acts that substantiate use of strict disciplinary

actions (James et al., 2018; Lewis, 2015). Although general education teachers want their students to be actively engaged in learning, there is a limit to the behavior they will tolerate (Kart & Kart, 2021; Kennedy, 2016). The tolerance level of teachers plays a significant part in terms of how and how often students are disciplined and severity of the punishment (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2020; Skiba et al., 2014; Smith-Menzies, 2023).

According to the Idaho State Department of Education (2018), when disciplining students with disabilities, schools should ask detailed questions to determine whether the misbehavior is due to the learner's disability. If it is, the student's IEP should be modified rather than issuing disciplinary consequences. However, the majority of schools fail to find a linkage between students' disabilities and their behaviors, which often results in students receiving the most severe school-level consequences (Camacho & Krezmien, 2020; Crone et al., 2015; Singerland, 2017). In order to see a change in disciplinary procedures for students with disabilities, IEP teams must make a conscious effort to analyze every area of the student's disability and behaviors to know conclusively whether the student's behaviors are aligned with the disability and how to address the negative behaviors appropriately.

Discipline issues and adequately addressing behaviors continue to be challenging for many teachers (Griffith, 2018; Moore et al., 2022). Learning how to manage negative behaviors effectively is the only accurate way of fully granting students with disabilities an appropriate education (Alsarawi & Sukonthaman, 2021; Kourkoutas & Hart, 2015; Krischler et al., 2018). Placement of special education students in the general education

classroom for the majority of the school day, along with restrictive mandates attached to educating students with disabilities, creates a need to reexamine disciplinary procedures and policies in schools (Bryant et al., 2019). For educators, especially general education teachers who teach in inclusive classroom settings, it is essential to know how certain negative behaviors are related to students' disabilities. Providing support through professional development for general education teachers who provide instruction in inclusive classrooms may help to lessen the discipline gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Green et al., 2021; Losen et al., 2017).

Strategies for Managing Behavior Among Students with Disabilities

School-wide, classroom-based, and individual student-centered interventions can be used to manage or change inappropriate behaviors of students with behavioral challenges (Baule & Superior, 2020; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018; Sugai & Horner, 2020). Classroom behavior management strategies can be used to create positive learning environments that minimize disruptive behaviors and reward engagement and achievement (Clair et al., 2018; Karakaya & Tufan, 2018; Nagro et al., 2020). However, planning and consistency are required for effective teaching and classrooms that work effectively with a low degree of disruptive behavior (Clair et al., 2018; Karakaya & Tufan, 2018; Nagro et al., 2020). Because low-level disruption may be pervasive and stressful, it may also lead to more problematic classroom behaviors; therefore, interventions should be broad in scope (Baule & Superior, 2020; Parsonson, 2012).

Simple and straightforward standards and expectations that are enforced consistently and equally can help establishment of routines, transitions, and consequences

(Parsonson, 2012; Rowe & Trickette, 2018; Tomlinson & Imbeau, 2023). One strategy for improving student behavior is verbal and nonverbal praise (Drake & Nelson, 2021; Parsonson, 2012). Vocal and nonverbal praise can positively impact students who receive it and others in the immediate vicinity. Teachers should give students at least four positive words for every negative one. Teachers can also use performance feedback to help them modify their interactions with students and behaviors they focus on (Drake & Nelson, 2021; Parsonson, 2012).

Teacher feedback may also improve students' work quality and result in teacher appreciation. Moreover, this self-management method involves instructing 4- to 6-year-olds to assess their work and provide feedback on job quality (Burke et al., 2020; Peterson et al., 2021). Furthermore, Peterson et al. (2021) stated this strategy might result in more teachers' positive attention and appreciation for students. Provided that teacher attention and praise serve as reinforcers for the intended behavior, educating children on how to successfully have positive interactions with their teachers as a method of increasing access to positive teacher attention and appreciation as a classroom reinforcement. Additionally, it provides an opportunity for teachers to shift their attitudes toward students who are seen as difficult in terms of behavior by focusing more on their right conduct (Sandjojo et al., 2020).

Another strategy is to provide effective instructions and directives. Effective instructions and directives must first capture students' attention and then be delivered, one at a time, as to-do items in a firm but not angry voice with time for compliance and praise (Parsonson, 2012; Zaheer et al., 2019). Instructions should be provided precisely,

clearly, and directly in a calm and quiet voice, followed by praise. Instruction should also be provided rapidly (Kauffman et al., 2021; Parsonson, 2012; Zaheer et al., 2019). Rapid instruction may be accomplished by increasing the pace of teaching or by shortening the time interval between student answers and presentation of the following task (Nagro et al., 2019; Parsonson, 2012).

Activities should be sequenced so that simple and quick tasks are alternated with longer and more challenging ones to increase engagement and learning while minimizing disturbance (Meyer et al., 2021). Preceding challenging activities with a easy ones improves transitions to new activities. Moreover, providing students breaks before transitioning to more passive activities is a means so students have time to adjust to calmer routines. Accelerated speed must be regulated carefully to ensure pupils take advantage of chances for response and reinforcement (Meyer et al., 2021).

Teachers may also provide students with opportunities to select and engage in activities of their choice (Edwards et al., 2021; Khasawneh, 2021). Access to favorite activities enhances participation and decreases negative behavior. In addition, by incorporating children's unique interests into activities, engagement may be dramatically increased (Edwards et al., 2021; Khasawneh, 2021; Parsonson, 2012). While many of these components may be intuitive to teachers, their systematic and skillful implementation can enhance the likelihood of increased learning and decreased bad behavior (Edwards et al., 2021; Khasawneh, 2021).

Reduced noise levels in the classroom may contribute to the classroom's effectiveness as a learning environment (Connolly et al., 2019; Massonnié et al., 2019;

Parsonson, 2012; Wilson & Hopkins, 1973). While complete stillness is no longer regarded as acceptable or desirable, excessive noise has been recognized as a source of teacher stress and is likely to influence learning. Massonnié et al. (2019), Parsonson, 2012, Wilson and Hopkins (1973) employed a sound level device to regulate the level of noise in a school where pupils were allowed to bring their favorite music recordings. The gadget switched off the music when the classroom noise level surpassed a predefined threshold. This device had a noticeable impact on classroom noise reduction. The gadget has also been utilized to help regulate noise levels in local schools. The teacher may adjust the decibel level, and the device notifies the class and teacher about noise compliance by flashing green for an acceptable noise level, yellow when the noise level is overly loud, or red when the noise level is unacceptable.

Teachers using color-coded rules and a matching signaling system to indicate which rules were in force at any moment provided children with a simple way to determine which behavior standards were applied to their assigned task (Fudge et al., 2008; Parsonson, 2012; Trabelsi et al., 2023). This system facilitated compliance and on-task behavior during transitions (Fudge et al., 2008; Parsonson, 2012; Trabelsi et al., 2023). Additionally, the researchers found the approach was preventative, enabling the teacher to remind pupils to review applicable requirements and to applaud compliance rather than reprimand students who violated the requirements.

Improving student involvement in academic activities by shifting how teachers elicit responses to questions offers one strategy for increasing participation in specific curriculum components (Mason et al., 2020; Parsonson, 2012). Gardner et al. (1994) and

Fowler et al. (2021) contrasted the traditional method of hand-raising and responding to teacher questions aimed at the class with a response card option in which all students typed a one- to two-word response to teacher questions on a response card. Compared to hand-raising, which tended to target just a few students, the usage of response cards resulted in a 14-fold increase in active student response. Enhanced student participation in academic activities is a critical component of increased on-task activities and proper conduct in classrooms since it creates more possibilities for learning (Gardner et al., 1994; Mason et al., 2020; Parsonson, 2012).

Teacher Perceptions of Student Management and Discipline

Teachers continuously struggle to meet stakeholders' demands to close the achievement and discipline gaps between vulnerable student populations and their peers. These demands may often include providing instruction using less money for resources amongst faculty layoffs. Due to such cutbacks, many school districts have increased class sizes (Turner & Spain, 2020; Walker, 2018). And because of increased class sizes, many general education teachers provide instruction to more students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings. Increasing enrollment of students with disabilities inside general education classrooms may change the dynamics of the learning environment, which can cause general education teachers to undertake additional roles and duties (Ghedin & Aquario, 2020; Gilmour, 2018). For teachers who are unaware and lack knowledge regarding how certain negative behaviors are associated with some disabilities, the larger classroom size can be problematic (Hassanein et al., 2021; Monje,

2017). Moreover, their lack of knowledge could impact general education teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities (Hassanein et al., 2021; Monje, 2017).

Teachers' perceptions significantly influence their expectations for students' academic and behavioral abilities and outcomes (Cooc, 2017; Nunez et al., 2022). Teachers' perceptions of students with disabilities can help close or widen the disciplinary gaps between this populace of learners and their peers (García & Weiss, 2017; Nunez et al., 2022). The degree to which teachers know students' histories with other teachers may influence their relationships (G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017; Koenen et al., 2022; McGarth & Van Bergen, 2015). For example, suppose a student has been labeled due to a previous conflict. In that case, future teachers may tend to reprimand that student more strongly or provide fewer warnings because the student has been prejudged as troublesome (McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015; G. Porter, personal communication, January 23, 2017; Van Dyke et al., 2022). Teachers who exhibit such bias demonstrate unethical and unprofessional behavior toward students with disabilities (McIntosh et al., 2014; Yildirim et al., 2020).

In some instances, it is general education teachers' perceptions of disabilities rather than the actual disabilities that shape their attitudes (Sanchez et al., 2020). Studies by Vaz et al. (2015) and Boitumelo et al. (2020) indicated that teachers' negative attitudes and low expectations were significant barriers to the successful implementation of inclusive classrooms and equal participation of all students. Teacher attitudes also impact how inclusive practices are provided when working with students with disabilities (Alsarawi & Sukonthaman, 2021; Tamakloe, 2018). An impression such as this may be

due to the lack of background training. Weathers (2019) asserted that some general education teachers had not received adequate training that provided strategies for modifying the negative behaviors of students with disabilities, especially in areas such as emotional behavioral disorders, oppositional defiant disorder, and autism.

In general, for veteran teachers who may not have been thoroughly trained in dealing with the negative behaviors of students with disabilities, past experiences can be compelling in shaping perceptions and expectations about students and their efficacy (McElroy, 2020; Suprayogi et al., 2017). In addition, teachers' efficacy affects their behavior and actions when dealing with unfamiliar situations (McElroy, 2020; Suprayogi et al., 2017). For general education teachers with inadequate training or exposure to managing the negative behaviors of students with disabilities, their attitudes and beliefs may also impact whether they deal positively or negatively with the behavioral incidents (McElroy, 2020; Suprayogi et al., 2017). Therefore, understanding teacher preparedness is a crucial predictor of teachers' efficacy and ability to implement effective behavioral strategies (Ruppar et al., 2016; Zainalabidin & Maa, 2021).

According to Girvan et al. (2017) and Fallon et al. (2022), bias could influence teachers' perceptions concerning which students represent the most significant threat to their desire to be respected, which leads to disproportionate discipline in students with disabilities, especially those with emotional and behavioral disorders. Lipschultz (2018) and Legette et al. (2021) noted that arbitrary interpretations might allow teachers' conscious or unconscious beliefs about their students to influence their decisions about disciplining them. Teacher attitudes may trigger disciplinary reactions due to the

expectations that their student exhibit (Chung et al., 2015; Demanet & Van Houtte, 2012; Santiago-Rasorio et al., 2021). For example, when students perceive their teachers' low expectations of them, they may exhibit oppositional behavior (Chung et al., 2015; Santiago-Rasorio et al., 2021). Mulholland et al. (2015) and Al Jaffal (2022) revealed that teachers feel pressure to maintain order and facilitate the learning of students with disabilities without adequate training. The lack of education and training are vital factors that influence a teacher's willingness and level of comfort when interacting with students with disabilities (Al Jaffal, 2022; Sharma & Nuttal, 2016). Teachers who work with students with disabilities should be well prepared to implement strategies or evidence-based interventions to increase their success. Teachers with positive attitudes toward students with disabilities are more open to implementing the strategies necessary to accommodate their academic and social needs (Garrote et al., 2020; Thomas, 2017; Yuknis, 2015). Unfortunately, many teachers must be adequately prepared to support their students in this area (Al Jaffal, 2022; Green & Stormont, 2017; Mader, 2017).

Teachers are lawfully and morally responsible for providing students with special needs with an appropriate education. However, they must also seek to understand and provide the accommodations to ensure their overall success. Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) proposed that engaging students in quality learning activities will lessen their desire to engage in behaviors that might result in disciplinary actions. Therefore, teachers should focus on providing students with meaningful learning opportunities that improve their grades rather than disciplining them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Special education services need to incorporate programs that advance student learning and the

differences in their cultural variation (Mitchell et al., 2019). Students can learn and understand various subjects effectively and purposely through quality special education programs. These programs prevent students from participating in indiscipline activities that attract teachers' attention (Mitchell et al., 2019).

