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# General educators perceptions of preparedness to teach in mixed-ability classrooms

Kristen Sparks Kantor  
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2010

ABSTRACT

General Educators Perceptions of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-Ability Classrooms

by

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M.A.T., Simmons College, 1994

B.A., Rollins College, 1992

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Doctor of Education  
Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning

Walden University  
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## ABSTRACT

The increasing populations of students with special academic needs included in general education classrooms in American public schools are providing a growing teacher preparation challenge. The purpose of this study was to analyze both strengths and weaknesses in how general education teachers perceived their pre-service preparation for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms. A constructivist learning theory paradigm was used to interpret shared experiences of general education teachers working in mixed-ability public elementary schools. The research question was centered in how this group of teachers assessed preparation to provide instruction for Autism Spectrum Disorder, English Language Learners (ELL), general education, gifted, and Inter-Related Resource students. A sequential explanatory mixed methods research design was used in the study, and a teacher survey and interviews with teacher focus groups served as data collection instruments. Triangulation of data sources and peer review ensured reliability and validity of findings. Comparison of categorical sample data using percentages revealed that teachers did indeed identify differences in their perceived training. Teacher focus group data was then coded and analyzed to reveal; a need for more in-depth training for general education certification to better meet the specific needs of Autistic, ELL, gifted, and Resource students; sustained environmental support; and comfort in essential professional knowledge and abilities. Recommendations include the addition of specific special education coursework for general education certification in higher education and ongoing in-service training for public school teachers. Adopting these recommendations in both arenas may affect positive social change by increasing the likelihood of retaining general education teachers in American public schools.



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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to my family, John, Blaine, and Andrew Kantor, who have supported me throughout this process with endless patience as I “worked on my paper” when I really wanted to play with you. You sacrificed many hours as I worked, read, wrote, and rewrote draft after draft in efforts to complete this goal. Hopefully, someday you will look back and remember that it takes persistence to achieve many goals in life. The days of having to wait until I finished just one more thing, even on vacation, are over.

Furthermore, I would like to dedicate this achievement to my parents, Dr. and Mrs. James E. Sparks, who put education at the top of our priority list from day one. This degree fulfills a promise made long ago. Your many years of sacrifice to send us to quality schools have not been forgotten as I work to provide a quality education to those in my care. Your belief in my abilities and potential is the backbone of all I do.

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## SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

When young teachers enter the world of education, they are eager to meet the needs of each student. These inexperienced teachers rely on their educational degrees, books, and brief time in classroom internships to get ready for this new world. In reality, teachers rely on their teacher preparation programs, training, and experience to give them the tools needed to be successful in teaching all types of students. The need to work with vastly different ability levels in one classroom, sometimes without special education or mentoring support, is expected in today's public schools. This study connected two socially relevant topics: general education teachers' perception of preparation for mixed-ability classrooms and teacher retention. Finding a relationship between these two concepts could lead to filling in the gaps in teacher preparation programs and at the local level to better serve the academic needs of American children.

### Problem Statement

Many teachers are leaving American public schools (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001; Voke, 2002) The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) provides shocking statistics in its 2003 report: On an average school day, 1,000 teachers quit, and 1,000 teachers "migrate," or move from school to school. So, although demographics, socioeconomic levels, school environment, salary, benefits, teacher background, and life circumstances contribute to teacher retention problem (Billingsly, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003, May; Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Ferguson 1999; Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Potter, Swenk, Shrum, Smith, & Weekly, 2001;

Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001), there is little research that considers teacher preparation for strengths and weaknesses in the skills needed to effectively teach in mixed-ability classrooms. Further analysis is also needed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' teacher retention in public school, general education classrooms. Therefore, it is not known if teachers find themselves prepared to meet the needs of the diverse population of learners in today's public school classrooms, nor is it known if there is a lack of preparedness for learning differences, which affect teachers' desires to remain in the classroom. If this link can be established, then the field of education may come closer to its goal of closing the achievement gap in United States' minority learners.

### Research Questions

The following quantitative question guided this sequential explanatory research: How do elementary, general education teachers assess their preparation to teach subgroup student populations?

The following qualitative questions guided this sequential explanatory research and were used in the qualitative element of the study to elaborate upon data obtained in the quantitative survey:

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?

3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?

4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?

5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?

6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

The following mixed methods question guided this sequential explanatory research and served as the foundation for inquiry: Is there a relationship between teachers' preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and the effect of preparedness on their desire to stay in teaching?

A mixed method study design provided a baseline of data and opened the study to ideas that were not included in a single administration survey. This study used the sequential explanatory design of mixed methods research. The first phase was a quantitative study and included Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers (Appendix A), which focuses on perceived knowledge and skills for teaching Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ELL (English Language Learners), General Education, Gifted Education (FOCUS), and Inter-Related Resource (Resource) students. For the second phase, a qualitative study included a convenience sample of teachers to participate in a focus study group. This interview will consist of open-ended questions (Appendix B) in the same areas as the quantitative survey with focus on what can be changed for better



student success for these populations: Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), ELL (English Language Learners), General Education, Gifted Education (FOCUS), and Inter-Related Resource (Resource) students. Discussion was related to the purpose of study and the topics of teacher preparation and teacher retention. A detailed description of the research design can be found in section 3 of this doctoral study document.

With the legal standards in place, general education teachers are expected to begin their teaching careers with a clear understanding of teaching, planning, and effectively modifying the regular education curriculum to meet the needs of students with nontraditional learning needs, in addition to teaching general education students. With limited classroom experience due to limited student teaching timeframes, the preparedness of novice teachers comes to the forefront; however updating the skills of veteran teachers to meet the needs of today's public schools is also a necessity. The teacher preparation program and the required time for face-to-face time in public school classrooms are in question. Keeping the qualified teachers in the classroom is essential to the future of the United States educational system. Whether the current preparation process is sufficient was examined in this doctoral study and will serve as a base for future research on this topic. The literature base for this study can be found in section 2 of this document.

Further study design details are discussed in section 3. I used the collected data to analyze the possible effect of teacher preparation on teacher retention using the guiding question, related background research, and coded, open-ended question and response research.

## Theoretical Framework

Within this conceptual research, I used the constructivist paradigm to discover the similar characteristics or shared experiences of novice general education teachers in their first 5 years of public school teaching. Originally based on Spinelli's (1998) call for preservice teachers to be better prepared for the instructional skills needed the highly diverse classrooms in United States public schools, the theoretical framework of this study focused on first year challenges of general education teachers, their perception of preparedness for inclusion in public schools, and changes in the classroom environment. Spinelli (1998) stated,

“In order to be adequately prepared for this diverse population of students, preservice teachers need to be familiar with a variety of teaching strategies and alternate assessment measures required to provide all students with the curricular and program modifications they need” (p. 6).

The question of preparedness was addressed by Darling-Hammond (2003) as she brought the topic of teacher retention and its possible relationship to preparedness, for the wide variety of abilities in general education classrooms to the nations' attention. Ingersoll (2001) focused on teacher attrition, and more specifically, why novice teachers are leaving the most diverse, poverty stricken schools. A more detailed review of the literature can be found in section 2 of this doctoral study.

I chose to pursue the concept of lack of preparedness for mixed-ability classrooms, which include physically, mentally, emotionally, and economically challenged students in the general education classroom. Changes in the inclusion mindset, leadership for novice teachers, and leadership for effective inclusion schools are

included. The literature review will continue with information on the regulation of preparation programs, current routes to certification in the state of Georgia, educator assessment testing for quality, and preparation program consistency. The literature review ended with information on the demand for new skills, attitude, acceptance of all learners, retention, application of the information, and potential for further study.

### Nature of Study

The sequential explanatory design of mixed methods research was used for this doctoral study. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered sequentially with priority given to the quantitative data. This study sought to determine whether there is a relationship between teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach in a mixed-ability classroom and desire to remain teachers in a public school classroom and to present experiences directly from the field in the form of anecdotal evidence.

### *Methodology Used in This Study*

The data were collected for this mixed method study using a sequential explanatory approach. Collection and analysis of the quantitative data was followed by the collection and analysis of qualitative data. Priority was given to the quantitative data and the two methods are integrated during the interpretation phase of the study. In this study, the quantitative data collection provided a statistical basis for the anecdotal responses, opinions, and reflection obtained in the group focus interview by use of emphasized, or recurrent, ideas.

These ideas were specifically defined and coded according to the grounded theory approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In this approach, I examined the interviews, referred to

literature in order to gain ideas on what themes and concepts for which to code, developed new concepts where appropriate, and then worked out the definitions prior to doing the physical coding (p. 221).

Development of the quantitative data by use of a second research methodology yielded more comprehensive and detailed results on the possible relationship between inclusion preparedness and teacher retention (Greene, Caracelli, & Graham, 1989). Data collected in the sequential explanatory design utilized both open and closed ended questions, multiple forms of data, and statistical and text analysis (Creswell, 2003, p. 17). By using this method, I brought together the qualitative and quantitative data so as to provide a comprehensive analysis of the obtained data. I served as the primary instrument of data collection by use of self and analysis tools (Merriam, 2002).

#### Purpose Statement

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. The results were used to determine if professional learning opportunities should exist for teachers at the local school to assist in helping prepare teachers to teach student subgroup populations.

The first phase was a quantitative study, which explored teacher preparedness for mixed abilities by collecting survey data from general education teachers, employed by S

Elementary School, through an online survey collection tool. The following quantitative question guided this sequential explanatory research: How do elementary, general education teachers assess their preparation to teach subgroup student populations? Members of the criterion-based sample group were questioned for this study using the Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers. It contained basic demographic questions, yes/no, ordinal, and Likert-type questions. Information from this first phase was explored further in a second, qualitative phase.

The qualitative phase was conducted using group interviews, including volunteer participants from Phase 1, and was conducted in a classroom at S Elementary School. The following qualitative questions guided this sequential explanatory research and were used in the qualitative element of the study to elaborate upon data obtained in the quantitative survey:

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?

5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?

6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

Scheduling depended on the availability of the participants. A date of May 4, 2010, was established by the group. Recurrent themes found in the research were probed in focus group interview, with the development of subject knowledge and the categorization of responses done by themes. Data included population sample survey responses, focus group interview logs, and analysis by the researcher. Following up with qualitative research allowed collected data to be used for the generalization of results to a larger population of novice teachers.

The following mixed method research question also guided the literature review: Is there a relationship between teachers' preparation for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and its effect on their desire to stay in teaching? The literature review can be found in section 2 of this document.

### Definitions of Terms

In the context of professional development, several terms carry unique, research-based meanings. The following list of terms is integral to this study.

*Comprehensive Induction:* Smith & Ingersoll (2004) defined comprehensive induction as a combination of high-quality mentoring, professional development and support, scheduled interaction with other teachers in the school and in the larger

community, and formal assessments for new teachers during at least their first two years of teaching.

*Free Appropriate Public Education:* In 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA), mandated that all children who receive special education services are entitled to a free, appropriate education, as directed by an individualized education program. According to Alexander & Alexander (2005), educational benefit to the child is measured by both academic and social progress. Special education and related services, which meet the standards of the state educational agency, are in conformity with the IEP, are to be provided under public supervision and direction, at public expense, in the state involved (p. 500).

*General Education Teachers:* Also known as regular education teachers, in this study, general education teachers were defined as teachers who have met the conditions of certification in the state of Georgia for certification but are not licensed in special education.

*Inclusion:* IDEA (2004) made the including disabled students in general education classrooms as much as possible the goal for special education programs. Each student is placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and general education teachers need to know how to teach each of these special learners. This practice is known as “mainstreaming” or “inclusion.”

*Individualized Education Program (IEP):* An IEP is a written educational program developed individually by a team including educators, parents, and sometimes the child to ensure success in the traditional school setting. The plan includes goals and

objectives for the child to succeed in the least restrictive, and most appropriate educational environment. Any special considerations or accommodations are defined in this document. Non-compliance by a teacher is the breach of a legal contract of student rights. According to the National Center for Educational Progress (NAEP), and IEP is a written statement for each individual with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with Title 42, U.S.C. Section 1414(d), which is also known as “Wrightslaw: IDEA 2004” (Wright & Wright, 2007).

*Least Restrictive Environment (LRE):* Wigle and Wilcox (1996) studied specific criteria necessary for the preparation of education personnel. They explained several elements, which should be a part of educational programming in order for it to be congruent with LRE, so that the student learning can be the focus. Based on empirical evidence, Wigle and Wilcox described the following suggestions as the “most logical criteria by which to evaluate any particular service delivery model” (p. 2). The five criteria included (a) substantive student-teacher interaction, (b) ample opportunity to respond, (c) high academic engagement time, (d) practical, relevant curriculum, and (e) maximization of student success.

*Mixed-Ability Classroom:* For the purpose of this research study, a mixed-ability classroom was defined as a general education classroom serving a heterogeneous group of learning needs, including students who receive additional services through ASD, ELL, FOCUS, and IRR (Resource) Programs.

*Teacher Attrition:* Boe, Bobbit, and Cook (1993) defined teacher attrition as a part of teacher turnover, which is the change in teacher status from year to year. Teacher



turnover includes those exiting the field of education and those who change schools or jobs within the field of education.

*Teacher Retention:* Darling-Hammond (2003) defined teacher retention as retaining competent, qualified teachers over a long term.

*The Individuals with Disabilities Act and its amendments in 1997 (IDEA, 1997):* IDEA specifies placement of students with disabilities in regular education settings, with access to the regular education curriculum.

### Assumptions, Limitations, Scope, and Delimitations

#### *Quantitative Assumptions*

This study has the following assumptions:

1. The quantitative portion of this study provided precise, quantitative, numerical data.
2. The research results were relatively independent of the researcher.
3. A large Elementary School in the southeastern region of the United States, referred to by the pseudonym of “S Elementary School” was the source of study data.
4. It was assumed that the researcher could provide stronger evidence for a conclusion by using quantitative results to develop the qualitative results.

#### *Qualitative Assumptions*

This study had the following assumptions:

1. The data were based on the participants’ own categories of meaning.
2. The study was useful for studying a limited number of cases in depth.

3. The study provided understandings of people's personal experiences or phenomena.
4. It was assumed that the researcher could add insights or details otherwise missed when performing a single method study.
5. It was assumed that the qualitative portion of study was especially responsive to local situations and conditions.
6. It was assumed that the anonymity of the survey distribution ensured the confidential nature of the obtained data, thus the participants chose to respond to the survey participated out of interest in the subject matter or desire to further research on topic matter.
7. It was assumed that the researcher could add insights or details otherwise missed when performing a single method study.

### Limitations

#### *Quantitative Limitations*

This study had the following limitations:

1. The participants were not analyzed on the basis of race, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, or economic level.
2. The research sample represented only one large public school system, located in the southeast region of the United States. Other systems, regions, and countries were excluded.
3. Methodological purists believe research should be conducted as either quantitative or qualitative, but not both.

4. Both the quantitative and qualitative portions were voluntary. Only the experiences and opinions of those willing to participate were represented.

#### *Qualitative Limitations*

This study had the following limitations:

1. The participants were not be analyzed on the basis of race, religion, socioeconomic status, gender, or economic level.
2. The research sample represented only one large public school system, located in the southeast region of the United States. Other systems, regions, and countries were excluded.
3. Methodological purists believe research should conducted as either quantitative or qualitative, but not both.
4. Both the quantitative and qualitative portions were voluntary. Only the experiences and opinions of those willing to participate were represented.

#### *Scope*

This study had the following scope:

1. This research focused on certified, general education teachers.
2. The sample teachers work in grades K-5.
3. The sample teachers work at S Elementary School.

#### *Delimitations*

The delimitations, or boundaries, of this study include the following:

1. Sample participants were general education teachers working in general education classrooms.

2. Sample participants were working with identified inclusion students (physical, mental, and learning disabilities).
3. Sample participants were employed by S Elementary School.
4. This study did not include teachers on leave of any sort, more experienced teachers, substitute teachers, or paraprofessionals.

### Significance of the Study

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was determined whether general education teachers in one public elementary school view themselves adequately prepared to teach in mixed-ability classrooms, and if those perceptions affect their desire to continue teaching.

Diversity in today's public schools demands the social change of established systems. The educational system in the United States is constantly evolving as research affects practices. Increasing numbers of special education students are being placed in general education classrooms with the expectation of active and high quality instruction. The growing diversity of America's population requires educators to be equipped with strategies to reach learners of different backgrounds. Public school teachers need to have the knowledge and experience before entering the classroom independently. The ability to differentiate and modify the curriculum in order to meet special needs is essential to the survival of novice teachers. Not only do the special education students benefit but the general education students benefit from the additional instructional strategies, the differentiated instruction which results, and the collaboration of additional education personnel.

## Summary and Transition

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to determine whether general education teachers in one public elementary school view themselves adequately prepared to teach in mixed-ability classrooms, and if those perceptions affect their desire to continue teaching.

Section 1 included the background of the topic to be examined: the possibility of a relationship between teacher preparation programs and novice teachers' intentions to stay in the teaching profession. In addition to the research questions, explanation for the methodology chosen for this study, methodologies chosen for related topics, methods for delivery, design, and relevant terminology are explained for the reader. Keeping capable teachers, who are able to reach a diverse range of academic needs, in public school classrooms is critical for the American educational system.

Section 2 consists of literature review and background information for the topics explored in attempt to find a correlation between teacher's perceptions of preparedness and teacher retention. Focus on prior research gives validity and meaning to current research endeavors.

Section 3 consists of the research design, the rationale for the chosen design, data analyses, and data collection procedures.

Section 4 reports the findings of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study in narrative and tabular form.

Section 5 provides a summary of the study as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings.

## SECTION 2: BACKGROUND AND THEORETICAL BASE

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms.

Section 1 reviewed historical and political perspectives on the purpose of this study, that is, to determine whether general education teachers in one public elementary school view themselves adequately prepared to teach in mixed-ability classrooms, and if those perceptions affect their desire to continue teaching.

When in 2004, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) mandated that all children who receive special education services are entitled to a free, appropriate education, as directed by an individualized education program, general education teachers were ultimately given a new challenge. IDEA (2004) made the including disabled students in general education classrooms as much as possible the goal for special education programs. Each student is placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and general education teachers need to know how to teach each of these inclusion students. Section 2 presents a literature review that focuses on specific themes related to the purpose of the study. The themes discussed are teacher preparation programs, the national regulation of teacher preparation programs, and the change in education due to the combination of disabled and nondisabled students. Attitude, acceptance of all

learners, and the addition of skills for general education teachers form the final elements of the literature review.

This literature review was conducted using online access to the Walden University Library, the local public school system's professional library collection, my local public library system, Walden University coursework textbooks, and professional literature recommended by professors in the Doctorate of Education program. Online libraries provided access to various research databases, including the Education Resource Information Center (ERIC), Sage online journals, Academic Search Premier, ProQuest, and dissertations. The following search terms were used: access to education, inclusion, inclusive education, internships, leadership, mainstreaming, mentoring, mixed method research design, student teaching, teacher attrition, teacher preparation, and teacher retention. In addition to the formerly listed sources, references were drawn from the references sections of other researchers and pursued for related information.

