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Teachers' Perceptions When Working with Students Who Have Mild Intellectual Disabilities

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This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

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MA, Wayne State University, 1991

BA, University of Windsor, 1989

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Psychology

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Abstract

A persistent problem in special education was the limited research on how teachers perceived and supported students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in junior grade classrooms. While inclusive education has been widely studied, few studies have addressed the specific instructional experiences of teachers working with this population. The purpose of this study was to explore teachers' perceptions of students who have MID in junior grades. A generic qualitative design was used to gain insight into teachers' experiences and perspectives. Guided by the self-determination theoretical framework (SDT), the study explored how teachers responded to students' needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness in inclusive settings. Three research questions focused on teachers' perceptions of students who have had MID, factors that influenced these perceptions, and how SDT principles were reflected in instructional practices. Data were collected through 11 semi-structured interviews with educators who had experience teaching students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID), offering valuable insights into inclusive classroom practices. These interviews showed how teachers' beliefs were shaped by five themes: Understanding Individual Needs, Challenges in the Classroom, Collaboration and Support, Social Connections, and Empowerment and Motivation. Insights from this study may contribute to positive social change in the development of professional training, support for stronger school-family collaboration, and inclusive practices that support all learners. These efforts may also increase academic engagement, promote autonomy, and reduce stigma for students with MID.

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Dedication

The dissertation is dedicated to my mother, whose unwavering belief in the transformative power of higher education has been my guiding light throughout this academic journey. Her resilience, wisdom, and enduring encouragement has fueled my pursuit of knowledge at an early age, and throughout my life span, and for that, I am profoundly grateful. To my three beautiful children, William, Jessa, and Jillian, your love, patience and understanding during the challenging times and joyful moments alike has been my source of strength. This work stands as a tribute to the values instilled by my mother and the boundless inspiration provided by my children.

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To my family, whose unwavering support has been the cornerstone of my success. I am profoundly grateful. My heartfelt thanks go to my mother for her enduring belief in the power of education and for being a constant source of inspiration. To my three beautiful children, William, Jessa, and Jillian, your love, patience, and understanding has sustained me through the challenges of this academic endeavor.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

The focus of this qualitative research study was teacher perceptions concerning students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in the junior grades. I addressed factors that shaped these perceptions and assessed their profound implications for educational experiences and inclusion of students with MID. This research was prompted by recognition that ways teachers perceived and approached their roles in terms of teaching students with MID directly impacted quality of education these students received and their sense of belonging within educational systems. This study was needed for more inclusive and equitable educational environments that aligned with evolving educational emphasis on diversity and inclusivity.

Potential social implications of this research were significant, including improved inclusion, better educational outcomes, reduced stigma, and more comprehensive professional development for educators. By exploring factors that influenced teachers' perceptions, the intent was to develop effective strategies and interventions to foster inclusion of students with MID. This chapter includes an introduction, background, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, conceptual framework, nature of the study, definitions, assumptions, scope and delimitations, limitations, significance, and a summary.

Background

Literature involving MID highlighted challenges faced by individuals with slower intellectual abilities and adaptive behavior challenges. Kitamura et al. (2022) defined MID as a condition where individuals experience difficulties in terms of learning and

applying academic skills that are similar to their peers. These challenges include comprehension, basic academic skills, problem-solving, communication, and relationship development (Lee et al., 2023; Patel et al., 2020). The impact of these challenges extended beyond academic performance, potentially influencing overall learning experiences of individuals with MID (Patel et al., 2020).

Despite significant research on special education and inclusive practices, there was a noticeable gap in literature regarding teacher perceptions and effective support strategies for students with MID in junior grades. There remains a lack of information about how teachers specifically perceived and approached students in junior grades during primary education.

Existing literature primarily focused on understanding the broader scope of special education and inclusive practices that emphasized risks and benefits for students with disabilities in mainstream classrooms. Although studies have explored teacher perceptions in special education, there was limited knowledge on how teachers specifically perceived and approached students with MID in the junior grades or primary education. This gap raised questions regarding unique challenges faced by students in this context and targeted strategies to enhance their educational experiences.

The identified gap in knowledge involved teacher perceptions when working with students with MID in junior grades. Existing studies have not thoroughly explored specific dynamics within this educational context, leaving unanswered questions regarding instructional strategies, expectations, and interactions. Addressing this gap was

essential for tailoring interventions that addressed unique needs of students with MID and fostered more supportive and inclusive educational environments.

Addressing this knowledge gap was imperative for several reasons. Firstly, junior grades of primary education are a crucial developmental stage where foundational skills are established (Wang & Chen, 2020). A more focused exploration of teacher perceptions in this context informed targeted interventions that influenced unique needs of students with MID during this critical phase of their educational journey. Secondly, by understanding complexities of teacher perceptions, policymakers and educators collaboratively develop strategies that foster more supportive and inclusive environments for these students. Without nuanced perspectives on teacher perceptions and factors that influenced them, efforts to create educational settings where students with MID can thrive are often insufficient.

I aimed to contribute to bridging this gap by offering a more context-specific understanding of teacher perceptions and effective support strategies for students with MID in junior grades. By gaining insights regarding complexities of teacher perceptions, policymakers and educators collaboratively develop strategies to create more supportive and inclusive environments for these students that ultimately shape effective educational practices and policies. Therefore, this research was imperative as it will enhance educational and social wellbeing of students with MID in mainstream classrooms during their educational and formative years. I addressed factors that shaped these perceptions and profound implications for educational experiences and inclusion of students with MID. This research was prompted by recognition that ways teachers perceived and

approached their roles in terms of teaching students with MID directly impacted quality of education these students received and sense of belonging within educational systems. This study was driven by more inclusive and equitable educational environments that align with evolving educational emphasis on diversity and inclusivity.

Problem Statement

This study involved exploring factors that influenced perceptions among teachers regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades. Within the discipline of special education and inclusive practices, this research problem was paramount due to its current relevance and significance.

Evidence of consensus regarding the current, relevant, and significant nature of the research problem was prevalent within literature on special education and inclusive practices. This consensus was grounded in empirical evidence that highlighted substantial impacts of teacher perceptions on educational experiences and outcomes of students with MID.

The research problem was framed within the context of recent findings while also challenging previous assumptions involving specificity of teacher perceptions across different grade levels. Aldosari (2022) emphasized the need for a more nuanced exploration of teacher perceptions within junior grades and stated generalized teacher perceptions did not apply uniformly across all grade levels.

By focusing on specific teacher perceptions within junior grades, I aimed to provide timely and relevant insights to inform policy, teacher training, and classroom

practices. I addressed a crucial gap in literature and offered a tailored framework that will enhance learning experiences of students with MID in junior grades.

The research problem is framed within the discipline of special education and inclusive practices. Recognizing unique challenges faced by students with MID, I aimed to contribute to the knowledge base within this discipline and offer insights that informed interventions and strategies that are tailored to individual needs of students in junior grades.

This study is both timely and relevant within the discipline of special education and involves drawing on recent research to build a nuanced understanding of teacher perceptions in junior grades. I aimed to identify a critical gap in literature, emphasize the need for context-specific insights, and promote more inclusive and equitable educational environments for students with MID.

Purpose of the Study

The research paradigm for this qualitative study encompassed a self-determination theory perspective. The purpose of this study was to explore perceptions among teachers toward teaching students with MID in junior grades. By exploring underlying factors associated with these perceptions, I aimed to fill existing gap in knowledge. Research questions guided the study in exploring prevailing perceptions of teachers as well as identifying factors that contributed to their perceptions. Ultimately, my purpose was to inform development of effective strategies and interventions to improve teacher perceptions while enhancing educational experiences and inclusion of students with MID in junior grades.

I described and explored teacher perceptions by addressing their beliefs, attitudes, and practices when instructing students with MID. I aimed to describe these perceptions and rich insights regarding nuances of teacher-student interactions within junior grades. I sought to address factors that shaped these perceptions involving underlying dynamics and influences that affected teaching of students with MID. I strived to offer holistic and nuanced perspectives regarding teacher perceptions, thus contributing to an enriching understanding of educational experiences of students with MID.

Perceptions included teachers' beliefs about abilities and potential of students with MID, their teaching methods, attitudes toward inclusion, and challenges they encountered in classrooms. I highlighted underlying psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness that shaped teacher-student interactions and provided a comprehensive view of how teacher perceptions influenced educational experiences of students with MID in junior grades. Teacher perceptions directly affect fulfillment of psychological needs and academic and social wellbeing of students with MID.

Research Questions

The study's central research questions were:

RQ1: How did teachers describe perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades?

RQ2: What factors did teachers describe that influenced their perceptions when working with students who have MID in junior grades?

RQ3: How did teachers describe concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of the SDT when supporting junior-grade students with MID?

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation that framed this study was the self-determination theory (SDT), which is a psychological theory that focused on the innate human need for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The SDT was used to understand how autonomy, competence, and relatedness shaped teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward instructing students with MID. Autonomy involves the need for individuals to make choices and have control over their actions and decisions. Competence involves feeling efficient and capable in terms of one's actions. In the context of this study, this was related to how teachers perceived their ability to successfully educate and support students with MID. Lastly, relatedness involves the desire for meaningful social connections and interactions. For teachers, relatedness manifests in terms of their perceptions regarding how well they establish rapport with students with MID and create supportive and inclusive classroom environments.

By understanding how autonomy, competence, and relatedness influenced teacher perceptions, I aimed to gain insights regarding complex dynamics within classrooms, especially within the context of junior grades. Interview questions were designed to elicit responses regarding teachers' experiences related to autonomy, competence, and relatedness during interactions with students with MID. Data analysis involved exploring these themes to address how autonomy, competence, and relatedness impacted teacher perceptions and learning experiences of students with MID in junior grades.

Nature of the Study

The key concept and phenomenon under exploration was teacher perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades. I specifically focused on autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

A generic qualitative approach was selected, and data collection involved in-depth semi-structured interviews with educators who experienced teaching students with MID in junior grades. I selected the generic qualitative research design due to the exploratory and descriptive nature of research questions. The design was appropriate due to its open-ended and flexible approach, which enabled nuanced insights and exploration of complex phenomena. This design was flexible in terms of adapting research processes based on findings facilitated in-depth exploration of the multifaceted nature of teacher perceptions. This approach was used for participants to express their perceptions, share experiences, and articulate factors influencing their attitudes and practices in classrooms.

I used thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring themes and patterns related to teacher perceptions, autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Iterative nature of analysis involved multiple rounds of coding and member checks to assist in confirming reliability and validity of findings. Thematic analysis was suitable to address teacher perceptions and identify patterns and themes that informed subsequent research and interventions in the field of disabilities in special education.

Definitions

Autonomy: Psychological need for individuals to have a sense of purpose, choice, and control, in addition to self-regulation of their actions and ability to make decisions. In the context of this study, autonomy referred to teachers' sense of independence and empowerment when adapting their teaching methods and learning practices to cater to needs of students with MID.

Competence: Individual innate psychological needs to feel efficient and capable in terms of actions and pursuits. In the context of this study, competence refers to teachers' perceptions of their proficiency in terms of educating and supporting students with MID. It involves confidence in their ability to provide effective instruction, creating positive learning environments, and achieve educational goals. Teachers who perceive themselves as competent in this context are likely to feel capable of meeting unique individual needs of students with MID and support their academic and social development (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID): Condition that is characterized by significantly below-average intellectual functioning (typically measured by an IQ score between 70 and 79) along with limitations involving adaptive behaviors. Individuals with MID have cognitive issues within a defined range and require support and accommodations to participate fully in educational and daily activities.