Teachers should attempt to modify negative student behavior and provide ample time to allow vulnerable students to self-manage and regulate their unacceptable behavior (Ervin, 2022; Gerlinger & Wo, 2016). The researchers suggested modifying punishment and counseling services to manage the negative behaviors of students with disabilities. According to McNeill et al. (2016) and Garro et al. (2021), behavioral modification strategies that involve keeping vulnerable students in school should be a part of alternatives to exclusionary discipline. The researchers further suggested that students with disabilities remain in school so that their teachers can teach them the importance of appropriate discipline behaviors. Teachers should also be provided with professional development to improve their efficacy in reducing undesired behaviors and promoting positive behaviors. The discipline strategies that teachers use to address negative behaviors should hold such learners more accountable for correcting their conduct (McNeill et al., 2016; Wriston & Duchesneau, 2023).

Results from studies conducted in the United States of America indicate the need for teachers to implement positive practices to reduce incidences resulting in suspensions among vulnerable students. Gregory et al. (2014) and Lodi et al. (2021) suggested using restorative practices for vulnerable student populations. The researchers emphasized the importance of transforming teacher-student relationships in regulating and managing

incidences of indiscipline behaviors. Greytak et al. (2016) and Stahl et al. (2023) suggested that teachers use appropriate discipline procedures and strategies to foster positive relationships with vulnerable students and use restorative practices to close disciplinary gaps among vulnerable students. Gregory et al. (2014) and Yassine et al. (2020) also focused on creating positive student-teacher relationships. Teachers should also listen and seek to understand the grievances of disabled students to enable and create a conducive environment for learning (Cahyo et al., 2021; Greytak et al., 2016). Langher et al. (2017) and Burdick and Corr (2021) argued that teachers should understand how to manage the emotions of students with disabilities. Building positive student-teacher relationships through mutual respect may decrease disproportionate discipline gaps among student subgroups (Adelsberger, 2023; McIntosh & Morse, 2015).

Implications

This project study aimed to explore elementary general education teachers' perceptions of the strategies used to discipline students with disabilities. The experiences of teachers, their level of background knowledge on students with disabilities, and their level of training on disciplining students with disabilities were examined to determine why and how general education teachers arrived and developed their perceptions toward the strategies that they use inside of the classroom to discipline students with disabilities. The insight gained from the data collected allowed for the development of a project that addressed the need to improve professional development measures to support general education teachers and provide effective disciplinary strategies that can be used with students with disabilities. This project centered on enhancing the knowledge and support

of general education teachers so that they could become equipped with the tools to implement positive disciplinary practices for their students with disabilities.

Implementing this project reduced the number of disciplinary referrals issued to students with disabilities, which will continue to decrease significantly over the years. In addition, through this project, teachers will know effective strategies that they can use to address behaviors before referring a student with disabilities for disciplinary actions outside of the classroom.

Summary

Section 1 involved understanding general education teachers' in a small school district in southwest Georgia perceptions when implementing disciplinary actions regarding students with disabilities. For decades, students with disabilities have received disciplinary sanctions at a much higher rate than their nondisabled peers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023; Simmons-Reed & Cartledge, 2014;). There had been a 15% or more increase in school districts that were cited for large numbers of students with disabilities receiving disciplinary actions that included suspension and expulsion (Georgia Department of Education, 2015; Green et al., 2021). There could be several reasons for this increase in numbers. I addressed how general education teachers' perceptions and attitudes tend to impact how and why students with disabilities are disciplined at higher rates than their nondisabled peers.

Section 2: The Methodology

Research Design and Approach

This exploratory qualitative case study involved examining general education teachers' attitudes and perceptions regarding disciplining students with disabilities at a local elementary school in a small Southwest Georgia school district. Based on information that was gained through the literature review, opinions or perceptions of general education teachers may have an immense impact on how and why they were disciplining students with disabilities. A qualitative case study design was chosen for this study to aid in gathering information from general education teachers to understand better experiences that may influence their perceptions based on real-life situations that can result in developing a rich and in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that was explored. Section 2 includes information about the research design, participants, data collection, instruments, and data analysis procedures.

Based on my research, a qualitative case study design was the best fit for obtaining desired results for this study. Using a case study design approach provided an opportunity to gain a comprehensive description of individual experiences and analyses of particular events involving student behaviors. Using a qualitative case study design can allow the participants to speak freely about the experiences without having constraints placed on them. Qualitative case studies help a researcher gain an understanding of a particular problem by providing an in-depth understanding of the problem (Akyildiz & Ahmed, 2021; Palinkas et al., 2015). Qualitative research entails individual perceptions about specific situations or phenomena and explanations for why

and how these individuals make meaning of what they have experience and engage in certain activities (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Thompson et al., 2021). Qualitative case studies involve examining inconsistencies between a preliminary theory and evidence that may lead to modifications or enhancements (Baskarada, 2014; Buestto et al., 2020; Sovacool et al., 2018). Using a qualitative research design, information gathered from this study aided in addressing the gap in research concerning increasingly high numbers of students with disabilities and disciplinary referrals. The following open-ended questions were used to guide probing of experiences of general education teachers, which may have influenced perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities:

RQ1: What are elementary general education teachers' perceptions of factors that lead to increasing numbers of discipline referrals among students with disabilities?

RQ2: How do general education teachers educating students with disabilities describe behavior strategies they use to decrease disciplinary referrals?

RQ3: How can school districts improve general educator training to address why there has been such a large number of behavioral referrals for students with disabilities in grades 3-5?

To gain information, I conducted semi-structured interviews along with participant observations and collection of documentation.

Participants

Criteria and Justification

The qualitative case study research design was selected for this study to gain an in-depth understanding of attitudes and perceptions of elementary general education teachers' personal experiences involving disciplining students with disabilities. For this study, a qualitative case study was a more appropriate tool for collecting data than other qualitative collection methods. I was not seeking to explore the chronological life events of an individual. Using the phenomenology approach was also inappropriate for this study because I was not seeking to understand the essence of a particular experience. This study did not involve focusing on individuals who shared similar experiences regarding one specific event. The grounded theory approach was not suitable for this study because I was not attempting to develop a theory based on data collected from research. The ethnography approach was also unsuitable for this study because I was not studying a cultural-sharing group. Based on information, a case study approach was identified as the most appropriate because I attempted to understand real-life experiences regarding a complex topic. The qualitative case study design was most appropriate because I sought to investigate an in-depth situation involving a specific issue, which was general education teachers' perceptions regarding disciplining students with disabilities.

The setting of this study was at an elementary school located in a small school district in a rural town in Southwest Georgia. The school district consisted of prekindergarten through 12th grade. It provided educational services to 2,855 students, of which 32% of the student body received services through the special education

department. For this study, data were collected from an elementary school. The elementary school only served second through fifth grade students. The student population of the elementary school was 72% African Americans, 18% Caucasian, 8% Hispanic, and 2% multiethnic. The elementary school had one self-contained special education class of about 10 students. At the same time, others were serviced in the general education classroom through a coteaching design. The school had a total population of about 398 students, of which 67 were identified as students with disabilities. The elementary school located in the small southwest Georgia district is a Title 1 school, of which 98% of the student population came from low-income homes.

Procedures for Gaining Access to Participants

In this case study, After Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) 07-07-21-0479622 approval was obtained, a small group of elementary general education teachers were chosen based on their disciplinary data reported over three school terms. Teacher participants were also selected based on their years of experience. For this study, teachers with 5 or fewer years were sought to participate. Thirty elementary general education teachers were invited to participate in the study. In qualitative research, the sample size should consist of a small number of participants to make data collection manageable (Boddy, 2016; Mweshi & Sakyi, 2020). Out of 30 invitations, the first 12 participants who responded were selected. This number of participants ensured that collected data reached saturation. In qualitative research, semi-structured interviews are used to explain, understand, and explore participants' opinions, behaviors, experiences, and phenomena (Naz et al., 2022; Virginia Tech, 2018). Interviews were conducted using

the Google Meet platform. I sought permission to record sessions. An interview outline was presented on screen so participants knew the order in which information would be obtained.

To gain access to participants for his study, I sought permission from the administrator of the elementary school as well as the IRB at Walden University (#07-07-21-0479622). Once approvals were received, a letter was sent to participants informing them of the focus of the study, procedures, any risks or benefits of the study, and assurances of confidentiality for participants. For this study, participants were informed at the beginning of research that their participation was strictly voluntary. Personally, and through the invitation letter, participants were told they were free to remove themselves from the data collection process at any time if they did not feel comfortable with study procedures. They were allowed to opt out of the study, and none of their data would be used during the remaining data collection process or included in findings.

The study occurred in the participant's natural setting so that no harm existed to the participants. Due to events centered on COVID-19, virtual meetings, such as Zoom, Google Meet, and Skype, were used to ensure the safety of all participants. All participants signed a consent form showing that they agreed to participate. Lancaster (2017) and the University of Nevada, Reno (2021) mentioned that when doing research, the research must be done in a way that preserves the confidentiality of the participants but still presents data honestly. To ensure that participants' confidence was safeguarded, all participants were provided pseudonyms using the alphabet to identify each participant and, likewise, for all data correlated to that participant. For example, each participant was

labeled as Participant "A," Participant "B," and so on. All collected data from each participant also had that participant's pseudonym attached to the data sources, such as Interview "A" and Documentation "A," etc. Each participant was informed of the identification letter system used to ensure their confidentiality.

The participants were asked about their years of experience and the grade level at which they were teaching. According to the demographic data collected, 12 individuals voluntarily agreed to participate in the study. Of the 12 participants, eight (67%) were women, and four (33%) were men. As for teaching experience, three of the teachers (25%) had 5 years of teaching experience, five teachers (42%) had 4 years of experience, three (25%) of the teachers had 2 years of experience in teaching, and there was one (8%) teacher that had 1 year of teaching experience. Participant demographic information is displayed in Table 1.

Table 1

Participants' Gender and Years of Teaching Experience

Participant	Gender	Years of experience
A	Male	5
B	Male	4
C	Female	4
D	Female	2
E	Female	5
F	Female	2
G	Male	4
H	Female	2
I	Female	4
J	Female	5
K	Female	1
L	Male	4

Data Collection

In this study, three data collection tools were used to collect data from semi-structured interviews, elementary general education teacher reflective journals, and classroom behavior documentation. These data collection tools were used in the belief that the information gained from these tools would bring about a level of saturation so that the proper coding could be determined upon data analysis. In addition, this study aimed to understand elementary general education teachers' perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities. Therefore, these data collection tools provided a level of in-depth information gathered through the real-life experiences of the participants.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain information and aided in collecting specific data. Semi-structured interviews consisted of several key questions that assisted in defining the area to be explored and provided room for more details (Keller & Conradin, 2019; McIntosh & Morse, 2015). Semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in the conversation between the interviewer and the interviewee. It provided opportunities for participants to elaborate on their answers, which led to newer information being brought forth that was considered to add value to the study. When conducting the interviews, the questions used needed to be presented in a clear, understandable way that granted as much information about the study as possible.

Each interview was scheduled for 30 minutes to one hour for this study. The interview questions were presented as open-ended, thereby allowing for flexibility (see Appendix A). Upon beginning the interview process, permission was sought to use an audio recording. It was explained that the tape would solely be to transcribe the

conversation to ensure that all the information obtained from the participant was presented in a manner in which it was provided and expressed. All the participants agreed to the recording, and data were transcribed within 2 working days and offered back to the participant to check for accuracy. All interviews were conducted during times of the day that were outside of instructional time.

Reflective journals from the elementary general education teachers were another data collection tool used to ensure that the information gathered was rich in detail. The journals were collected at the end of each week for 6 weeks using the Google Forms platform. The forms were designed to capture the narrative of each participant's week. Collecting data using reflective journals meant the elementary general education teachers provided personal experiences in the school setting and insight into the challenges they faced in disciplining students with disabilities. Writing in a personal-reflective journal can be valuable for developing metacognitive abilities and promoting self-orientation and responsibility for processes of personal and collaborative learning and teaching practices (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Chen et al., 2020). In addition, through reflection, teachers become aware of their thoughts, positions, and feelings concerning learning within their community (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Suphasri & Chinokul, 2021).

Classroom behavioral documentation was another data collection tool that provided rich and descriptive information during this study. The information collected was used in the same format as the data obtained from the other data collection tools. Classroom behavior data forms were used to provide information on the behaviors continuously observed in the class. These forms noted the time of the day, subject, and

setting where the incident occurred, the behavior, and the consequences or actions the teacher took. The general education teacher was to provide more information on the possible triggers of the undesired behavior. The forms were researcher-produced products. I used the documentation to identify any trends in words, behaviors of students, and actions provided by teachers over that period.