### Teacher Retention

Research has shown that retaining teachers has been a national problem for decades. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor (2006), teachers held 3.8 million jobs in elementary and secondary United States public and private schools, representing 4% of the civilian workforce. Three-quarters of the teachers were females, 18% of which were newly hired (Strizek, Pittsonberger, Riordan, Lyter, & Orlofsky, 2006). The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (NCTAF) provides shocking statistics in its 2003 report: On an average school day, 1,000 teachers quit, and 1,000 teachers "migrate," or move from school to school.

Many variables exist in this complex problem. The research has been ongoing and has increased in intensity over the past 30 years. The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. Therefore, this study will focus on teacher preparation and its effect on teacher retention.

### *First-Year Challenges*

According to Otis-Wilburn, Winn, Griffin, and Kilgore (2005), "The first year in a teacher's professional life is often the most challenging" (p. 143). Teachers today are facing many circumstances when they enter the regular education classroom. Teachers may encounter English Language Learners (ELL), language immersion classrooms, inclusion and state mandated programs, as well as new curriculum, new technology, new assessment, and a wide variety of instructional practices (Potter, Swenk, Shrumph, Smith, & Weekly, 2001). There is evidence to suggest that general education teachers do not believe that they are adequately prepared to effectively teach students with disabilities (Schumm & Vaughn 1995; Schumm & Vaughn, 1992; Singh, 2006). A 7-year study on this topic was done in the Netherlands to address the country's teacher shortage (Stokking, Leenders, De Jong, & Van Tartwijk, 2003). One of the three elements of Dutch research was the "insufficient training" (Stokking et al., 2003) which teaching candidates receive during the preparation period. The lack of adequate preparation led to



“the inevitable shock that occurs from entering practice” (p. 330). How do these challenges affect job satisfaction? Inman and Marlow (2004) called the reaction a “classroom reality shock” (p. 2) and often mistook the discomfort and uneasiness teachers felt as “an indication that they have made a mistake in their choice of profession” (p. 2).

*Perceptions of Student Teaching and Preparedness for Today's Public Schools*

Historically, the student teaching experience has long been considered one of the most important parts of teacher preparation research (Chepystor-Thomason & Liu, 2003). I questioned the student teachers' perceptions of their field experiences and the relationship to retention in this mixed method study. Did the guided student teaching experience and time in the college classroom adequately train perspective teachers for the reality of today's public school classroom? The reflection on this topic gave researchers more evidence for ideas in the broad topic of teacher retention. Student teaching does allow the trainees' time to evaluate the application of ideas and strategies learned from coursework and from text. The perception of these candidates assisted the administration with the development of professional development programs (Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2000).

Teacher preparation for most general education educators on inclusion practices provides only limited opportunities to prepare for the demand on a new classroom teacher (Jorgensen et al., 2006). For most students, the student teaching practicum continues the development of teaching related skills. Planning lessons, communicating content information, classroom management and discipline ideas, learning new pedagogical skills

and strategies, adapting materials to meet individual needs, and assessment methods are among the benefits of student teaching. On the other hand, student teaching sheds light on the basics of practice which the trainee has not yet mastered. In these ways, students have a better idea of their personal strengths and weaknesses, which ultimately leads to the question of whether or not they have the skills to teach in a public school independently (Ojeme, 1984).

### *Changes in the Classroom Environment*

Over the past two decades, the basic skill needs for regular education teachers have grown. IDEA specified placement of students with disabilities in regular education settings, with access to the regular education curriculum. Students are to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and general education teachers need to know how to teach inclusion students. Wigle and Wilcox (1996) studied specific criteria necessary for the preparation of education personnel. They explained several elements, which should be a part of educational programming in order for it to be congruent with LRE, so that the student learning can be the focus. Based on empirical evidence, Wigle and Wilcox described the following suggestions as the “most logical criteria by which to evaluate any particular service delivery model” (p. 2). The five criteria included (a) substantive student-teacher interaction, (b) ample opportunity to respond, (c) high academic engagement time, (d) practical, relevant curriculum, and (e) maximization of student success. Some tips for new teachers might include these ideas: encourage the teacher to develop interest in each child as an individual; give the children a chance to process and answer questions; keep the students engaged with little transition time; make the lesson

relevant and interesting for real life situations; and promote achievement by celebrating even the smallest successes. The ability to express expressed and implicit needs is a skill necessary for a successful inclusion experience for both the students and the teachers.

Novice teachers need the support of an experienced educator and involved administration to give such guidance, especially in challenging classroom situations. This type of advice and training is a good example of what should happen in extended teacher internships before working in one's own classroom. Do certified teachers think that they were given strategies such as the ones mentioned during preparation?

### *Changes in the Inclusion Mindset*

Novice teachers especially need support when they have inclusion students. To the general public, the terms *mainstream* and *inclusion* are often used interchangeably, but the definitions of each have grown and changed since the 1960s. Dianne Ferguson, known to her peers as a “rabid inclusionist” (2005), had struggled with her own definition of inclusion. When diverse students were initially put back in regular education classrooms, there were still those who were educated in separate schools and environments, often far from their homes. Ferguson credited the “zero reject” (p.1) provisions of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (P.L. 94-142) in 1974 that afforded the opportunity for severely handicapped children to attend school at all. Even with that piece of legislature, she found the mental assumptions of administrators, teachers, and the children themselves prohibitive.

Ferguson (2005) referred to the fact that the mindset of the time led to the notion that “if children did not learn, there was something wrong with them” (p. 2), and “the job

of the school was to determine what was wrong with as much precision as possible, so that students can be directed to the tracks, curricula, teachers, and classrooms that match their learning-ability profiles” (p. 2). Ferguson’s perception led to her deep-rooted belief that despite every effort to integrate, these prejudices still existed. Gliedman and Roth (1980), labeled an unexpected minority developing in the United States: handicapped children. Ferguson (2005) pointed out the following, in application to handicapped students:

For those moderately and severely handicapped students who had previously been excluded from schooling on the ground that they were too disabled to benefit, the application of a civil rights framework gave them the same status as any minority group that was widely disenfranchised and discriminated against. (p. 2)

In order to affect change in the educational system, social discrimination must be eliminated. If the mindsets could be changed, then effective inclusion could be implemented. Research does not show the necessary new mindset has entered the teacher preparation programs; neither does research show if new teachers are aware of the necessity of regular educators to work with special needs individuals, with or without support from the special education teacher. The state of Georgia requires a course called “Introduction to the Exceptional Child” for certification. This coursework requirement needs to be backed up by time spent directly working with special needs learners, even for a general education certificate in American public schools. Although Australia defines inclusion differently than the United States, research showed that general education teachers struggled to address special needs learners as individuals in classrooms there, rather than as members of a whole group who need to fit into one role. Paterson (2007)

suggested that teachers in Australia should replace the focus on differences with the development of rich practical knowledge and effective instructional techniques. In that way, teachers can focus on the needs of individuals rather than on a class as a whole (p. 3). Without this experience of working with individuals in context, inexperienced teachers made poor choices for individuals although it may have seemed appropriate for the group as a whole (Clark, 1997). General education coursework needs more focus on strategies for individuals.

Although general education teachers are trained in working with a group as a whole, choosing strategies for individuals needs development. According to Hines and Johnson (1997), teachers agreed in principle with the goals of inclusion, but many did not feel prepared to work in inclusive settings and were hesitant to accept new ideas about teaching and learning. According to Baker and Zigmond (1995), teachers in general education classrooms typically lack confidence in their own abilities to meet the needs of inclusion students. Consideration of teachers' current knowledge and beliefs was essential in creating effective professional development to close this knowledge gap (Putnam & Borko, 1997).

### Leadership and Retention of Novice Teachers

#### *Leadership for Novice Teachers*

A strong administration, which focuses on the development of its teachers, can also make a difference in closing this knowledge gap for learning differences in teachers of all experience levels. What makes a good leader? This question about leadership qualities has been developing and growing steadily since the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An

easy to understand leadership theory comes from The Iowa Studies (1939). Leaders were classified as authoritarian, democratic, or laissez-faire. Authoritarian leaders ran the work situations with very little input from subordinates. This type of leader tended to elicit aggressive and resentful behavior. The democratic leader balanced the responsibility with employees, valuing group discussion and decision-making. Productivity was the highest with this type of leadership. This type of leader was preferred by most employees. The laissez-faire leader gave complete freedom to employees, provided very little direction or leadership, and often led to low productivity. While this research was criticized, it led to the closer look at leadership behavior, rather than the assumption that leaders are or are not capable, based upon personality at birth.

### *Leadership is Critical*

Another survey, “Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Alabama Schools” was administered by three Alabama school districts: Hoover City Schools, Mobile County Schools, and Talladega County Schools (Hirsch, 2006). It was a direct result of a commission set up by Governor Bob Riley called the “Governor’s Commission on Quality Teaching” (p. 2) to develop strategies for recruitment and retention and to work through a 5-year implementation period. Many areas of the subject of teacher retention were analyzed in this study. According to the survey of teachers, leadership was the main factor in plans to stay or leave a school (p. 11). Supportive school leadership manifested itself in the leader’s ability to establish and maintain a positive climate, clearly stated expectations, and support when needed. Those teachers, who found those qualities in

their administration, were 45% less likely than their colleagues to verbalize desires to quit teaching.

The strength of this research lies in the fact that this survey covered multiple schools, systems, levels of poverty, and ethnic populations. The support of leadership outweighed salary and benefits, planning time, and the quality of facilities, as well other factors with smaller study significance. Further study of what it would take to recruit and retain teachers in hard-to-staff schools indicated that educators voiced the desire for strong, supportive leadership as “important” at a response rate of 94%, while 83.2% of those teachers felt that it was “extremely important” (p. 13). Among the recommendations of the “Recruiting and Retaining Teachers in Alabama Schools” survey was the following:

Ensure the universities preparing teachers are including hard-to-staff schools in their clinical placement and that faculty who must spend time in K-12 schools are doing so in hard to staff schools, helping to provide the needed professional development and support in these schools. (Hirsch, 2006, p. 21)

The support of a strong administration and other experienced education professionals, as well as competence in needed skills, may keep some teachers from looking into other professions. Research on leadership traits has developed over the past hundred years and may lead to an understanding of who is best suited to guide novice teachers.

### *Leadership Traits*

Characteristics of a good leader have been studied by numerous research teams and individuals. Roger Stogill (1948) reviewed studies conducted between 1904 and 1947. In his study, he identified the following characteristics of leaders vs. non-leaders:

1. Capacity (intelligence, alertness, verbal facility, originality, judgment)
2. Achievement (scholarship, knowledge, athletic accomplishments)
3. Responsibility (dependability, initiative, persistence, aggressiveness, self-confidence, desire to excel)
4. Participation (activity, sociability, cooperation, adaptability, humor)
5. Status (socioeconomic position)

Stogill found that the presence of these characteristics varied across situations. A few years later, more research was done which did not find any specific patterns of traits necessary for a strong leader. Stogill, along with colleague, Bass, updated his earlier leadership research in 1990. It will assist the reader to notice the growth pattern from the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to this piece of work. After reviewing over 300 traits, the pair categorized leadership traits in five broad dimensions, which aligned easily with “The Big Five Dimensions of Personality Traits”:

1. Surgency (sociable, gregarious, assertive, leader-like)
2. Agreeableness (sympathetic, cooperative, good-natured, warm)
3. Conscientiousness (hardworking, persevering, organized, responsible)
4. Emotional stability (calm, steady, self-confident)
5. Intellect (imaginative, cultured, broad minded, curious)

More recent research was done in more controlled settings, such as in the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) Assessment Center. The center diagnosed traits and skills of individuals and gave them baseline data on personal strengths and weaknesses using an outside assessment center. The center wanted to



develop data, which would help ensure best-fit placement and selection of principals. The (1998, 2002) model, “Selecting and Developing the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Principal,” put candidates through observed simulations of the everyday life of a principal. They recorded behaviors, reactions, and then presented a report to the candidate. The report contained information in the following categories:

1. Educational Leadership (setting instructional design, teamwork, sensitivity).
2. Resolving Complex Problems (judgment, results orientation, organizational ability).
3. Communication (oral communication, written communication).
4. Developing Self and Others (development of others, understanding own strengths and weaknesses).

The center offered skills development programs, which like past research, suggested that leadership is a learned skill. Specifically, the development of beginning teachers should be of utmost importance to administrators if we are to keep the teachers we have trained in the field. Darling-Hammond (2003) suggested that good school leaders provide “strategic investments” (p. 6) needed to keep good teachers, such as providing mentoring for beginners and creating ongoing learning and leadership challenges for veterans. She suggested the value of these tactics will actually pay for themselves by keeping teachers from quitting.

“Emotional intelligence,” or adeptness at managing ourselves and our interactions with others, sets strong, well-liked leaders apart from others. Brain research by Daniel Goleman and Associates (2002) showed qualities such as empathy, motivating power,

integrity, and intuitive ability come from a different part of the brain than academic intelligence. Therefore, a person may be extremely intelligent in theory, but ineffective in managing people. Promisingly, Goleman showed belief that leadership is a learned behavior. One just needs to know what to improve, practices consistently, and how to maintain motivation. A principal with the above characteristics, who is trained and savvy in emotional intelligence skills, will be a crucial factor in keeping young teachers in the field, especially with the increasing demands on the classroom teacher due to The Individuals with Disabilities Act, and its amendments in 1997 (IDEA, 1997). The acceptance of inclusion students must come from the top down.

#### *Environment*

Administrators promote success in inclusion by the allocation of funds, staff members available for support, and by creating a supportive climate. “To ensure the success of inclusion, it is important that principals exhibit behaviors which advance the integration, acceptance, and success of students with disabilities in general education classes” (Praisner, 2003, p. 135). By surrounding beginning teachers in a network of support, a leader can help retain novice teachers. “It seems apparent that the nature of the experiences in a school setting and not the amount of experience is connected to attitudes toward inclusion (Praisner, p. 141). A study in a school system employing 8,000 teachers, the administration, special education teachers, and general education teachers agreed that the general education teachers were not prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Daane et al., 2000). One principal specified, “My teachers have not had enough training on what strategies to use with students with disabilities (Daane et al.,

2000). Understanding the need for professional development for inclusion preparedness comes from administrative commitment (Karten, 2005). Even though a beginning general education teacher is surrounded by supportive personnel, there still remains the perception that general education teachers are not prepared for inclusion.

### Preparedness and Perceptions of Preparedness

Do the novice teachers come prepared or are they given more challenging students, room assignments, and less desirable situations? A study by The Consortium on Chicago School Research at the University of Chicago (CCSR) in 2005 compared a subsample of fourth to eighth grade elementary school teachers, looking for a link between novice teachers' perceptions of difficulty and reality. The researchers acknowledged the difficulty of the extent to which these findings reflect reality or the inexperience and perceptions of beginning teachers. They used student-level data from subsamples of volunteers' room numbers, which allowed them to compare against actual student data. Their data indicated the novice's perceptions of the students who lacked basic skills in their classroom correlated with the percentages of students in their class below norms in reading and math. Based on this evidence, they decided they could "reasonably rely on their survey reports" (p. 19). CCSR's research found that novice teacher in Chicago Public Schools (CPS) in 2004-05 had classrooms with more students reading below norms and more students below norms in math than experienced teachers in CPS. This research boldly suggested that novice teachers work in more challenging classrooms contexts than more experienced educators. "Given the multiple challenges new teachers face, placing them in less-demanding classrooms might ease their transition

into the workforce” (p. 19). An administrator who is well versed in factors affecting teacher retention should deliberately place students so that new teachers can be successful.

### Preparing General Education Teaching Trainees for Inclusion

#### *Regulation of Preparation Programs*

State and national agencies oversee and regulate the teacher preparation programs. In Georgia, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission offers four possible routes to teacher certification as of May 2010. These routes all lead to a “Clear Renewable Certificate” regardless of which route to certification is chosen. They are as follows:

1. Traditional Route- In this route, one would earn a college degree along with a state certificate.
2. Alternative Route- This possibility is offered to attract “career switchers,” who already hold degrees and different work and life experiences, and to renew licenses for expired or out of state applicants.
3. International Exchange Teacher Route- This method of certification is designed to enable license holding foreign educators to work in Georgia schools for up to three years as a part of an international exchange program.
4. Permit Route- Permits allow performing artists, retired teachers, and native foreign language speakers to teach in Georgia classrooms and selected business/professional leaders to serve in a Superintendent position based on their rich expertise.

The state of Georgia also requires educator assessment tests (Georgia Professional Standards Commission, 2010). An educator assessment program called the Georgia Assessments for the Certification of Educators ® (GACE®) has been developed by the Professional Standards Commission (PSC) with contracted assistance from the National Evaluation Systems, Inc. To maintain quality, the PSC aligned the new assessments with national standards, Georgia educator certification requirements, Georgia educator preparation standards, and the new Georgia Performance Standards (GPS) for P-12 students. The intent of the Georgia Professional Standards Commission is to ensure the quality of incoming teachers. There may be a missing puzzle piece: strategies and demonstrated time spent with diverse students in a real classroom setting rather than hypothetical situations in textbooks.

State and national certification commissions set the quality standards for licensure, and although in place, many do not address the definition of LRE, inclusion, and how to effectively prepare student teachers for the classrooms which await them (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 1994; Division for Learning Disabilities, 1992; National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 1995). There is no set measurement of mental preparedness and attitude toward diverse student groups. However, the participating school system, an attitude and values questionnaire must be completed before the first day of employment for the individual's contract to be valid.

Further study is needed to determine how to effectively collect data from novice teachers in Georgia. The analysis of teacher perception of preparedness coming from different certification routes will be useful in furthering this study. Specific information on diverse learners could be analyzed and compared using both objective and subjective measurements, as in the sample used in this study. “The career paths of teachers who completed different types of programs could also be compared (e.g. non-categorical versus categorical; dual preparation in general education and special education versus special education preparation; bachelor’s versus master’s degrees)” (Billingsly, 1993, p. 10). Do classroom progress and standardized test scores indicate success in comparison with non-identified students? Are the teachers really prepared for today’s classrooms? Such useful data may be used to advocate teacher preparation program reform if done on a wider scale than this study demonstrates.

#### *Regulation of Preparation Program Consistency*

Teacher education programs have a responsibility, not only to the participants, but to the students whom will be affected in the future and the society which they will form. Holm and Horn (2003) outlined the overall picture of the student education continuum:

If teaching is to become a recognized profession, teachers need a model of preparation that is in line with the demands and realities of teaching, and schools of education have a critical role to play. They are in the best position to guide the progress of pre-service teachers as they move along the continuum of professional growth from novice to the master teacher. (p. 25)

The groundwork is already in place. The consistency in standards is in place with the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher education (NCATE), the Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), and the National Board for

Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS). These organizations come together to form a framework upon which student preparation programs can build.

Individually, these three organizations have specific purposes. The NCATE standards require teacher education programs to demonstrate how they are incorporating the latest research into the subject matter, teaching strategies, learning styles, and student diversity into their programs. The INTASC clearly states the knowledge and skills that beginning teachers should demonstrate in order to receive an initial license, and the NBPTS define the characteristics and practices of master teachers. Although this framework is in place, the problem of keeping teachers beyond their first five years remains.