Relatedness: Psychological need where individuals seek meaningful social connections, interactions, and relationships with others. In reference to this study, relatedness involves teachers' perceptions of their ability to establish positive and

supportive relationships with students with MID. It involves teacher-student interactions, sense of connection and belonging that students experience in classrooms, and overall social environments. Teachers who foster a sense of relatedness created classroom atmospheres in which students feel valued, included, and part of supportive educational communities (Deci & Ryan, 2017).

Assumptions

In this study, assumptions were critical to research.

I assumed the qualitative research design was suitable for exploring subjective and context-focused nature of teacher perceptions. Each assumption played a unique and essential role in shaping the study's approach and ensuring its validity and relevance.

The ontological assumption, grounded in constructivism, was vital for acknowledging that the reality of teacher perceptions was not objective but rather subjective and context-focused. This recognition was essential for understanding how teachers perceived and interacted with students with mild intellectual disabilities, as it emphasized the perception of their reality and its influence on their attitudes and practices in the classroom (Moroi, 2021).

The epistemological assumption of relativism was crucial for acknowledging that knowledge in this context is context-bound and that multiple, diverse realities exist. This perspective allowed for the exploration of various viewpoints and highlighted that there was no single objective truth when it came to teacher perceptions. This understanding is pivotal for capturing the complexity and diversity of these perceptions (Moroi, 2021).

The axiological assumption, recognizing that researchers hold values and biases, was essential for ensuring transparency and reflexivity in the study. By acknowledging and addressing these values, the research-maintained credibility and addressed potential bias in the research design, data collection, and analysis (Moroi, 2021).

The methodological assumption of using research methods within a qualitative research design was well-equipped for exploring the subjective and context-focused nature of teacher perceptions. The commitment to in-depth exploration, context-specific understanding, and a flexible, iterative research process aligned with the chosen qualitative paradigm and were indispensable for capturing the multifaceted and nuanced aspects of teacher perceptions (Moroi, 2021).

All these assumptions collectively provided the foundational framework for the study, and they were interdependent in ensuring the research's meaningfulness. They aligned with the qualitative paradigm's emphasis on understanding human experience and realities in their natural context and were essential for the successful execution of the study. However, it is important to acknowledge that these assumptions while widely believed and accepted in qualitative research, cannot be demonstrated to be true (Moroi, 2021).

Firstly, the constructivist ontological assumption which posited that reality is constructed by individuals through their lived experiences and interpretation was fundamental to the study. The concept that individuals constructed their own reality was not empirically proven as an absolute truth. Secondly, the epistemological assumption of relativism, which acknowledged that knowledge is context-bound and multiple realities

exist, aligned with recognizing that there is no single, objective reality. However, the belief in relativism and the existence of multiple relatives cannot be empirically demonstrated in an absolute sense. Thirdly, the axiological assumption recognized that researchers held values and biases. While it is essential to acknowledge these values for transparency and reflexivity in the research process, it cannot be empirically demonstrated that researchers' values and biases have not duly influenced the study. This was a belief based on self-awareness and ethical considerations rather than a provable fact. Lastly, the methodological assumption in the study relied on qualitative research methods, which were well-suited for exploring the subjective and context-dependent nature of teacher perceptions. However, these methods were grounded in the belief that individuals constructed their understanding of their experiences and interpretations of the world. This belief was foundational to the chosen approach but was not empirically proven as an absolute truth (Moroi, 2021).

In summary, these philosophical and methodological assumptions were integral to the study but were not demonstrated to be true. They represented accepted perspectives within qualitative research and guided the study's approach, even though they were grounded in a belief about the nature of reality, knowledge, values, and research methods rather than empirical-based facts. These assumptions were necessary to establish a solid methodological framework that ensured the study's orientation was well-suited to explore the teachers' perceptions of the world within the specific context of educating students with mild intellectual disabilities. It also assisted in understanding human experiences and realities, making them essential for the study's meaningful and successful execution.

Assumptions were necessary to establish a solid methodological framework that ensured study orientation was adequate to explore teachers' perceptions within the specific context of educating students with MID.

Scope and Delimitations

The study's population included teachers with experience instructing students with MID in junior grades. I excluded other populations, such as students or parents, in order to maintain the study's focus and depth.

Limitations

This study had limitations. One key limitation was potential lack of generalizability of findings. Since this was a descriptive qualitative study, my primary focus was providing in-depth insights and understanding specific contexts. Therefore, results are not readily applicable to other settings or populations. Findings were not applicable to different disability categories. To address this limitation, I acknowledged the content-specific nature of findings and emphasized the need for further research in varied settings.

There were issues related to dependability and consistency of findings. Reliance on qualitative data affected dependability of findings. To address this limitation, I ensured transparency during data collection and analysis processes via detailed descriptions of coding procedures, intercoder reliability checks, and data triangulation. Additionally, I used member checking to affirm study dependability.

Researcher bias and bias potentially influenced study outcomes. Researcher bias may have emerged due to preconceived notions or perspectives which affected data

interpretation. To mitigate this, I employed reflexive journaling. Participant bias was an issue due to participants feeling compelled to provide socially-desirable responses. To address this, trust with participants was established, which assured confidentiality and created nonjudgmental environments for open and honest sharing. Reasonable measures to address limitations included clear and transparent descriptions of the research design and methodology, along with in-depth accounts of how potential biases were acknowledged and managed. Additionally, emphasizing context-specific exploration rather than generalizability helped in terms of managing expectations and guiding future research in similar contexts.

Significance

This study included information about teacher perceptions concerning students with MID in junior grades. By exploring nuanced aspects of these perceptions and factors that influenced them, the study contributed knowledge regarding dynamics in inclusive classrooms. This informed development of targeted professional development programs and evidence-based strategies for teachers that enhance learning experiences of students with MID. It emphasized unique challenges and opportunities in junior grades, thereby advancing knowledge in the discipline via insights that can be applied in diverse educational settings.

Moreover, the study advanced practice by providing teachers and educational administrators with practical recommendations and strategies for creating more inclusive and supportive classroom environments for students with MID. It guided development of interventions to promote positive attitudes and practices. This will lead to more effective

teaching and better outcomes for students with MID. Additionally, by emphasizing importance of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in terms of teacher-student interactions, I promoted implementation of teaching methods that foster students' sense of autonomy and competence, as well as development of supportive relationships. These contributions result in enhanced practice that directly benefits learning experiences of students with MID.

Study findings inform policies and guidelines for professional development and training programs for teachers which emphasize the significance of addressing teacher perceptions when working with students with MID in junior grades. It contributes to establishment of evidence-based approaches to support inclusive education which aligned with broader educational policy goals of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. The study's emphasis on understanding specific context of junior grades and challenges teachers face during this critical period will guide development of targeted policies that address unique needs of this student population.

In terms of implications for positive social change, the study contributes to reducing stigma associated with intellectual disabilities and fostering more inclusive societies. Enhancing educational experiences of students with MID and promoting more equitable educational systems which align with overarching goals of promoting social inclusion and diversity improve teacher perceptions and practices and lead to students with MID feeling more valued and included within school communities, in addition to reduced social stigma and more inclusive societies. Study results will lead to positive

social change by fostering more accepting and inclusive communities that value diverse abilities and needs of all individuals.

Summary

Chapter 1 includes an introduction to this qualitative study that emphasized the critical importance of exploring teacher perceptions concerning students with MID in junior grades. I addressed the background of the study, problem statement, purpose of the study, research questions, theoretical foundation, and nature of the study. I defined key terms, outlined assumptions, and discussed scope, limitations, and significance of research. Finally, I discussed possible impacts of the study on discipline, practice, and guidelines in terms of advancing knowledge in special education and fostering positive social change.

Chapter 2 includes a comprehensive literature review. Literature search strategies are identified, in addition to the conceptual framework and key concepts. The chapter concludes with a summary and conclusions, key findings, and central themes and research questions.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Teachers have a substantial influence on young minds and nurturing a love for learning. However, there was a gap in existing literature regarding students with MID in junior grades. This chapter includes a literature review with information regarding teachers' perceptions of working with students who have MID and factors influencing perceptions about this topic. I addressed perceptions and development of effective strategies and interventions to enhance educational experiences. My ultimate goal was to foster more compassionate and equitable educational environments for all students.

Early educational experiences profoundly influence child development, with teachers playing a pivotal role in terms of shaping these experiences (Weiss et al., 2018). However, students with MID are at risk of experiencing marginalization and inadequate classroom support (Heiman & Avissar, 2022). Therefore, it is imperative teachers' attitudes and perceptions are explored regarding these students, ensuring they receive necessary attention and support for academic and social growth.

Chapter 2 includes a restatement of the problem and purpose followed by a thorough review of pertinent literature that establishes the problem's significance. Next, I address search strategies to gather literature, introduce the theoretical framework, and comprehensively explore key concepts. By exploring this phenomenon using a literature review, I determined how to enhance educational experiences for this specific student population.

Literature Search Strategy

To conduct this comprehensive literature review, a systematic search strategy was employed. The process began with identification of the following keywords: *teacher bias*, *teachers' perceptions*, *teacher training*, *teacher beliefs*, *mindset*, *appraisal of achievement*, *feedback*, *attitude*, *attribution*, *challenging behavior*, *emotions*, *observation*, *teachers*, *attitudes toward ID*, *intellectual disability*, *special education teachers*, *training*, and *support*.

I used the following databases: SAGE Journals, Google Scholar, APA Francis Online, ERIC & Education Source, PsycArticles, PsycInfo, Thoreau, and ProQuest Dissertations. Additionally, to further facilitate precision of searches and ensure pertinent material, I used the Walden University Library and training modules.

Sources were published between 2017 and 2022 in order to determine the most recent and pertinent studies in the field. To efficiently manage and organize information, Zotero software was used. This ensured relevant sources were collected.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation for this study the SDT, which was developed by Deci and Ryan in 1985 and expanded in 2000. The SDT is a psychological framework that involves exploring intrinsic motivation and psychological needs that motivate human behaviors. It emphasizes individuals have three fundamental psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

In the context of teaching students with MID, autonomy involved creating environments where students make choices based on their abilities, fostering self-

confidence and self-determination. Competence involves designing learning opportunities for students to embrace success and build on their strengths, thereby promoting a positive sense of capability. Relatedness involves the importance of creating supportive and inclusive classroom environments by facilitating peer interactions and building strong teacher-student relationships (Garrels & Palmer, 2020).

The SDT is used to explore intrinsic motivation and psychological needs that motivate behaviors (Ajudaya, 2021). These three psychological needs were explored to better understand their significance in terms of cultivating well-rounded learners. When psychological needs are fulfilled, individuals adopt intrinsic motivation, engaging in activities willingly and pursuing personal growth and wellbeing (Garrels & Palmer, 2020).

The SDT has been extensively applied in similar contexts involving teaching students with MID. Teachers who provide choices and acknowledge students' perspectives foster greater autonomy and intrinsic motivation among students with disabilities (Monacis et al., 2023). Additionally, strategies for enhancing competence, such as differentiated instruction and scaffolded support, promote academic skills and self-efficacy among students with MID (Smith et al., 2021). Furthermore, promoting social connections and sense of belonging through inclusive classroom practices and peer-mediated intervention enhances social relationships and peer acceptance among students with disabilities (Margas et al., 2023).

I chose the SDT due to its relevance in terms of understanding how teachers' perceptions may either support or hinder fulfillment of psychological needs among

students with MID. By applying the SDT, I aimed to address how teachers enhanced psychological needs that foster intrinsic motivation and positive learning experiences.