Data were gathered, generated, and recorded during after-school hours. The elementary general education teachers were not pulled out of their classrooms or interrupted during instructional time to complete any areas of the study. All data were collected over 6 weeks. In Week 1 through Week 3, data were collected using reflective journals, interviews, and the transcription of the interview session. Each interview session was held for approximately one hour. Weeks 4 through 6 consisted of reflective journals and collecting behavior documentation from teachers. At the end of the data collection period, a narrative was developed by presenting the analysis of the data collected from all the data collection tools in this study.

All data points were tracked using a reflective journal log indicating the dates and times of receiving data, which aided with the data organization. All transcripts from the interviews were securely stored in a locked storage unit. The behavioral documents submitted by the participants through an online platform were kept in a secure password-protected file. Access was gained from the participants using their personal email. No school district-issued email addresses were used to ensure that confidentiality was maintained. All invitations and scheduling of interviews were communicated through the email addresses provided by participants.

Role of the Researcher

I am a special education teacher at a Title 1 public school. I have been working as a special education teacher for 10 years. Over the last 8 years, I have had the opportunity to serve as the lead special education teacher serving on many school district-wide committees. The school where the study was completed is no longer within the school district where I work; therefore, I did not influence the level of interactions with the participants or the development of any bias during the data collection process. During the interviews, I knew I needed not to interject my personal feelings, opinions, and beliefs with the participants. Therefore, I ensured that I only verbalized the interview questions. When any follow-up questioning was required to elicit more details or clarification, I made sure to keep the questions open-ended so that my words would not influence the interviewees' thoughts. I expressed my gratitude for their participation and explained the protocols that would be fulfilled during and after the interview sessions.

Data Analysis

The data gathered for this case study were used to examine general education teachers' perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, general-education teacher reflective journals, and classroom behavioral documentation. The interview questions were developed by first breaking down the research questions to determine the key concepts within the questions. Once the key concepts were identified within the questions, the interview questions were developed using open-ended questions that would guide the participants to answer the questions honestly and openly. After creating the interview questions, a four-person team

within the target group was developed to pilot the interview questions and behavioral documentation. Lastly, the pilot review team provided feedback on the interview questions and behavioral documentation in order to ensure that the highest clarity possible were used in the data collection process.

Any data collected and deemed as discrepant information were also analyzed to provide more credibility to the findings. Data were recorded and reported as all other information collected during this study. In stage one of analyzing data, the interviews, reflective journals, and classroom behavioral documentation were gathered from each participant, of which alphabetical pseudonyms were provided to conceal the participant's identity. The interviews were transcribed to understand the information better and referenced later in the study when needed. The interview transcription aided in code development and establishing categories. The behavioral documentation was analyzed by looking for similar and different terms compared to the data collected from the interviews, behavioral documentation, and reflective journals. A matrix was used to determine the use of key phrases or words identified in the data tools.

In stage two of analyzing the data, I took the information from the interviews, the general education teacher reflective journals, and behavioral documentation to develop an open coding system. Once the information was broken down, codes were provided to identify each area. After reviewing the coding to ensure that all the information under each code had a relationship, the codes were categorized into themes. Using an organizational method such as coloring coding aided in analyzing the data more

efficiently (Huang, 2022; Saldana, 2016). The themes were then organized using similar colors that correlated any relationships among the data.

The next step of analyzing data were through the process of triangulation. Due to having multiple forms of data, the method of triangulation was used to ensure that a complete picture was formed of the phenomenon (Naeem, 2019). Through the triangulation technique, I ensured that even though there were more than one data source, all three produced the same or similar results. If not, I would have to go back and revise my research questions. Based on the triangulation results, the data sources provided enough data aligned with each other.

In the first step of triangulation, the process of member-checking was conducted. Member-checking was undertaken to ensure that the information transcribed from the interviews was accurate, to provide participants with an opportunity to review and comment on the preliminary interpretation of the data, and to make suggestions or additions (Harper & Cole, 2012; Merriam & Grenier, 2019). The participants were provided a copy of the transcript of their interviews to ensure that it had been recorded accurately and that the I interpreted their perceptions correctly. After receiving participant feedback and making any corrections, the data then went through the process of peer debriefing.

Peer debriefing was used to eliminate bias by gaining multiple perspectives on the data. Morey et al. (2016) and Stahl and King (2020) indicated that peer debriefing could establish reliability in the data of a study. The peer debriefing was done once the data had been analyzed and both themes and narratives had been formed. Two colleagues with

experience as special and general education teachers conducted the peer debriefing sessions. Both individuals who participated in the peer debriefing sessions had been in education for a minimum of 10 years.

The final step of the triangulation process was the development of a narrative for the entire data collection process. The narrative results were sent out to each participant for final approval of the verbiage used and to ensure everyone agreed with the information in the data collection. I wanted to verify everyone's responses were accurately represented within the data.

At the time of the data collection process for this study, restrictions were placed on the social interactions among individuals due to COVID-19. Approval by Walden's IRB was issued when the participating school district allowed face-to-face summer sessions for students that met specific qualifications. These qualifications consisted of students with disabilities and those that failed two or more content areas. Keeping with the COVID-19 restrictions, all class sizes were reduced to no more than 15 students. This method allowed me to collect data needed through reflective journals and behavioral documentation.

The data collection for the study was done within 6 weeks using a qualitative methodology. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews, reflective teacher journals, and classroom behavior documentation. After obtaining approval from the IRB (07-07-21-0479622), I recruited participants for the study by first posting a flyer within a designated area. The flyer indicated the basics of the research and asked interested participants to contact the researcher via email. Once contacted, I emailed each potential

participant an invitation letter that included a Google Forms link for the participants to complete a form of consent for completion to submit. A total of 30 invitations were sent out to potential participants who met the requirements, but only the first 12 responses were selected for the study. The 12 participants were not selected based on special submission requirements, but the first 12 responses I received. Within 2 days of sending out the invitations, I received the targeted number of participants.

Before disseminating the data instruments among the participants, I developed a group of four individuals who fell within the same target group and piloted the data instruments. The pilot test ensured that all questions were understandable without the assistance of outside help and that there was no bias within the tools. According to Busetto et al. (2020), piloting interview questions allows the researcher to learn which questions work best or what questions should be used based on the desired length of an interview, especially for participants with trouble concentrating for an extended time.

Before the scheduled interview, I sent each participant a copy of the open-ended questions so they could have the time to reflect on their responses fully and not feel as if they were caught off guard. Semi-structured interviews are characterized by open-ended questions and an interview guide in which broad areas of interest are defined (Busetto et al., 2020). The interview consisted of nine questions developed to answer one of the related research questions (see Appendix A). The open-ended questions allowed for gathering information that could validate the responses collected from the other data instruments. Each interview session was recorded so that a transcript could be generated.

Within 2 working days after the completed interview session, a transcript of the interview was sent to each participant for a member-checking system to be implemented.

Member-checking confirmed validity by ensuring that what was said during the interview was correct and understandable. Member-checking enabled participants to verify the accuracy of the data transcribed from the interviews, evaluate and comment on the preliminary data interpretation, and provide ideas or improvements (Candela, 2019). Demographic information was collected for this study, including the years of teaching experience, the teaching setting, including students with disabilities, and the number of students they had to teach within Grades 3-5.

According to Alt et al. (2022), reflective journals were used to gather rich and detailed information from the personal perspectives of each participant. The reflective journals were provided via a Google Forms link at the end of each week for the participants to share their reflections. Each form consisted of the same weekly questions so that the participants were not faced with any risk that could lead to any form of psychological risk. For organizational purposes, I placed each weekly submission in an online folder under the specific week. I maintained each participant's submission by recording each one on a personal log. I also used the log to send out reminders to participants to submit their forms by the required date. Each submission was also organized by the identification pseudonym provided for each participant to keep the identity of each participant confidential.

The behavioral documentation was also sent via a hyperlink at the beginning of the study (see Appendix B). The participants were asked to bookmark the link and access

it whenever a behavior was observed throughout the school day. The behavioral documents were gathered differently from the other tools. Behavioral forms were a daily submission and were organized in separate folders by the participant's pseudonym code. Once a participant submitted a form, it was placed into the personalized folder for each participant. Each submission was saved using the date and the number of the submission. For example, Participant A's submissions were saved as 01/12/2021- 1 and 01/15/2021-2. This system allowed a log of the number of submissions received by participants each day. The submissions were also recorded on a personal log sheet. I did not record the number of submissions from each participant but only whether the participant had submitted for that day. For participants who did not have any behavioral forms to provide for that day, it was noted on the log after confirmation through email from the participant.

At the end of the data collection period, the results submitted by the participants were carefully reviewed several times to ensure a clear understanding. Data were used to develop a coding system to assist in organizing participant responses. Developing a coding system allowed data organization so that a better understanding of the phenomenon could be revealed. Developing the coding system also allowed for significant descriptors to be used in the data, thus establishing the ability to elevate the codes deemed excessive to the study. Assigning codes to words and phrases helped capture what the responses were about, which later assisted in better analysis and summarization of the data results (Medelyan, n.d.). After reviewing the data and developing the coding system, each code was placed within a color scheme. Each color

scheme consisted of a theme generated based on the relevance of the information provided.

Data Analysis Results

This study's findings were obtained from the analysis of data collected from semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and behavioral documentation. The results of this study were constructed to address the research questions aligned with this study. Semi-structured interviews consisted of open-ended questions and were the first data collection tools used. The participants were asked about demographic information based on the requirements to participate in the study. Data were used solely to aid in categorizing the participants.

Participant Interviews

For this study, three data collection tools were used to collect and analyze the data. The first tool used to collect data for the research was participant interviews. The interview questions were developed to gain information that could gain insight into the three research questions outlined in the study. Next, a matrix was constructed to analyze the data. The matrix construction consisted of columns in which the interview questions were placed along the left side of the matrix. The following columns provided the participant's identification pseudonym and their response to the interview questions. At this point, an open coding system was used to identify any words or phrases used across the board with all participants' responses. Finally, the interview questions were developed for the three research questions to gain insight that would provide answers for each research question.

Based on an analysis of the interview responses, students with disabilities tend to receive a higher rate of disciplinary referrals because many teachers had not been informed or trained on how to discipline students with disabilities properly, according to the study participants. Because they have yet to be appropriately trained, teachers tend to use what is familiar to them, the school-wide discipline plan. When asked about their comfort level with disciplining students with disabilities, the findings indicated that the participants were not comfortable providing discipline to students with disabilities. Their comfort level may be due to all the possible legal ramifications for students with an IEP, thereby leading them to use only the school-wide discipline plan.

Based on the findings, the strategies used primarily in the classroom to eliminate the behaviors that caused parent contact and administration assistance. Though these are the majority of used recourses, they are only temporary fixes. These strategies are only effective when student buy-in occurs for the consequences. The data indicated that none of the techniques used to address the disciplined behavior in students with disabilities were designed to target those exhibited behaviors. Therefore, the behaviors continued, which caused the discipline referral when they returned to the classroom. The data showed that participants had little to no training in effectively addressing these behaviors in students with disabilities.

According to the data, training seemed only to have been about academics and teaching students with disabilities, but never how to correct behaviors inside the classroom. Because of this, the need for more training was expressed through forms such as professional learning on how to discipline students with disabilities effectively. Based

on the data, there was a need for the school district to better support the needs of teachers by providing ongoing learning and support for not only special education teachers but general education teachers as well. Several terms were identified throughout the data that appeared the majority of the time in participant responses to the interview questions.

After analyzing these terms and phrases by their similarities, the categories of strategies and training were identified as themes of the data findings. Many responses aligned with the fact that the participants lacked the appropriate background of knowledge to discipline students with disabilities. The lack of background knowledge may result from not participating in different training and professional developments.

Though words such as school-wide plan, academics, behavior, and parent contact appeared multiple times within the data, they were not deemed to have a level of high relevance. Instead, these terms aligned with the concept that teachers were implementing familiar strategies to address behaviors, thus coming from the school-wide discipline plan. The reason for using the school-wide behavior plan was that they did not know other strategies that could be used to help address disruptive behavior because they had not had any training in the discipline and behaviors of students with disabilities. The theme that emerged from the teacher interview tools was that general education teachers tended to rely more on school-wide discipline plans to implement behavioral protocols for students with disabilities because it was most familiar to them.

Reflective Journals

The second source used to collect data for this study was reflective journals. The reflective journals allowed the teachers to reflect weekly on their responses to dealing

with the undesirable behaviors of students with disabilities. The reflective journals were collected at the end of each week using an online Google Forms form. All 12 participants submitted six weekly reflections for study data collection. During the 6 weeks, weekly notifications were sent out electronically to participants on Friday mornings, reminding them to transmit their reflection submissions. A matrix was constructed similar to the analytical process for analyzing the data collected through the weekly reflections. The matrix construction consisted of columns that identified the week indicated along the left side of the matrix. The participant's identification pseudonym and weekly reflections were provided in the following columns.