Some question licensure boards' reliability and consistency in program evaluation. Arthur Levine, a former president of Columbia's Teacher college and current president of Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation in Princeton, New Jersey, shocked the world of education in his report "Educating School Teachers" based on the "The Education Schools Project" (2006). He compared teacher education to "Dodge City" in this highly controversial report. The four-year study cited a lack of standard approach to preparing teachers that is "unruly and chaotic" (2006). He stated the lower admission standards, professors with lesser credentials, and fewer technology resources create a teaching pool that is less than qualified. Levine also criticized programs which do not offer doctorate degrees. He questioned the quality of many programs.

Despite allegations and statements released by other agencies and individuals, he supported the study and said it was based on solid empirical methods. Levine (2007) said

it was based on solid empirical methods and insisted that the information gathered was based on a national survey of school leaders, visits to a variety of schools throughout the country, and an examination that shows a large-scale growth of student achievement and educator preparation. Levine's key findings suggested that students who graduate from American teacher preparation programs are inadequately prepared to cope with the realities of the classroom (2006). After stirring up such controversy, Levine offered suggestions to the educational community. He said the colleges of education need to do the following:

1. Prepare teachers in professional schools focused on school practice.
2. Focus on student achievement as the primary measure of teacher education program success.
3. Rebuild teacher education programs around the skills and knowledge that promote classroom learning.
4. Make 5-year teacher education programs the norm.
5. Establish effective mechanisms for teacher education quality control.
6. Expand excellent teacher education programs and create incentives for outstanding students and career-changers at doctoral universities.

The president of NCATE, Arthur E. Wise, responded by comparing similarities of the above list to NCATE standards, since the accreditation organization has switched to a performance-based system for judging the effectiveness of teacher education programs. He pointed out the suggestions by Levine are based on current practice by NCATE, thus refuting Levine's criticisms.



*Changes Demand New Skills*

With the challenges in the field, how do teachers feel about the changes in their profession? General educators are searching for ways to improve the quality of their instruction. “Master teachers continually seek opportunities to network, collaborate, and work with other professionals to build a community of learning that will benefit all students” (Holm & Horn, 2003, p. 31). Many are pursuing advanced degrees, enrolling in professional development programs locally, sharing information through collaboration, and visiting professional libraries for reference material. The need for more information is obvious to seasoned educators. Spinelli (1998) stated:

Elementary and secondary level teachers are finding they need to be more innovative and non-traditional in order to reach and teach the diverse population of students that are increasingly in the mainstream. Practicing teachers are voicing concern about their lack of preparation to address the range of learning styles, to follow the remedial recommendations suggested by specialists and to modify their teaching and evaluative methods to accommodate the wide range of individual needs. (p. 6)

Novice teachers must feel this sentiment to a greater degree, perhaps leading to confusion and exhaustion from trying to keep up from day to day. To support the kind of teaching demanded by today’s reforms, beginning teachers need mentors who are skilled in helping them learn in and from practice (Carver & Feiman-Nemser, 2009). Mentoring is one tactic, which is used in the schools today to ease this discomfort. A more experienced teacher is paired with a novice for support, help in planning, assistance with difficult situations, and collaboration. This mentoring program is not enough if the novice teacher does not come with the tools needed to get started. The mentor cannot carry the workload for the beginner, despite good intentions, and student achievement declines, especially

the mainstreamed students with special needs. Mentors in hard-to-staff schools have an even bigger challenge: working with their own students and trying to support and teach a new teacher how to work effectively with a variety of learners. Previous experience from internships would relieve the mentor. The mentor could then share experiences from previous students, strategies to help children learn a difficult concept, and pedagogical knowledge. The mentor's knowledge could begin then build upon the more current basics, rather than starting with a blank slate.

Furthermore, listening to the veteran teachers and those considered "effective" (Jobe, 2000) in working with students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms uses resources which are already in place in schools-the staff members themselves. The findings of Jobe's study (2000) suggested that information from these teachers has a significant impact on the way teacher preparation programs are designed, professional development opportunities are organized, and ways children with special needs are taught.

#### *Attitude for Success*

A sample study supporting mainstreaming cited the attitudes of general education teachers as the key to its success (Olson, Chalmers, & Hoover, 1997). Other factors were identified in their study: (a) tolerant, reflective, and flexible personalities; (b) accepted responsibility for all students; (c) positive relationships with the special education department; (d) adjusting personal expectations for integrated students; (e) the demonstration of personal warmth and acceptance; and (f) sufficient time for collaboration. Attitude is important, but basic knowledge is required before a supportive

attitude can be developed. A positive attitude often comes with a feeling of success with different types of learners. Attitude can be affected by lack of preparation and lack of skills needed to work with inclusion populations.

### *Acceptance of All Learners*

Throughout the past few decades, the inclusion of all learners in classrooms has led to acceptance and compliance or resignation from the field. This mindset must come from the top down. One cannot work in today's public schools and expect a homogenous classroom. American schools work with a wide range in student population. Thirty years ago, these changes were noted: "Increasingly, general education teachers find that besides their typically achieving students, their classes have several students who have learning disabilities, physical impairments, medical needs, visual or auditory acuity disorders, or attention deficits" (Spinelli, 1988, p. 5). Skill level within a single classroom can range from the gifted to the disabled. One will also find "at-risk" students-those whose home life is in upheaval, are stressed, ill, or living in poverty Lapidus (2001) stated, "The regular classroom teacher too often is poorly equipped to simultaneously meet the needs of the special student and educate regular students" (p. 1). Support personnel are available in many schools, but they are often not readily available. Time can be scheduled to collaborate and work through classroom issues, but it is the teacher's responsibility in many schools to seek that help. On a regular daily basis, teachers have a large role to fill, and the demands can be draining to new, enthusiastic teachers. These factors can affect attitude and confidence in personal abilities to handle all that is needed. Extra time spent in the field during the preparation period would allow exposure to a

wider variety of learners before the responsibility to educate these students were theirs alone.

### *Retention*

The benefits of retaining teachers are multi-dimensional and can make the difference in the ultimate goal of high student achievement. Losing a teacher means losing a teacher who is deeply involved in the culture of the school, the community, and with the students, parents, and co-workers. Losing a teacher means the administration has to spend energy and time to hire and train a replacement. Then, the new hires will have a transition period in which they will need to learn curriculum, practices, and acclimate to the school culture. High-poverty schools have a high turnover rate, which leads to the revolving door for the students who are the most vulnerable (Johnson & Birkland, 2003; Olson, 2003). In short, keeping the next generation of teachers will provide continuity of learning for the future of public school education.

### *Study Design*

I designed Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers (Appendix A), which comprised the quantitative portion of this study. The results are presented via various statistical measurements. The qualitative portion of the study consisted of a phenomenological based study of the volunteer participants. After the distribution, collection, and analysis of the quantitative data, a focus interview was conducted. The number of participants was based on convenience. One representative from kindergarten, first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and fifth grade was invited to be part of the focus group. The kindergarten teacher cancelled, so an alternate was chosen who

taught kindergarten in the past but was currently teaching second grade. The group was made up of a total of six teachers, and I served as the interviewer. During the focus group interview, I presented the questions and the discussion of individual and group experiences and recorded and coded it for analysis. These ideas were specifically defined and coded according to the grounded theory approach (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In this approach, I examined the interviews, referred to literature in order to gain ideas on what themes and concepts for which to code, developed new concepts where appropriate, and then worked out the definitions prior to doing the physical coding (p. 221).

Since teacher retention is a complex educational issue, this study aimed to seek “elaboration, enhancement, illustration, or clarification of the results from one method with the results from the other method” (Green et al., 1989, p. 259) of the possible relationship between teacher preparation and teacher retention. In order to develop (Greene et al., 2006, p. 258, Madey, 1982; Sieber, 1973) the themes of teacher retention research which include demographics, socioeconomic levels, school environment, salary, benefits, teacher background, and life circumstances are factors in the teacher retention problem, I decided to add the probing, qualitative element to the initially planned quantitative survey (Billingsly, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003, May; Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Ferguson 1999; Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Potter et al., 2001; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001).

### Application

As job vacancies occur, a principal could screen for personality types which are more open to inclusion. Specific needs of individual schools can be predetermined and focused on during the candidacy search. A sample study supporting mainstreaming cited the attitudes of general education teachers as the key to its success (Olson, Chalmers, & Hoover, 1997). Other factors identified in the study included: (a) tolerant, reflective, and flexible personalities; (b) accepted responsibility for all students; (c) positive relationships with the special education department; (d) adjusting personal expectations for integrated students; (e) the demonstration of personal warmth and acceptance; (f) sufficient time for collaboration. Attitude is important, but basic knowledge is required before a supportive attitude can be developed. A positive attitude often comes with a feeling of success in working with different types of learners. Having a better idea of whom one is hiring may lead to more success for a new teacher. Conversely, the applicant needs to know what kind of administration is leading the school. Interviewees should also ask questions about the school culture and environment in order to evaluate the level of support that would be available in that particular teaching environment. Perhaps a summary of the administrations beliefs, strategies for learning, and management style should be given to each interviewee. An educated decision on behalf of both parties could increase the likelihood of keeping the new hire.

### Potential for Further Topic Research

The direct correlation of teacher preparation programs, inclusion, teacher retention, leadership, and mentoring are the base upon which to build further research.

General education teachers should be able to individualize and meet the needs of a vast range of needs, so in the field experience in teaching and assessment for diverse learners need to be a core part of teacher preparation programs. In order to meet the needs of diverse classrooms, pre-service teachers need to come with knowledge of individualized instructional strategies and assessment techniques as well as content knowledge for students in the general education program and for children with special needs. The development of those skills should begin even before working in one's own classroom. Increased time in directly supervised classrooms during preparation programs will help novices develop skills needed for today's classroom environments. The mainstreaming of special needs students trend is common practice, and pre-service preparation programs should include additional internship time devoted to special education practices for diverse learners. These skills will enable the beginning general educator to be more confident in meeting the needs of all students. Without these skills, the beginning teacher risks failure. Carefully screening applicants and mentoring new hires, leadership practices, and the support of new teachers with groups of experienced educators in the form mentoring, are important factors in decreasing the teacher shortage. The relationships of these foci will be further researched with the goal of keeping our teachers in the classroom. Our society will benefit in the future from a better-educated society.

Sections 1 and 2 introduced the purpose, background, and literature review to identify the need for the study to determine if there was a relationship between the perception of preparedness to teach in a mixed-ability, general education classroom and if those perceptions affect their desire to continue teaching.

Section 3 describes the research design in depth. It contains information on the research design and approach, setting and sample, context and strategies, the instrumentation and materials, the researcher's role and biases, data collection procedures, and the data analysis and validation.

Section 4 reports the findings of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study in narrative and tabular form. Each survey item and interview questions were presented individually and according to student population subgroup, to provide specific information about participants' beliefs.

Section 5 provides a summary of the study as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. The social impact of the findings, recommendations for further study, recommendations for teacher preparation programs, recommendations for teacher retention, and my reflections conclude the Section.



### SECTION 3: STUDY DESIGN

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms.

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2006) defined mixed method research "as research in which the investigator collects and analyzes data, integrates the findings, and draws inferences using both qualitative and quantitative approaches or methods in a single study or program of inquiry" (p. 15). The sequential mixed method research design will first gathered and analyzed the quantitative data first through the online survey, and followed with the qualitative portion of the research through the focus group interviews. I categorized responses by themes, assigned a code to each theme, analyzed the data, and referred back to the quantitative results. The possible emergence of additional details for the quantitative data by use of the qualitative focus group data set this study apart from past single method studies.

Section 3 is organized into seven sections entitled, Research design, Population, Sample and setting, Context and strategies, Data analysis and validation, Data analysis, and Summary and Transition.

## Research Design

This doctoral study used the sequential explanatory design of mixed method research. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered sequentially with priority given to the quantitative data. This study sought to determine whether there is a relationship between teachers' perceptions of preparedness to teach in a general education, mixed-ability classroom and desire to continue teaching and to present experiences directly from the field in the form of anecdotal evidence.

### *Rationale for Mixed Methodology Choice*

This study sought to develop elements of teacher preparation of such needed skills as adequate training to plan lessons for mixed-ability classrooms, ability to read IEPs, ability to plan differentiated instruction, ability to modify assessment, ability to prepare for RTI meetings for at-risk students, ability to modify behavior, and ability to obtain resources for use in teaching inclusion students. A single administration quantitative survey provided a statistical basis for the anecdotal responses, opinions, and reflection obtained in the qualitative, focus group interviews by use of emphasized, or recurrent, ideas.

The selection of this research design was chosen due to the complex nature of preparedness. The design of the study is more heavily weighted in the quantitative results. Gravetter & Wallnau (2005) stated that numeric data is used to test whether or not there is a relationship between the tested concepts, in this case preparedness for inclusion and teacher retention. The statistical measures and test in the quantitative portion used frequency distributions and percentages to report the findings of the survey given to the

purposive sample, which was (a) certified teachers, (b) who are working in a general education classroom, (c) who are employed by S Elementary School, and (d) who are working with identified inclusion students (physical, mental, and learning disabilities). A phenomenological study, which focuses on a phenomenon or concept (Creswell, 1998) was used for the qualitative portion for the study. Due diligence on behalf of the researcher deemed a mixed method study necessary to fit the nature of the study.

#### *Previous Research Methodologies for Related Topics*

Previous research on teacher retention and teacher preparation (Billingsly, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003, May; Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Ferguson, 1999; Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Porter et al.; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001) used either the traditional quantitative or the traditional qualitative methodologies of research design. The development of the concept of teacher preparation as it relates to teacher retention called for a combination of the two traditions. Therefore, the sequential explanatory design offered the possibility for expansion, through the focus group interview, upon the data that will be gathered in the quantitative portion of the study, the survey. The end result was the analysis of data, relationship to prior research works, and the potential for emergence of new themes.

#### Population

The population was all of the certified teachers in the State of Georgia who are working in public school, general education classrooms.

### Sample and Setting

A purposive sample was intentionally designed for this purpose of this study. It will include certified teachers: (a) certified teachers, (b) who are working in a general education classroom, (c) who are employed by S Elementary School, and (d) who are working with identified inclusion students (physical, mental, and learning disabilities), were given the opportunity to participate in this doctoral research study. This study did not include teachers on leave of any sort, more experienced teachers, substitute teachers, or paraprofessionals. The quantitative portion of the study had a 62.96% response rate from the 54 certified teachers on the staff. Additional personnel work at the school, however only 54 met the criteria for the population sample. The qualitative portion of the study included a focus group with six members, plus the interviewer. Further details are outlined in section 3.

Although the research instrumentation was delivered by email, the setting of the participants is a large, public, elementary school in the southeastern part of the United States. For this research study, the school was known as “S Elementary School.” There were 1,120 students attending students attending S Elementary School. The quantitative portion of this study was distributed to potential participants’ school email addresses, as this is the preference of the Gwinnett County Public Schools’ research coordinator. The focus interviews took place in my classroom at S Elementary School for participants’ convenience. The focus group interview was held on May 4, 2010.

## Context and Strategies

### *Instrumentation and Materials*

A mixed method study requires the use of various instruments and materials. Details are provided in separate sections for clarity. One focuses on the instrumentation and materials for the quantitative section, and the other on the qualitative section.

### *Quantitative*

The Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers was used to gather statistical data about the perception of preparedness of general classroom teachers when first entering a public school classroom. It is an online survey, created for the purpose of this study, which participants completed within a one month time frame. At the end of the survey, I invited a teacher from each grade level at S Elementary School to participate in focus group to further share related experiences.

I chose to use an online survey because all the potential participants have access to the internet and a common email program at work. The delivery of the invitation to participate and survey was timely, and an accurate account of delivery times is available from the research site's computer servers. Survey data can also be recovered in case of unforeseen circumstances, thus protecting collected data.

I designed the Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers to answer the research question. The survey included basic demographic questions, yes/no, ordinal, and Likert questions. Common themes found in the teacher preparation and teacher retention research described in section 2 were used to design the questions.

Population parameters were ensured through the design of the survey and wording of the invitations to participate. The quantitative survey also questioned whether or not the participants believe inclusion students should be served in public school, general education classrooms. The following question guided this doctoral research and served as the foundation for inquiry: Is there a relationship between teachers' preparation for teaching inclusion students and its effect on their desire to stay in teaching? More specifically, the following questions, also outlined in section 1, guided the question design for quantitative portion of the research (Appendix D):

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?
6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

The survey was tested for validity and reliability before distribution by conducting a field test of five teacher leaders in my home school. These teacher leaders can be described as having over 10 years of teaching experience in public school settings, having a masters degree in an education related field or higher, who are serving or have served as grade level chairperson, and are currently employed by S Elementary School. The feedback obtained from the field test was used to rework the survey questions for style and clarity.

The submission for approval from the local school principal was submitted and is attached in this section of the doctoral study. I abided by the guidelines set by the school system by submitting the research proposal. The local school approval submission is included (see Appendix C).

I started the distribution of the survey: April 1, 2010. The time frame in which the population had to answer was two weeks, thus closing on April 15, 2010. Once I obtained approval from the local school principal, I sent the teachers an email; that email included an invitation to participate and an explanation that survey completion was implied consent (Appendix E). The survey is entitled, Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers (Appendix B). The survey consent form was attached for informational purposes (Appendix F). Upon the acceptance of the proposed dates, I collected and analyzed data at the end of April 2010 and hosted the focus interview session on May 4, 2010. The survey company used, SurveyMonkey.com, is an online data collection tool used to design surveys, collect responses, create graphs and charts, and analyze results in real-time. SurveyMonkey.com allows the results to be downloaded into Microsoft Excel

or SPSS (SPSS, Inc., Chicago, IL). I collected, downloaded and analyzed the data at this stage.

### *Qualitative*

I used focus group interviews for the qualitative portion of this study. Focus groups are sets of individuals with similar characteristics or shared experiences who sit down with a moderator to discuss a set topic (Hatch, 2003, p. 24). In 1997, Morgan stated, “the hallmark of focus groups is their explicit use of the group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group” (p. 2). I used focus groups to obtain the “rich, thick description” (Creswell, 2003, p. 196), which adds depth to the topic.

I invited one participant from each grade level at S Elementary School for this study’s focus group interview; therefore, six teachers attended from first, second, third, fourth, and fifth grades. The kindergarten representative cancelled, so I invited another participant, who taught kindergarten in the past but was employed as a second grade teacher at the time of the interview, to take her place in the research. The focus group interview took place on May 4, 2010, from 3:15 P.M. to 4:15 P.M. in my classroom at S Elementary School.

A set of preplanned, guided questions (Appendix B) guided the discussion. These questions were based on the quantitative survey question topics (Appendix A); they aimed to address the same topics in an open-ended manner. The guiding questions were “the scaffolding of an interview” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 134). By using a preplanned set of questions, my goal was “to encourage people to talk about their experiences,



perceptions, and understandings rather than to give a normative response, company line or textbook type answer” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 135). After the interview, the gathered data was transcribed by me and included in this doctoral study document. I then coded and analyzed the data (Appendix G).