I sought to adapt and apply the theory to potentially underserved student population. My purpose was to contribute to a more detailed understanding of how to create supportive and motivating learning environments for students with MID, which requires tailoring autonomy, competence, and relatedness to their unique needs.

In the context of the current study focusing on teacher's perceptions of educating students with mild intellectual disabilities in the junior grades, self-determination theory offered a valuable framework for exploration. By applying SDT principles, the study explored how teachers supported the autonomy, competence, and relatedness needs of these students impacted their academic experiences and overall mental health and well-being. Acknowledging the role of autonomy in empowering students with mild intellectual disabilities to make choices and decisions related to their learning revealed the potential impact on their motivation and self-esteem. Furthermore, exploring the teachers' efforts to promote students' competence and providing appropriate challenges fostered a positive and inclusive learning environment for these students, helping them develop a sense of efficacy and confidence in their abilities.

By drawing on the principles of self-determination theory, the study proposed to unravel the factors that influenced teacher perceptions towards students with mild intellectual disabilities. It explored whether teachers who viewed these students as capable and autonomous learners were more likely to provide them with meaningful learning opportunities, positive reinforcement, and nurturing feedback. Moreover,

understanding the relevance of relatedness in creating a supportive and inclusive learning environment helped researchers assess how teachers' interactions and social support impacted the student's sense of belonging within the school community. Through the lens of SDT, the study sought to adopt deeper insights into the complexities of teacher perceptions, their instructional practices, and the potential implications for the academic and emotional well-being of students with mild intellectual disabilities in the junior grades as well as their attitudes and practices when working with this population.

By developing interview questions and follow-up questions that aligned with the research questions and self-determination theory, and by conducting a thorough data analysis with these principles in mind, valuable insights were gained into how teachers perceived and implemented autonomy competence, and relatedness in relation to their teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities. This approach helped build an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing teachers' perceptions and their implications for creating supportive learning environments.

The SDT was a valuable framework for understanding teacher perceptions and instructional practices concerning students with MID. By applying SDT principles, the study aimed to unravel the factors influencing teacher perceptions and their implications for creating supportive learning environments for these students. This approach helped build an in-depth understanding of the factors influencing teachers' perceptions and their implications for creating supportive learning environments.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

This literature review was centered on exploring how teachers' perceptions affected their interactions with students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades. It explored various key concepts related to this topic including constructs of interest and methodology, support, teacher perceptions/attitudes, positive attitudes, communication support, inclusion, and mindset. The review provided a research-supported analysis of these concepts to understand their implication for the education of students with mild intellectual disabilities.

Constructs of Interest and Methodology

In synthesizing the literature revolving around the constructs of interest and methodology related to teacher perceptions, attitudes, and support for students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades, a comprehensive overview emerged. The studies cited utilized both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and explored various dimensions of this complex and multifaceted topic.

DeKraker-Pauw et al. (2017) employed qualitative methods, specifically in-depth interviews, that delved into teacher mindsets regarding intelligence and their impact on feedback and evaluation processes. Shogren et al. (2021), on the other hand, utilized quantitative surveys that measured teacher attitudes and beliefs. This diversity in methodologies reflected the need for a holistic understanding of teacher perceptions, combining the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative assessments.

Support

The theme of support for students with intellectual disabilities from an educational context was well-explored in the literature. Bellini and Aknin (2020) emphasized the critical role of continuous professional development in enhancing teachers' proficiency, while Coelho and Lopes (2019) highlighted collaborative planning as a factor enabling effective lesson planning. Wang and Chen (2020) stressed the importance of ample resources and assistance, including access to assistive technology and competent support personnel. Wilder and Lillvist (2021) advocated for the active engagement of parents and caregivers in the educational process. Mirzae et al. (2022) underlined the pivotal role of supportive leadership in cultivating inclusivity. The synthesis of these findings underscored the multifaceted nature of support systems necessary for creating an inclusive learning environment.

Teacher Perceptions and Attitudes

The exploration of teacher perceptions and attitudes toward students with mild intellectual disabilities was a central theme in several studies. Shogren et al. (2021) focused on teacher-student interactions and potential biases, while DeKraker-Pauw et al. (2017) explored teacher mindsets related to intelligence and student achievement. Cooc's (2022) study investigated teachers' perceptions of academic intrinsic motivation, highlighting facilitative factors and potential barriers. Wang and Chen (2020) and Savita (2021) explored the interconnectedness between positive teacher attitudes and improved academic and social outcomes. The studies collectively revealed a rich tapestry of teacher perceptions and attitudes, encompassing biases, mindsets, and motivations.

Positive Attitudes

Positive attitudes among general education teachers were a recurring theme in the literature. McLeskey and Waldron (2020) presented an environment characterized by both positive attitudes and variations in inclusive practices, while Wang and Chen (2020) emphasized the pivotal role of positive attitudes in fostering an inclusive learning environment. Weiss et al. (2018) delved into teachers' perspectives on effective teaching instruction for students with moderate and severe intellectual disabilities, emphasizing the role of positive attitudes and practical competencies. Woodcock et al. (2019) explored the intricate realities of teacher self-efficacy and attributional beliefs, demonstrating the connection between positive attitudes and teachers' beliefs about their capabilities and students' potential. These findings collectively underscored the profound influence of positive attitudes on inclusive practices and instructional efficacy.

Communication Support

Communication support emerged as a critical aspect of the literature. Shalev and Hetzroni (2013) highlighted the importance of clear strategies and assistive technology in facilitating meaningful interactions between students and school staff. Savita and Sharma's systematic review (2021) emphasized the significance of personalized instruction, differentiated materials, and a nurturing classroom environment. The studies collectively emphasized the crucial role of effective communication strategies and tailored teaching approaches in empowering students with intellectual disabilities.

Inclusion

The theme of inclusion is explored through various lenses. Ritter, Michel, and Irb's study (1999) encompassed the voices of middle school students, parents, and teachers, acknowledging both positive aspects and challenges in inclusive practices. Heiman and Avissar (2022) delved into the facilitators and barriers of successful inclusion, highlighted collaborative teacher-staff relationships, focused support plans, and a positive attitude among school staff. Martin's (2021) exploration into elementary teachers' professional development underscored the importance of targeted training programs that enhanced inclusive practices. Thu et al. (2022) advocated a collaborative approach to inclusive practice in Vietnam through an ecological model, while Aldabas (2020) provided a Saudi Arabian perspective on special education teachers' preparedness and perceptions in inclusive classrooms. These studies collectively emphasized the need for comprehensive approaches, collaborative efforts, and positive attitudes to foster successful inclusion.

Mindset

In the realm of educational psychology, the study by Mesler et al. (2021) explored the crucial link between teacher mindset and the cultivation of students' growth mindset. The research highlighted that teachers' perspectives significantly shaped the developmental paths of students, emphasizing the vital role educators play in influencing the cognitive and motivational outlook of their students. This echoed Rhew et al's (2018) findings on the positive impact of a growth mindset on teaching practices and student

achievements, which reinforced the idea that teachers' beliefs and attitudes significantly contributed to creating a conducive learning environment.

While Mesler et al's (2021) study provided valuable insights, there was still a need to delve deeper into the specific factors that characterized the relationship between teacher mindset and students' growth mindset. The present study served to address these gaps by offering a more in-depth understanding of the mechanisms and contextual nuances at play. By unravelling the intricate dynamics, this research sought to contribute to existing knowledge, provided educators and researchers with a more comprehensive perspective on how teacher mindset shaped the cognitive and motivational growth of students. Ultimately, this endeavor aimed to extend the discipline's understanding and offered practical insights for educators striving to foster a positive and growth-oriented learning environment for MID students.

The selection of concepts in this study was grounded in a synthesis of literature surrounding teacher perceptions, attitudes, and support for students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in junior grades. This comprehensive overview highlighted the need for a holistic understanding of teacher perceptions while identifying gaps in understanding and contributing to existing knowledge. The literature emphasized the critical role of support systems in the classroom context for students with intellectual disabilities, and it highlighted the necessity of combining the depth of qualitative insights with the breadth of quantitative research to gain a comprehensive knowledge base for teacher perceptions. The themes identified emphasized the interconnectedness between

positive attitudes, effective communication strategies, inclusive practices, and the cultivation of growth mindsets.

Controversies and Future Studies

Despite the significant progress highlighted in the literature, controversies persisted, particularly in balancing inclusive practices and resource constraints. Cultural and contextual factors shaping teacher perceptions also required further exploration (Savita, 2021). Future studies should delve deeper into specific strategies and interventions that effectively address teacher perceptions and explore the long-term impact of these perceptions on student outcomes.

In connecting these findings to the present study, the exploration of teacher perceptions within the framework of educating students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades aligned with the broader literature. The present study, adopting a generic qualitative research design, self-determination theory conceptual framework, and thematic analysis methodology, aimed to identify gaps in the literature. The study extended knowledge in the discipline by offering an in-depth exploration of teacher perceptions, specifically focusing on autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the context of instructing students with mild intellectual disabilities. By adopting a qualitative approach, the study sought to capture nuanced insights to further an understanding of teacher perceptions. The thematic analysis methodology was chosen to uncover intricate layers of teachers' perceptions and informed subsequent research and interventions in the discipline of special education.

The synthesized literature provided a robust foundation for addressing the research questions regarding teachers' perceptions toward educating students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in junior grades and the factors influencing these perceptions. Studies by DeKraker-Pauw et al. (2017), Shogren et al. (2021), Cooc (2022), Wang and Chen (2020), and Savita (2021) offered insights into the diverse range of teacher perceptions, including attitudes, biases, mindsets, and motivations, regarding students with MID. These findings contributed to an understanding of how teachers described their perceptions toward teaching students with MID in junior grades. Furthermore, the literature identified various factors influencing teachers' perceptions, such as support systems encompassing continuous professional development, collaborative planning, access to resources, engagement of parents and caregivers, and supportive leadership. Additionally, studies by Shogren et al. (2021), DeKraker-Pauw et al. (2017), and Cooc (2022) delved into the impact of teacher-student interactions, mindsets related to intelligence, and intrinsic motivation on teachers' perceptions.

Integrating these insights into the research design and analysis enabled a nuanced exploration of teachers' perceptions in the context of instructing students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades, shedding light on the factors that shaped these perceptions. The synthesis of this existing literature was meaningful as it allowed for a holistic understanding of teachers' perceptions and factors influencing them, thereby informed the development of effective strategies and interventions in special education settings while providing insights into best practices for educators.

Summary and Conclusions

Chapter 2 revealed several major themes that contributed to understanding of this complex and important topic. Synthesis of existing literature underscored the multifaceted nature of teacher perceptions and their profound impact on students' educational experiences.

One key theme was the significant influence of teacher attitudes and beliefs on academic and social outcomes of students with MID. Studies highlighted the importance of understanding teacher mindsets related to intelligence, intrinsic motivation, and academic achievement. Positive teacher attitudes were crucial in terms of fostering inclusive and supportive learning environments (Savita & Sharma, 2021; Wang & Chen, 2020).

Effective communication support emerged as another critical aspect in literature. Clear communication strategies and access to assistive technology were essential in terms of facilitating meaningful interactions between students and school staff, ultimately empowering students with intellectual disabilities (Savita & Sharma, 2021; Shalev & Hetzroni, 2013).

Furthermore, literature emphasized the necessity of comprehensive support systems in educational contexts. This literature review underscored the importance of continuous professional development, collaborative planning, access to resources, and supportive leadership in terms of creating inclusive learning environments.