After collecting data for 6 weeks, an open coding system was used to identify words or phrases sharing similarities among the participants' reflections. This concept was used to categorize the responses to each participant's weekly reflections. After the codes were identified within the reflections each week, an axial coding system was used to look for any connections between the reflections provided by the participants. Once the codes were grouped according to their significance level and impact on the problem, they were placed in categories.

The categories that emerged from the data were training and strategies. For the training category, words and phrases such as "training" and "I need a better understanding" appeared 45 times through the teacher reflections data. For the strategy category, words and phrases such as school-wide discipline and parent contact appeared within the teacher reflections data approximately 53 times. The categories were

consolidated into one central theme in the last stage of analyzing teachers' reflections data.

The theme that emerged from the teacher reflection tools was the lack of training in general education teachers on disciplining students with disabilities. For 6 weeks, reflections were provided based on different disciplinary events that occurred with students with disabilities. The events, along with the strategies and consequences involved, were presented within the data. Based on an analysis of the reflections, students' behaviors and how they impacted not only their learning process but the learning of others were indicated through data. Because of this, the school-wide disciplinary plan was used to address disruptive classroom behaviors.

Terms and phrases such as school-wide discipline plan, time out of class, parent contact, and administrative assistance were identified as the most frequently used terms within the data. The teachers expressed how the consequences were not as practical, thus causing students to return to class exhibiting the same behaviors. This result frustrated many of the participants. Due to high frustration levels, participants automatically sought administrative assistance to deal with the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities versus using the behavior plans to de-escalate the undesired behaviors. Based on the data, the terms and phrases such as school-wide plan, removed from class, frustration, parent contact, administration, seat change redirection, and training frequently appeared in the teachers' reflections submitted each week.

Behavior Documentation

The last collection tool for gathering data in this study was behavior

documentation. The use of behavior documentation aided in determining the types of behavior and response patterns to the behaviors between the teachers and students. The behavior documentation forms were researcher-produced. The documents were distributed electronically using Google Forms. All 12 participants submitted behavior forms each week during the 6-week data collection period. Parameters were set for the number of days and submitted entries each week.

For this study, participants documented behavior data only for students with disabilities and were directed to report all behavior accounts that resulted in consequences by the participant each week. At the end of the week, the information from the forms was placed within a matrix using abbreviations. A key indicating the name and the corresponding abbreviation was placed at the bottom of each week's matrix.

After 6 weeks, data were analyzed to find patterns or commonalities among the information reported each week. Based on the data provided each week, there was no specific day or time of the day that the behaviors were occurring more frequently. After analyzing the behaviors and their reported days of the behaviors, the most disruptive behaviors were reported on Mondays and Fridays. Based on the number of days reported, only 2 to 3 more incidents were reported on these days compared to the other days of the week. No significant indication was alerted by the data to suggest that the behaviors happened more on Mondays and Fridays.

As for the setting, the majority of the behaviors were happening inside the classroom; out of the 72 entries, 69 specified events within the classrooms. The hallway and playground were also reported as areas where the behaviors were exhibited. Still,

based on the number of events reported in these areas, which only ranged between 8 to 12 entries out of 72, the classroom was reported most frequently within the data. As for content areas, the data showed that the majority of behavior issues occurred when reading and math instruction occurred or when the students completed independent and partner work. Data determined that reading and math incidents were reported in each of the six weeks. Some events were reported during social studies, but this content area was not considered an area of concern because it was reported infrequently and in only 18 out of the 72 entries.

After the setting, the types of behaviors were analyzed. The themes of behavior and strategies were identified as the corresponding data categories to probe for further behavior documentation. Under the category behavior, terms such as off-task, disrespect, and defiance appeared within the data over 195 times. The term off-task behaviors included excessive playing and talking, disrespect, and defiant behaviors reported frequently within the data. Refusal to do work was also reported in the data as a behavior, but it did not appear as often as the other terms; therefore, it was not deemed a significant factor in the research study.

Lastly, for the category of strategies, words and phrases such as time out of class, redirection, parent contact, and administration appeared within the data over 200 times. Verbal warnings and seat changes were also terms reported within the data. However, due to both consequences only being reported 11 times through the 72 behavior entries, the actions were not deemed important to continue analyzing.

The data collected from the behavior documentation supported the data analyzed through interviews and reflective journals. All three data points were used to triangulate study data. Those data sources were from member-checked semi-structured interviews, teachers' reflective journal entries, and classroom behavior documentation. The results from the data presented information emphasizing the need for training teachers in disciplining students with disabilities. The need for discipline training was determined as necessary after the data analysis was completed. A matrix was constructed to compare the information generated from the three data tools.

Other than the school-wide behavior plan, the data tools shared commonalities in training, which appeared over 25 times within the data collection tools, and the teacher's emotional state of frustration appeared over 20 times within the data. The common phrases used were "more training," "have not been trained," "would love to be trained," "frustration," and "I cannot take this anymore." Based on the findings, the terms "behaviors" and "classroom" were commonalities between the teacher reflections, the behavior documentation, and the interviews. These terms were identified over 100 times throughout the data tools matrix. The overarching theme that emerged from the behavior data were that the process used to address behaviors was not working. The behaviors continually resurfaced each day, causing teachers to become more frustrated.

Lack of Training

Once the codes were identified, emergent themes were developed based on the patterns found within the commonly used words and phrases. The first theme that emerged from comparing the three data sources was the lack of training for general

education teachers on disciplining students with disabilities. Many participants shared that they have not been trained in disciplining students with disabilities. All the participants mentioned that they have only received formal training on providing academic services to students with disabilities. Because of this, many teachers need more confidence and knowledge to implement behavior procedures to address student behaviors effectively.

Participants shared that their perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities have not been a positive experience due to the lack of exposure to better ways of handling disruptive behaviors. Participants shared that their perceptions of how to deal with the behaviors of students with disabilities have stemmed from past and personal experiences. For some participants, students with disabilities have reputations as repeat offenders. Because of this reputation, teachers automatically come in with a zero-tolerance attitude that allows no room for error when dealing with the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities. Yet, many teachers have realized that one of the most significant reasons disruptive student behaviors seem to continue throughout the year and even throughout grade levels is that teachers need to be trained in behaviors and discipline for students with disabilities.

Participant B stated during the interviews, "Most teachers I know have not been trained in disciplining students with disabilities, so because they have not been trained, they just discipline them as they do the general education students." Participant B also stated during the weekly journal reflections, "I need training on disciplining students with disabilities but understanding what or how a child with a particular disability performs

academically and behaviorally.” Participant A also shared during the interviews, “I am not that comfortable because I do not know much about disciplining a student with a disability.” Such as Participants A, B, and C stated during their interview, “All of the training that I have had has been strictly on academics. None of my training has dealt with disciplining students with disabilities.”

During the weekly journal reflections, Participant C stated, “I would love to learn different strategies to target behaviors seen in students with disabilities as well as how to properly address them. I need more training and understanding of what behaviors or triggers to look for in students with disabilities.” Through the analysis of the behavior documentation, the majority of teachers used the school-wide behavior plan to discipline students with disabilities because it was familiar to them. No training was needed for implementing consequences such as time out of class or parent contact. These were actions that were natural to the teachers. Because it was a part of the school’s disciplinary framework, the teachers thought it was acceptable to use for disciplining students with disabilities.

Challenges in Discipline

The second theme that emerged from comparing the qualitative data collected from the three data sources emphasized challenges in disciplining students with disabilities. In the data, 11 out of 12 participants experienced difficulties implementing behavioral procedures for students with disabilities. Participants indicated there was a lack of knowledge associated with providing practical strategies to students with disabilities, so many teachers used what was familiar to them, such as the school-wide

discipline plan, to address the behaviors. A thorough analysis of the reflective journals revealed the importance of needing more help and support from the administration and through school district professional learning.

Without the necessary training, teachers reported that the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities never changed. They noted that the students continued to behave in the same manner weekly and even sometimes daily. The teachers shared that they used things such as sending students out of class to another teacher's class removing privileges, and the most reported consequence was parental contact. Though these school-wide discipline procedures were being enforced, they needed to be more effective in diminishing long-term disruptive behaviors. For the majority of teachers, this started to cause frustration and left them with a sense of defeat.

Feeling defeated prompted them not to enforce the elements of the school-wide discipline plan but to refer students to the office directly. Participant B stated, "I am not comfortable at all with the concept of discipline. I have always been told that with students with disabilities, you must be careful what you do. Therefore, I use the school-wide discipline plan." Participant C said:

When it comes specifically to issuing disciplinary actions to students with disabilities, I am not that comfortable only because I know that special education comes with many guidelines and safeguards. Using the school-wide discipline plans ensures that I stay within the legal ramifications.

Participant A shared through the weekly observations, "I used the name on board, counting method, weekly incentives, and parent contact in my class. "Participant H also

shared through the weekly reflections, “In my classroom, I use incentives, a point system, time-out, loss of privileges, parent contact, and administrator help.” Based on the data analyzed from the behavior documentation, every participant documented that throughout the 6-week data collection period, they used one or more of these consequences: (a) removal from the classroom to another teacher’s class, (b) removal of privileges, and (c) the most frequently reported consequence was parent contact.

Parent contact was used because it provided immediate action. Using these consequences allowed for the immediate release of the teacher having to deal with the disruptive behavior. Even though the behaviors were not addressed in a manner that provided long-lasting results, it was a temporary fix that enabled the teachers a moment to gather themselves.

Frustration

The third theme identified through the three data collection tools was increased teacher frustration and lack of support. Many participants shared frustration because of the continuous behavior issues and the notion that nothing seemed to work toward effectively addressing negative behaviors in students with disabilities including calling parents. Participants also shared that they became very frustrated with disciplining students with disabilities. Because of students’ continuous misbehaviors, teachers became frustrated with their disruptive behaviors and the students overall.

Students were referred to the office for specific behaviors that could only be adequately addressed when effective behavior strategies were used. Because these behaviors were not being addressed in a way that could produce long-lasting results,

students were coming back into the classroom and repeating the same behaviors. This continuous and repeated cycle caused teachers to become increasingly frustrated. Teachers resorted to the temporary solution of removing disruptive students from their classroom, which required them to be referred to the office.

Many participants shared that they submitted a referral to the office simply because they were irritated with the consistency of the behaviors and the ineffectiveness of none of the strategies being adequate. The participants also shared that at other times, they developed referrals because they just needed a form of peace. Some participants also shared that, at that point, they had reached a frustration level at which they needed time to think and regroup. So, for that to happen, they sent the disruptive students to the office for administrative assistance.

Lack of Administration Support

Within this theme, another evident area was the feeling from the participants that there was a lack of support from their administrators. When seeking assistance prior to office referrals, participants stated that they needed more support from their administrators. The participants shared that this also increased their level of frustration. One of the most significant responses indicated that frustration was due to having to continuously address the same behaviors weekly, if not daily, from the same students. The disciplinary protocols set in place by the school were all the participants had to use due to never being trained to address behaviors inside their classrooms. Even though these behavior protocols were being implemented, based on the numbers from the data,

the strategies/protocols being used needed to be fixed to address the behavioral needs of the students effectively.

As a result of this constant level of frustration, seeking administrative assistance, which typically resulted in an office referral, was the first option. The terms “parent contact,” “seat change,” and “redirection” were repeated several times during the analysis of the teacher reflections but were not deemed a theme within the data. Therefore, these terms did not aid in identifying factors that may have led to the increase in disciplinary referrals toward students with disabilities. The participants believed that if they could get the level of support needed to guide or assist them with the behaviors when required, then they would not have to use the method of office referrals as much.

Participant F stated, “The behaviors that I had to deal with this week have been off-task behaviors and excessive talking and planning. I did not know what else to do, so I found myself getting frustrated due to constantly repeating myself.” Participant D mentioned during the weekly reflections, “This week was a challenge for me. I found myself getting overly frustrated with some of my students with disabilities.” Participant J also shared, “This week in my class, I got very frustrated with the excessive talking and playing from my students with disabilities.” Participant E stated during week 4 of the weekly reflections, “After removing him from the class several times and a parent call home, I sent him to the front office for administration to address his behavior.” Participant A mentioned, “I did reach out to my administration about support with my repeat offenders but, at this time, have not received a response.”

Based on the behavior documentation, the participants reported over 41 times that they reached out for administrative assistance during the 6 weeks of data collection. Based on the data, each participant reported seeking administrative assistance at least twice a week. For some teachers, it was more. The data also gave insight into the types of student disruptive behaviors where administrative assistance was sought. The data identified a trend of behaviors such as disrespect to the teacher and defiant behavior. These elements would likely promote frustration among teachers, especially when disruptive behaviors happen frequently, and there is a preconception of not being supported by the administrative team.