### *Researcher’s Roles and Biases*

I am an elementary teacher at S Elementary School, the school in which this study will take place if approved. My Georgia certification certifies me to teach Elementary Grades K-5 and Middle Grades 4-8. I have an additional certification in Social Sciences 4-8. My past experiences include employment in two independent boarding schools: one which specializes in students with advanced academic credentials and test scores, and one which specializes in students with learning and behavioral difficulties. The majority of my experience has been in Gwinnett County Public Schools teaching second through fifth grades. I have a Bachelor’s degree in psychology, with an emphasis in child and adolescent behavior, and a Master of Arts in Teaching with an emphasis in Elementary Education.

The survey portion of this study was conducted anonymously; I do not have a way to identify participants. The exception to the anonymous nature of this study is the voluntary contact by participants who were invited to take part in the focus group study interviewing process.

The protection of participants was maintained throughout the study. I received permission from the school principal for the research study (Appendix C); upon approval I sent an invitation to participate in an online survey introductory invitation to teachers

(Appendix E) which included a survey consent form (Appendix G). A focus group consent form (Appendix H) and a focus group interview invitation (Appendix I) were sent upon completion of the survey. The research consent form provided background information, explained the voluntary nature of the study, explained the risks and benefits of being in the study, and explained that no compensation was provided for participation in the study, confidentiality measures, and contact information. Another invitation was sent for further participation in the focus group interviews. Focus group participation information was coded and used pseudonyms. I will house copies of the focus group data in locked file cabinets and a password protected laptop in my home, which will be available to participants viewing upon request.

In order to maintain internal and external validity in this study and reduce bias (Creswell, 2003, p. 204, Greene et al., 2006, p. 259), I employed the following strategies: development of data through the use of multiple data sources; peer examination with a doctoral student in the same workplace serving as a peer examiner; clarification of researcher bias, with the researcher clarifying bias in the doctoral study proposal, the accurate and detailed reporting of data, and triangulation of data.

## Data Analysis and Validation

### *Data Collections and Procedures*

The period for data collection for this study was April 1 to April 15, 2010, for the quantitative section. The data were collected in order to answer the research questions outlines in section 1. The individuals who agreed to participate in the focus study group were contacted April 15, 2010. The time for data collection for the qualitative section was

May 4, 2010. The data from these interviews provided supplemental data to answer the quantitative research question.

### Data Analysis

The data was analyzed in different ways due to the mixed method approach. The sequential explanatory design of this mixed method study used different instrumentation for the quantitative and qualitative sections.

#### *Quantitative*

The quantitative section of this research study used frequency distributions and percentages. The test and survey results of the survey given to the study sample population are presented using the statistical test and measures. Specific information can be found in section 4.

#### *Qualitative*

The qualitative section of the study was analyzed using a coding process. Coding allows a researcher to quickly find portions of interviews which refer to the same concept, theme, or event or topical marker (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 219). Hatch (2002) discussed the benefits of coding for qualitative research as assisting researcher in finding patterns, establishing themes, and identifying relationships. Since I attempted to establish a relationship between inclusion preparedness and teacher retention, coding was appropriate.

### Summary and Transition

Section 3 described the research design in depth. It contains information on the research design and approach, setting and sample, context and strategies, the

instrumentation and materials, the researcher's role and biases, data collection procedures, and the data analysis and validation.

Section 4 reports the findings of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study in narrative and tabular form. Each survey item and interview questions were presented individually and according to student population subgroup, to provide specific information about participants' beliefs.

Section 5 provides a summary of the study as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. The social impact of the findings, recommendations for further study, recommendations for teacher preparation programs, recommendations for teacher retention, and my reflections conclude the Section.

## SECTION 4: PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

### Introduction

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms.

This section provides an in depth presentation of the following quantitative research question: Is there a relationship between teachers' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and the effect of preparedness on their desire to stay in teaching? First, the data gathered from the survey is reported. Then, the data gathered from the focus group interview is presented.

This mixed methods study utilizes the sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2003). The data were gathered sequentially with the quantitative data receiving priority. The quantitative data provided a foundation from which to gather additional, more detailed feedback in the qualitative portion of the study. The goal of expansion beyond the scope of a survey was attained through use of a mixed method study. The remainder of this section is presented as follows: Research Question, Survey Results, and Group Interview Results.

### Research Question

The following quantitative question guided this sequential explanatory research:  
How do elementary, general education teachers assess their preparation to teach subgroup student populations?

The following qualitative questions guided this sequential explanatory research and were used in the qualitative element of the study to elaborate upon data obtained in the quantitative survey:

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?
6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

The following mixed methods question guided this sequential explanatory research and served as the foundation for inquiry: Is there a relationship between

teachers' preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and the effect of preparedness on their desire to stay in teaching?

### Quantitative Study

The Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers was used to gather statistical data about the perceptions of public elementary school general education, teachers regarding their preparedness to teach in mixed-ability classrooms via an Internet survey service company called Survey Monkey. Survey Monkey allows participants to complete surveys, upon invitation, via the internet. I created an account with the company, designed the survey, and presented it to the population sample. The survey included the basic demographic questions, yes/no, ordinal, and Likert questions.

#### *Quantitative Purpose*

The purpose of the quantitative portion of the study was to gather statistical data to answer the research question. The data gathered represents the perspectives of the teachers at S Elementary School and is presented in tabular format for the reader.

#### *Quantitative Procedures*

I followed accepted survey protocol for gathering and analyzing data by using a survey which was peer reviewed, field tested, and approved by the principal at S Elementary School. Further, the participants were informed of their rights by an attached survey consent form (Appendix G). Participants gave informed consent by completing the online survey. The data was downloaded from SurveyMonkey.com and uploaded into Excel to create tables.

### *Quantitative Participants*

Fifty-four general education, elementary school teachers received an invitation to complete the survey. A total of 34 surveys were returned out of 54 invitations, for a 62.96% response rate. One of the surveys had items that were not answered; therefore on those items, the percentages totaled 97.1%, and the missing questions were excluded from the data analysis. Zero surveys were deleted due to insufficient answers. Therefore, a total of 34 surveys were used in the data analysis.

The total number of responses for each question and the percentage of preparedness to teach each total inclusion population are presented. Presentation in this manner provided an overall understanding of participants' perceptions of their preparedness to teach in a public school, mixed-ability, general education classroom.

### Quantitative Results

The overall findings of the survey questions are discussed in the following pages by examining the results of each participant's perception of preparedness to teach in a public school, mixed-ability, general education classroom. Each of the survey questions is presented below in the order that they appeared in the online survey. A narrative explanation and a table or figure is used to explain the data gathered for each item.

#### Part 1

Section one of the survey introduced the participants to the survey upon opening of the link found in the invitation inviting the staff at S Elementary School to participate the study (Appendix B). The opening of a dialogue from me added a personal element expressing appreciation for participation.



## Part 2

Section two of the survey focused on professional skills needed to work with ASD students. After analyzing questions one through five which were labeled ASD Inclusion, I found that 9.4% strongly agree, 48.18% agreed, 30% disagreed, and 7.6% strongly disagreed that they had the necessary skills needed to work with students in the ASD program at S Elementary School. Therefore, 57.58% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 42.42% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. Individual question responses are broken down by question. Results are found in Table 1.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I know the characteristics of autism spectrum disorder (ASD).	%	11.8%	70.6%	11.8%	5.9%	100%
	Count	4	24	4	2	34
I can plan lessons specific to the needs of ASD inclusion students with confidence.	%	8.8%	47.1%	35.3%	8.8%	100%
	Count	3	16	12	3	34
I know how to read an IEP and understand modifications needed for ASD students.	%	17.6%	61.8%	17.6%	2.9%	100%
	Count	6	21	6	1	34
I have training in behavior modification for ASD students.	%	0%	20.6%	61.8%	17.6%	100%
	Count	0	7	21	6	34
I have enough training to teach ASD students with supportive personnel in the room to assist	%	8.8%	58.8%	23.5%	8.8%	100%
	Count	3	20	8	3	34

The first question of part 2 asked participants if they know the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder. The majority of the 34 participants, 70.6 % of the participants agreed, and 11.8% of the participants strongly agreed, that they know believed that they know the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). 11.8% disagreed that they know the characteristics of the ASD student populations, while 5.9 % strongly disagreed (see Table 1).

Question 2 asked participants if they can plan lessons specific to the needs of ASD inclusion students with confidence. Forty seven point one percent of participants agreed, and 8.8% strongly agreed, that they can plan lessons specific to the needs of ASD inclusion students with confidence, while 35.3% and 8.8% strongly disagreed (see Table

1). Professional development could be used in planning lessons specific to the needs of ASD students for 44.6% of the population sample.

The majority of the respondents, 79.4%, indicated in question three that they agreed with 61.8% or strongly agreed with 17.6% indicating that they believe they know how to read an IEP and understand modifications needed for ASD students. 17.6% disagreed and 2.9% strongly disagreed that they could perform these tasks (see Table 1).

The majority of participants in the S Elementary School sample, 79.4%, indicated that they did not have training in behavior modification for ASD students. 61.8% disagreed with the statement, while 17.6% strongly disagreed with the statement, "I have training in behavior modification for ASD students." Only 20.6% of the population sample indicated that they have training in behavior modifications for ASD students (see Table 1).

Although the majority of general education teacher respondents indicated that they did not have behavior modification training for ASD students, the majority of the participants, 67.6%, agreed or strongly agreed that they believe they have enough training to teach ASD students with supportive personnel in the room to assist the child. 32.4% indicated that they do not have enough training to teach ASD students, even with the assistance of supportive personnel present (see Table 1).

### Part 3

The third section of the survey focused on English Language Learners (ELL), which is another one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions six through ten which were labeled ELL Inclusion, I found that

10.59% strongly agree, 62.94% agreed, 22.96% disagreed, and 3.52% strongly disagreed that they had the necessary skills needed to work with students in the ELL program at S Elementary School. Therefore, 73.53% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 26.47% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. Individual question responses are disaggregated by question. The section consists of five questions, which are detailed below (see Table 2).

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I know the stages of ELL language acquisition.	%	11.85%	61.8%	20.6%	5.9%	100%
	Count	4	21	7	2	34
I can plan lessons specific to the level of language acquisition of my ELL students.	%	8.8%	64.7%	20.6%	5.9%	100%
	Count	3	22	7	2	34
I know how to write an ELL modification plan independently.	%	8.8%	67.6%	20.6%	2.9%	100%
	Count	3	23	7	1	34
Deciding which Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) to modify is difficult for me.	%	2.9%	26.5%	61.8%	8.8%	100%
	Count	1	9	21	3	34
I have enough training to work with ELL students independently.	%	14.7%	58.8%	26.5%	0%	100%
	Count	5	20	9	0	34

In question 6, 73.6% percent of the participants in this study agree or strongly agree that they know the stages of ELL language acquisition; 20.6% disagree and 5.9% of the participants strongly disagree (see Table 2).

As indicated in question 7, participants believe they can plan lessons specific to the level of language acquisition of their ELL students with 64.7% agreeing and 8.8% strongly agreeing with this statement for a total of 73.5%. A minority of the population sample, 26.5%, indicated a lack of ability to plan lessons for the ELL population (see Table 2).

In response to question 8, 67.6% of the population sample agreed that they can write and ELL Modification Plan independently, while 8.8% strongly agreed. Therefore, a total of the 76.4% of the population sample indicated ability to write an ELL Modification Plan independently. A minority of the population sample disagreed, 20.6%, or strongly disagreed, 2.9%, that they had this professional skill (see Table 2).

Responses for this question about modifying the Academic Knowledge and Skills (AKS) refer to the participating school's curricula. Seventy point six per cent have little difficulty in deciding which AKS to modify for their ELL students. However, 29.4% agreed that this element of planning and preparation was difficult for them (see Table 2).

A total of 73.5% of the population sample at S Elementary School agreed or strongly agreed that they have enough training to work with ELL students independently in question 10. The remaining 26.5% of the population sample disagreed or strongly

disagreed in having enough training to work with ELL students independently (see Table 2).

#### Part 4

The fourth section of the survey focused on Focus (Gifted) students, which is one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions 11 through 15, which were labeled Focus Inclusion, I found that 28.84% strongly agree, 58.66% agreed, 11.78% disagreed, and 0.0% strongly disagreed that they had the necessary skills needed to work with students in the gifted program at S Elementary School. Therefore, 87.5% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 12.5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population (see Table 3). Individual question responses are broken down by question. The section consists of five questions, which are detailed below.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I know the characteristic differences between bright and gifted students.	%	35.3%	55.9%	8.8%	0%	100%
	Count	12	19	3	0	34
I can plan lessons which encourage the higher level thinking and application skills needed by gifted students.	%	26.5%	61.8%	11.8%	0%	100%
	Count	9	21	4	0	34
I know how to enrich my gifted students in each of these content areas: Reading, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies.	%	23.5%	55.9%	20.6%	0%	100%
	Count	8	19	7	0	34
I know how to assess my students for pacing purposes.	%	32.4%	55.9%	11.8%	0.0%	100%
	Count	11	19	4	0	34
I know how to recognize and make a referral to the GCPS Focus (Gifted) Program independently.	%	26.5%	64.7%	5.9%	2.9%	100%
	Count	9	22	2	1	34

The data in question 11 indicated that 91.2% of the respondents believe they know the characteristic differences between bright and gifted students, leaving only 8.8% who do not know the characteristics of this student population (see Table 3).

Question 12 asked participants if they could plan lessons which encourage the higher level thinking and application skills needed by gifted students. The majority of the 33 participants, 88.3% agreed or strongly agreed that they could perform this task in their general education position. Only 11.7% of the population sample believed that they could not plan for the higher level thinking and application skills needed by gifted students (see Table 3).

Question 13 asked participants if they know how to enrich students in five content areas: Reading, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, Social Studies. The majority of the 33 participants, 79.4 % indicated believe in their abilities to enrich gifted students across all five of the content areas. 20.6% of those responding believed they do not have the skills for content area enrichment for gifted students (see Table 3).

A total of 88.3% of respondents agreed, 55.9%, or strongly agreed, 32.4%, that they know how to assess students for pacing purposes. As few as 11.7% of the population sample disagreed or strongly disagreed in having the preparation to assess for pacing purposes (see Table 3).

A total of 91.2% of the population sample indicated ability to recognize and make a referral to the participating school system's Focus (Gifted) Program independently. Only 8.8% of the respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they have the preparation to refer students to the gifted program (see Table 3).

## Part 5

The fifth part of the survey focused on regular education students. After analyzing questions 16-20 which were labeled Regular Education, I found that 48.82% strongly agreed, 50% agreed, 1.18% disagreed, and 0.0% strongly disagreed that they had the necessary skills needed to work with regular education at S Elementary School. Therefore, 98.82% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 1.18% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that



they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population (see Table 4). Individual question responses are broken down by question. The section consists of five questions, which are detailed below.

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I know effective general education instructional strategies and use a variety of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and spatial elements in my lesson plans.	%	52.9%	47.1%	0%	0%	100%
	Count	18	16	0	0	34
I differentiate assignments for the learning needs in my classroom.	%	44.1%	55.9%	0%	0%	100%
	Count	15	19	0	0	34
I use assessment in planning instruction of the following content area subjects: Reading, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies.	%	50%	44.1%	5.9%	0%	100%
	Count	17	15	2	0	34
I use small groups in my classroom to better meet individual learning needs.	%	50%	50%	0%	0%	100%
	Count	17	17	0	0	34
I use effective behavior modification for a general education classroom.	%	47.1%	52.9%	0%	0%	100%
	Count	16	18	0	0	34

Item 16 asked participants to reflect upon their instructional strategies and use of multisensory planning for general education students, and 47.1% agreed that they use a variety of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and spatial elements in their lessons plans.

Another 52.9% strongly agreed that they make use of this knowledge, for a total of 100% (see Table 4).

When asked if they believed that they differentiate assignments for the learning needs in their classrooms, 55.9% agreed that they differentiate for their students. 44.1% strongly agreed that they differentiate lessons and instruction in their general education classrooms, for a combined total of 100% belief in using these skills (see Table 4).

Item 18 asked participants if they use assessment in planning for five content areas subjects: Reading, English/Language Arts, Math, Science, and Social Studies. The majority of the 33 participants, 94.1% believed that they use assessment to drive planning in content area subjects. A minority, 5.9%, of the population sample does not believe that they use assessment for planning purposes (see Table 4).

When asked if they use small group instruction to better meet individual learning needs, 100% of the population indicated utilizing small group learning in their general education classroom. Of the 34 participants, 50% agreed, or 50% strongly agreed that they use small groups to increase success for individuals (see Table 4).

When questioned about use of effective behavior modification for a general education classroom, the population sample at S Elementary School was in full agreement that they believed they effectively use behavior strategies for multi-ability classrooms. 52.9% agreed with the statement and 47.1% strongly agreed that they are using effective behavior strategies for their students (see Table 4).

## Part 6

The sixth section of the survey focused on Interrelated (IRR) Resource students, which is one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions twenty-one through twenty-five which were labeled Resource Inclusion, I found that 6.68% strongly agree, 59.02% agreed, 28.22% disagreed, and 6.12% strongly disagreed that they had the necessary skills needed to work with students in the Resource program at S Elementary School. Therefore, 65.7% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 34.3% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population (see Table 5). Individual question responses are disaggregated by question. The section consists of five questions, which are detailed below.

The first question asking the population sample at S Elementary School if they know specific instructional strategies to teach Resource students resulted in a positive outcome. 75.8% of participants agreed that they know specific instructional strategies for Resource population, while 3.0% strongly agreed in possessing this strategy knowledge, for a total of 81.9%. The minority of respondents, 18.2%, disagreed or strongly disagreed in having the knowledge of specific instructional strategies needed to teach Resource students (see Table 5).

		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
I know specific instructional strategies to teach Resource students.	%	6.1%	75.8%	9.1%	9.1%	97.1%
	Count	2	25	3	3	33
I can plan lessons specific to the needs of specific Resource inclusion students with confidence.	%	3%	66.7%	24.2%	6.1%	97.1%
	Count	1	22	8	2	33
I know how to read an individual education plan (IEP) and understand modification needed for Resource students.	%	15.2%	60.6%	21.2%	3%	97.1%
	Count	5	20	7	1	33
I have training in behavior modification for Resource students.	%	0%	37.5%	56.3%	6.3%	93.9%
	Count	0	12	19	2	32
I have enough training to teach Resource students either with or without supportive personnel in the room to assist the child.	%	9.1%	54.5%	30.3%	6.1%	100%
	Count	3	18	10	2	33

Participants were asked in question 22 if they can plan lessons specific to the needs of Resource inclusion students with confidence. A combined 69.7% agreed or strongly agreed in their abilities to plan lessons for Resource students. A minority of 30.3% do not believe that they have the preparation to plan lessons specific to the needs of Resource students (see Table 5).

When participants were asked if they knew how to read an IEP and could understand modifications needed for Resource students, 60.6% agreed that they could read the IEP and understood needed modifications, while 15.2% strongly agreed, giving the positive response of 75.8%. However, a combined total of 21.2% indicated that they did not have the skills indicated in this question (see Table 5).