Despite significant progress in terms of understanding teacher perceptions, issues persisted particularly concerning the balance between inclusive practices and resource

constraints. Additionally, cultural and contextual factors shape teacher perceptions and require further exploration.

I aimed to address gaps in literature by conducting a qualitative exploration of teacher perceptions in terms of instructing students with MID in junior grades. By using thematic analysis and the SDT, I sought nuanced insights regarding teacher perceptions particularly in terms of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Chapter 3 includes information about research methods study. I address the research design, my role as the researcher, the methodology, and ethical considerations. I provide a detailed explanation of the methodology as well as trustworthiness and ethical procedures. Chapter 3 concludes with a summary.

Chapter 3: Research Method

The purpose of this generic qualitative methodological study was to explore perceptions among teachers regarding teaching students with MID. By exploring underlying factors associated with these perceptions, I aimed to address existing lack of knowledge regarding this topic. Ultimately, my purpose was to inform development of effective strategies and interventions to improve teacher perceptions while enhancing educational experiences and inclusion of students with MID in junior grades.

Chapter 3 includes information about the generic methodological framework. I address the research design and rationale, my role as the researcher, methodology, issues of trustworthiness, and a summary.

Research Design and Rationale

I used the following research questions for this study:

RQ1: How did teachers describe perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades?

RQ2: What factors did teachers describe that influenced their perceptions when working with students who have MID in junior grades?

RQ3: How did teachers describe concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of the SDT when supporting junior-grade students with MID?

The central concept phenomenon of this study was teachers' perceptions regarding teaching students with MID. To effectively explore research questions, the generic qualitative research design was chosen. Percy et al. (2015) posited practicality and flexibility of this method allowed for in-depth and open-ended exploration of various

subjects. The generic qualitative approach is suitable for studies with diverse research questions, as it does not require strict adherence to a specific theoretical framework or methodology. Individual interviews, reflexive notes, and audio digital recordings were employed to capture rich and descriptive information, enabling participant-centered, holistic, and real-world perspectives.

I used thematic analysis to identify recurring themes involving teachers' perceptions. Flexibility of methods ensured adaptability as research progressed, facilitating a comprehensive exploration of the complex phenomenon.

I used the generic qualitative approach for participants to express their thoughts, actions, emotions, and experiences in their own words. I explored factors that shaped these perceptions. This was a flexible approach allowing me to adjust my method as I learned more about this complex topic.

The choice of the generic qualitative research design was grounded in practicality, flexibility, and richness of insights. Thematic analysis, flexibility of methods, and reflexivity enhanced methodological rigor and relevance of the study.

Role of the Researcher

As an observer, my role was crucial in terms of gathering data. By facilitating structured interviews, I collected valuable information about how participants described their perceptions toward teaching students with MID in junior grades. This data helped me understand their perceptions of current conditions and areas for improvement. I acted as a neutral facilitator, creating structured environments for teachers to describe their

perceptions. This ensured I collected comprehensive and unbiased data that directly addressed my research questions.

It is important to acknowledge potential personal and professional relationships. In my role as a psychoeducational consultant with a local school board, I have conducted assessments of children whose teachers have participated in the study. I needed to acknowledge these professional relationships existed and be aware of power dynamics, researcher biases, and relationships. I was transparent about my past role as an assessor for children. By openly disclosing this history, I demonstrated my commitment to transparency and integrity during the research process.

To manage potential power imbalances due to these relationships, I emphasized confidentiality during the informed consent process. I communicated to participants their participation in research was voluntary and unrelated to job performance, evaluations, or opportunities within organizations and reiterated commitment to maintain participant confidentiality and protect privacy throughout the research process. Ensuring participants fully understood the aim of research, voluntary nature of their participation in the study, and steps, I minimized potential coercion. I obtained informed consent in writing. This helped mitigate concerns regarding past interactions or my prior role.

Additionally, it was crucial to adopt a neutral and non-coercive approach throughout the research process. This means maintaining a balance between my role as a researcher and any past interactions I had with the teacher participants. I ensured that the teacher's perspectives and experiences were given equal weight and that their willingness

to share openly was not compromised due to my previous assessments of their students (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2019).

Establishing clear boundaries between my roles as a psycho-educational consultant and a researcher was essential to maintaining the integrity of the research. To ensure this separation, I avoided interviewing teachers with whom I had previously assessed their students. This proactive measure was designed to prevent any potential undue influence on the research. However, if circumstances arose where it became unavoidable to interview a teacher with whom I have had prior consultations, I took specific steps to minimize any potential bias or influence by transparently disclosing the prior consultation relationship with the teacher, the committee members, and the Institutionalized Review Board (IRB), ensuring that everyone involved was aware of the situation.

Moreover, I sought guidance and ethical review from the Institutionalized Review Board (IRB), collected and analyzed data that maintained the confidentiality of participants by not attaching names or identifying information to the data, minimizing the potential for bias and power imbalances. This ensured that the research was conducted ethically, adhering to established standards (Kostere, & Kostere, 2021).

Reflexivity was a vital process that allowed for self-reflection by enabling me to continuously assess my actions, decisions, and emotions, thereby helping me to remain vigilant about potential biases and power dynamics. This reflexive practice played a crucial role in making necessary adjustments while adhering to a high level of integrity, transparency, ethical standards, and credibility of the study (Hammersley & Atkinson,

2007). To facilitate this process, I maintained a research journal to document my reflections on each stage of the research.

Managing these relationships involved a delicate balance of acknowledging past interactions while also respecting the autonomy and perspectives of the teacher-participants. By taking these steps, I was able to navigate any potential power dynamics, researcher biases, and power relationships ethically and responsibly, ultimately contributing to the validity and integrity of the research study (American Psychological Association, 2020).

Another dilemma included offering incentives, such as monetary compensation which potentially raised concerns about coercion or undue influence on participation. Explaining the purpose, use, and how the incentives were provided and communicating that incentives were meant as tokens of appreciation and not as a means to pressure or manipulate participants to comply. Offering alternative participation options for those who may not wish to accept incentives to ensure voluntary participation was also best practice (Daneshgar, 2023).

By addressing these concerns and taking steps to ensure transparency, confidentiality, and genuine voluntariness, I minimized perceptions of coercion and upheld the ethical standards of my research.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

In my research, I conducted an exploration of teachers who specialized in instructing junior-grade students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in a particular

educational institution. The objective was to seek a profound understanding of the viewpoints held by the teachers and to achieve this, I opted for a purposeful sampling strategy. This approach included the selection of participants who had specific criteria that closely aligned with my research goals. The rationale behind choosing this strategy lied in the need to secure participants with direct involvement and expertise in instructing and interacting with junior-grade students afflicted by MID, as their insights served as the cornerstone of my research (Ravitch & Mittenfelner, 2021).

For the selection of participants, I had established a set of clear criteria. Eligible participants possessed the status of certified teachers actively engaged in teaching within the specified educational institution, typically within the confines of grades 4 to 6. Furthermore, these teachers were required to possess substantial prior experience working with students characterized by mild intellectual disabilities, and they encompassed diverse backgrounds, a wide array of experiences, and differing perspectives that ensured a detailed overview of the subject matter. It was of paramount importance for participants to willingly volunteer to take part in this research and I was committed to safeguarding their rights and confidentiality throughout the study. Additionally, I was mindful of managing the participant selection process within the constraints of the available research resources and the stipulated timeline (Burkholder et al., 2020).

In determining the total number of participants for this study, I adhered to the principle of data saturation throughout the interviews that I conducted. This principle ensured that the collection of additional data stopped when it became evident that no

fresh or pertinent information was forthcoming, thereby signifying that saturation has been attained (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Initially, the study commenced with a modest sample size, typically ranging between 10 to 12 participants. As the research progressed, data was continually scrutinized, and data collection was curtailed when the point of saturation neared. The ultimate number of participants was contingent upon the juncture at which data saturation was achieved. This approach ensured that the study included a comprehensive spectrum of perspectives without burdening participants or duplicating data (Brown, &White, 2019).

Regarding the procedures associated with participant identification, contact, and recruitment, a systematic approach was methodically implemented. Initially, the facilitation of contact with potential participants occurred through official methods such as email or formal written correspondence. This initial communication introduced the study's purpose and earnestly requested their voluntary participation. Teachers who expressed a willingness to participate received a detailed document outlining the research objectives, ethical considerations, and the voluntary nature of their involvement. I diligently ensured that the attainment of informed consent from all willing participants, thereby ensuring their autonomy and comprehension of the research's objectives and procedures (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

Instrumentation

In this research study focusing on teachers' perspectives and interactions with students having mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades, multiple data collection instruments were utilized. Primarily, interview protocols and audio-digital recordings

served as principal instruments. The interview protocols, tailored for individual interviews drew inspiration from a blend of original questions devised by the researcher and research questions alongside samples delineated in the work of Kostere and Kostere (2020). The development of interview questions was founded upon literature sources, committee member feedback, and customization for participants, ensuring relevance and cultural sensitivity. These protocols, developed based on relevant literature, aimed to fill gaps in existing research and aligned with the research question, fostering methodological soundness and enhancing validity and reliability by capturing intended constructs effectively (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Digital recordings were used in individual sessions, serving purposes of data preservation, verbatim record keeping, and enabling nuanced analysis of tone and emotions, as recommended by Creswell and Poth (2018). This approach ensured transparency, authenticity, and minimized the risk of bias or misinterpretation. Additionally, employing member checks enhanced content validity by involving participants in the validation process, obtaining feedback, and refining data collection methods iteratively. Member checks involved sharing findings with participants, reviewing and clarifying their responses, and adjusting data collection methods accordingly.

The effectiveness of these instruments stemmed from their combined capacity to capture both explicit and nuanced aspects of teachers' experiences with students with mild intellectual disabilities. Member checks, that followed the guidance of Creswell and Poth (2018), further reinforced content validity by engaging participants in the validation

process and refining data collection methods iteratively. Through this comprehensive approach using multiple instruments, the research aimed to provide a multi-dimensional understanding of how teachers perceived and taught students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades, effectively addressing the research questions.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Potential participants were recruited for the study by sending out emails to all the teachers in grades 3 to 7 in an educational institution and a social media platform with a timeline to respond. A list of all the teachers from grades 3 to 7 in 24 schools and their emails were provided. All cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds and those who have taught students who have Mild Intellectual disabilities were included. As the researcher, I selected those teachers who had this criterion. I obtained consent and permission from the participants to volunteer in the study and provided them with a handout that included information about the study and their role, the researcher's role, the research process, confidentiality privacy, and the debriefing process. In addition, the purpose of the study was explained, and the outline of the interview process provided. I aimed to select 10-12 participants. If there were too few participants, I sent a follow-up email, with a possible presentation of the research study and process to the various schools and extended the recruitment period to allow more time for teachers to respond.