All data were collected, and any that was deemed as discrepant information were also analyzed to provide more credibility to the findings from this research study. All data were recorded and reported in the same manner, whether considered to be confirming or discrepant, as all other related information collected from participants and collection instruments during this study. In stage one of analyzing data, the interviews, reflective journals, and classroom behavioral documentation were gathered from each participant. Alphabetical pseudonyms were provided to conceal each participant's identity. The interviews were transcribed to understand the information better and referenced in the study. The interview transcription aided in code development and establishing categories. The documentation was analyzed by looking for similar and different terms, meanings, and phrases and compared to data collected from other interviews, behavioral documentation, and reflective journals. A matrix was used to determine the use of key phrases or words identified in the data tools.

Trustworthiness

In a qualitative research study, the research is uniquely positioned to provide a narrated story more closely related to human experiences (Stahl & King, 2020). In qualitative research, the readers must be able to interpret the written works and have confidence in the data reported; therefore, the researcher must have a sense of trustworthiness in the data and its analysis. Stahl and King (2020) stated that based on the theory by Lincoln and Guba (1985), there are four areas in which genuine trustworthiness in data can be achieved. These areas are credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability.

For this study, credibility was one of the primary focuses for proving trustworthiness. The member-checking and peer-debriefing processes were used to ensure the credibility and accuracy of the data reported. The process of member-checking was used as a method of eliminating the chance of analyzing inaccurate data. After the data collection period, the participants were emailed a copy of their one-on-one interview and a summary of the findings based on their reflective journals and the behavior documentation they submitted. The participants were allowed to provide their input on the accuracy of my interpretations. During the peer-debriefing process, I recruited a former coworker to review the data analysis and information to ensure it was understandable to someone outside the study.

Triangulation also was another primary source of trustworthiness for this study. Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Coleman (2021) stated that the trustworthiness of a research study refers to the extent to which one can have confidence in the study's

findings. To ensure trustworthiness within the findings of this study, Creswell and Creswell (2022) developed strategies that could be used to guide the process of properly triangulating one's data. The three strategies used for this study were external audits, member-checking, and peer debriefing. An external audit is a strategy that can be used to assess the trustworthiness of qualitative research. The strategy of external audits involved someone not associated with the research process who could review the data collected and determine if the findings accurately represented the data collected. For this study, a former coworker, who was retired in the field of education, reviewed the data and findings collected from the data and compared them to the findings gathered by the researcher. Ravitch and Carl (2020) suggested that member-checking could be used as a method for how the researcher "checks-in" with the participants in their study. After the final analysis of the data had been developed, the participants were provided a copy of the findings. The participants were able to review the information provided and provide feedback. After receiving participant feedback, the findings went through the peer debriefing process. The peer debriefing process involved two colleagues with experience as special and general education teachers with over 10 years of experience working with students with disabilities. During the session, the peers could ask clarifying questions that brought a level of honesty to the research and findings.

Results

The project study evolved from the problem that elementary general education teachers' perceptions of the strategies used with students with disabilities impacted the high disciplinary referrals found in third through fifth grades. Because of high

disciplinary rates for students with disabilities, the problem needed to be explored to gain a complete understanding of the issue was critical. The findings from the study suggested that the high number of disciplinary referrals toward students with disabilities was aligned with the lack of training that general education teachers had for disciplining students with disabilities. Due to the lack of professional development training, general education teachers reported constant struggles in disciplining students with disabilities. The emphasis on the lack of teacher training and background knowledge on disciplining students with disabilities tended to be consistent with the literature regarding the need for professional development for general education teachers.

The literature emphasized the importance of teacher training in disciplining and understanding the behaviors of students with disabilities. O'Connor et al. (2016) and Shurtleff (2020) stated that in the absence of special education teachers, general education teachers were motivated to lean more on office referrals to remove the students from their classes because they were not trained to deal with such behaviors. Through the data collected from the study, it was emphasized by the participants that many of them lacked the needed training and background knowledge to address these classroom behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities effectively.

Griffith (2018) and Stevenson et al. (2020) reported that this lack of training can become very challenging for teachers because they must be equipped with the tools to succeed to be effective in this area of behavior management for students with disabilities. The behaviors found in the data included hostile actions such as yelling out, students constantly getting out of their seats, and refusing to do the work or follow directions.

These same behaviors were noted in a study conducted by James et al. (2018) and Van Dyke (2022), which also described the same student actions and reported they appeared to be deliberate or defiant behaviors, which could lead to teachers substantiating the use of strict disciplinary measures.

Throughout the data, the tolerance levels that many of the participants had when dealing with students with disabilities and their disruptive behaviors were emphasized as a source of frustration. The tolerance level of a teacher plays a significant part in how often a student is disciplined and the severity of the punishment (Hines-Datiri & Carter Andrews, 2017; Saleem & Muhammad, 2020). Therefore, training and support are vital to the effectiveness of student behavior outcomes.

The result of the findings in this study was in agreement with the literature. Both sources found that it was best to provide support through professional development for general education teachers who provide instruction to students with disabilities in the inclusive setting, which helps lessen the discipline gap between students with disabilities and their nondisabled peers (Johnston, 2022; Losen et al., 2017). Suprayogi et al. (2017) stated through the literature that teachers' efficacy affects their behaviors and actions when dealing with unfamiliar situations. The data suggested that many participants did not feel they were trained correctly or knowledgeable about managing disruptive classroom behaviors in students with disabilities. Because of this situation, their attitudes and beliefs played an important role in how they chose to deal with the behaviors of their students.

This condition was also noted in the literature through a study by Mader (2017) and Stevenson (2020), who underscored that many teachers did not feel adequately prepared to support their students with disabilities in managing their disruptive behaviors. Due to the lack of training, and background knowledge in disciplining students with disabilities, teachers relied on their experience, attitudes, and beliefs to judge how they should provide disciplinary actions. This concept aligned with Weiner's attribution theory (1985) which was based on the idea that people perceive the behaviors of themselves and others by connecting specific attitudes such as traits, abilities, or feelings to displayed behaviors (Bogdan et al., 2023; McLeod, 2012; Wang & Hall, 2018).

When comparing Weiner's attribution theory (1985) to the findings in this study, Weiner's theory suggested that teacher perceptions and attitudes were impactful factors in how students with disabilities were disciplined and the severity of the disciplinary action. Monje (2017) and Alkahtani (2022) stated that teachers' lack of knowledge could impact general education teachers' attitudes toward students with disabilities. This scenario was seen several times throughout the data analysis, where teachers needed to learn how to address specific behaviors within the classroom. Without the necessary training, they became frustrated, thus leading to the most restrictive disciplinary actions being used toward students with disabilities. The results typically centered around the teacher using a disciplinary referral to the office to remove the student from the classroom. Due to this, Sharma and Nuttal (2016) and McKamey (2023) stated that the lack of training was a crucial factor that influenced the teachers' willingness and level of comfort when dealing with the disruptive behavior of students with disabilities.

Weiner (1985) explored individuals' perceptions of the cause of their success and failures, specific to emotions, decision-making, and performance (Cristofaro & Giardion, 2020; Wang & Hall, 2018). Wiener's theory has two approaches, which focus on intrapersonal and interpersonal. For this study, the researcher focused on the interpersonal aspect. The interpersonal aspect approach centered on the concept that attributions were made from outcomes that contributed to experiences and focused on how the perceptions could contribute to direct emotions such as anger and frustration, as well as behaviors that lead to forms of punishment (Weiner, 1985; Wang & Hall, 2018).

Weiner (1985) stated that one's perception of success and failures could naturally impact one's attitude and future actions. Weiner's theory focused on three central attribution elements that influenced people's affective and behavioral responses: locus of causality, stability, and responsibility (Yao & Siegel, 2021). Based on the findings of this study, it was determined that many of the participants were issuing out consequences to their students with disabilities, which they deemed unsuccessful due to the frequent recurrence of those same behaviors.

Due to this finding, the attribution of stability was examined. Stability refers to being consistent or inconsistent and the likelihood that the behavior will reoccur in the future (Clara, 2021). For the majority of teachers, having to constantly redirect or readdress the same or even multiple behaviors in students becomes overwhelming and frustrating. However, through the findings, it was evident that teachers perceived they did not have the constant support or background knowledge to effectively address the

disruptive behaviors in students with disabilities because they were not being adequately trained on how to deal with undesirable behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities.

This realization began to bring a different mindset for the participants on their failure to effectively address behaviors in students with disabilities due to the lack of knowledge of strategies that could be implemented inside the classroom. The participants began to understand that they were not as successful with diminishing disruptive student behavior because they needed to address the misbehaviors appropriately. This situation occurred because they had yet to be trained; thus, professional development was urgently needed. Many participants shared a sense of urgency to gain the knowledge necessary to implement effective behavior strategies for students with disabilities. Hence, there is a need for professional development.

Summary

A case study design was used to examine elementary general education teachers' perceptions of disciplinary actions against students with disabilities in an elementary school located in a small southwest Georgia town. Semi-structured interviews, reflective journals, and behavior documentation were used to gather data. Research questions were used to guide collection of data. Data were analyzed using a coding system that incorporated a color system for organization. Upon completion of analyzing data from the reflective journals, behavior documentation, and the semi-structured interviews, I was able to identify common themes provided by participants. Data were then organized into overarching themes to present study findings.

Findings indicated general education teachers perceived several factors that could have led to increased office referrals. However, the most prevalent among participants was lack of knowledge and training in terms of disciplining students with disabilities. Participants shared they had been trained in several areas, such as how to teach students with disabilities, but never how to discipline students with disabilities. This was believed to be the most significant factor.

The second theme was challenges participants found in terms of disciplining students with disabilities. Many participants experienced challenges when implementing disruptive behavior procedures for students with disabilities. Due to their lack of knowledge about providing practical strategies to address misbehavior for this population, many participants used what was familiar to them, such as the school-wide discipline plan to address disruptive behaviors. However, many participants also shared these strategies were ineffective in terms of diminishing negative behaviors of students with disabilities.

The third theme was increased teacher frustration and lack of administrative support. Several participants shared continuous behavior issues and feelings that nothing, including calling students' parents, seemed to work in terms of effectively addressing disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities. Many shared they became frustrated with disciplining students with disabilities. To improve these circumstances, participants shared they would benefit from the school district providing continuous training for general education teachers and school district support for teachers and students with disabilities who were identified as repeat offenders.

Findings suggested that a form of professional development for general education teachers was needed to support decreasing the number of disciplinary referrals for students with disabilities.

Section 3: The Project

This study involved examining elementary general education teachers' perceptions of disciplinary actions against students with disabilities in a small school district in Southwest Georgia. Due to lack of training in the discipline area, many participants shared they felt they needed to be more knowledgeable about providing appropriate disciplinary practices because of their lack of knowledge. In addition, due to lack of knowledge, many participants said they enforced the same consequences on their nondisabled students. Therefore, a 3-day professional development program may benefit elementary-level general education inclusion teachers.

Rationale

Construction of the professional development program was based on study findings and recent literature to support the need for professional development for elementary general education teachers. During this professional development program, teachers will learn about common disruptive behaviors in inclusion classrooms, what these behaviors may look like when exhibited by students with disabilities, why the behaviors occur, and how to address the behaviors before or after they have occurred. General education teachers will also have an opportunity to participate in collaborative sessions with special education teachers and administrators regarding appropriate consequences and proper protocol for addressing behaviors before they reach the point of receiving a disciplinary referral. General education teachers will also collaborate to create a list of strategies and consequences that can be used in their classrooms.

Review of the Literature

For this literature review, the following key terms and phrases were used: *students with disabilities, disability, impact of disabilities, student behavior, disciplinary practices and students with disabilities, learning disabilities, professional development, impact of professional development on teachers, teacher mindset, teacher motivation, and professional development coaching*. Databases that were used for this literature review were Education Research Complete, ERIC, ProQuest, Walden Library, and Google Scholar. Literature for this review was organized as follows: (a) students with disabilities, (b) definitions of disabilities and how they impact students' behavior, (c) disciplinary practices regarding students with disabilities, (d) recognizing learning disabilities, (e) professional development, (f) impact of professional development on teachers and their ongoing learning, (g) teacher mindset or motivation regarding professional development, and (h) impact of coaching or support on teachers during and after professional development. I aimed to provide scholarly information promoting the need for professional development to advance elementary general education teachers' perceptions regarding strategies that are used to discipline students with disabilities.

Students With Disabilities

Students with disabilities are integral to the student body in educational institutions worldwide. The student with disabilities population in schools is increasing steadily due to increased awareness and improved availability of services and facilities for this population (Maciver et al., 2019). As a result, educators should understand unique needs of these students in order to support them in their learning. This study includes

definitions of disabilities, how they impact student behavior, strategies used to address inappropriate behaviors among students with disabilities, implementing disciplinary practices toward this population, and recognizing learning disabilities inside the classroom.

Definition of Disabilities and How They Impact Students' Behavior

A disability is any condition of the body or mind (impairment) that makes it more difficult for the person with the condition to do certain activities (activity limitation) and interact with the world around them (participation restrictions; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020). These limitations can range from physical disabilities, such as vision or hearing impairments, to intellectual disabilities, such as Down syndrome or autism spectrum disorder (Babik & Gardner, 2021; Groce, 2018). Disabilities can also include mental health conditions, such as depression or anxiety, impacting students' ability to learn, interact with friends, and participate in activities. For some students, disabilities can cause behavioral issues, such as aggression, impulsivity, and difficulty managing emotions (American Psychiatric Association, 2021).