Item 24 asked the population sample if they have behavior modification training for Resource students. The majority of the 34 participants indicated that they did not have the behavior modification training for Resource students. 56.3% disagreed in having the training and 6.3% strongly disagreed, for a total of 62.6% of the respondents indicating that they did not have the skills necessary to modify behavior for the Resource population group. However, 37.5% of the populations agreed and 0% indicating that they strongly agreed that they had training that they have training in this area (see Table 5).

Fifty four point five percent of respondents agreed that they have enough training to teach Resource students either with or without supportive personnel in the room to assist the child. 9.15% of the population sample strongly agreed that they have enough training for this task, for a combined total of 63.65% of the S Elementary School population sample. However, 36.4% indicated that they do not have enough training to teach Resource student either with or without supportive personnel in the room to assist the child (see Table 5).

#### Part 7

The seventh section of the survey gathered information on the respondents and their personal beliefs regarding the possible relationship between teacher preparation and teacher retention (see Table 6). The section consists of five questions, which are detailed below.

A total of 78.8% of the population sample originally qualified to teach with a bachelor's degree, 15.2% qualified with a master's degree, and 6.1% qualified through an

alternative certification process, and 0.0% qualified through any other process (see Table 6).

Table 6

*Original Teacher Certification Degree Level*

		Teacher Response
Bachelors Degree	Count	26
	% within group	78.8%
Masters Degree	Count	5
	% within group	15.2%
Alternative Certification Program	Count	2
	% within group	6.1%
Other	Count	0
	% within group	0.0%
Total	Count	33
	% within group	97.1%

The population sample in the quantitative portion of this study had a diverse number of years experience. Each experience level category was represented in this

study's survey: 15.2% had between 1-5 years of experience, 21.2% had between 6-10 years of experience, 30.3% had between 11-14 years of experience, 15.2% had between 15-19 years of experience, 6.1% had between 20-24 years of experience, 3.0% had between 25-29 years of experience, and 9.1% had thirty or more years of experience (see Table 7). These numbers represent 97.1% of the respondents, with only 2.9% not answering this question. So, the average number of years of teaching experience from this population sample was 14.3 years.

Table 7

*Years of Teaching Experience*

		Teacher Response
Between 1-5 years	Count	5
	% within group	15.2%
Between 6-10 years	Count	7
	% within group	21.2%
Between 11-14 years	Count	10
	% within group	30.3%
Between 15-19 years	Count	5
	% within group	15.2%
Between 20-24 years	Count	2
	% within group	6.1%
Between 25-29 years	Count	1
	% within group	3.0%
30 or more years	Count	3
	% within group	9.1%
Total	Count	33
	% within group	97.1%



The respondents were asked whether or not they were prepared to teach in a mixed-ability classroom serving a heterogeneous group of learning needs upon completion of their teacher preparation program. The examination of the responses to this question provide a basis in answering the guiding question, Is there a relationship between teachers' preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and its effect on their desire to stay in teaching?

Only 36.4% of the survey respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared to teach in a mixed-ability classroom upon completion of their teacher preparation program. A majority (63.6%) disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to teach in a mixed-ability classroom upon completion of their teacher preparation program. The determination of preparedness upon completion of the teacher preparation program as opposed to experience gained in the field, through professional learning opportunities, or collaboration is discussed in the quantitative section of data analysis. Completion of a state approved teacher preparation program is required for certification in the state of Georgia and for hire in Georgia public School. Since respondents are currently certified teachers, it is assumed that this question was a reflective, self-analysis for the respondents based on knowledge and experience (see Table 8).

Table 8

Relationship: Teacher Preparation and Teacher Retention

		Teacher Response
Strongly Disagree	Count	4
	% within group	12.1%
Disagree	Count	17
	% within group	51.5%
Agree	Count	10
	% within group	30.3%
Strongly Agree	Count	2
	% within group	6.1%
Total	Count	33
	% within group	97.1%

The relationship of teacher preparation and teacher retention is supported by Eighty four point four percent of respondents in this population sample. Only 15.6% of this group indicated that they did not think the teacher preparation and teacher retention are related (see Table 9). The open-ended portion of this question allowed participants to offer additional information (See Table 10).

Table 9

*Relationship: Teacher Preparation and Teacher Retention*

			Teacher Response
	Yes	Count	27
		% within group	84.4%
	No	Count	5
		% within group	15.6%
Total		Count	32
		% within group	100%

Table 10

*Teacher Reflections: Teacher Preparation and Teach Retention Relationship*

1. Teachers leave for many reasons.
2. My program prepared me pretty well. I didn't get specific training for learning disabilities, though. Although I can identify those who struggle, I have a hard time knowing exactly what to do to help them. I could use more professional development in that area.
3. There are many reasons teachers quit. Poor preparation and short time in real classrooms seem to add to the stress of teachers at the beginning of their careers.
4. Students who are not meeting requirements worry me. I am afraid that I fail them because I don't know what other ways to help them learn. I am asking a lot of questions, but it takes time.
5. There are so many aspects of teaching to balance at one time, all while trying to reach every student. If you were not prepared properly, then it is hard to do a good job with every child, which is our purpose.
6. Yes. I have watched the younger teachers struggle with managing the needs of so many different types of students, as I did when I first started. Even after teaching for 17 years, I still feel like I could improve in teaching students with learning disabilities. I know trying to master the needs of different student populations while learning to manage a classroom, learning the content, and performing related duties can be very overwhelming for beginners. It still is for me sometimes.
7. Teaching ELL students takes a lot of studying on my part. I wish that I had a better understanding of how to teach these students, especially when the students who don't speak English are from different countries. I could use more training for what to do for those students.
8. Teaching is my second career. While I am comfortable teaching much of the content to children considered average or above average, I really did not receive the training in my certification program that I have found necessary to effectively work with ASD and Resource students. Teaching really is more than just content and theory. People should know that. So yes, I think that preparation is related to teacher retention.
9. Not clear of what answer is needed here.
10. I'm sure there are gaps. There were some gaps for me, but overall I felt that the University of Iowa teacher program gave me a great foundation. I felt prepared. But there were some gaps. These gaps were filled in by some amazing teachers in the building who shared with me and who had the time to plan with me and model how they do it. They were amazing. But I am the type of person who is not shy and

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table continued

went and sought out people. Kristen, you know most teachers, if asked, are flattered and what to share and explain how they do it. Also in the 1990's when times were better the county had money to put into some great training programs. I learned many, many things that brought me up a few notches. I worked with Dana last year who, did the MI program with Jill. I really learned so much from Dana. We team taught science and social studies. I wish I would have had more time to pick her brain.

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11. I think there are gaps for some---some education programs are not as good at preparing teachers for the real world of education and all the classroom is comprised of...I feel I was very prepared to teach any child and I teach to ALL children.

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12. I feel as though I have strategies to meet the needs of general education students. I can recognize if a student is bright or if a student is below grade level; however, my struggle is to recognize the extra areas of resource and gifted. I have not been given training on ASD, so I am very unclear about this aspect. Therefore, the skill gap between me and other teachers who do have this training feels very significant to me.

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13. If a job is difficult and frustrating because you were not properly prepared, it might cause a person to change career fields.

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14. Teachers who are better prepared are able to function effectively and feel more comfortable in the classroom. Those who are less prepared become overwhelmed or frustrated and leave the profession sooner.

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15. Teachers must make numerous decisions each day based on what they believe will best support each individual child's learning. Without confidence in one's ability to make these decisions, this profession could become extremely frustrating and overwhelming. It makes sense that teachers would leave the field of education if they did have these feelings. I do believe that teacher preparation may play an important role in the ability to make the decisions and as well as to be confident in them.

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16. When teachers are not prepared, this job can be overwhelming!

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17. Teacher training needs to include differentiation strategies for various levels, learning styles and personalities found in the classroom. This would help prevent the new teacher feeling so overwhelmed with many expectations.

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18. We would be more effective, confident, and successful if trained more thoroughly to deal with the many different needs in one classroom. In my college prep classes, I was introduced to the types of needs there might be, but I was not taught specifically or deeply as to how to teach these students effectively.

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19. I think we all need to learn more and that we all reach different kinds of kids and we all are weak in an area.

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20. Teaching is an art that must be learned with experience.

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21. It is overwhelming, to say the least, learning how to meet the needs of all the diverse learners as a beginning teacher. Very little training was provided at the undergraduate level to prepare you for what you face when you enter the classroom for the first time. My school was not as diverse as some and still I struggled to meet my students' needs. I found I needed additional training and support personnel to become effective. Ongoing training would be helpful!

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22. The curriculum is so wide that enough depth for teaching doesn't occur for skills as in the past. Teachers get tired of "teaching to the test" or pushing students to supposedly master so many curriculums instead of students being able to truly know the material on a select few skills in every subject.

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23. A child is retained due to a number of factors. Typically a child has not mastered the skills required to move up to the next developmental level/grade. Gaps in teaching are very possibly a cause of this, but the gaps may be unrelated to a public school or general education classroom.

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24. If I can't reach a student in my classroom, then I get really frustrated, even with my level of experience. So, I can see how beginning teachers might feel like they don't know what to do to better teach students who don't learn easily.

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25. Teaching is a wonderful profession and those that are called to it will find a way to teach the children to the best of their ability. Those that quit or resign probably shouldn't have been teachers to begin with.

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Teachers were asked which of the following areas of professional learning would most benefit your teaching of S Elementary School students as the school tries to close the achievement gaps of our students. Responses to this question were not limited to one answer choice. Participants were allowed to check as many as were applicable to their teacher preparation needs. The top two training needs indicated were ASD Teaching Inclusion Strategies (66.7%) and Resource Teaching Categories (54.5%). ELL Inclusion Teaching Strategies (45.5%) and Gifted Teaching Strategies (39.4%) were also indicated as areas of need. Unspecified General Education Teaching Strategies (9.1%) were selected by the fewest respondents (see Table 11). Professional development at S Elementary School for general education teachers focuses mostly on general education strategies and methodology. Perhaps training for the inclusion populations discussed in this survey would increase teacher ability, knowledge, and comfort, leading to greater success for these populations at S Elementary School.

Table 11

*Identified Professional Development Needs at S Elementary School*

		Teacher Response
ASD Inclusion Teaching Strategies	Count	22
	% within group	66.7%
ELL Inclusion Teaching Strategies	Count	15
	% within group	45.5%
Focus (Gifted) Teaching Strategies	Count	13
	% within group	39.4%
General Education Teaching Strategies (unspecified)	Count	3
	% within group	9.1%
Resource Teaching Strategies	Count	18
	% within group	54.5%

## Application

The application section of this study first asked the respondents at what level they originally earned teaching credentials. Future development of this topic, based upon earning teaching certification at different collegiate levels will add to the study of teacher preparation. The further development the topic of teacher preparation and preparedness

for mixed-ability general education classrooms is an important contribution for the field of education.

### Qualitative Study

A focus group interview and the open-ended responses to question 29 comprised the qualitative portion of the study. Data was collected in late April and early May 2010 through the online survey tool and face-to-face interview. Thirty-two respondents answered the qualitative section of question 29 in the survey. Teachers were able to access the survey through their employee email program, either on the school site or outside the campus through the county website portal. Therefore, teachers were able to respond at their convenience and take as long as the needed for the survey. A convenience sample of six general education teachers participated in the focus group interview, with one teacher representing each grade level at S Elementary School. The interview lasted approximately one hour. The focus group interview was conducted at my school, S Elementary School in the southeastern part of the United States. This location was selected because it was the participating research partner and employment location of the participants.

#### *Qualitative Purpose*

The purpose of the interview was to gain further insight into the experiences of general education teachers as they explore the question, Is there a relationship between teachers' preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and its effect on their desire to stay in teaching? The guide questions for the interview can be found in Appendix F.

### *Qualitative Procedures*

I followed interview protocol for recording information during the qualitative interview by using a form that includes a heading, an opening statement which included the purpose of the study, the research question, the key research questions, probes to follow key questions, space for recording the interviewer's comments, and space to record reflective notes (Creswell, 2003, o. 190). In addition to the notes, the interview was audio taped for accuracy. I transcribed and coded the interview, repeatedly playing the recording during transcription to maintain accuracy.

### *Overarching Themes*

The process of coding and analyzing the transcription revealed three overarching themes that coincided with the questions found on the survey, as well as themes found in the literature review. Although the focus group interview was based on a specific academic setting, the findings can be used to assist teacher preparation programs and other public elementary schools in working more effectively with a broader range of student needs. In addition to setting specific suggestions for improvement, I identified three themes by triangulating the data with research and the quantitative study. They are as follows: training for specific student populations, environmental support, and comfort in professional knowledge and abilities. These themes are detailed in section 4 and used in section 5 to interpret the findings of the study.



### Training for Specific Student Populations

Educators in both the survey and in the focus group interview emphasized the need for additional training specific to the populations of students with learning differences. One respondent stated,

I feel as though I have strategies to meet the needs of general education students. I can recognize if a student is bright or if a student is below grade level; however, my struggle is to recognize the extra areas of resource and gifted. I have not been given training on ASD, so I am very unclear about this aspect. Therefore, the skill gap between me and other teachers who do have this training feels very significant to me.

While some teachers were taught basics in working with learning differences, deep training did not take place according to one participant:

We would be more effective, confident, and successful if trained more thoroughly to deal with the many different needs in one classroom. In my college prep classes, I was introduced to the types of needs there might be, but I was not taught specifically or deeply as to how to teach these students effectively.

Another reminded the reader of the purpose of teachers,

There are so many aspects of teaching to balance at one time, all while trying to reach every student. If you were not prepared properly, then it is hard to do a good job with every child, which is our purpose.

In addition to general education students, the teachers at S Elementary School work with students in the ASD, ELL, gifted, and Resource programs. Specific training needs were indicated in questions 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, and 24.

### Environmental Support

Educators of all experience levels discussed the importance of support when working with all students, but particularly the populations with learning differences. One

teacher respondent voiced concerns about students meeting mandated requirements, but knew to ask for help from colleagues:

Students who are not meeting requirements worry me. I am afraid that I fail them because I don't know what other ways to help them learn. I am asking a lot of questions, but it takes time.

Yet another teacher emphasized the importance of differentiation in order to meet the needs of students and prevent discomfort,

Teacher training needs to include differentiation strategies for various levels, learning styles and personalities found in the classroom. This would help prevent the new teacher feeling so overwhelmed with many expectations.

Discussion of increased teacher classroom experience before working independently in a classroom was supported by the member of the focus group. Another teacher confirms the importance of experience with the following words:

Teaching is an art which must be learned with experience.

This theme was also revealed in the responses in questions 4, 5, 21, 23, 24, and 25.

### Comfort in Professional Knowledge and Abilities

The educational themes discussed during the focus group interview related to comfort in professional knowledge of student population characteristics, methodology needed to teach different student populations, and ability to perform these task for the benefit of the children.

One teacher participant linked preparedness and comfort,

Teachers who are better prepared are able to function effectively and feel more comfortable in the classroom. Those who are less prepared become overwhelmed or frustrated and leave the profession sooner.

In addition to the focus group interview, these themes were revealed when asked questions 1, 2, 9, 10, 12, 15, and 23.

### *Qualitative Participants*

The six teachers who participated in the focus group interview were all females who represented a variety of grade level knowledge, experience, and educational levels. Each of the 6 participants has been given a pseudonym to protect her identity. The women will be referred to by these pseudonyms for the remainder of this study.

1. Interviewee A is an elementary school teacher and has been teaching for 11 years. She has experience in kindergarten, first, and second grades. Interviewee A has earned a masters degree in education. She primarily works with Resource and ELL students and was recently chosen by the school to take a course in which to earn a gifted endorsement for her general education certificate.

2. Interviewee B is an elementary school teacher who has been teaching for 17 years. She has experience in second and fourth grades. Interviewee B works with ASD, ELL, and Resource students. She has earned a masters degree in education.

3. Interviewee C is an elementary teacher and has been teaching for 15 years. Her experience includes kindergarten, fourth, and fifth grades. She works with Resource and Gifted students. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and has a gifted endorsement for her general education certificate. Interviewee C has also earned her Doctorate in Education.

4. Interviewee D is an elementary school teacher and has been teaching for four years. She teaches first grade. She works with ELL, ASD, and Resource students.

Interviewee D has an ELL endorsement for her general education certificate.

5. Interviewee E is an elementary school teacher and has been teaching for 15 years. Her experience includes second and fourth grades. She works with ASD, ELL, and Resource students. She is a National Board Certified Teacher and has earned endorsements in ELL and Leadership for her general education certificate. Interviewee E has earned her Doctorate of Education.

6. Interviewee F is an elementary school teacher and has been teaching for 16 years. Her experience includes second, third, and fifth grades. Interviewee F works with ASD, ELL, and Resource students. She has earned a bachelor's degree and has almost completed her master's degree.

### *Qualitative Results*

The following discussion presents examples of information gathered from the focus group interview. I used prepared guide questions and prompts to facilitate the discussion and gather data. Since the focus group interview was based on questions, the question topics often overlapped and referred back to previous questions and answers. The interview was transcribed, examined for themes, and coded for data analysis by me in order to work closely with the data for interpretation.

The first question in the interview asked participants which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion. One of the main needs emerging from this question was the need for training in the characteristics and special needs of students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Teaching the general educators how to recognize signs and characteristics of ASD was also discussed:

Interviewee F: I think for me it was being more aware of diagnosis, what to look for when I started having a thought that this child might have that. We have experts in our school, but I have to really go digging. I want to know what we are looking for, what are the signs, what do I have to chart, what behaviors am I trying to document. I really had to dig deep on my own to find out how to help this child. So for me, that was important.

Interviewee B: As far as ASD, I don't really know what to expect academically. I have never taught them before.

Additionally, informal training through experience and environmental support was praised and acknowledged for modeling effective reactions and interactions with ASD students. The interaction of the general education staff, the special education staff, and the parents was considered important. The teachers considered this department the most effective in meeting the needs of general education teachers in collaboration.

Interviewee C: I would say experience, because you don't know. We haven't had any training on how to handle it, to be quite honest. Ummmm...except actually being thrown in there and experiencing it. I've found that I learned the most from watching the paraprofessionals who are in the room with them or the teachers who mainstream in with them in the classroom. Just watching how they handle it when they get upset about something and just learning how to read their reactions...Now, it's almost the end of the year and it's very obvious, but I didn't know what to look for at first. You know, I didn't know what to do... so, it has been helpful watching what they did. For me, that's how I learned.

The group agreed that communication as children age and change grade levels needs to be improved.

Interviewee F: It sounds like it would be important for teachers who have gotten to know their students well to make a list of triggers and behaviors to watch so you don't have to spend a quarter of a year finding out.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee A: More of a continuous record in formal and informal records.

Group: Agreement.

The concept of comfort in teaching certain student populations was identified at the beginning of the interview. The group indicated that professional knowledge, support, and experience led to comfort in working with student subgroup populations.

Interviewee C: When looking at the different groups today, wouldn't you say that the ASD program is probably one of the best in coming in and providing support for us?

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee B: I've never taught ASD, and I'm counting on the paraprofessionals to help me, teach me, and that I can learn from them to get through it.

Interviewee C: The ASD teachers and paraprofessionals are really good at coming and showing us what to do and are very patient with us and understanding that we're learning. They make us feel comfortable.