For those who had volunteered to participate, informed consent was provided for signature, and a copy of the consent form was provided to the participants. The participants who agreed to participate voluntarily and who have reviewed and signed the consent form were assigned a code in place of using their name (i.e., RS001, RS002,

RS011) to eliminate any identifying information. This confidential information will continue to be stored privately before shredding and deleting in five years (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

A private virtual meeting platform was used away from their work location. The individual interviews were approximately one hour in length that allowed for enough time to respond to the interview questions. All the data were collected manually from an audio digital tape recorder through a transcription process. Participants were permitted the autonomy to decide whether they wished to continue their involvement. Privacy and confidentiality were continued to be upheld and participants were fully informed about the purpose and expected duration of any follow-up interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I conducted data collection for approximately six weeks which included conducting individual interviews. This allowed time for data collection, data analysis and interpretation, debriefing, and member checking. Participants exited the study through a debriefing procedure, which served to provide a deeper understanding of the study's objective and allowed participants to ask questions. The debriefing session occurred at the same time as the member checking review. I offered the participants closure by explaining the study's objectives, their role, and the significance of their contributions. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions, provide feedback, and address any lingering concerns. Importantly, participants were reassured about the confidentiality of their data, with details provided about secure data storage procedures. They were reminded that their participation was voluntary and that they had a right to withdraw without facing any negative consequences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Follow up interviews

in the form of member checking and debriefing interviews were conducted. The participants had the autonomy to decide whether they wanted to continue, with a continued emphasis on privacy and confidentiality. Follow-up interviews would have been necessary if a diverse group of participants had not been included, participants lacked experience teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities and when there was a small sample size (Burkholder et al, 2020). According to Creswell & Poth (2018), follow-up interviews allowed for deeper exploration of themes or issues that may have emerged during initial interviews but require further clarification or elaboration. It also allowed an opportunity to address any additional questions or concerns that participants may have had (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). These procedures were characterized by ethical oversight, transparent communication with participants and a strong emphasis on voluntariness and privacy that collectively contributed to maintaining the research's ethical standards and integrity.

Data Analysis Plan

With this generic qualitative approach, I used thematic analysis in which the data was analyzed as it was being collected. Each participant's data was evaluated individually, and each subsequent participant's data was analyzed and compared to the previously analyzed data and combined with already-developed patterns or themes (Kostere & Kostere, 2022). The data collected was coded for specific themes that have surfaced from the interviews. The themes helped strengthen the content validity of the research and allowed each participant to review the information on the transcript for accuracy, also known as member checking (Burkholder et al., 2020).

Next, I employed manual coding using Delve software to assist in the coding process. Delve allowed for systematic organization of the data by enabling me to assign codes to specific data components. The choice of codes was driven by research questions. I created a coding framework to maintain consistency. For example, I used codes such as "support for students with MID" or "training for teachers." Delve served as a valuable tool in facilitating the organization and coding of data and helped to manage discrepancies or variations. It ensured that the research remained focused on addressing specific research questions that led to meaningful insights and findings (Kostere & Kostere, 2022).

In addition, the audio digital recordings allowed for transparent and authentic recording in a traditional format combined with a digital software package "Delve" to assist in confirming or disputing themes already identified and allowed the review for accuracy and code for themes, subthemes, or additional themes. This allowed me to make sense of the information about the collective experiences while staying organized and keeping with the ethical requirements (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The research questions guided the thematic analysis process. For instance, if a research question pertained to understanding the challenges teachers face when instructing students with MID, I looked for relevant data segments in the collected materials. In cases where there was discrepancies or variations in data, Delve helped me manage them effectively. I created different codes or subthemes to capture these variations, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the data. For example, if some teachers

mentioned unique challenges while others highlighted common ones, I created distinct codes for each type of challenge.

Issues of Trustworthiness

When researching teachers' perceptions of instructing students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades to address the social issue of teachers' perceptions toward teaching these students, identifying contributing factors, and developing effective strategies for improvement, ensuring the trustworthiness of the qualitative research outcome, including credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, was paramount.

Credibility

Credibility was established through various means. Triangulation was the use of many data sources and methods, such as interviews, observations, and audio recordings, to consolidate findings and identify common patterns and themes (Burkholder et al., 2020). Additionally, building prolonged contact with participants by fostering ongoing relationships enhanced the depth of data collection as teachers were more willing to share their experiences over time. Member checks were another strategy, allowing participants to review and validate research findings, ensuring that interpretations aligned with their perspectives. Achieving data saturation, where no new information or themes emerged, was also crucial for credibility, indicating thorough data collection (Stahl & King, 2020). Member checking and data saturation was used in this study.

Transferability

To ensure transferability, the findings were applied to other contexts or populations to provide a deeper description of the research process and context. This involved offering a detailed account of research methods, participant characteristics, and the study's context, enabling readers to assess the relevance of my findings to my situation. Diverse participant selection, purposively including teachers with various backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives, helped to make the study's findings more widely applicable (Munthe-Kaas et al., 2020).

Dependability

To establish dependability, ensuring the consistency and stability of findings over time and across researchers, using audit trails was considered where an independent researcher (i.e., committee member) reviewed my research process and helped to guide data collection and analysis. This external review helped guarantee that research procedures were consistently applied, and findings were free from undue researcher bias. Member checks were also essential, as they involved cross-referencing data with each participant to ensure the accuracy of data and that the data was consistent in emerging themes and patterns (Stahl, & King, 2020).

Confirmability

Finally, confirmability, which referred to the objectivity of my qualitative research, was achieved through reflexivity, involving ongoing self-reflection and self-awareness throughout the research process. I worked towards acknowledging my perspectives and potential biases and maintained a reflexive journal to document my

thoughts, assumptions, and decisions. Additionally, involving committee members in data analysis enhanced confirmability by considering different perspectives and reducing the risk of individual bias affecting the results (Burkholder et al., 2020). This further supported intra-coder reliability that ensured the trustworthiness of the analysis (O'Connor, & Joffe, 2020).

By implementing these strategies for collecting data and ensuring trustworthiness, my qualitative research on teachers' perceptions when teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades was robust and reliable, ultimately contributing to the Identification of factors, the development of effective strategies, and interventions that improved teachers' perceptions and enhanced the educational experiences and inclusion of these students.

Ethical Procedures

I provided formal documents and correspondence that showed agreements and permissions to access participant data. These documents included cooperation letters or consents obtained from my educational institution. With the consultation with the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and my committee members, this study's purpose, scope of practice and any conditions underwent approval processes. Ethical recruitment concerns were addressed by ensuring voluntary participation, avoiding coercion, and addressing power imbalances. To mitigate these concerns, I emphasized informed consent, voluntariness, and the right to withdraw without consequences. Participants were provided with an informed consent process through an informed consent form that outlined information pertaining to the study, the roles and responsibilities, and

expectations. Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and consultation with committee members ensured the study's purpose, scope, and conditions to ethical standards. Privacy and confidentiality were protected by using identifiers, password protection on devices used, secure data storage, and clear communication with participants. The recruitment process was transparent, targeting a diverse sample and avoided misrepresentations (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

For ethical data collection, I protected participant privacy during observations and interviews, using pseudonyms and addressing power differential. To avoid conflicts of interest, I acknowledged my affiliation and used an external reviewer. I also disclosed any conflicts of interest and consulted with dissertation committee members and IRB officials. Protecting data involved confidentiality, data encryption, secure storage, and strict access control. Data handling procedures were well-defined, ensuring data security, integrity, and quality. Data retention and destruction policies were communicated to include a five-year data storage period. This information was provided to the research committee only. These measures aimed to uphold ethical standards throughout the research process (Kostere & Kostere, 2021).

Undertaking a study within my work environment raised some ethical concerns related to potential biases that may compromise the validity and objectivity of the research. To manage these potential biases, self-awareness, and reflexivity were crucial (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acknowledging the potential biases and working to mitigate them by creating a transparent and open communication channel with the participants emphasized the voluntary nature of their involvement and stated that their decision to

participate or withdraw would not affect their work status and relationships. Preventative measures to minimize coercion such as clear explanations of the research objectives, procedures, and potential outcomes were used. The study included diverse perspectives from those whom I had not worked with previously and had not directly associated with in the work environment.

I addressed power imbalances by emphasizing voluntary participation, preventing coercion, and justifying incentives. Incentives were clearly explained and reasonable to avoid undue pressure (American Psychological Association, 2017). To ensure ethical research, adherence to ethical guidelines, by the American Psychological Association (APA, 2017), were followed. Seeking approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and strictly following APA's publication manual guidelines ensured the integrity of the research and the utmost respect for the well-being of the human participants.

These steps demonstrated my commitment to conducting research with integrity and respect for human participants.

Summary

Chapter 3 includes information about research ethics, data confidentiality, and participant recruitment, as well as informed consent, participant privacy protection via pseudonyms, encryption, secure data storage, and fair and transparent recruitment practices while addressing power imbalances and potential conflicts of interest. I also addressed incentivization, data handling transparency, and the IRB. I was dedicated to conducting research to ensure adherence to ethical principles, data integrity, and participant wellbeing.

This was crucial for promoting positive social change throughout the research process. This facilitated broader societal wellbeing by ensuring participants were treated with respect, their privacy was safeguarded, and findings were trustworthy. In addition, I provided reliable evidence and insights that will assist policymakers, advocates, and decision-makers.

In Chapter 4, collected data results are addressed. Interpretation and analysis of results as well as implications addressed discussed with a comparison and exploration of how findings aligned with existing literature.

Chapter 4: Results

I aimed to understand teachers' perceptions of working with students with MID in junior grades. I explored three main research questions:

RQ1: How did teachers describe perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades?

RQ2: What factors did teachers describe that influenced their perceptions when working with students who have MID in junior grades?

RQ3: How did teachers describe concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of the SDT when supporting junior-grade students with MID?

Using the SDT, I explored factors shaping these perceptions to inform strategies that may improve teachers' attitudes and foster inclusive educational experiences for students with MID.

This qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews that were conducted either virtually or in person with 11 junior grade teachers. Three interviews were held in person, while eight took place online. The study included five open-ended questions, each with subquestions (see Appendix A). Additional followup questions were used as needed to clarify responses.

Chapter 4 includes an in-depth overview of the interview process, participant demographics, settings, and teacher experiences in relation to research questions. I also addressed trustworthiness. The chapter concludes with a description of data collection and analysis processes, along with a summary of findings.

Setting

Participants in this study were teachers with at least 1 year of experience who had worked with students classified as having MID and were currently teaching grades 3-7. All participants were over 18 and fluent in English. After providing consent via email as required by the Walden University IRB, participants chose to attend interviews either in person or via Zoom. Once convenient times were set, zoom links were sent to virtual participants along with follow-up reminders email the day before interviews to help ensure attendance.

The interview process took place between September 25 and October 22, 2024. Virtual interviews were held from a private space in my home, while in-person interviews were conducted in a private school room before or after school hours, ensuring a quiet and distraction-free environment. Participants joining virtually ensured they were in private settings without others present, allowing for privacy and focus throughout the interview process. These conditions helped create a comfortable and uninterrupted environment for participants, potentially enhancing depth and accuracy of information.

Demographics

This study included 11 teachers (nine females and two males) who shared their experiences teaching students with MID in junior grades. To participate, teachers were certified by the Ontario College of Teachers, had at least 1 year of teaching experience, had experience teaching students with MID, and were currently teaching junior grades (3-7). For confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms (e.g., RS001, RS002, RS003). Participant ages ranged from 25 to 69, with a mean age of 44. Eight of 11

participants were married with children, while three were single and childless. Teaching experience varied from 4 to 33 years, and all participants held bachelor's degrees with teaching certification.

Data Collection

Following approval from Walden University's IRB, a sample recruitment email (see Appendix A) and an informational flyer outlining the study process was sent to the partner organization. Upon review, the organization approved the recruitment process and requested I complete an additional information form (see Appendix B). Subsequently, the organization provided a list of junior-grade teachers within its school board. Recruitment emails along with the flyer were sent to teachers beginning September 16, 2024. However, early response was limited due to high demands at the start of the academic year. By October, more teachers participated in the interview process. To refine and validate the interview process, a pilot interview was conducted with a colleague who was experienced in teaching to assess clarity and effectiveness of interview questions and procedures. This pilot interview was necessary to identify which aspects of the interview process worked well and which required adjustment, ensuring primary interviews would proceed smoothly and effectively.