The impact of disabilities on student behavior can vary greatly depending on the individual, type of disability, and environment (Blaser & Ladner, 2020; Roberts et al., 2018). For example, a student with a physical disability may have difficulty participating in physical activities and become frustrated or aggressive when unable to keep up with their peers. Similarly, a student with an intellectual disability may have difficulty understanding or interpreting social cues, leading to inappropriate behaviors, lower peer acceptance, friendships, and decreased interactions (Schwab et al., 2021). Schwab et al.

(2021) contended students with cognitive disabilities may struggle with academic tasks or connecting ideas, while those with emotional disabilities may have difficulty controlling their emotions, which in turn leads to displaying disruptive behavior in the classroom.

Strategies to Address Inappropriate Behaviors in Students with Disabilities

When addressing inappropriate behaviors among students with disabilities, individual unique needs, abilities, and environment should be considered. Teachers should strive to create a supportive and inclusive environment where all students feel safe, respected, and accepted (Alhwaiti, 2022; Owens, 2021). Safety can be achieved by establishing clear expectations, providing positive reinforcement, and using positive behavior support strategies to help students manage their emotions and behaviors (Beqiraj et al., 2022).

Teachers should be aware of any accommodations that are needed to ensure all students have the opportunity to participate and succeed (Owens et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2021). Teachers should strive to understand root causes to address inappropriate behaviors effectively (Markkanen et al., 2019). Root causes can be understood by observing students and noting any patterns or triggers. Additionally, teachers should talk to students and their parents or guardians to better understand their needs, abilities, and environment (Bariroh, 2018; Liu et al., 2020). Once causes of the behavior have been identified, teachers can develop an individualized behavior plan to help the student manage their behaviors.

Disciplinary Practices Toward Students with Disabilities

When implementing disciplinary practices toward students with disabilities, it is essential to remember they are still entitled to their civil and educational rights (Underwood, 2020). As such, any disciplinary action should be reasonable and appropriate for the individual student. Additionally, disciplinary practices should be consistent and applied fairly and equitably. Teachers should make a unique plan for each student and consider their needs and abilities when deciding on disciplinary punishment (Underwood, 2020). Instead of punishing students for engaging in inappropriate behavior, this approach should emphasize teaching appropriate student behavior (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Mitchell et al., 2022).

Additionally, teachers should strive to provide students with positive reinforcement when appropriate behaviors are exhibited (Lovett, 2021). It is important to note some students with disabilities may need additional support and accommodations to succeed in the classroom. Teachers should collaborate with parents and other professionals to ensure students receive appropriate attention. Additionally, teachers should be aware of any legal protections that are available to students (Lovett, 2021).

Recognizing Learning Disabilities

Inside the classroom, learning disabilities can be challenging to recognize because they are not always visible. According to Kohli et al. (2018) and Rani and Reddy (2021), it is critical for instructors to be knowledgeable about the symptoms and indicators of learning difficulties and to administer preventative measures to identify kids who may be at risk. Learning disabilities frequently manifest as difficulties with reading, writing, or

math, as well as attention, adhering to directions, time management, and organizing (Aktan, 2020; Grigorenko et al., 2020; Muktamath et al., 2021). Low self-esteem, social challenges, and behavioral problems can also affect students with learning disabilities (Musetti et al., 2019). When recognizing learning disabilities, it is essential to realize that each student is unique, and their needs may vary (Paccaud et al., 2021). Additionally, it is necessary to collaborate with parents and other professionals to ensure that the student is receiving the appropriate support and accommodations. Finally, teachers should strive to create an inclusive and supportive environment where all students feel safe, respected, and accepted (Paccaud et al., 2021).

Professional Development

Professional development refers to all versions of education, training, and certification necessary for an employee to advance in their chosen field (Bambang, 2023; Bates & Morgan, 2018). It is common knowledge that diverse types of work call for specialized skill sets, and according to the researchers, a worker may require new talents in the future, even though they presently possess all the knowledge and skills necessary. Professionals can master these competencies to become effective contributors who are also more productive by participating in professional development programs (Dille & Røkenes, 2021). Training on the job is a vital component of professional development; consequently, Makovec (2018) and Smith and Gillespie (2023) referred to professional development as all methods of learning and education designed to assist workers in achieving their goals. Additional types of professional development include college education, online training courses, obtaining industry certifications, and engaging in

activities such as coaching, mentorship, and consulting (Hullinger & DiGirolamo, 2020; Makovec, 2018).

Hauge and Wan (2019) stated that when educators' professional learning is framed for practice, and there are possibilities for the extension of overall systematic improvements, it could be beneficial in promoting professional development for teachers and advancing their classroom instruction strategies. The researchers also claimed that when institutions assist teachers with well-designed, relevant, and adequate opportunities for professional development, they will become more capable of providing the same chances for growth and learning for the learners in their classrooms (Bates & Morgan, 2018; Liang et al., 2020). Teacher professional development is regularly centered on formal procedures, such as training programs, mentor systems, seminars, and workshops with exposure to new ideas and practices (Ansyari et al., 2022). According to Hauge and Wan (2019), formal approaches are frequently established in advance, and there are limited chances for teachers to be highly engaged and interactive in their personal and educational experiences.

As explained by Bowe and Gore (2017) and Zhang (2023), a favorable learning culture for educators is contingent upon including three distinct components and synchronizing those factors. The three components are structure, values, and links. The researchers added that culture described the various ways in which a group of people behaved and the beliefs that were associated with those behaviors. Bragg et al. (2021) stressed the importance of an inclusive culture that makes it acceptable to discuss

differences and that such a culture is essential for productive conversations, learning, and advancement in collaborative efforts among teachers.

Professional development programs for teachers, specifically those focusing on dialogic-based training, have improved teachers' abilities to solve school problems (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Moreover, teachers with solid academic backgrounds can better adjust their teaching practices when applying informed and systemic reflections. Professional development programs help teachers improve and build upon their educational experiences, thus effectively making them more effective in their teaching strategies. Teachers cannot be expected to rely on the same approach to be effective for students with different mentalities and attitudes. The ability to adapt to specific student groups and tailor the teaching to the demands of those student groups is, thereby, a critical part of the teaching profession. Professional development helps teachers improve their adaptation skills, especially in dialogic-training programs (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Professional development enables teachers to build upon the emotional intelligence necessary to engage effectively in professional teaching (Lyudmyla, 2020). Teacher professional learning is a complex process that requires teachers' emotional and cognitive involvement, both individually and collectively, with the willingness and capacity to examine one's convictions and beliefs and establish appropriate alternatives for improvement (Bautista & Ortega-Ruiz, 2017; Tantawy, 2020). This process designates that teachers are stuck on an endless quest for improvement to align their beliefs and convictions with those most appropriate for enacting professional learning.

Professional teaching requires high emotional intelligence to assess relationships among students, peers, and administrators (Lyudmyla, 2020). Most teachers engage in in-person learning, which makes emotional intelligence even more important for teachers. Professional development helps improve teachers' emotional intelligence allowing them to build effective and healthy relationships with students and peers at school (Opiola et al., 2020; Vesely-Maillefer & Saklofske, 2018; Yin, 2015). Consequently, these relationships reduce the problems teachers face in their daily professional roles and duties.

Impact of Professional Development on Teachers and Their Ongoing Learning

Teacher professional development positively impacts both teachers and students (Jacob et al., 2017; Tantawy, 2020). It can help teachers improve their instructional practices, better understand students' needs, and develop new strategies for engaging students in learning. These benefits can improve student achievement. Teacher professional development can comprise many forms, but it is most effective when it is ongoing, job-embedded, and collaborative (Jacob et al., 2017; Nguyen & Nguyen, 2020).

Furthermore, ongoing professional development ensures teachers can continuously improve their practice (Heppt et al., 2022). Job-embedded professional development ensures that educators can apply what they learn in the classroom to their work environment. Finally, collaborative professional development helps teachers share best practices and build relationships with other professionals in the field (Heppt et al., 2022).

Professional development programs and collaboration help standardize teaching styles and strategies that streamline the professional teaching field (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Teachers must regularly change and update their skill sets to meet the new demands through professional learning. These skill sets are especially critical in the contemporary period, where teachers must constantly change teaching strategies to fit in with modern times. Professional development programs allow teachers to acquire standardized and accepted skills and techniques that reflect the new demands. As a result of teachers' participation in professional development, they become more effective (Rodriguez et al., 2020).

Professional development programs can be significantly improved to increase their effectiveness and, subsequently, the improvements in student learning. According to Diaz-Maggioli (2004) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2020), the lack of variety in the delivery modes of training and education is one of the problems facing professional development for teachers. Inadequate investments in professional development programs mean that the moderators usually choose the cheapest delivery modes for the programs. Delivery modes then reduce the impact of the programs on the teachers who then cannot improve themselves, their craft, and their students' achievements as significantly as intended.

Additionally, professional development programs do not allow teachers to own their programs, which could then positively influence their reaction and reception of the programs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Vadivel et al., 2021). The researchers further stated that there was a general lack of ownership of the professional

development process and its results for teachers and that is because they are not allowed to participate actively in these programs. There needs to be consideration of the teachers' feedback despite the programs aiming to improve the same teachers' professional learning. It indicates there are significant gaps in the delivery of professional development programs, which limits their impact on professional learning. The result is quite strange, considering that professional development programs have been proven to have the potential to improve the professional learning experience. More research on the involvement of teachers in the formulation and delivery of professional education programs could provide more precise results on its potential impact on teachers and education as a whole (Darling- Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Yurtseven et al., 2020).

Teacher Mindset or Motivation Toward Professional Development

Teacher participation in professional development should come willingly and naturally to improve their professional, pedagogical, and personal qualities. A teacher's professional development thus enables the improvement, not just of the participating teachers and their students but also of the community around these teachers. This point aligns with the holistic process that caters to the teachers' personal and professional development. Teachers must participate in ongoing professional development to hone their teaching skills and ensure they remain competitive in the classroom.

Furthermore, educators must be updated with the most recent research findings and advancements in their respective fields to present their students with the best available education (Bragg et al., 2021). In addition, participation in professional development programs can assist educators in maintaining their level of expertise and

knowledge, which, in turn, can help them to be more effective in the classroom (Merz, 2017; Puhala, 2020). Besides, participating in professional development allows teachers to build relationships with other educators, making it easier to acquire resources and support for their job (Methlagl, 2022). Therefore, teachers need to participate in ongoing professional development to maintain their knowledge of the most recent advancements and trends in their industry, as well as improve their teaching abilities.

Regarding teacher motivation and mindset toward professional development, it is essential to consider the factors affecting these two critical areas (Heppt et al., 2022). First, it is vital to understand the need for teacher motivation. Teacher motivation can be defined as why teachers engage in professional development activities (Jacob et al., 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). For example, teachers may be motivated to improve their teaching practice, learn new techniques, or stay up to date with the latest research. Whatever the reason, teacher motivation is an essential factor to consider when planning professional development activities (Chung & Fisher, 2022).

Regarding teacher mindsets, it is crucial to understand that teachers have different ways of approaching professional development (Egert et al., 2018; Williams et al., 2021). For example, some teachers may be more motivated by the opportunity to learn new techniques and improve their teaching practice than by meeting new people or networking. While other teachers may be more motivated by the opportunity to meet other educators and build relationships. Ultimately, each teacher has a different approach toward professional development. Therefore, it is vital to consider the teacher's

motivation and mindset when planning professional development activities (Egert et al., 2018; O’Keeffe-Foley, 2019).

Regarding teacher motivation, it is essential to understand that different factors can affect a teacher’s willingness to engage in professional development activities (Jin et al., 2022). For example, one of the most important variables affecting a teacher’s motivation was their level of satisfaction with their current teaching practice. When teachers feel they are doing an adequate job, they may be less likely to invest time and energy into improving their skills. However, when teachers think their teaching practice could be improved, they may be more likely to engage in professional development activities (Jin et al., 2022).

Another essential variable affecting teacher motivation is the level of support they receive from their administrators (Huijboom et al., 2021). Jacob et al. (2017) and Yurtseven et al. (2020) concluded that when teachers feel that administrators support their efforts to improve their teaching practice, they may be more likely to engage in professional development activities. However, when teachers believe administrators need support more of their efforts to improve their teaching practice, they may be less likely to engage in professional development activities (Jacob et al., 2017; Sterrett. & Richardson, 2020).