Interviewee E: I think that's where all of these are related, because if you aren't comfortable teaching populations, then you're not comfortable having them in your class. And it goes along with teacher retention when you start realizing how many different types of students are out there. You start questioning whether you can do it.

The second question asked participants which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion.

The training needed and ability to serve ELL students received the most passionate responses from the focus group. Environmental support in the form of assistance from ELL specialists is noted as helpful.

Interviewee F: The benefits of my training and use of my second language, Spanish, ended when I started getting students outside my second language comfort zone. Even after ten years of working with ELL students, it is still a challenge to know how far they're supposed to go, how much growth they are supposed to make in a year.

Support from other departments was also noted as important for this student population. Knowing how much growth is needed, and ability to determine whether academic difficulties are a language acquisition issue, a learning disability, or another student challenge, concerned teachers of various experience levels.

Interviewee C: Yes, and it is also hard to determine whether an ELL student is having difficulties because they are learning the language or because they are having trouble for some other reason. We have students in fifth grade who have never been RTIed because they're ELL.

Interviewee F: It seems like we are missing a group of kids who need services. It seems like we don't look at them too closely because they are ELL. At what point do we stop and say that maybe they are from another country, they speak another language, and they have a learning disability? How much are we disserving those students by not helping them on top of all of that? That has been my greatest source of frustration...

Interviewee C: ...and you're a veteran teacher. A new teacher is not going to do that.

Group: Agreement.

Teachers were concerned about the lack of skills and the potential effects on their students. Environmental support, especially in the form of assistance from ELL specialists, is noted as helpful.

Interviewee C: They're not. They're not going to know what to look for and they're not going to know the difference between an ELL student who is just struggling with the language, and an ELL student who is struggling academically. You're going to get them confused if you're new and inexperienced.

Interviewee D: That leads us back to lost time in the child's life from what we don't know. In Florida, our extra coursework was ELL classes. So you are automatically endorsed when you graduate. It's still hard. My first two years really half of my class spoke something else or was Spanish. It was really hard. I got some grey hairs. Luckily I had an ELL Inclusion teacher, and she was great. She also had expertise in Reading Recovery. She helped me learn how to teach students from different cultures how to read, even when they didn't know how to read in their native language. Otherwise, I wouldn't have had any experience with doing that.

The communication of student progress and collaboration within the school and with the students' parents were of concern to the focus group participants. Expressions of discomfort with the current practices and possible solutions were discussed.

Interviewee A: What about the modification plans that we put in place for the ELL students? How much are we helping them with the required standardized test when there are no modifications in place for that? Maybe they pass, maybe they don't. I mean are they not passing these tests they're required to pass since we are putting so many accommodations in place for them? What can we do about that? Hey come to us reading below grade level, it's going to continue as the years goes on. So how are we going to address their needs and teach what we need to teach at the current grade level? I need help with that.

Interviewee D: Even with report cards, it says that it is modified. The E, S, N, U system we use in first grade is really not communicating to the parents or to the next teacher that the child isn't on grade level. If the children don't pass those tests, the parents want to know why, because the report card makes it look like they are doing fine.

Interviewee B: Maybe a more standards based report card like Forsyth County. uses would work better for us. More of a continuum.

Interviewee C: You can note growth with that. Now, I can pull a fourth grade record and see the report card. Great. Tells me nothing. It tells me their motivation and their effort. It doesn't really tell me their work productivity at this level. It doesn't tell me their growth. They could have made a year and a half



grade level jump in fourth grade, but they started out on a second grade level. So I'm still looking at them as low, but they've made this huge progress. So, we need a way to show amount of growth as well. Some sort of way to track their growth each year. Wouldn't that be nice for our Focus kids, too?

The third question asked participants which skills needed for teaching FOCUS (gifted) students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion. The quantitative portion of the study showed that there is not as much apprehension about teaching the gifted student population, yet there are approximately 30 percent of teachers at S Elementary School who identify themselves as needing further training and skills. Training these teachers in the nuances of working with gifted students will produce teachers who are better prepared to meet their needs.

Interviewee C: I think there's a misconception about Focus children... People think, Focus students, I'd love to have them, they're going to do their work, and they're going to do a great job. I'm going to be done. That's really not what you get. You get a lot of kids telling you they're bored, and you get a lot of behavior issues with that. You see that they're finishing everything you give them in five minutes, so you've got to have a well laid plan to really handle a lot of them, especially the older they get. You know, they can be very complicated if you're not ready for it. I can see where you would think you're getting one thing and it turns out to be something else, I think, especially with new teachers. There's a misconception with what the focus students needs are about. You just think that you give them more work rather than change the type of work it is. They get confused with that.

Like the ASD and ELL populations, new teachers need to be trained for the social issues associated with gifted education. Some examples are noted below in the comments.

Interviewee F: There's a whole realm of social issues that go with the gifted class. Either the perfectionism or worry about being perfect. Sometimes their organizational skills are incredibly lacking, sometimes they're so proud and

boastful, and their social skills... You know because they can't interact with people. So I feel like there's some training right there.

Interviewee D: In first grade, with the Focus kids, there's that fine line of finding something that is challenging but still developmentally appropriate b/c just b/c they are reading a fifth grade reading level, it doesn't mean they can go get a fifth grade chapter book.

Interviewee F: Right.

Interviewee D: The content is not appropriate for them. It's too mature, so even finding the fine line between challenging and appropriate. That's tricky.

The fourth question asked participants which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion. While the group responses did not directly answer this question, it followed the topic of Resource students and the three overarching themes found in the qualitative portion of the research. As the teachers described their student teaching experiences, it became clear that they wished that they had more time in classrooms and more time with students with exceptionalities. Feelings of unpreparedness and self doubt caused them discomfort and lack of confidence in their real abilities, rather than their textbook knowledge.

Interviewee C: I took 'Students with Exceptionalities,' and they looked at anybody who was different, and we spent a day on each. That's not a lot. Never went into a classroom that was really diverse. They all spoke English. It was not an issue in the school that I went into, so I was not prepared at all, but my school did do a better job of Resource students. That's where I did do a lot of practical experience, so I came in feeling more comfortable. So I think it has a lot to do with your teacher education program. Your classroom experience. Your student teaching.

Interviewee F: I went to UGA. We had to do ten weeks in one room and four weeks in another. That was it. I got to observe for four weeks and then teach for

part of the ten weeks. It would have been helpful to spend four weeks in a special education room, four weeks in an ELL room, and four weeks in a .... I just feel like when I got out, I had minimal, minimal experience. I spent the first year subbing and took more classes on my own because I felt completely unprepared.

Interviewee B: I had practicums and then 15 weeks of student teaching. I was in all regular education classrooms during all of the practicums. I would have liked to shadow the teacher in other areas, instead of just seeing regular education classrooms. I think that it would have been really helpful to just go around job shadowing during your practicums, even before you did any student teaching.

Environmental support became a topic of conversation as the group discussed the varying levels of support once employed in the school. Ideas for improvement in this area led to excitement as ideas for change began to generate with conversation.

Interviewee B: What would be helpful and nice to me was if there was some time set aside, not at the end of the day, or not on your own planning, because you know they resource teachers are tired. They usually have to do some duty around the school. Plus, I'm tired. So sometime during the day when an administrator can hire a sub, when you can sit down and see their curriculum and collaborate with them....I had one student recently, and I just wish I would have known kind of what she was doing. I could've supported her in the classroom better. I know I had to search it out and part of that was on me, but you have those years when there are so many fires to put out and you're juggling all these populations. Sometimes you just can't get down and see. I don't know, but I've learned over the years, what materials they use.

Interviewee E: I think we should have a better understanding of their IEP, and the special education teacher should say each year, you need to make sure you're doing this, this, and this.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee C: We always sit in on their IEPs at the end of the year, wouldn't it be nice if you sat in on the IEP of the child you're about to get?

Interviewee E: Yeah!

Interviewee C: Like if I went back to her IEP as a kid, because I pretty much know, that I'm a Resource fifth grade class, and I know that I'm going to get some Resource students. Let's just go ahead and figure out who they are. What's the big secret? Let me sit on that IEP so I know. That way, by the time the school

year's started, I know what their goals are, I know what their weaknesses are, and there's no question about it, and the parents know you, and you're good to go.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee F: It's like when you go to the doctor and you're seeing a cardiologist, a neurologist, and a gastroenterologist, and, and nobody's talking to each other, and all these medicines interact. If we have a child, and we're all working with them, we should have some time to talk to one another.

Interviewee E: It's the same way with ELL. We never even talk with the teacher.

Interviewee C: I know. I know. I don't even know who services them in fifth grade. I mean, I don't, and that's not to be ugly, but I just really don't know.

Interviewee E: Well, we've got collaborative planning. Why can't the first month of collaborative planning be when they sit, and instead of having a team meeting, they sit with you?

Interviewee B: One on one...

Interviewee E: ...and talk about your kids for 15 minutes and then move to the next second grade teacher who has their kids.

Interviewee B: A conference.

Interviewee E: Why can't those teachers come to classes for the first couple of weeks and walk you through a day with that child?

Interviewee B: I feel, and I imagine they probably feel like they're in the dark. I could probably help them a little more and do a better job if I knew what their homework was and what they are doing when they get pulled out.

Interviewee E: If they came into our rooms, like Kimberly does with mine because I have the ASD population every year, and the first week, or two to three weeks of school, we're talking about that child. Well, here's what he's capable of, here's some of his quirks, and here's what we do if he does this.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee C: These kids have the same thing, learning quirks. You're exactly right. It would be nice to have a little heads up.

The mixture of two of the overarching themes became apparent in the following part of the conversation, as training and seeking training in an area in which one feels comfortable. The element of environmental support came into the conversation at the end, as the relationships of all of the professional working with the same children were recognized.

Interviewee E: So do ELLs. I had the professional learning community (PLC) with the Social Studies ELL. I don't know how the other ones went, but the one thing the teachers said about the social studies PLC for ELLs was that we got to collaborate and share the strategies. It wasn't some professional coming in and throwing out all this stuff. We were sharing what we do in our own classrooms. And what if we had that for Resource?

Interviewee B: Aah, that'd be nice.

Group: Undistinguishable chatter.

Interviewee E: Kimberly said she'd do one for ASD, and if you want to be a part of it, you become a part of it. If you don't, there are other teachers who don't want to become a part of it.

Interviewee A: So do you think the ones who want to be a part of it are the stronger teachers in that area, or do you think the people would come forward and identify themselves as having a weakness in an area?

Interviewee C: But, I think that's ok.

Interviewee E: Uh-huh.

Interviewee E: I think, uh, and I'm not knocking any group, because you know we all feel more comfortable with one or the other. I'm probably not going to go to the ELL group but I'm going to be right there at that Resource group because I feel more comfortable and want to get better at it. So that's the group that I check on my list that I want in my class. Or I might check the gifted because that's going to be a group that I get, so I would want to go to that one. S I think it's ok that there are some groups that you don't want to go to. I think you definitely need to pick one, though.

Group: Sounds of agreement.

Interviewee C: And maybe even year after year we should get the same ones so that we can get better at it. I don't think we should have to jump around and take all the groups if you don't feel comfortable with one. You know, I mean, I really think, I think that's ok.

Interviewee F: Because as you become better, people will come to you. In fifth grade, I was the one people came to for ELL. Okay, I got one, what do I do?

Interviewee B: Yeah.

Interviewee B: Yeah, and she was fantastic.

Interviewee F: Ok, now start with this...and set up this, and I felt like I knew what to do. So, if we spent a few years becoming masters at our group, and there's enough of us willing to take our share, then we're not juggling ASD, and Resource, and ELL, and Focus.

Interviewee C: Yeah.

Interviewee B: We don't have time to make multiple lesson plans.

Interviewee F: Even during the year, when a child is placed, it might not be so farfetched to move them to the classroom where they can be served instead of saying, 'Oh well, in January they got placed for Focus, so, now I have ESOL and Focus. "Oh, and that one is diagnosed with Autism. So now I have Focus, ESOL, and Autism.' It's not working for us.

Interviewee E: It's not working.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee C: If you worked in a high school. You wouldn't be teaching every subject. You'd teach one, and you'd get good at it.

Interviewee F: That would really help.

The fifth question asked participants how teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention. The overarching themes of training for specific student populations, environmental support, and comfort in professional skills

and abilities were again the center of this part of the conversation. One survey response stated,

It is overwhelming, to say the least, learning how to meet the needs of all the diverse learners as a beginning teacher. Very little training was provided at the undergraduate level to prepare you for what you face when you enter the classroom for the first time. My school was not as diverse as some and still I struggled to meet my students' needs. I found I needed additional training and support personnel to become effective. Ongoing training would be helpful!

Specific preparation skill gaps were not mentioned, but the redesign of teacher education programs with more regular and consistent classroom experience came to the forefront.

Interviewee E: If you're uncomfortable, you're not going to stick with it, I don't think, and you have to, so you can become proficient. I don't think any college would totally prepare you, anyway, for the situation until you're there.

Interviewee F: Which means we still need more practice.

Interviewee C: Being out in the field.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee C: I think they need to redesign how they do teacher education classes. I think it should be half the class theory and things you need to do and the second half of the class put it into practice. Go into the classroom and try it out, and...get evaluated based on that. You know, do some sort of product that you do. We wait until the end of college and that's our student teaching. I mean, come on.

Interviewee F: You might decide then, after the whole time, that you don't want to be a teacher.

Interviewee C: You might want to have one semester of every year you're in teacher education that you do student teaching.

Interviewee D: Well, my sister, my younger sister and I went through the same exact program. She graduated in December, and she took over for a teacher halfway through the year and is finishing her program, and she's at the point where she thinking about quitting. We went through the exact same program. So

even beyond teacher preparation, it's the support once you get to a school, because if I didn't have a supportive staff, team, a supportive administration, I would've had no clue what to do, and that would drive you out.

Interviewee E: That's true.

Interviewee D: I mean when you reach that peak of frustration, you're done.

Interviewee F: Especially if you're feeling judged.

The sixth questions asked what skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs. The conversations following tells about perceived weaknesses in the teacher preparation programs through emotional reflection on past experiences. Comfort in professional knowledge and abilities and environmental support were again forefront in the group discussion.

Interviewer: Can you tell us more about feeling judged?

Interviewee F: I worked in a good, supportive school. The assistant principals (APs) would go around really watching and evaluating. When they found a weakness, it wasn't a write up or that you were in trouble. They would go in and work with you on that skill. It didn't feel like you were in trouble or going to get fired. It was nothing more than to help you get better in this area, and I just felt like, when you get to that level of support where you're really watching each other's back ... (interrupted)

Interviewee B: One thing I noticed, just by talking to new people not necessarily on my grade level, but just visiting with people around the building, that especially in Gwinnett, you've got your hands in so many things. People think that they have to keep up with all that. One thing that helped me was that, and I've seen it, would be to get somebody with some experience to go to that new person and say to that person, 'Look you're not going to get it all perfect in one year. Pick a few of these areas, try to figure those out and do a good job. Then the next year, you can do a better job.' There's kind of that illusion that everyone's perfect. I have to do this, this, and that. You just can't keep up with all of it.



Interviewee C: You know what helped me, and you can probably relate. I started with Kimberly Van Buren, both first year teachers, rooms right near each other. We were on a team of all veteran teachers, but we had each other, and we had veteran teachers all around us. It was so nice having somebody else in the exact same situation that you're in, so that was a nice support system to have. There wasn't anybody else on our team that was new. We were the 'newbies' and we had each other, but then we had these great people around us who were so experienced....I've always been on a team where there's been somebody who's been there about the same amount of time, and I found myself navigating to them because we were experiencing similar things.

Interviewee D: The peer coaching that we've been doing has been awesome. I team teach with Laura, I see her all the time, but seeing her in math instead of when we're together, and you think that you see your peers all the time, but by not participating and just looking you can learn so much from each other. If we could further develop that, it would be great.

Interviewee A: I think working on working on collaborating more with people, not just on your grade level but other grade levels, different areas, ELL, ASD, and really working with people together, and really taking the time out to really have the time to plan with those people. That would be very beneficial for the teachers as well as the students.

Group: Agreement.

Once I thanked the participants for their time and the sharing of professional knowledge, the group adjourned. There were professional smiles and interaction as the group dispersed. Some stayed together to discuss the agenda topics. Further dialogue among colleagues continued with other staff members. The school administration asked to see the results of the study as attempts to improve student performance are analyzed.

### Summary

The use of a sequential explanatory mixed method study was the foundation of this doctoral study. The literature established the foundation of the problem described in section 1, and, subsequently, the question: Is there a relationship between teachers'

preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and the effect of preparedness on their desire to stay in teaching? The foundation of the study was based on the cited, peer-reviewed research of teacher preparation and teacher retention in section 2. The research methodology discussed in section 3 described my choice of conducting a mixed method study in order to obtain more data on the themes revealed in the peer-reviewed, quantitative survey. The data detailed in section 4 first started with the disaggregation of data by question, and then by topic area, and finally followed by application questions. In this way, preparation for the school research site's subgroup populations was given equal attention and potential to reveal statistical data on which to build a conclusion. The relationship between the topics of teacher preparation and teacher retention was further established and discussed during the convenience sampling interview of six, certified teachers in a school in the southeastern part of the United States. During this time, anecdotal data was gathered to supplement and extend the data found in the literature and the survey. The data from the sequential mixed, method study revealed a need for staff development in the areas of ASD education, ELL education, gifted education, and Resource education. Three overarching themes were repeatedly mentioned in the focus group interview. They are as follows: training for specific student populations, environmental support, and comfort in professional knowledge and abilities. Each theme was supported by specific quotations by the interviewees by survey (see Appendix A), focus group interview question (see Appendix B), and by theme referenced in this paragraph. Section 5 identifies the interpretations of

the findings, implications for social change, and recommendations for further action and study.

## SECTION 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

The purpose of this sequential explanatory mixed methods study was to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis was performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms.

This section presents an interpretation of the findings from the study entitled *Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators' Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms*. Section 1 gave basic, detailed, and essential background information about teacher preparation and teacher retention. A problem statement, research question, theoretical framework, and purpose statement were included. The definition of terms, assumptions, limitations, scope, and delimitations conclude the section. Section 2 provided in-depth information about the topics of teacher preparation and factors in teacher retention research. It provided specific information on teacher retention, leadership and retention of novice teachers, preparedness and perceptions of preparedness, preparing general education trainees for inclusion, application, and the potential for further research. Section 3 provided details about the sequential explanatory design chosen for this sequential explanatory mixed method research. Quantitative and qualitative data were gathered sequentially with the quantitative data receiving priority. The research question, instrumentation details, data

collection procedures, and limitations are also described in this section. Section 4 reported the findings of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study in narrative and tabular form. Each survey item and interview questions were presented individually and according to student population subgroup, to provide specific information about participants' beliefs. Section 5 provided a summary of the study as well as the conclusions that can be drawn from the findings. The social impact of the findings, recommendations for further study, recommendations for teacher preparation programs, recommendations for teacher retention, and my reflections conclude the section.