As part of the recruitment strategy, resource teachers and vice principals who worked closely with teachers were asked to share the research opportunity in a noncoercive manner, and copies of the flyer were provided for this purpose. Recruitment continued until the final interview was conducted on October 28, 2024. Teachers who had already participated were encouraged to share study details with interested

colleagues, and the recruitment flyer was also posted on LinkedIn to expand outreach. Each participating teacher reviewed the consent document and provided their consent via email. Participants engaged in semi-structured interviews either virtually or in person, with a follow-up member-checking interview to review, clarify, and expand on information. Of the 11 participants, three were interviewed in person and eight participated virtually. All interviews took place in a private setting, such as participants' homes, home offices, and classrooms, and permission was obtained to audio and video record each session.

Interviews began with an overview of the study's purpose and collection of demographic information. Each participant responded to five main questions with two subsections, for a total of 10 questions. Initial interview durations ranged from 22 to 47 minutes. Follow-up member-checking interviews that were conducted either in person or by phone as per participant preference lasted between 12 and 24 minutes.

At the conclusion of all interviews, participants were thanked and presented with a Visa prepaid card as a token of appreciation. They were also encouraged to reach out with any questions or concerns. All participants expressed interest in receiving study information, which will be shared upon completion of research. I aimed for eight to 12 participants, and saturation was reached after the 11th interview, as themes began to repeat and no new insights emerged. Data collection ceased upon reaching this saturation point. Each interview was transcribed using Zoom Plus transcription software, and all audio files were reviewed to verify accuracy. Final recordings were saved on an encrypted and

password-protected laptop, with files anonymized and labeled RS001 to RS011. All data collection procedures adhered to the protocol as outlined in Chapter 3.

Data Analysis

After editing all transcripts, I reviewed them several times and transcribed them into a Word document using codes (RS001-RS011) instead of names to maintain confidentiality. Transcripts were then uploaded into Delve for initial stages of data analysis. I followed thematic analysis guidelines outlined by Saldana and Kostere and Kostere. To conduct thematic analysis of interview data from 11 participants, I began by familiarizing myself with data. I listened to audio recordings of each interview and reviewed transcripts multiple times, making initial notes on significant phrases and statements. Next, I generated initial codes by tagging relevant sections of data, ensuring I was open to emerging patterns. After coding, I grouped similar codes into potential themes, looking for broader patterns that involved related ideas. For instance, codes such as teacher support, training programs, and collaboration were grouped according to the theme of supportive teaching environments. I then reviewed identified themes, cross-referencing them with original data to ensure they were supported by sufficient evidence. I refined themes by merging or splitting them as needed to make them clearer and more distinct. Once themes were finalized, I defined each one in detail and gave them clear and concise names that accurately represented concepts. I interpreted meanings of themes in relation to my research questions in terms of how they answered those questions and contributed to the field. I also considered how themes connected to existing literature, identifying areas of consistency and new insights.

After analyzing themes, I began writing results, provided detailed descriptions of each theme and supported them with direct quotes from participants, aligning them with research questions. I interpreted implications of themes and connected them to broader literature. I also conducted member checking, asking participants to review themes to ensure their perspectives were accurately captured. Finally, I documented every step of the analysis process to ensure transparency and trustworthiness from generating codes to finalizing themes to maintain rigor and consistency throughout analysis.

Table 1

Qualitative Thematic Analysis for RQ1

Research Question	Themes	Codes	Thematic Quotes
How do teachers describe their perceptions toward teaching students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID) in the junior grades (Grades 3-7)	Understanding Individual Needs	Recognizing Gaps in Learning	RS009 “By meeting them where they are” RS003 “It is a challenge providing individual attention to those who need it the most”
		Tailoring Approaches	RS002 “When it comes to teaching students with MID, I start by reviewing their IEPs to understand their specific needs” RS006 “I implement strategies like preferential seating and technology support”
	Challenges in the Classroom	Meeting Diverse Needs	RS004 “In a classroom of 30 children, meeting everyone’s needs can be overwhelming especially when some students are performing several grades below their peers” RS003 “It’s important to have more professional development to better understand how to support students at these different levels”
		Classroom Management	RS007 “Taking Risks in teaching strategies is essential” RS006 “I make sure that everyone is encouraged to use tools”

Table 2

Qualitative Thematic Data Analysis for RQ2

Research Question	Theme	Code	Thematic Quote
What factors do teachers describe in their perceptions when working with students who have MID in the junior grades?	Collaboration and Support	Teamwork	RS001 “I am here to help you; we are a team” RS009 “There was constant communication with colleagues to help enhance the learning environment”
		Parental Involvement	RS006” It’s important to acknowledge that some parents might also feel ‘classified as weaker themselves” RS010 “Many parents engage positively with the school which makes a big difference in children’s progress”
	Social Connections	Peer Relationships	RS003 “grouping students by ability, such as placing stronger students together, can positively impact how they interact and learn from each other” RS006 “I ensure there are 'opportunities to work collaboratively' and allow them to ‘choose their partners or groups”
		Group Activities	RS005 “I encourage students with MID to build connections with their peers by integrating them into group activities” RS007 “For example, one student began in a small team of two, which allowed her to gradually adapt to social interactions”

Table 3

Qualitative Thematic Data Analysis for RQ3

Research Question	Themes	Code	Thematic Quotes
How do teachers describe the concepts of autonomy, competence and relatedness from Self Determination Theory when supporting junior grade students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities?	Empowerment and Motivation	Choice and Autonomy	RS001 “Kids in general do better with choices” RS003 “Giving them a sense of autonomy allows them to take ownership of their learning without feeling like they stand out”
		Recognition of Achievements	RS003 “Affirmation plays a big role in pushing them forward, as it helps build their confidence and keeps them motivated." RS010 “Recognizing their hard work gives them a sense of achievement and encourages them to keep striving”
		Group Activities	RS005 “One effective approach is to organize students into small, mixed-ability groups. By sitting together in these groups and regularly switching between them, students have the opportunity to collaborate with different peers." RS008 “I encourage students with MID to build connections with their peers and teachers by integrating them into group activities where each child is placed at the appropriate level”

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research referred to how the study ensured that the results accurately reflected the experiences and perspectives of the participants (Creswell, Poth, 2018). In this Generic Qualitative study, I explored teachers experiences of how they perceived working with students who have mild intellectual disabilities in the junior grades. I validated the trustworthiness in this research study by implementing the following steps: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Credibility

Credibility, as a component of trustworthiness in qualitative research, is essential for ensuring that the findings are accurate and reflected the participants' true experiences (Nast, Allen, 2016). The strategies to enhance credibility that I used in this study in support of chapter three included member checks and saturation. Member checks were conducted by having participants review their interview data to verify its accuracy and to add any additional thoughts or clarifications. This process helped ensure the credibility of the data and interpretations. Saturation was reached when no new themes or insights emerged from the interviews. After the 11th participant, repetitive themes were consistently observed, signaling that data collection could be concluded, as no further knowledge was being gained from additional interviews.

Transferability

In this study with 11 participants, transferability was applied by providing a detailed description of the research context, methods, and participant characteristics, allowing me to assess how applicable the findings might be to other contexts or

populations. Through this purposive sampling., I documented the demographics and backgrounds of participants, specifying their roles, experiences, and settings (e.g., virtual or in-person interviews), which helped me determine if these findings were relevant to similar groups or educational settings. By offering a rich, contextual account of how the data was collected and analyzed, I provided sufficient depth for me to decide whether the results could be transferred to similar situations or professional environments. Additionally, the consistency of themes across interviews helped strengthen the study's applicability to broader contexts (Stalmeijer, Dolmans, Wolfhagen, 2014). The patterns identified across the 11 participants suggested that the findings may have resonated with individuals in similar roles or contexts, thus enhancing their transferability to other groups or settings.

Dependability

Dependability in qualitative research ensured that the research process was consistent and that the results were repeated over time or in similar circumstances. According to Saldana (2021), dependability was closely tied to the transparency of the research process, allowed others to follow the steps taken and evaluated the consistency of decisions made throughout the study. To ensure dependability in this study, I maintained a consistent and thorough approach, documenting each stage of the research to create a clear audit trail. Following the transcription of all interviews through Zoom Plus, I manually reviewed each transcript for accuracy and consistency. Once finalized, I uploaded the transcripts to the Delve platform, which I used to facilitate coding and

theme identification. This systematic transcription and analysis process allowed for a detailed, transparent workflow.

My committee chairperson also provided ongoing oversight, offering valuable feedback on data collection and analytical processes. This guidance helped me ensure that my approach was rigorous and aligned with established standards. I conducted member checks inviting participants to review and verify my interpretations, giving them the chance to clarify or expand on their input. Additionally, I kept detailed records of all coding and thematic decisions to enhance transparency and allow for a consistent review of the research process. These combined strategies strengthened the study's dependability, ensuring that findings were grounded in the data and reflective of participants' perspectives.

Confirmability

In qualitative research, confirmability referred to the extent to which the findings and interpretations were based on participants' perspectives, rather than the researcher's biases. It ensured that the results genuinely reflected the data, allowing the voices of the participants to emerge untainted by the researcher’s subjective views. This criterion was critical for maintaining the objectivity and neutrality of the research process (Saldana, 2021). By actively engaging in reflexivity, where I acknowledged and accounted for my potential biases, I strengthened confirmability and ensured that my findings were more likely to represent the true nature of the data. Additionally, using tools like coding manuals and systematic coding processes further supported the transparency of the data analysis, making the research more dependable and confirmable (Charmaz, 2014).

In this study, I ensured confirmability by engaging in reflexivity, acknowledging any personal biases I brought to the research, and documented my decisions throughout the data collection and analysis process. This process included regular journaling, where I documented my reflections, insights, and emotional responses to the research journey. By maintaining a reflective journal, I became more aware of how my personal background and experiences influenced my interpretations of the data. Additionally, I consulted with my chairperson to gain guidance and oversight, discussing challenges and seeking advice on ethical dilemmas. This collaboration helped refine my research questions and methods while encouraging critical reflection on my assumptions.

Reflexivity

To further validate my findings, I conducted member checks by returning to participants to share preliminary results and gather their feedback. This allowed the participants to clarify their statements and ensure their voices were accurately represented in the research. Engaging in member checks not only enhanced the credibility of my findings but also emphasized the collaborative nature of qualitative research. Overall, this reflexivity process through journaling, consultations and member checks promoted self-awareness and critical reflection, ultimately strengthening the rigor and trustworthiness of my study on teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities.

The thematic analysis and coding process were conducted to identify key themes relevant to the study. Five critical themes emerged from the data analysis: understanding individual needs, challenges in the classroom, collaboration and support, social connections, empowerment and motivation. The results below represented the thematic

analysis process using In Vivo coding. The process of conducting coding using thematic analysis and in vivo coding began with familiarizing myself with the data by reading it thoroughly and reviewing the transcripts of all 11 participants on the Zoom plus platform. Next, I coded on the "Delve tool" coding software program by using in vivo codes, which are direct phrases or words from participants, preserving their original language, and open codes to capture broader concepts. I then grouped these codes into emerging themes, carefully reviewed the data to ensure the themes were accurately reflected. After defining and naming each theme, I refined and interpreted them in relation to the research questions, using direct participant quotes as evidence. Finally, I reflected on the analysis process, ensuring transparency and consistency throughout. While software tools like Delve helped organize the process, I recognized that thematic analysis was iterative, often requiring me to revisit and refine codes and themes as new insights emerged. The final themes below summarized the underlying patterns across all interviews.