Professional development helps increase teachers’ motivation in professional learning (Appova & Arbaugh, 2017; Zhang et al., 2021). This increased motivation can be linked to Weiner’s attribution theory (1985), which defines how individuals envision the success or failure of their behavior or that of others (Graham, 2020; McInerney &

Van Etten, 2004). According to Weiner's theory, the motivation level to engage in a particular task is directly related to their belief in their ability to complete it. When individuals have high confidence in their ability to complete a specific task, they are more likely to succeed and vice versa. This theory can be integrated into professional development programs for teachers to build their ability to engage successfully in professional learning (Graham, 2020; McInerney & Van Etten, 2004).

Teachers are no different from other humans and, as such, require motivation to participate in professional learning. This motivation can be increased through professional development programs that reiterate the importance of the teacher in influencing student success. Professional development programs also increase teachers' confidence by equipping them with the necessary skills for professional learning. As a result, they build the teachers' self-esteem and subsequently improve their motivation to engage in professional skill-building.

Coaching or Teacher Support Impact During and After Professional Development

Cooperative learning and practices significantly contribute to professional growth and advancements in teaching. Makovec (2018) revealed that teachers' self-identities have an important relationship to three elements of equal value. The first is that the more experience teachers have, the more competently and adequately they assess their self-efficacy in their skill level to complete their duties and tasks, including planning and teaching students. The second element found in the study was that teachers based their professional identity and development on factors such as their education and then their increased skills obtained not only through experience but also through their continued

educational pursuits of professional development and pedagogical skill-building. The third element is that teachers believe their personality traits affect their professional identity and are important to them in building their skills and competence levels. The issues affecting the role of teachers include both internal and external factors. The aim of professional development for teachers is not just to change or improve their teaching habits and abilities but also to improve their personal and social dimensions (Amrulloh & Galushasti, 2022; Makovec, 2018). Professional development for teachers thus aims at achieving holistic development and creating opportunities for them to gain continuous support through areas such as coaching, which is vital to advancing teacher effectiveness.

Professional development can be a daunting and overwhelming experience for teachers, especially when they are new to the field or do not have much experience. According to Korthagen (2017) and Perret and Mckee (2021), a coach or other support system can help teachers feel more comfortable and confident during this process and can provide guidance and assistance after the professional development journey is complete. Many teachers report feeling more supported and motivated when they have someone to guide them through the learning process (Brouwer et al., 2022; Huijboom et al., 2021).

Coaching can help teachers better understand the material and how to use it in the classroom, leading to increased confidence and productivity, which are valuable assets for any teacher (Stewart & Jansky, 2022). After completing professional development, many teachers feel more equipped to handle their classrooms and work more effectively with their students (Kenny et al., 2020). In addition, many times they have new ideas or strategies they can apply in future sessions or classes. As per Hennessy et al. (2022),

having support throughout the process can make a huge difference and help teachers achieve their professional development goals.

In conclusion, coaching and support are essential for teachers striving to improve their skills and knowledge. These systems provide comfort, guidance, and support throughout the process, thereby increasing classroom confidence and productivity (Kenny et al., 2020). Teachers who benefit from these resources feel more prepared to handle whatever comes their way. As a result of this support system, students have better opportunities to learn and succeed in school (Stewart & Jansky, 2022). Coaching or support during professional development can make a massive difference for teachers.

Resources for Designed Professional Development

The professional development designed for this project (see Appendix C) addresses elementary general education teachers' lack of knowledge on effective strategies for disciplining elementary school students with disabilities who receive instruction in inclusive classrooms. Through this professional development, elementary general education teachers will be able to gain a better understanding of different disabilities and disorders as well as what those disabilities and disorders may look like inside the classroom. A video created by Avella (2016) provided background information on many disabilities and conditions that can be exhibited at school. Avella (2016) also provided visual representations of what these disabilities and disorders may appear to be in an instructional setting.

The professional development offered several hands-on learning opportunities, and the cooperative learning strategy was embedded through activities throughout each

session. Cooperative learning is an instructional strategy based upon the human instinct of cooperation. In cooperative learning, each member is responsible for learning what is taught and helping other members learn to create an atmosphere of achievement (Yusuf et al., 2019).

During the Day 3 professional development session, the participants participated in a cooperative learning task called jigsaw. The jigsaw teaching strategy allows participants to actively apply their learning abilities by sharing their learning experiences with other participants and receiving instructor feedback (Sanaie et.al., 2019). Another strategy that will be used to implement a task during professional development is the “Think, Pair, Share.” This strategy provides opportunities to discuss thoughts and ideas in a way that allows for constructing personal knowledge in these discussions and discovering what is or is not known or understood about the topic (Ganatra et al., 2021; Sharma & Saarsar, 2018).

For participants to connect visually with the content of the professional development session, the participants were provided with handouts. Jacobson (2022) offered in-depth information with teacher tips on recognizing whether a student inside the classroom may have a learning disability. The researcher provided insight into areas such as off-track behavior, missing assignments, and avoidance during different academic-related tasks. All of these are areas that the majority of teachers would not think to correlate with a learning disability or disorder, yet, in contrast, they are indicators that there may be a need for assistance. Haddad (2020) provided information on how disabilities can affect student behavior inside the classroom and important information

for teachers to understand better how behaviors are used to mask different learning disabilities. The researcher also gave in-depth information on how this may impact a child's life and how to get the necessary help for a child needing assistance.

Project Description

For this study, 30 elementary general education teachers with 5 or fewer years of experience were invited to participate. Three data collection tools were used to collect data semi-structured interviews, elementary general education teacher reflective journals, and classroom behavior documentation. Based on the findings from the data, the increase in disciplinary referrals of students with disabilities in grades third through fifth was aligned with a lack of training for the general education teachers on the elementary level.

In addition, the data showed that elementary general education teachers lacked the background knowledge and strategies needed to address the undesirable behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities effectively. As a result of the findings, a 3-day professional development was developed for elementary general education teachers at the site.

During the Day 1 session, general education teachers will analyze school and school district data related to office referrals, suspensions, and expulsions among special education students. Also, during the first day, general education teachers will have the opportunity to review IDEA regulations and to ask local and school district administrators questions concerning discipline policies, procedures, and school-wide expectations.

During Day 2 of the professional development session, general education teachers will be presented with a series of scenarios using videos and case studies. General education teachers will share their thoughts and gain insight and feedback on why the student may have behaved in that manner and the dos and don'ts of handling such behaviors. Next, they will be paired with a colleague, provided with a particular behavior, and then directed to create a situation that may be experienced inside the classroom. Each group of teachers will share their scenarios, provide feedback, and discuss effective ways to handle behaviors.

During Day 3, general education teachers will collaborate with a team of special education teachers and administrators to create meaningful and effective strategies for disruptive behaviors inside their classroom. Teachers will gain insight into which behaviors should be handled by the teacher and which should be handled by the administration. In addition, general education teachers will participate in an activity requiring them to role-play different challenges they may face when disciplining students with disabilities (see Appendix C.)

The findings from this project will provide general education teachers with specific research-based strategies to address the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities. The knowledge and use of these strategies may be instrumental in lowering the number of elementary school students with disabilities who receive discipline referrals each year.

Project Goals

The project goal aims to increase elementary general education teachers' knowledge of disciplinary practices for students with disabilities by providing strategies that teachers could use to decrease the number of disciplinary referrals. The professional development created for this project allows elementary general education teachers to collaborate with their colleagues to promote growth and knowledge. Through this professional development, general education teachers may discuss and reflect on their concerns and experiences surrounding the challenging behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities.

Providing opportunities for elementary general education teachers to get together with other teachers with knowledge and experience in managing the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities will provide them with a blueprint for change that can be implemented within their classrooms. This change can promote change in the culture and climate of the classroom and, ultimately, the school. Participating in professional development provided general education teachers with tools to implement new practices. The goals developed for this project were for elementary general education teachers to:

1. Gain a better understanding of disabilities and their role in student behaviors.
2. Increase teacher knowledge by providing strategies to address inappropriate behaviors in students with disabilities.
3. Increase teacher confidence in implementing disciplinary practices toward students with disabilities.

Resources and Supports

The designated elementary school located in a small Southwest Georgia district used for this project will be equipped with all the necessary resources for fully implementing the project. The professional development will be presented inside the elementary school's library. This area of the school has tables, chairs for suitable seating, and spacing. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, the proper spacing is enforced. This area of the school is also equipped with an adequate number of electrical outlets for charging devices, as well as a projectable board for use during the presentation. In the library, the general education teachers also have access to school printers in case the teachers want to print out information. All elementary general education teachers were provided laptops from their school district, updated with the latest software, and the internet connection was reliable in the library area.

The teachers will be provided with pencils, paper, and sticky notes. A copy of the presentation will be provided at the beginning of the professional development. The administrative team from the elementary school will be available for questions and concerns aligned with building protocols throughout the sessions. A PowerPoint presentation (see Appendix D) will provide a visual for the participants. Using PowerPoint allows the presenter to address the needs of both visual and auditory learners by providing cues that could help the participants make a connection between the information that the presenter provides. Providing the participants with a hard copy of the PowerPoint presentation allows participants to refer to or reference information as needed and make personal notes.

A smartboard will be used as a means of interaction. The smartboard provides a path for both the presenter and participants to be engaged in the information that is being presented. With the smartboard, the presenter may project audio and video files and make ongoing annotations aligned to the needs of the participants. During the professional development, participants will be offered sticky notes to make notes on the materials and the information presented.

With sticky notes, participants may provide feedback to the presenter and vice versa. Participants will be provided with handouts containing information on different behaviors. The handouts (see Appendix E) are entitled “Tips for Recognizing Learning Disorders in the Classroom” (Jacobson, 2022) and “How Learning Disabilities Can Affect Behavior” (Haddad, 2020), which were used with the Day 2 “Think Session” activity. The participants will use the information from articles to help them determine why each student in the offered scenario behaved in the manner in which they did. The participants will also use the article information to help guide their discussions on what triggered the behaviors and how they could address the disruptive behaviors inside the classroom.

For the Day 2 session, there will be a continuation of the “Think Session” activity. The participants will be provided a sheet of the big, posted paper. In this paper, the paired participants will develop a situation to share based on the behavior supplied to them for the activity. The participants will use the big, posted paper due to its ability to stick on the wall to make it visible to other participants.

For Day 3, the participants will be provided a presentation copy. The participants will also be offered sticky notes in order to write questions, comments, and concerns. The participants will be asked to write anything they want to share with the school district-level personnel.

Potential Barriers

The project is designed to address the needs of general education teachers who work with students with disabilities in an inclusion setting. The project will focus on elementary-level teachers who teach grades 3-5. The professional development sessions will be scheduled at the beginning of the school year during pre-planning. The scheduling may be a barrier due to the number of other simultaneous training sessions. In addition, teachers may be hesitant to attend due to the number of required trainings they must attend that are aligned with their required content training. A solution would be to reach out to the participants and share the purpose and benefit of attending the training. Another solution would be to schedule the professional development during a time that allows teachers to attend both academic-content training and professional development.

Implementation and Timeline

The proposed project is a 3-day training intervention (see Appendix C). Each day the sessions will occur from noon to four o'clock PM. This professional development would occur during the school district's pre-planning days at the beginning of the school year. Day 1 will consist of the teachers gaining background information on the specific terms used in particular education policies that are aligned to behaviors and discipline in special education and how they may impact the classroom. The teachers will also have an

opportunity to share challenges that they have experienced in the process of disciplining students with disabilities. In this situation, the teachers will be able to gain feedback on each experience.

On Day 2, the teachers will have the chance to understand the different behaviors observed in their classrooms and how to and how not to address them using a series of scenarios and videos. Day 3 will be geared more toward collaboration. Teachers will have the opportunity to collaborate with other special education teachers, administrators, and school district-level personnel on areas of need, such as expectations and strategies that can be implemented inside the classroom. General education teachers will also be able to research and develop strategies and collaborate with other teachers and school district attendees on the most effective ways to implement them in their classrooms.

Roles and Responsibilities

All individuals participating in this project have specific roles and responsibilities. My part will be to serve as the facilitator of the project. As the facilitator, I will be responsible for developing the presentation and all materials needed to deliver the information. My role will also be to lead discussions and facilitate the activities for each session. The responsibility of the school administrators will be to communicate the dates and the times of the professional development. The administrators will also play a role in communicating the importance of this professional development for novice elementary-level teachers. The administrators will also attend Day 3 of the training to support the teachers. The role of the general education teachers will be to be active and engaged learners. The general education teachers will be expected to attend each session. Finally,

the role of the special education teacher will be to provide support and feedback at each session.

Project Evaluation Plan

To evaluate the effectiveness of this project, assessment tools will be used to provide feedback from the teachers on the overall outcome of the professional development. At the end of Day 1 and Day 2, the teachers will be asked for their feedback (see Appendix F) on areas such as the level of information, whether the quality of the information aligned with their needs, what things they want to know during the next session that was not addressed in the previous session, and what can I do as the facilitator to make the subsequent sessions better. In addition, the teachers will be assessed to rate their overall professional development experience on a Likert scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being that the information was *not helpful* and 5 being that I have a *good understanding* now. The gathering of this information will be used to aid in implementing any changes that need to be made for future sessions.