#### Brief Overview

This study used a sequential explanatory mixed method study to examine the perceptions of teacher preparedness for teaching students with learning differences in a general education, mixed-ability classroom. Factors in teacher preparation for subgroup inclusion populations, and self analysis of the skills needed to work with exceptional student populations, were first analyzed based on a quantitative survey. After anonymously asking for survey responses regarding perceived abilities to perform skills necessary to work with ASD, ELL, Focus, General Education, and Resource students, I analyzed the responses in order to find out what was currently lacking in S Elementary School's certified, general education teachers. I gained further information about the needs of each population, teacher preparation for the demands of a general education classroom, environmental support from professionals within a setting who possess different certifications, and teacher retention, in the qualitative portion of the research. Three specific themes emerged as needs for teachers who teach in general education

classrooms: specific training for exceptional student populations, environmental support, and comfort in their professional knowledge and abilities.

### Interpretation of Findings

The following quantitative question guided this sequential explanatory research:  
How do elementary, general education teachers assess their preparation to teach subgroup student populations?

The following qualitative questions guided this sequential explanatory research and were used in the qualitative element of the study to elaborate upon data obtained in the quantitative survey:

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in S Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?
6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

The following mixed methods question guided this sequential explanatory research and served as the foundation for inquiry: Is there a relationship between teachers' preparations of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed-ability classroom and the effect of preparedness on their desire to stay in teaching?

The data in this study confirmed a relationship between teacher preparation and teacher retention. In addition to the quantitative data, in which 84.4% of the respondents indicated the belief in the relationship of teacher preparation and teacher retention, participants shared thoughts on this relationship through the three emergent themes discussed in section 4 of this document. The following statement is one sample of the qualitative data supporting this relationship:

If a job is difficult and frustrating because you were not properly prepared, it might cause a person to change career fields.

Another statement emphasized the importance of teacher preparation and comfort in one's own professional skills and abilities, as related to teacher retention,

Teachers must make numerous decisions each day based on what they believe will best support each individual child's learning. Without confidence in one's ability to make these decisions, this profession could become extremely frustrating and overwhelming. It makes sense that teachers would leave the field of education if they did have these feelings. I do believe that teacher preparation may play an important role in the ability to make the decisions and as well as to be confident in them.

After analyzing data for each section of the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study, I found perceived strengths and weaknesses in the S Elementary School certified teaching staff.

The first section of the survey, entitled “Closing the Achievement Gap: Survey for Teachers,” was an introduction for the survey. It did not have data to analyze.

The second section of the survey focused on professional skills needed to work with ASD students. After analyzing questions 1-5, which were labeled ASD Inclusion, I found 57.58% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 42.42% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. As a result of the data collection and analysis, I determined the general education teaching staff at S Elementary School could benefit by specific training for students with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Components of this training should include specific characteristics of ASD for identification and documentation purposes, behavioral techniques, and teaching pedagogy for ASD learners. Training for this student population should be implemented for teachers before the ASD students enter an untrained teacher’s classroom. Further collaboration between the regular education and special education departments will assist the student and teachers’ transitions each year. Reducing the anxiety and hesitation in working with this population will increase teacher comfort in their professional knowledge and abilities.

The third section of the survey focused on English Language Learners (ELL), which is another one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions 6-10 that were labeled ELL Inclusion, I found that 73.53% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 26.47%, either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to



meet the needs of this special population. As a result of the data collection and analysis, I determined the general education teaching staff at S Elementary School should be offered professional learning opportunities for best practices in teaching English Language Learners. Components of this training should include the levels of language acquisition, specific methodology for the modification of curriculum for each language acquisition level, teaching pedagogy for ELL learners, and assessment of student work. The changes in the American population deem this knowledge necessary for general education teachers. This study found novices to be better prepared than veteran teachers for the ELL population. Support from the ELL certified staff is also recommended to increase teacher retention.

The fourth section of the survey focused on Focus (Gifted) students, which is one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions eleven through fifteen which were labeled Focus Inclusion, I found that 87.5% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 12.5% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. The majority of the respondents believed that they were prepared to teach the gifted student population, however the focus group interview revealed some common misconceptions about teaching this student population. Misconceptions about the ease of teaching this population, knowledge of unique behavioral and social needs of gifted students, and the understanding of the type of work needed by gifted students were suggested as areas needing improvement in the general education teaching staff at S Elementary School.

The fifth section of the survey focused on regular education students, which is the population which the population sample is certified to teach through their teacher preparation programs. After analyzing questions 16-20 that were labeled Regular Education, I found that 98.82% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 1.18%, either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. Teachers are required to take professional development coursework for license renewal and to participate in professional learning each contract year. No additional training needs were identified in this study for general education teachers at S Elementary School.

The sixth section of the survey focused on Interrelated (IRR) Resource students, which is one of the inclusion populations at S Elementary School. After analyzing questions 21-25 that were labeled Resource Inclusion, I found that 65.7% of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they were prepared for this student group. The remainder, 34.3% either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they were prepared to meet the needs of this special population. Approximately one third of the respondents indicated a need for training in this area. Pedagogical practices for Resource students, alternative curricula, and behavioral modification should be included in this staff development.

The process of coding and analyzing the transcription revealed three overarching themes that coincided with the questions found on the survey, as well and themes found in the literature review. Identified themes are training for specific student populations, environmental support, and comfort in professional knowledge and abilities. The qualitative section of the study uncovered three overarching themes, all of which had

been included in the literature review on teacher preparation and teacher retention, as discussed in the next section.

### Implication for Social Change

The first overarching theme, Training for Specific Student Populations, is supported by teacher preparation research. Due to the many challenges in a general education classroom, teacher preparation programs need to change with societal needs. Teachers may encounter English Language Learners (ELL), language immersion classrooms, inclusion and state mandated programs, as well as new curriculum, new technology, new assessment, and a wide variety of instructional practices (Potter, Swenk, Shrum, Smith, & Weekly, 2001). There is evidence to suggest that general education teachers do not believe that they are adequately prepared to effectively teach students with disabilities (Schumm & Vaughn, 1992, 1995; Singh, 2006). Teacher preparation for most general education educators on inclusion practices provides only limited opportunities to prepare for the demand on a new classroom teacher (Jorgensen et al., 2006). This study provides additional evidence that general education teachers do not perceive themselves to be adequately prepared to teach students with exceptionalities.

The second overarching theme, Environmental Support, came to the forefront of this study as a method that not only improved teacher skill but aided in the level of comfort general educators feel about working with inclusion populations. In this study I evaluated the perceptions of preparedness of one elementary school's certified staff in the southeastern part of the United States. The teachers not only work with general education students, but children in the following programs: Autism Spectrum Disorder, English

Language Learners, Focus (Gifted), and Inter-Related Resource. Therefore, the general educators in that setting need to be prepared for a variety of educational, social, and emotional issues. These programs vary by individual school, but the concept is the same. General educators need training and experience with children with exceptionalities before entering the classroom independently. Increased time in school settings during the teacher preparation program will expose novices to a wider variety of students, give them a chance to see veteran teachers work with children, and expand their skill set.

The third overarching theme, Comfort in Professional Knowledge and Abilities, became obvious as the focus group discussed the need for collaboration, modeled training, and extended classroom experience in teacher education programs. Basic knowledge is required before a supportive attitude can be developed. A positive attitude often comes with a feeling of success in working with different types of learners. General educators also need continuous training for exceptionalities throughout their careers, as societal changes require growth and development of skills. According to Baker and Zigmond (1995), teachers in general education classrooms typically lacked confidence in their own abilities to meet the needs of inclusion students. One way to clarify the difference in a novice and a master teacher is stated as follows: “Master teachers continually seek opportunities to network, collaborate, and work with other professionals to build a community of learning that will benefit all students” (Holm & Horn, 2003, p. 31). Darling-Hammond (2003) suggested that good school leaders provide “strategic investments” (p. 6) needed to keep good teachers, such as providing mentoring for beginners and creating ongoing learning and leadership challenges for veterans. She

suggested the value of these tactics would pay for themselves by keeping teachers from quitting.

The qualitative portion of this study revealed the collaboration of educational specialties, departments, and resources are in place, but they could be used more effectively and consistently for the benefit of the students and the teachers. Beyond the training and student teaching experience, teachers need to collaborate and be supported by personnel in different roles around the school. Consideration of teachers' current knowledge and beliefs was essential in creating effective professional development to close this knowledge gap (Putnam & Borko, 1997). Comfort comes with training, experience, guidance, and experience in one's abilities to teach students so they can be academically and socially successful. Teachers want their students to be successful, and professional learning opportunities to address the school populations' needs would help the general educators to better meet the needs of students in their care.

Teacher preparation programs need to be reformed to better prepare teaching candidates for general education and special education populations. If teaching candidates perceive themselves to be better prepared, the United States' teacher retention statistics may be affected, and passionate, highly qualified teachers may stay in the United States' educational system. Therefore, it is essential to prepare today's teaching candidates for the inclusion of the United States' previously overlooked students.

It is hoped that the Georgia Department of Education will review this study's findings and support the increase of in-classroom practicum time during the teacher preparation period. An increase the depth of coursework for students with

exceptionalities in order to earn general education certification is also recommended. Increasing face-to-face time with disabled and nondisabled students and a longer mentoring period without individual responsibilities can improve the work of general education teachers. They will better meet Spinelli's (1998) stated needs for the United States' classrooms: a better understanding of teaching techniques, positive behavior modification, and a more experienced understanding of how to work with the many students found in today's public schools. Specifically, perhaps the most significant social change might be that teachers will choose to stay in the classroom longer, thus increasing the likelihood of having a highly qualified teacher in every United States classroom.

#### Recommendations for Further Study

Further study is needed to determine how to effectively collect data from novice teachers in Georgia. The analysis of teacher perception of preparedness coming from different certification routes will be useful in furthering this study. Specific information on diverse learners could be analyzed and compared using both objective and subjective measurements, as in the sample used in this study. "The career paths of teachers who completed different types of programs could also be compared (e.g., non-categorical versus categorical; dual preparation in general education and special education versus special education preparation; bachelor's versus master's degrees)" (Billingsly, 1993, p. 10).

Additionally, I would like to perform a similar study on a county and state level, adjusting the survey to include all populations for exceptional students. Surveying teachers and categorizing responses by teacher preparation program, by experience level,

and by historical trends at the time of graduation could assist in the hire of the most highly qualified applicants. The determination of strengths, but particularly weaknesses, in teacher skills and abilities would give the administration and professional learning departments of school systems a basis for the development of continuing education for their teachers.

To gain a more local perspective of schools in one's own area for the study the topics of teacher preparation and teacher retention, I suggest conducting the research at the local level. Just as in this doctoral study, issues in preparation needs and teacher retention connect to the literature done by scholars in the United States and around the world. The teachers on the local level, however, know what is needed for their student population and demographics. While school administrations have perceptions of the strengths and weaknesses of their staffs, sitting down to collaborate, brainstorm, and problem solve generates ideas relevant to the situation.

### Recommendations for Action

My recommendations for action are presented at the local level first, and then address suggestions useful to other schools, finally to teacher preparation programs.

#### *Local Research Site Recommendations*

It was assumed that the teachers at S Elementary School were open in their self analysis during this doctoral study. Since the results were anonymous and coded, I assumed the data is concrete and accurate. Based on the collected data, I determined that professional development for the inclusion of the following areas would be beneficial to

S Elementary School: ASD, ELL, Focus, and Resource. Specific areas of focus are detailed in section 4 of this doctoral study document.

According to question 30 in the quantitative study, the teachers at S Elementary School would like to see professional development for student population education, teaching strategies, and behavioral methodology for their student populations as follows: ASD Inclusion Teaching Strategies (66.7%), Resource Teaching Strategies (54.2%), ELL Inclusion Teaching Strategies (45.5%), Focus Strategies (39.4%), and Unspecified General Education Strategies (9.1%). Since the participants were allowed to choose more than one response, the numbers do not add up to 100%. Participants were allowed to anonymously indicate areas for which improvement is needed at S Elementary School on the local level.

Rather than county wide professional learning, members indicated interest in increased collaboration, more in-depth communication with special education personnel, choosing a population group in which to become an expert, attendance of IEP meetings for future students based on cluster grouping, professional learning communities with focus on the subgroup populations in this study, and continuation of the peer coaching program.

If teachers at this research site can improve teacher preparation in order close the achievement gap in students with learning differences, the answer for increased teacher retention and collaboration may be evident by example. Further evidence based on student pre-assessments and post-assessments will give additional statistical information to the schools to gauge the success of implemented professional learning programs.



*Recommendations for Other Schools*

As with this sample study at S Elementary School, general education teachers work in multi-ability classrooms and must be prepared to teach the student populations hosted by the employer. Programs for students with identified special needs are dependent on local and state funding, along with the organization of the school district to which the school is affiliated. This study showed that teachers are able to admit personal strengths and areas of weakness. If administrators make use of surveys and focus groups within the school staff, the teachers will identify the areas specific to the schools' needs. Furthermore, scores from standardized tests can also identify strengths and areas of weakness by each teacher, by each subgroup population, and by curriculum strand. Combing the self-analysis and the student yields a clearer picture than relying on either element independently of the other.

*Recommendations for Teacher Preparation Programs*

Teacher respondents in this study reported a relationship between teacher preparation and teacher retention. Therefore, in order for the United States to improve the teacher retention problem the country is facing today, general education teachers must be better prepared to work with many ability levels in one classroom. Teacher preparation programs need to be reformed to better prepare teaching candidates for general education and special education populations. If teaching candidates perceive themselves to be better prepared, the United States' teacher retention statistics may be affected, and passionate, highly qualified teachers may stay in the United States' educational system. Therefore, it

is essential to prepare today's teaching candidates for the inclusion of this country's previously overlooked students.

In this study, I provided additional quantitative and qualitative data to support the need for teacher preparation reform. It is hoped that the Georgia Department of Education will review this study's findings and support the increase of in-classroom practicum time during the teacher preparation period. The increase of time spent in classrooms with students of all ability levels will increase future teachers' confidence in skills necessary to work in mixed-ability classrooms once they become independent. This confidence, plus a longer mentoring time once employed will help local schools better meet Spinelli's (1998) stated needs for the United States' classrooms: a better understanding of teaching techniques, positive behavior modification, and a more experienced understanding of how to work with the many students found in today's United States' public schools. Specifically, perhaps the most significant social change might be that teachers will choose to stay in the classroom longer, thus increasing the likelihood of having a highly qualified teacher in every United States classroom.

#### Researcher's Reflection and Conclusion

The suggestions made by the educators at S Elementary School led me to trust that this group of educators has the best interest of all students despite learning differences, and a willingness to retrain in order to make all students successful. This conclusion relates to educators in general and can be assumed for most people who devote their lives to teaching children. I believe that teachers do not teach to fail students; teachers want their students to learn in the way that is best for their individual learning

needs and want their students to succeed. Sometimes, however, teachers do not know how to reach certain populations of students, despite their best intentions. Therefore, the assumption is that most teachers would be willing to learn new methodologies and techniques for the benefit of student achievement and for the success of children.

Before teachers reach the point of frustration, as shared during the focus group interview, specific, targeted training for weaknesses on the local level could reduce teacher attrition from schools, especially those schools teaching the most vulnerable student populations. Additional time in classrooms with a variety of special need experiences, support and collaboration from the different departments, and experience in order to gain the confidence leading to comfort in personal abilities, will greatly contribute to the goal of retaining the nations' most qualified and most dedicated teachers.

#### *Recommendations for the Field of Education*

As the population of the United States changes, a different, more specialized skill set will be needed by teachers to address the needs of children in America's public schools. Increased time in heterogeneous classrooms will be necessary throughout the teacher education coursework. General educators need to come to the public schools armed with a deep set of skills for students with exceptionalities learned not only by textbooks and coursework but by seasoned professionals in the field. Once hired, the continuation of environmental support from general education, special education, and administrative colleagues increases the likelihood of success. Success with students, progress, and academic gains in students increases a teacher's confidence, which may

increase the likelihood of retaining the teacher and reducing the teacher attrition which plagues American public schools.

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## APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GUIDE

*Closing the Achievement Gap:  
General Educators' Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms*

### ***FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW***

**The following questions will guide the focus group interview:**

1. Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in Sugar Hill Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
2. Which skills needed for teaching ELL students could be better developed in Sugar Hill Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
3. Which skills needed for teaching FOCUS students could be better developed in Sugar Hill Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
4. Which skills needed for teaching RESOURCE students could be better developed in Sugar Hill Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?
5. How do teacher preparation skill gaps in general education teachers affect teacher retention?
6. What skills need to be developed in elementary, general education teacher preparation programs?

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study will be to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis will be performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. The results will be used to determine if professional learning opportunities should exist for teachers at our local school to assist in helping prepare teachers to teach student subgroups populations.

For the purpose of this research study, a **mixed-ability classroom will be defined as a general education classroom serving a heterogeneous group of learning needs, including students who receive additional services through ASD, ELL, FOCUS, and IRR (Resource) Programs.**

Thank you for your time and participation!  
Kristen Kantor

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## APPENDIX B: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY

### *Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators' Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms*

#### ***Survey for Teachers***

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study will be to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis will be performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. The results will be used to determine if professional learning opportunities should exist for teachers at our local school to assist in helping prepare teachers to teach student subgroups populations.

Participation in the survey is strictly voluntary. Please complete the survey today through the link provided below. Your responses will remain anonymous to the researcher, and identifying information will be removed from the research study documents.

For the purpose of this research study, **a mixed-ability classroom will be defined as a general education classroom serving a heterogeneous group of learning needs, including students who receive additional services through ASD, ELL, FOCUS, and IRR (Resource) Programs.**

---

#### **Section A:**

Directions: Please read each statement and place a checkmark in only one box for each question that describes your analysis of your strengths and weaknesses as a general education teacher.

<b>Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) Inclusion</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
1. I know the characteristics of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD).				
2. I can plan lessons specific to the needs of specific ASD inclusion students with confidence.				
3. I know how to read an IEP and understand modifications needed for ASD students.				
4. I have training in behavior				

modification for ASD students.				
5. I have enough training to teach ASD students with supportive personnel in the room to assist the child.				

<b>English Language Learners (ELL) Inclusion</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
6. I know the stages of ELL language acquisition.				
7. I can plan lessons specific to the level of language acquisition of my ELL students.				
8. I know how to write an ELL Modification Plan independently.				
9. Deciding which AKS to modify is difficult for me.				
10. I have enough training to work with ELL students independently.				

<b>FOCUS (Gifted Program) Inclusion</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
11. I know the characteristic differences between bright and gifted students.				
12. I can plan lessons which encourage the higher level thinking and application skills needed by gifted students.				
13. I know how to enrich my gifted students within each of the content areas.				
14. I know how to assess my students for pacing purposes.				
15. I need additional training to best meet the needs of the gifted population in my classroom.				

<b>General Education Students</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
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16. I know effective general education instructional strategies and use a variety of visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and spatial elements in my lesson plans.				
17. I differentiate assignments for the different learning needs in my classroom.				
18. I use assessment in planning instruction of the content area subjects.				
19. I use small groups in my classroom to better meet individual learning needs.				
20. I use effective behavior modification for a general education classroom.				