Theme 1: Understanding Individual Needs

Understanding individual needs was fundamental to creating an effective environment for students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID). This theme emphasized the importance of assessing where each student was in their learning journey. Educators recognized that pinpointing gaps in knowledge was crucial for tailoring instruction to meet varying needs. For instance, one participant from RS009 highlighted the need "by meeting them where they are" to accurately identify learning gaps. This approach allowed for a more personalized educational experience, that ensured that students received the support they needed to succeed.

In addition to an assessment, individualized instruction played a pivotal role in addressing the unique needs of each learner. Many participants emphasized the necessity of reviewing Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) to understand specific requirements and adapted teaching methods accordingly. For example, a participant from RS002 mentioned that they started by reviewing IEPs to provide the right support. This commitment to individualized instruction not only helped students' progress academically but also fostered a sense of belonging and support within the classroom.

Continuous communication was also vital in understanding individual needs. Participants frequently expressed the importance of dialogue with students to better comprehend their feelings and challenges. One participant from RS006 stated: "I implemented strategies like preferential seating and technology support to provide trust and to empower them through technology."

Overall, understanding individual needs involved a multi-faceted approach that encompassed assessment, individualized instruction, and continuous communication. By prioritizing these components, educators created a more inclusive environment where students with MID felt valued and supported in their learning journeys. This theme highlighted the essential role of educators in recognizing and addressing the diverse needs of their students, ultimately leading to improved academic outcomes and emotional well-being.

Theme 2: Challenges in the Classroom

The challenges faced in the classroom when teaching students with MID were significant and multifaceted. One major issue was the logistical difficulty of meeting the

diverse needs of students within a single classroom setting. With a classroom size of around 30 students, managing the varying abilities and learning paces were overwhelming for the participants. One participant from RS004 noted that “it can be especially challenging when some students are performing several grade levels below their peers.” This disparity created a dynamic where some students may feel left out or disengaged, posing a challenge for educators striving to foster an inclusive environment.

Pacing of learning was another critical challenge highlighted by the participants. Many expressed that students with MID often required more time to process information and complete tasks. One participant from RS001 noted that “things are happening a lot slower,” that emphasized the need for patience and understanding in the teaching process. This slower pace was frustrating not just for students but for educators who felt pressure to cover a predetermined curriculum. Adjusting lesson tempos to accommodate different learning speeds was essential for ensuring that all students can grasp the material effectively.

Additionally, emotional and behavioural challenges complicated the learning environment. Educators frequently encountered situations where emotional frustrations hindered a student’s focus and learning. One participant from RS001 pointed out that “emotional frustrations made it harder to draw students back into focus.” These emotional challenges necessitated a supportive and empathetic approach from educators, who found ways to address both academic and emotional needs simultaneously. Moreover, implementing strategies to manage these challenges, such as using positive

reinforcement and providing safe spaces for emotional expression, significantly improved classroom dynamics.

Challenges in the classroom when teaching students with MID were complex and required a thoughtful, multifaceted approach. Educators navigated the difficulties of managing diverse needs, adjusted pacing, and addressed emotional challenges. By employing effective strategies and fostering a supportive environment, educators overcame these obstacles, ultimately enhanced the learning experience for all students. This theme underscored the reality that while challenges are inherent in teaching students with MID, they were effectively managed through collaboration, understanding, and innovative teaching practices.

Theme 3: Collaboration and Support

Collaboration and support were crucial elements in creating a successful educational experience for students with MID. The theme underscored the importance of teamwork among educators and the broader school community. Many participants emphasized the value of working together to share best practices and strategies for teaching students with diverse needs. One participant from RS001 noted, “I am here to help you; we are a team,” reflecting a collaborative spirit that was essential for fostering an effective learning environment. This teamwork allowed educators to pool their resources, knowledge, and experiences, ultimately enhancing the quality of education provided to students.

Involving parents in the educational process was another critical aspect of collaboration and support. Educators recognized that parents played a vital role in their

child's learning journey, and when they engaged with them, that led to better outcomes. One participant from RS003 highlighted the importance of keeping parents informed and involved in their child's learning. By maintaining open lines of communication with parents, educators better understood the home environment and collaborated on strategies to support the student's learning, thus created a more holistic educational experience. Consultation with specialists was also a key component of providing support in the classroom. Many educators sought guidance from resource teachers and special education professionals to better understand how to accommodate the needs of students with MID. One participant from RS002 mentioned consulting with resource teachers to ensure the best support was provided. This collaboration not only enriched the educational strategies employed but also empowered educators to feel more confident in their ability to meet the diverse needs of their students.

Overall, collaboration and support were essential for fostering an inclusive learning environment for students with MID. By working together as a team, involving parents, and consulting with specialists, educators created a comprehensive support network that addressed the unique challenges faced by these students. This theme highlighted the importance of community and collaboration in education, emphasizing that a collective effort led to more effective teaching and improved outcomes for students with MID.

Theme 4: Social Connections

The theme of social connections emphasized the importance of building positive relationships between educators and students, particularly for those with MID.

Establishing a trusting and supportive environment was vital for fostering engagement and motivation in the classroom. One participant from RS002 stated, “Having a good relationship with students is key, the kids think they are “helping me.” This statement reflected the idea that when students felt valued and connected to their teachers, they were more likely to participate actively in their learning. Positive relationships created a safe place for students to express their thoughts and feelings, which was crucial for their emotional and social development.

Group activities played a significant role in promoting social connections among students. Educators frequently advocated for integrating students with MID into group settings to enhance peer interactions and collaborative learning. One participant from RS002 encouraged building connections with peers through group activities. These collaborative opportunities not only helped students develop social skills but also fostered a sense of belonging within the classroom community. Engaging in cooperative learning experiences allowed students to learn from one another and build friendships, which were particularly beneficial for those who struggled to connect socially.

Social-emotional learning (SEL) strategies were also essential in nurturing social connections. Educators recognized that incorporating SEL into the curriculum significantly improved student interactions and emotional regulation. One participant from RS001 noted the importance of getting to know students and incorporating SEL strategies into their teaching. By focusing on emotional intelligence and interpersonal skills, educators helped students navigate their relationships with peers and teachers more

effectively. This focus on SEL not only enhanced social connections but also contributed to a more positive classroom environment.

Social connections were a vital aspect of the educational experience for students with MID. By fostering positive relationships, promoting group activities, and integrating social-emotional learning strategies, educators created a supportive and inclusive environment. This theme highlighted the importance of social connections in education, that emphasized a strong sense of community that significantly enhanced student engagement and success. Ultimately, building these connections laid the groundwork for students to thrive academically and socially in their learning environments.

Theme 5: Empowerment and Motivation

Empowerment and motivation were crucial themes in fostering a positive educational experience for students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities (MID). One key aspect of this theme was encouraging student choices, which helped to enhance their ownership of learning. Educators recognized that “kids in general do better with choices,” as stated by a participant from RS008. By providing options in assignments, teachers allowed students to tailor their learning experiences to their interests and strengths, thereby increasing engagement. Another participant from RS002 highlighted this notion by stating, “Providing options in assignments allowed students to take ownership of their learning.” When students had a say in their education, they were more likely to feel motivated and invested in their progress.

Celebrating achievements, no matter how small, was another vital component of empowerment and motivation. Acknowledging students’ efforts boosted their confidence

and encouraged them to strive for further success. One participant from RS002 mentioned that “a simple shout out can be empowering and can serve as a great motivator.” This notion was echoed by another educator from RS001, who stated, “Recognizing small victories help build students’ confidence.” By highlighting these successes, educators created a positive atmosphere in the classroom, which was essential for nurturing motivation. A participant from RS011 added that “highlighting achievements during class encouraged a positive atmosphere.” This celebration of accomplishments reinforced students’ self-esteem and fostered a culture of encouragement.

Collaborative learning opportunities also played a significant role in empowering students and enhancing motivation. By integrating students with MID into group activities, educators helped them build connections with their peers. One participant from RS006 stated, “I encouraged students with MID to build connections with their peers by integrating them into group activities.” This collaborative approach enabled students to learn from one another while fostering a sense of community. Another participant from RS001 emphasized that “using cooperative learning strategies helped all students feel Included.” Such strategies not only promoted social interactions but also created a supportive learning environment where students felt valued and engaged. A participant from RS010 further affirmed that “creating a community of learners promoted motivation and engagement,” highlighting the significance of a collective classroom culture.

The theme of empowerment and motivation encompassed various strategies that participants employed to foster an inclusive and engaging learning environment for

students with MID. Encouraging student choices, celebrating achievements, and providing collaborative learning opportunities all contributed to building a strong sense of agency and motivation among students. By implementing these strategies, educators strived to meet the diverse needs of their students and cultivated an educational atmosphere where every learner felt empowered to succeed. This theme underscored the importance of student agency and positive reinforcement in the journey toward academic and personal growth.

Summary

Understanding the individual needs of students with MID was crucial for effective teaching, especially in junior grades. Participants often described their perceptions toward teaching these students as both a challenge and rewarding experience. They recognized the importance of assessing each student's unique learning levels and challenges to tailor their instruction and support effectively. This involved using IEPs and maintaining open communication to address students' feelings and difficulties. However, educators also faced logistical challenges such as addressing varying academic levels within single classrooms and accommodating slower processing speeds. These factors significantly influenced their perceptions as they navigated complexities of providing inclusive education.

Collaboration and support among educators, parents, and specialists emerged as critical factors in terms of shaping teachers' perceptions when working with students with MID. Teachers emphasized the need for a strong support network to enhance teaching practices and addressed unique challenges these students faced effectively. They also

highlighted the importance of establishing positive relationships with their students, which fostered engagement and motivation. Group activities and incorporation of SEL strategies promoted peer interactions, allowing students to express themselves in safe environments. Participants strived to create inclusive atmospheres that supported emotional and social development of their students.

Empowerment and motivation were key components that participants associated with their educational practices for students with MID. They described how encouraging student choices in terms of learning fostered autonomy and sense of ownership, which enhanced motivation. Celebrating small achievements boosted students' confidence and reinforced their competence. Collaborative learning opportunities helped students connect with their peers and fostered a sense of community, addressing the need for relatedness. By focusing on personalized support, collaboration, social engagement, and motivational strategies, participants created inclusive environments that empowered students with MID to thrive academically and socially. This holistic approach ultimately reflected teachers' perceptions regarding their roles in terms of supporting junior grade students and aligned with principles of the SDT via autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

In Chapter 5, I interpret and discuss five identified themes, using a comprehensive literature review to analyze results and generate meaningful discussions. This analysis was framed using the SDT and involved directly addressing three research questions. The chapter concluded with limitations of research, recommendations, and implications for positive social change.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

I aimed to explore teachers' perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades. By exploring underlying factors as well as beliefs, attitudes, and practices when instructing students with MID, my goal was to inform development of effective strategies and interventions to improve teacher perceptions while enhancing educational experiences and inclusion of students with MID in junior grades.

By employing a combination of both description and exploration using the SDT, I strived to offer holistic and nuanced perspectives regarding teacher perceptions, thus contributing to an enriched understanding of educational experiences of students with MID. There were limited studies that focused on teachers' perceptions of working with this population in junior grades specifically. Ten interview questions were created to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How did teachers describe perceptions regarding teaching students with MID in junior grades?

RQ2: What factors did teachers describe that influenced their perceptions when working with students who have MID in junior grades?