Project Implications

Professional development aims to help provide general education teachers with the knowledge and support needed to address the disruptive behavior concerns in students with disabilities better. In this school district, students with disabilities have been identified as having a higher rate of disciplinary referrals than any other student population in grades 3-5. Implementing this project could contribute to developing an improved working environment for teachers and a better learning environment for students with disabilities. Social changes may be instituted with this development of a

more workable environment. In addition, helping general education teachers understand the disruptive behaviors of students with disabilities and how to address them appropriately can improve the ability of general education teachers to control the negative behaviors displayed in the inclusive classroom setting.

When teachers have a better understanding of their students, their perceptions and levels of empathy may change, which may cause them to develop a higher level of patience and willingness to address students more positively and effectively. Teachers will be less impulsive in seeking administrative assistants but try to establish a bond that ultimately changes the interactions between teacher and student. This change may lead to a higher level of trust and acceptance. When students feel that they have a bond with their teachers, they tend to want to do better with that teacher in the sense of not doing anything to upset them or cause them to become disappointed.

A safer learning environment can be created when better relationships are formed between teachers and students. Class environments where students feel safer tend to be less distracting due to decreased misbehavior. With fewer distractions, students will gain a deeper understanding of the content being taught inside the classroom, thus causing an increase in both school-level and school-district-level achievement data. With the increased performance in achievement data, a far-reaching goal could be achieved, leading to accolades throughout the state for the gains made in improving academic achievement in students with disabilities and decreasing inappropriate behaviors. In addition, other school districts may see the progress and effectiveness of the professional development and seek assistance from these distinct teachers and other school personnel.

Conclusion

As a result of findings of this study, a professional development program was created to provide elementary general education teachers with needed tools and support to feel more confident in order to address inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities inside their classrooms. During this 3-day professional development, teachers will be provided with background information and opportunities to collaborate with colleagues and other professionals as well as gain access to strategies that can be used in their classrooms. In Section 4, detailed information is provided on the strengths and limitations of the project study as well as any recommendations. I reflect on my experiences, the project's strengths and weaknesses, and any recommendations for future research.

Section 4: Reflections and Conclusions

Project Strengths and Limitations

For this project, I used a qualitative case study design to examine elementary general education teachers' perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities. I decided to investigate this topic in this particular elementary school located in a small Southwest Georgia district because it was cited by the state department 3 years in a row for disproportionately disciplining students with disabilities. After reviewing data, it was determined that 48% of referrals came from the primary level, mainly grades 3-5. After further investigation, a trend was developed in terms of types of teachers submitting behavior referrals. Due to this information, I decided to focus on novice teachers and how they perceive students with disabilities and their behaviors inside the classroom. Based on data, I determined general education teachers need support in terms of being more effective and knowledgeable when disciplining students with disabilities.

A potential limitation of this study involved the significant amount of time for the data collection period. The data collection period was conducted over 6 weeks. During those 6 weeks, over 40 hours was spent developing transcripts, summary of reflective journals and behavior documentation, and member-checking and peer-debriefing processes. Participants of the study were all from the same elementary school. They had 5 or fewer years of teaching experience and were general education teachers who taught students with disabilities in inclusion classrooms at the time of the study. During the data collection process, participants answered all questions to the best of their ability based on their level of knowledge. Their responses were provided openly and honestly. In Section

4, I reflect on what I have learned as a practitioner, developer, and leader. I also reflect on the project's strengths, limitations, and recommendations for alternative approaches to the problem. In Section 4, I also discuss implications for social change and directions for future research.

Project Strengths

A strength of the project was the development of a professional development training in which elementary general education teachers. Based on the findings, a professional development training can be implemented to strengthen elementary general education teachers' knowledge on behaviors associated with students with disabilities and how to implement best practices for effectively addressing the disruptive behaviors inside of the classroom. This will provide support to help general education teachers overcome challenges they may have when disciplining students with disabilities. During professional development, teachers will explore opportunities to collaborate with colleagues to develop strategies and gain insights regarding methods that can be used in the classroom. These collaborative opportunities may also lead to teachers developing trust among their colleagues.

Through this professional development, elementary general education teachers will gain resources to use when addressing disruptive behaviors instead of using office referrals. These resources will help decrease the number of office referrals that are submitted each year. In addition, effectively implementing these strategies and methods will reduce the number of negative behaviors that are exhibited inside the classroom. Student attitudes and behaviors will decrease due to teachers trying new positive

approaches with them. Most students with disabilities, when they feel that teachers exhibit a sense of care toward them, tend to want to do better inside those teachers' classrooms (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020). Student academic scores will increase, thus producing productive and academically prepared students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Remediation of Limitations

This project has two limitations. The first limitation is that the professional development sessions is only applicable to teachers in grades 3 through 5. This project may benefit all teachers, not just teachers at a particular grade level. The school should develop a professional development program that includes all teachers at every grade level, including special education teachers and those who teach special education students in courses such as music and art. Having the opportunity to collaborate with other elementary general education teachers and gain resources and strategies to use could be helpful in terms of maintaining a level of consistency among the disciplinary data at the school and even throughout the district.

Currently, there is no follow up method after participants have had some time to reflect on outcomes of implementation of strategies and resources that were gained from professional development to see if the information has impacted the behaviors inside of the classroom. A formal plan is need for the general education teachers and administrators to review the teacher's behavior data and discuss what is and is not working. The development of a monitoring tool is needed for the elementary general education teachers and administrators to collaborate and then, as needed, share concerns and gain insights from other colleagues.

Recommendations for Alternative Approaches

An alternative approach that could be implemented is developing a school-based behavior team. The team should include administrators, school counselors, teachers, and student representatives. The behavior team can analyze monthly behavior data information and teachers' concerns and discuss how to address behaviors. The team can find ways to support teachers who need other options and establish systems and practices for support. Team members ensure there is timely access to interventions, oversee implementation, and regularly use data to monitor student progress and evaluate the program's overall outcomes (Positive Behaviors Interventions and Support, 2021). Student representatives can provide insights regarding maintaining positive behaviors among their peers.

Another approach is to create individual teams with students. Teams would include administrators, students, parents, current teachers, and any individual in the building who has a relationship with that student. This individual should be willing to help monitor the child's behavior and serve in the role of mentor to the child.

Scholarship, Project Development and Evaluation, and Leadership and Change

While completing this study, I learned many effective scholarly methods to ethically develop a research problem and find scholarly evidence to defend my research and study methods. I have learned how to recruit participants, collect, accurately analyze data, and straightforwardly represent data in a way that is clearly communicated to the audience. This process has also taught me how to rely solely on data and make sure that my personal biases did not impact data results or how they were presented.

Project Development and Evaluation

The research project was developed to provide elementary general education teachers with knowledge and support to address inappropriate behaviors exhibited by students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Findings reveal many general education teachers lack background knowledge to address disruptive behaviors in students with disabilities effectively. A 3-day professional development plan was designed to present opportunities for general education teachers to collaborate with others and make decisions that will benefit students in their classrooms. I learned that throughout these 3-day sessions, it is vital all participants have a goal to obtain, as well as a structured outline presented. Information must be delivered within a timeline. At the end of each day, some form of evaluation must be provided so that, as a facilitator, I can know whether information is effective and meets needs of participants in terms of professional development.

Leadership and Change

Over the last 15 years, I have taught special education at the primary and high school levels. Over these 15 years, I have served in leadership positions within my department at the school and at the district levels. While serving in these positions, I was always asked to share my thoughts and opinions on issues within the department. However, I never had the opportunity to investigate a topic by collecting and analyzing data.

Through this project study, I was able to investigate a local problem by analyzing data and developing a program that could make a lasting change within the school and

the school district. By conducting a more in-depth investigation of the problem, I received the chance to fully understand how teacher attitudes and their level of training can influence a change within a school's climate and culture. The knowledge and skills I have received from completing this project have provided me with a better understanding of how to be an advocate for change. Through this project, I hope that this professional development continues yearly to promote consistency within the differences being made in teacher perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities.

Reflection on the Importance of the Work

Analysis of Self

Completing this study's research and writing processes, I have learned to become a more critical research reader by reading literature research and deciphering factual information. My skills and knowledge of the research process have deepened during this study. I can now create and implement research tools that collect compelling data and provide results for information designed for research. As an educator, I have gained a better understanding of the importance of professional development and the need for general education and special education teachers to have time to collaborate on areas centered on academics and disruptive behaviors effectively. This project opened my eyes to how much general education teachers need support in addressing academics and behaviors in students with disabilities. This project also taught me the importance of time management skills and balancing everyday tasks such as home, family, and work.

Self-Analysis as a Practitioner

The process of this project study has helped me practice research skills. They have allowed me to become a better practitioner. I have learned how to develop and implement adequate data-collecting tools and ethically collect and analyze data to determine the most pertinent findings to the investigated problem. I have learned the importance of being an effective leader who can make decisions not for myself but for the betterment of students. I am more comfortable exhibiting my leadership skills and being more vocal about finding ways to encourage change. I am also more confident in taking the initiative in a task requiring collecting and analyzing data.

Self-Analysis as a Project Developer

The development of this project study has been a challenging yet rewarding experience. The experience began with making decisions on the most appropriate data collection tools and being strategic with how the information was collected. As I was involved with interviewing the participants, I had to make sure that I was focused on the needs of the teachers as they were relating their perceptions to me and not be focused on my personal opinions. I ensured that I provided information that general education teachers truly needed and would benefit from attending professional development. I wanted to ensure that I addressed all of the concerns shared by the teachers.

It was also important that I included opportunities for teachers to collaborate with their peers. Teachers' interests and strengths can contribute to a sense of trust and accountability when collaborating. This collaboration makes teachers feel confident about contributing their most dynamic skills toward student achievement and school

improvement (Bergmark, 2023; Schleifer et al., 2017). Finally, when developing this project study, I needed to include a chance for feedback on the appropriateness and effectiveness of the professional development. This information will provide insight into any changes required to improve future professional development presentations.

Self-Analysis in Leadership and Change

At the beginning of this project study, my goal was to gain a better understanding of why students with disabilities were receiving the highest number of disciplinary referrals compared to their non-disabled peers. Through this problem, I wanted to develop a change that centered on how the students with disabilities were exhibiting their behaviors inside the classroom. However, after reviewing the plethora of literature and the data collection, I realized that the student's behavior was not the primary concern but how the general education teachers chose to address those behaviors. Based on this data, a better level of change could be implemented through professional development that focused on teachers, addressing their concerns and misconceptions, and providing new teachers with the level of support they needed to change the climate of their classrooms. My focus quickly changed to helping other educators achieve a level of success.

This process would positively impact the general education teachers, students, local schools, and school district data. Providing teachers with behavioral support for dealing with negative behaviors exhibited in students with disabilities could change their perceptions as teachers and give them a new way of interacting with their students more positively. This change demonstrates to students that the teachers care about their level of

success, both behaviorally and academically. This positive change also improves school-district behavior data according to the state guidelines.

Implications, Applications, and Directions for Future Research

This study examined general education teachers' perceptions of disciplining students with disabilities. Through this project, an understanding of general education teachers' challenges and concerns when disciplining students with disabilities was acknowledged. Based on the data, teachers expressed the need for more training and support in disciplining students with disabilities. With this information, professional development was developed to help general education teachers gain strategies, support, and opportunities for collaboration with their colleagues. The professional development was initially developed for general education teachers within the primary sectors in grades 3-5; however, this professional development can be implemented throughout several sectors and grade levels. Understanding how disabilities, behaviors, and academics align can bring more significant change by enhancing student performance. When teachers understand how all three areas correlate, they can develop a positive learning environment for both students and their teachers.

The data collected for this project provided information on the needs of general education teachers when disciplining students with disabilities. In addition, the data provided information that allowed for informed decisions on how to best help general education teachers improve their classrooms into healthier learning environments for students with disabilities. For further research, data may be collected to track particular students and the strategies used over time. Following a student's behavior patterns and

the techniques used to address them will help gain information on how effective strategies can be when implemented consistently and with fidelity. This information could help school districts develop training to improve how teachers address challenging behaviors and students with disabilities. This information may also give school districts an understanding of future studies needed to change practices for developing higher-level classroom management.

Conclusion

In this study, general education teachers' perceptions when disciplining students with disabilities were examined. Data collected indicated that general education teachers needed more knowledge and support when implementing disciplinary practices toward students with disabilities. Based on the findings, a three-day professional development was created to address the teachers' concerns and needs according to data results. The teachers were provided with background information, behavior strategies, and opportunities to collaborate with their colleagues. Based upon the success of the modified behaviors, the professional development, measured on the provided teacher feedback, can be used over different school levels as well as specific school personnel, including non-content-related classes. Social change will occur as more school districts begin providing training that focuses on addressing behaviors as well as academics for students with disabilities. As a result, schools and school districts may begin to see a decrease in misbehavior and an increase in academic achievement.

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