<b>Inter-Related Resource (IRR) Inclusion</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
21. I know specific instructional strategies to teach Resource students.				
22. I can plan lessons specific to the needs of specific Resource inclusion students with confidence.				
23. I know how to read an IEP and understand modification needed for Resource students.				
24. I have training in behavior modification for Resource students.				
25. I have enough training to teach Resource students either with or without supportive personnel in the room to assist the child.				

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**Section B:**

26. I originally qualified to teach as a general education teacher through the following program:

- Bachelor's degree  
 Master's degree  
 Alternative Certification program  
 Other

27. I have the following number of years of experience teaching:

- Between 1-5 years  
 Between 6-10 years  
 Between 11-14 years  
 Between 15-19 years  
 Between 20-24 years  
 Between 25-29 years  
 30 years or more

	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>
28. I was prepared to teach in a mixed ability classroom serving a heterogeneous group of learning needs upon completion of my teacher preparation program.				

29. Do you think there is a relationship between skill gaps for teaching for mixed-ability classrooms and teacher retention?

Yes or No

Why or why not?

30. Which of the following area(s) would you most like to receive additional training?

- ASD Inclusion Teaching Strategies  
 ELL Inclusion Teaching Strategies  
 FOCUS (Gifted) Teaching Strategies  
 General Education Teaching Strategies  
 Resource Teaching Strategies

**Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey. Let's work together to close the achievement gap of our students here at Sugar Hill Elementary.**

## APPENDIX C: LOCAL SCHOOL APPROVAL COPY



### LOCAL SCHOOL RESEARCH REQUEST FORM

**Name of School:** Sugar Hill Elementary

**Name of Researcher:** Kristen Sparks Kantor

**Position or Grade:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade, General Education Teacher

#### **A. Research Project**

**a. Title:** Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators' Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed Ability Classrooms

**b. Statement of Problem and research question:**

##### **Problem Statement:**

Many teachers are leaving American public schools (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001; Voke, 2002). So, although we know that demographics, socioeconomic levels, school environment, salary, benefits, teacher background, and life circumstances are factors in the teacher retention problem (Billingsly, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003, May; Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Ferguson 1999; Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Potter, Swenk, Shrump, Smith, Weekly, 2001; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001), there is little research which considers teacher preparation for strengths and weaknesses in the skills needed to effectively teach in mixed ability classrooms. Therefore, it is not known if teachers find themselves prepared to meet the needs of the diverse population of learners in today's public school classrooms, nor is it known if there is a lack of preparedness for learning differences which affect teachers' desire to remain in teaching. Further analysis is also needed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. If this link can be established, then the field of education may come closer to its goal of closing the achievement gap in United States' students and may increase the retention rate of highly qualified teachers.





### LOCAL SCHOOL RESEARCH REQUEST FORM

**Name of School:** Sugar Hill Elementary

**Name of Researcher:** Kristen Sparks Kantor

**Position or Grade:** 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade, General Education Teacher

**A. Research Project**

**a. Title:** Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators' Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed Ability Classrooms

**b. Statement of Problem and research question:**

**Problem Statement:**

Many teachers are leaving American public schools (Inman & Marlow, 2004; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001; Voke, 2002). So, although we know that demographics, socioeconomic levels, school environment, salary, benefits, teacher background, and life circumstances are factors in the teacher retention problem (Billingsly, 1993; Darling-Hammond, 2003, May; Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, 2007; Ferguson 1999; Ingersoll, 2002, 2001; Inman & Marlow, 2004; Potter, Swenk, Shrump, Smith, Weckly, 2001; Recruitment and Retention Project, 2001), there is little research which considers teacher preparation for strengths and weaknesses in the skills needed to effectively teach in mixed ability classrooms. Therefore, it is not known if teachers find themselves prepared to meet the needs of the diverse population of learners in today's public school classrooms, nor is it known if there is a lack of preparedness for learning differences which affect teachers' desire to remain in teaching. Further analysis is also needed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. If this link can be established, then the field of education may come closer to its goal of closing the achievement gap in United States' students and may increase the retention rate of highly qualified teachers.

**Research Question:**

Is there a relationship between teachers' perceptions of strengths and weaknesses for teaching in a mixed ability classroom and its effect on their desire to stay in teaching?

**c. Subjects or population for the study:** General Education Teachers at Sugar Hill Elementary

**d. Reason for doing this research:**

Graduate Study at Walden University

Publication/Presentation

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**e. Dates research will be conducted:** April 1, 2010 to June 30, 2010

**B. All research and researchers must** a) Protect the rights and welfare of all human subjects, b) Inform students and/or parents that they have the right not to participate in the study, c) Adhere to board policies and applicable laws which govern the privacy and confidentiality of students records.

**C. This request applies to research conducted within and by local school personnel. All other research requests must be submitted to the Research & Evaluation Office according to the GCPS Research Proposal Format.**

**D. Principals ONLY need to approve Local School Research Requests. The copy sent to the Research & Evaluation Office is for filing purposes only. No further approval is necessary.**

**E. After approval by the principal, please forward a copy of this completed form to:**

<b>Via GCPS Courier:</b> Colin Martin GCPS - Research & Evaluation ISC	<b>Via US Mail:</b> Dr. Colin Martin, Executive Director Research & Evaluation Office Gwinnett County Public Schools 437 Old Peachtree Road, NW Suwanee, GA 30024	<b>Via Fax:</b> Colin Martin 678-301-7088
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 \_\_\_\_\_  
**Principal's Signature**

3-30-10  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
**Date of Approval**

## APPENDIX D: INITIAL ONLINE SURVEY INVITATION

**Dear Sugar Hill Elementary Teachers,**

If you are a general education, certified teacher, you are invited to participate in a doctoral study entitled, **Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms** by completing the linked online survey.

Through self-analysis of our strengths and weaknesses as educators, we will be able to better identify areas needing additional professional development. In this way, we can work together to close the achievement gaps which exist for our student population.

The survey will take approximately ten minutes of your time. If you choose to participate, please print the attached survey consent form for your records.

Thank you for your time and support. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at [kristen.kantor@gwinnett.k12.ga.us](mailto:kristen.kantor@gwinnett.k12.ga.us).

Gratefully,

Kristen Sparks Kantor

Please use the link below to access the survey.



<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BHWX9G6> SURVEY CONSENT FORM to print.docx

## APPENDIX E: ONLINE SURVEY INVITATION REMINDER

Dear Sugar Hill Elementary Teachers,

If you have already completed this survey, thank you for your participation! **If you have not** and are a general education, certified teacher, you are invited to participate in a doctoral study entitled, *Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classroom*. Please complete the linked on-line survey **by Friday, April 16, 2010 at 5:00 p.m.** The survey will take approximately five to ten minutes of your time. The consent form is attached for your records.

<http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/BHWX9G6>



SURVEY CONSENT FORM to print.docx

Thank you in advance,  
Kristen Kantor  
2nd Grade

## APPENDIX F: SURVEY CONSENT FORM

### Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms

You are invited to participate in a research study on teacher preparation. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before acting on this invitation to be in the study. Kristen Sparks Kantor, a doctoral candidate at Walden University, is conducting this study. The researcher is an employee of Gwinnett County Public Schools. This survey should take approximately ten minutes of your time.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study will be to analyze the perceived preparedness of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms, with the goal of closing the achievement gaps for students with learning differences. Further analysis will be performed to relate the perceived preparedness in skill to the topic of teacher retention.

The results will be used locally to determine if professional learning opportunities should exist for teachers at our local school to assist in helping prepare teachers to teach student subgroup populations.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, please complete the following survey which is accessible by the link attached in this email.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your participation only involves a survey, unless you choose to participate in the follow-up focus group interview. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Gwinnett County Public Schools. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw at any time later without affecting those relationships.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study and there are no short or long-term benefits to participating in this study. In the event you experience stress or anxiety during your participation in the study you may terminate your participation at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful. Refusing or discontinuing the survey involves no penalty.

#### **Compensation:**

There will be no compensation provided for your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report of this study that might be published, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Individual responses are not identifiable to the researcher.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Kristen Sparks Kantor. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [kristen.kantor@waldenu.edu](mailto:kristen.kantor@waldenu.edu). The Research Participation Advocate at Walden University is Dr. Leilani Endicott. You may contact her at 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210, if you have questions about your participation in this study.

**You may wish to print a copy of this form for your records.**

**Statement of Consent:**

Your completion of the following survey will indicate your consent if you choose to participate.

## APPENDIX G: CODED FOCUS GROUP DATA SAMPLE FOR QUESTION 1

*Question 1: Which skills needed for teaching ASD students could be better developed in S  
Elementary School teachers for more effective inclusion?*

One of the main needs emerging from this question was the need for training in the characteristics and special needs of students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Teaching the general educators how to recognize signs and characteristics of ASD was also discussed:

Interviewee F: I think for me it was being more aware of diagnosis, what to look for when I started having a thought that this child might have that. We have experts in our school, but I have to really go digging. I want to know what we are looking for, what are the signs, what do I have to chart, what behaviors am I trying to document. I really had to dig deep on my own to find out how to help this child. So for me, that was important.

Interviewee B: As far as ASD, I don't really know what to expect academically. I have never taught them before.

Additionally, informal training through experience and environmental support was praised and acknowledged for modeling effective reactions and interactions with ASD students. The interaction of the general education staff, the special education staff, and the parents was considered important. The teachers considered this department the most effective in meeting the needs of general education teachers in collaboration.

Interviewee C: I would say experience, because you don't know. We haven't had any training on how to handle it, to be quite honest. Ummmm...except actually being thrown in there and experiencing it. I've found that I learned the most from watching the paraps who are in the room with them or the teachers who mainstream in with them in the classroom. Just watching how they handle it when they get upset about something and just learning how to read their reactions...Now, it's almost the end of the year and it's very obvious, but I didn't know what to look for at first. You know, I didn't know what to do... so, it has been helpful watching what they did. For me, that's how I learned.

The group agreed that communication as children age and change grade levels needs to be improved.

Interviewee F: It sounds like it would be important for teachers who have gotten to know their students well to make a list of triggers and behaviors to watch so you don't have to spend a quarter of a year finding out.

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee A: More of a continuous record in formal and informal records.

Group: Agreement.

The concept of comfort in teaching certain student populations was identified at the beginning of the interview. The group indicated that professional knowledge, support, and experience led to comfort in working with student subgroup populations.

Interviewee C: When looking at the different groups today, wouldn't you say that the ASD program is probably one of the best in coming in and providing support for us?

Group: Agreement.

Interviewee B: I've never taught ASD, and I'm counting on the paraprofessionals to help me, teach me, and that I can learn from them to get through it.

Interviewee C: The ASD teachers and paraprofessionals are really good at coming and showing us what to do and are very patient with us and understanding that we're learning. They make us feel comfortable.

Interviewee E: I think that's where all of these are related, because if you aren't comfortable teaching populations, then you're not comfortable having them in your class. And it goes along with teacher retention when you start realizing how many different types of students are out there. You start questioning whether you can do it.



## APPENDIX H: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW CONSENT FORM

### Closing the Achievement Gap:

#### General Educators Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms

#### **Consent Form**

You are invited to participate in a research study on teacher preparation. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before acting on this invitation to be in the study. This focus group interview should take approximately one hour of your time upon arrival at the interview site.

Kristen Sparks Kantor, a doctoral candidate at Walden University, is conducting this study. The researcher is an employee of Gwinnett County Public Schools.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this sequential mixed methods study will be to analyze the perceived strengths and weaknesses of general education teachers for teaching in mixed-ability classrooms with the goal of closing the achievement gap for students with learning differences. Further analysis will be performed to relate the perceived strengths and weaknesses in skill to the teachers' intentions to continue teaching in public school, general education classrooms. The results will be used to determine if professional learning opportunities should exist for teachers at our local school to assist in helping prepare teachers to teach student subgroup populations.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in a group interview on May 4, 2010. The interview will be audio recorded so the researcher can code and analyze the data.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Gwinnett County Public Schools. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw at any time later without affecting those relationships.

#### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study and there are no short or long-term benefits to participating in this study. In the event you experience stress or anxiety during your participation in the study you may terminate your participation at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful. Refusing or discontinuing the survey involves no penalty.

#### **Compensation:**

There will be no compensation provided for your participation in this study.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report of this study that might be published, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be kept in a locked file, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Kristen Sparks Kantor. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact the researcher at [kristen.kantor@waldenu.edu](mailto:kristen.kantor@waldenu.edu). The Research Participation Advocate at Walden University is Dr. Leilani Endicott. You may contact her at 1-800-925-3368, extension 1210, if you have questions about your participation in this study.

**You will receive a copy of this form from the researcher.**

**Statement of Consent:**

Your completion of the following focus group interview will indicate your consent if you choose to participate.

Printed Name of Participant

Participant Signature

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Signature of Researcher

*Kristen Sparks Kantor*

## APPENDIX I: FOCUS GROUP INVITATION

**Dear Sugar Hill Elementary Teachers,**

If you are a general education, certified teacher, you are invited to participate in a doctoral study entitled, **Closing the Achievement Gap: General Educators Self Analysis of Preparedness to Teach in Mixed-ability Classrooms** by participating in a focus group interview in Kristen Kantor's classroom on May 4, 2010 from 3:15-4:15 P.M.

You will receive the interview guide in advance so that you know what the conversation outline will be before starting. A consent form will be available at the time of the interview. Participation is completely voluntary. Snacks and water will be available for your comfort since this interview takes place after school hours.

Through self-analysis of our strengths and weaknesses as educators, we will be able to better identify areas needing additional professional development. In this way, we can work together to close the achievement gaps which exist for our student population.

Thank you for your time and support. If you have any questions or comments, please contact me at [kristen.kantor@gwinnett.k12.ga.us](mailto:kristen.kantor@gwinnett.k12.ga.us).

Gratefully,

Kristen Sparks Kantor

## CURRICULUM VITAE

### **KRISTEN SPARKS KANTOR**

**4608 Arbor Crest Place, Suwanee, GA 30024**

#### **Experience**

**2006-present**

**1998-2004      *Teacher, Grades 2, 3, 4, 5 Gwinnett County Public Schools*      **Atlanta, GA****

- Planned, taught, and evaluated an independent classroom according to Gwinnett County Public School Academic Knowledge and Skills curriculum requirements
- Served on the Leadership Committee as Grade Chair, an administration/teacher liaison
- Conducted weekly grade level meetings with agendas
- Maintained, interpreted, and used student testing data to drive teaching methodology
- Differentiated instruction based on student assessments for remediation and enrichment purposes
- Consistently used technology to teach and reinforce concepts
- Analyzed and interpreted student standardized testing data for Special Education and Gifted programs
- Participated regularly in student RTI and IEP meetings to develop plans for student improvement
- Communicated regularly and effectively with parents via website, weekly newsletters, and conferences
- Served on team of teachers and administrators to enhance community relations and increase student and family participation both inside and outside the classroom
- Served on various school committees: Discipline, Technology, Media, Literacy, Math, Sunshine, CARE TEAM/Counseling

**1998      *Teacher, Grades 6-8 Math and Science Brandon Hall School*      **Atlanta, GA****

- Provided individualized and group instruction for students with severe learning and behavioral disorders
- Enforced strict system of action responsibility with anecdotal data
- Maintained academic, behavioral, and special education records

**1995-1997      *Teacher, Grade 4 Wyoming Seminary College Preparatory School*      **Kingston, PA****

- Planned, taught, and evaluated an independent classroom
- Maintained academic accountability with extensive progress checks at scheduled intervals
- Produced students' annual grade level play on India, coordinating parent volunteers, costuming, and set design

- Coached Junior Varsity Tennis-Grades 9-12
- Developed and integrated mini units using a literature based approach for multi-age groups during summer school sessions

**1995 Elementary Substitute Teacher, Gwinnett County Public Schools Atlanta, GA**

- Developed and adjusted lesson plans to meet unforeseen classroom situations
- Learned the importance of flexibility in teaching

**1993-1994 Teacher, Full Time Internship, Grade 4 Cunningham School Milton, MA**

- Planned, taught, and evaluated all subjects for students in a **French Immersion Program**
- Provided individualized instruction for students with language barriers
- Designed and implemented academic and behavioral intervention for at-risk students

**Relevant Experience:**

**1995-1997 Dormitory Faculty Wyoming Seminary College Preparatory School Kingston, PA**

- Maintained accountability and support in an upper school residential community consisting of students from over 30 different countries

**1994 Summer Art Director and Teacher Northside United Methodist Church Atlanta, GA**

- Developed and coordinated art projects for Rise and Shine Campers Grades 1-5

**1986-1992 Summer Swim Team Coach and Private Lesson Instructor Atlanta, GA**

- Coached summer teams with 80-120 swimmers
- taught private and group lessons
- Coordinated and ran team and league meets

**Examples of Professional Development:**

**1995-2011 Enriched Teaching and Academic Processes including the following courses and seminars:**

“Challenging Your Gifted Students”, “Increasing Spelling Achievement”, University of Chicago’s “Everyday Math”, “Creating an Outstanding Fourth Grade Program”, “Motivating Students: The Key to Success in Teaching Math Grades 1-6”, “Focus on Dyslexia”, “Brain Based Learning”, “Opening Eyes to Mathematics”, “Introduction to the Exceptional Child”, “INTECH Training I and II”, “Steven Covey: Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, Social Studies Integration, Science Curriculum Implementation, Love and Logic, ELL Learning Strategies, extensive Reader’s and Writer’s Workshop coursework, The Daily Five methodology, research, administration and leadership theory and application

**Community Service:**

**Girl Scouts of America**

- Assistant Leader Troop 1058 Sugar Hill Elementary

**Rollins Alumni Network (R.A.N.)**

- Representing member for Rollins College in the Atlanta area for interviewing and informational purposes

**The Junior League of Gwinnett and North Fulton Counties- “Women Building Better Communities”***Finance Committee:*

- Yearly Solicitation of financial contributions and auction item donations
- Community vendor sales and public relations
- Researched and analyzed local needs with community leaders for new project startup

*Community Committee:*

- Foster Care Support Foundation, Roswell
- Various yearly projects relating to women and children, providing support and resources

**Mount Pisgah Christian School- PALS (Parents Are Loyal Supporters), 2004-2006***Barnes and Noble Book Fair Committee*

- Raised \$12,000 for student and teacher resources
- Coordinated groups of student, parent, and teacher volunteers for daily events

*Preschool Room Parent*

- Worked to coordinate special events for children and families

**Education:****2006-2011****Walden University, Ed.D. - Administrative Leadership for Teaching and Learning**

Research interests:

teacher retention, teacher preparation, inclusion preparedness, differentiation  
ABD as of October 2008**1994****Simmons College, M.A.T. Boston, MA**

Master of Arts in Teaching - Elementary Education -Dean’s List

Georgia Certificate, Type “T-5”, Elementary Education P-8; Massachusetts Standard  
Elementary Certification Grades 1-6 # 316624 - Life Validity**1992****Rollins College, B. A.****Winter Park, FL**

M.A.T. Program Post Graduate Studies - Elementary Education

B.A. Psychology ‘92

Suicide Intervention Training and Hotline Experience; Child/Adolescent Crisis Training; Rape  
Response Hotline Training and Experience; Drugs/Addictions Diagnostic and Treatment Work  
involved with Orlando treatment facilities; Grant Writing Proficiency