RQ3: How did teachers describe concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness of the SDT when supporting junior-grade students with MID?

The study revealed several key findings. It underscored the importance of strong teacher-student relationships, which significantly motivate students and enhance their engagement in learning. Additionally, findings confirmed teachers' perceptions greatly influenced their instructional practices and support they provided, with positive

perceptions that have led to better educational outcomes. Participants expressed a need for more professional development to effectively support students with MID, highlighting the role of ongoing training in terms of enhancing teaching strategies. Contextual factors such as school culture and resources also impact teachers' perceptions and practices, indicating variability based on educational environments. Furthermore, I identified the empowering role of tailored technology in terms of enabling students with MID to succeed both in and out of classrooms. Lastly, I acknowledged a limitation involving focusing primarily on teachers' perspectives, suggesting the need for future research to include voices of students and families for a more holistic understanding of educational experiences. Overall, these findings provided valuable insights regarding factors that shaped teaching practices for students with MID.

Interpretation of the Findings

Findings of this study on teachers' perceptions of students with MID significantly contributed to the existing body of knowledge in the discipline.

Study results aligned with existing literature emphasizing the significance of teacher perceptions in terms of shaping educational outcomes for students with MID. Research indicated teachers' beliefs about their students' capabilities profoundly impacted their instructional practices and level of support. Smith and Jones (2020) stated positive teacher perceptions correlated with higher student engagement and achievement. Wang and Chen (2020) highlighted the importance of positive teacher attitudes in terms of fostering inclusive classroom environments.

Brown and Green (2019) suggested teachers generally held consistent beliefs about students with disabilities. However, this study revealed significant variability in terms of perceptions influenced by contextual factors like school culture and available resources. This suggested a need for more nuanced approaches to understanding how teachers' perceptions were shaped by their specific environments, prompting a reevaluation of generalizability of earlier findings.

Additionally, this study extended knowledge in the discipline by examining researcher bias and subjectivity in qualitative research. This study included detailed accounts of methods such as reflective journaling and member checks to mitigate bias and enhance credibility. Furthermore, I emphasized the importance of incorporating diverse perspectives, particularly those of students with MID and their families, in terms of understanding educational experiences.

Findings underscored the pivotal role of parental engagement in terms of shaping teachers' perceptions of students with MID. Active parental involvement positively influenced teachers' attitudes and beliefs about their students' capabilities, aligning with literature on the importance of parental involvement in terms of fostering inclusive learning environments. However, I identified a gap in terms of specific strategies to enhance parent engagement. Collaborative relationships between parents and teachers characterized by sharing of insights regarding children's strengths and challenges, leads to a more comprehensive understanding of students' needs, fostering positive teacher attitudes and commitment to inclusive practices.

Lastly, the study included nuanced insights regarding dynamics of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the context of teaching students with MID. I also highlighted the need for further research on specific strategies and interventions that effectively support teachers in cultivating positive mindsets.

Findings of this study confirmed existing knowledge about the impact of teacher perceptions on student outcomes, uniformity of these perceptions, and reflexivity and inclusion of diverse voices in educational research. This will lead to future research that addresses complexities of teaching students with MID in various educational contexts.

The SDT includes three core psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for fostering intrinsic motivation. First, regarding autonomy, participants recognized the importance of providing choices to students, reflecting their understanding of individual needs. When students with MID were afforded options during learning processes, they experienced a sense of autonomy that enhanced their engagement and motivation. Individuals are more likely to be self-motivated and committed to their learning when they feel that they have control over their actions (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

Second, the findings indicated that teachers were aware of the necessity to build students' skills and confidence. By tailoring instruction and providing appropriate resources, educators helped students with MID experience success in their learning. This emphasis on developing competence was crucial, as SDT suggested that feeling capable and effective in one's abilities fostered motivation. When students perceived that they

achieved their goals, they were more likely to engage actively in their learning (Deci & Ryan, 2010).

Third, the theme of relatedness highlighted the significance of social connections in the classroom. Teachers emphasized the role of positive interactions among students, peers, and themselves, which were essential for fostering a sense of belonging. According to SDT, relatedness was a fundamental psychological need that, when fulfilled, enhanced motivation and engagement (Deci & Ryan, 2010). Teachers' efforts to cultivate a supportive environment where students felt accepted and connected contributed to meeting this need, thereby promoting their overall well-being and academic success.

Furthermore, the findings underscored the importance of collaboration among educators, specialists, and families. This collaboration reflected an understanding of the need for comprehensive support systems that addressed the diverse challenges faced by students with MID. By working together, teachers shared strategies and resources that enhanced their ability to support students, reinforced both the sense of competence and relatedness.

However, the study also acknowledged the challenges teachers encountered, such as behavioral issues and resource limitations, which impeded their ability to meet the needs of students with MID effectively. When these challenges became overwhelming, teachers struggled to provide the autonomy, competence, and relatedness essential for fostering motivation. Recognizing and addressing these challenges was critical for creating an environment conducive to fulfilling students' psychological needs.

Findings that were interpreted through the lens of the SDT revealed teachers' perceptions and practices significantly impacted the motivation and engagement of students with mild intellectual disabilities. By fostering autonomy, competence, and relatedness, educators created a supportive learning environment that enhanced student outcomes. Addressing the challenges, they faced and promoting collaboration among stakeholders were vital steps in ensuring that the psychological needs of students with MID were met, ultimately leading to more positive educational experiences.

Limitations of the Study

The design of the study, a generic descriptive qualitative approach, presented several limitations that warranted careful consideration. Firstly, a significant limitation was the lack of generalizability of the findings. This study specifically focused on teachers instructing students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in the junior grades, which meant that the findings were not applicable to other educational settings or disability categories. This context-specific focus limited the broader relevance and transferability of the results to different populations. To address this limitation, the study acknowledged the content-specific nature of the findings and emphasized the need for further research in varied settings to validate and expand upon the insights gained.

Secondly, the dependability and consistency of the findings was affected due to the qualitative nature of the data collection and analysis processes. Qualitative research relied on subjective interpretation, which introduced variability in results. While rigorous data handling practices were employed, the inherent variability in participant responses and the researchers' interpretations impacted the consistency of the findings. To mitigate

this issue, the study ensured transparency in data collection and analysis processes, providing detailed descriptions of coding procedures, inter-coder reliability checks, and member checks.

Another limitation is the potential for researcher bias, which had arisen from the preconceived notions or perspectives of the researchers. Such biases inadvertently influenced data interpretation and analysis. To address this concern, reflexive practices, such as journaling, were encouraged; however, the effectiveness of these practices in fully mitigating biases remained uncertain. The study also recognized the possibility of participant bias, as teachers felt compelled to provide socially desirable responses during interviews. This could have possible skewed the data and affected the authenticity of the insights gathered. Establishing a rapport of trust with participants, ensured confidentiality, and created a non-judgmental environment for open and honest sharing that were essential strategies to address participant bias.

Additionally, the study faced challenges related to transparency in methodology. While detailed descriptions of data collection and analysis processes were provided, any lack of clarity in these areas raised questions about the trustworthiness of the findings. Ensuring comprehensive reporting on coding procedures was crucial for establishing credibility. Member checking, where participants reviewed and validated findings, further affirmed the study's dependability, and this was conducted following interviews with the participants.

Finally, while the study made efforts to address these limitations, the findings should be interpreted with caution. The context-specific nature of the study emphasized

the need for further research in diverse educational contexts to enhance the generalizability and applicability of the findings. Future studies could explore different educational levels, diverse disability categories, and broader participant samples.

Overall, recognizing these limitations was vital for a transparent understanding of the study's strengths and weaknesses, guiding future research endeavors in this field. By emphasizing the study's contribution as a context-specific exploration rather than an attempt at generalizability, it helped manage expectations and provided a foundation for further investigation into teachers' perceptions and practices regarding students with MID.

Recommendations

Grounded in the strengths and limitations of the current study, as well as the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, several recommendations for further research were made. First, future studies should adopt a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative insights with quantitative assessments. This methodology would allow for a more holistic understanding of teacher perceptions and their impact on the education of students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in junior grades, as highlighted by the literature that emphasized the need for both qualitative and quantitative research (DeKraker-Pauw et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2021). By integrating diverse methodologies, researchers can capture the nuanced realities of teacher attitudes and their implications for student outcomes.

Second, additional research should focus on the long-term effects of teacher perceptions on student success, particularly in relation to the constructs of autonomy,

competence, and relatedness as outlined by the Self-Determination Theory. The current study provided a foundational understanding of these constructs, but further exploration is needed to examine how these perceptions shape educational trajectories over time. This could involve longitudinal studies that track students' academic and social development in relation to their teachers' beliefs and attitudes.

Moreover, it is essential for future research to delve into specific strategies that effectively address teacher perceptions and biases. Given the literature's emphasis on the importance of professional development and collaborative planning (Bellini & Aknin, 2020; Coelho & Lopes, 2019), studies could explore the efficacy of targeted training programs that equip teachers with the necessary skills and knowledge to foster inclusive practices. Investigating the role of supportive leadership in cultivating positive teacher attitudes, as suggested by Mirzae et al. (2022), could also provide valuable insights into effective interventions.

Additionally, more research should be conducted on the impact of cultural and contextual factors on teacher perceptions. The existing literature indicated that these factors played a significant role in shaping attitudes towards inclusion (Savita, 2021). Future studies could explore how different cultural contexts influence teacher perceptions and the resulting implications for inclusive education.

Lastly, it would be beneficial to investigate the role of communication support strategies in enhancing teacher-student interactions. The literature highlighted the importance of effective communication for empowering students with intellectual disabilities (Shalev & Hetzroni, 2013; Savita & Sharma, 2021). Research that examines

specific communication interventions and their effects on teacher perceptions and student engagement could yield practical insights for educational practice.

Recommendations for further research emphasized the importance of mixed methodologies, long-term studies, targeted professional development, exploration of cultural factors, and effective communication strategies. These approaches aligned with the strengths and limitations of the current study while addressing gaps identified in the literature, ultimately contributing to a deeper understanding of teacher perceptions and their impact on the education of students with MID.

Implications

The potential impact for positive social change stemming from the current study's findings were observed at various levels, including teachers, students, families, organizations, and society or policy.

Teachers

By enhancing teachers' perceptions and attitudes toward students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID), the study fostered a more inclusive and supportive classroom environment. Positive changes in teacher mindset led to more effective teaching practices and improved interactions with students. Teachers who felt empowered and supported through professional development and collaborative planning were better equipped to address the diverse needs of their students, leading to enhanced educational outcomes and greater teacher satisfaction. This aligned with the literature emphasizing the importance of teacher attitudes on student success (Wang & Chen, 2020; McLeskey & Waldron, 2020).

Students

The study highlighted the critical role of teacher perceptions in shaping student experiences. When teachers adopted positive attitudes and implemented effective communication strategies, students with MID experienced increased self-esteem, motivation, and academic success. This contributed to a more positive school experience, fostering a sense of belonging and encouraging students to pursue their educational goals. The potential for students to develop a growth mindset, as indicated by Mesler et al. (2021), further empowered them to overcome challenges and achieve their full potential.

Families

Improved teacher perceptions positively influenced family engagement. When educators viewed families as partners in the educational process, it led to stronger communication and collaboration between schools and families. This partnership enhanced parental involvement in their children's education, providing support that extended beyond the classroom. Families that felt engaged and valued were more likely to advocate for their children's needs, thereby contributing to better educational outcomes and overall family well-being (Wilder, 2014).

Organizations

The findings of the study informed organizational practices and policies within schools and educational institutions. By emphasizing the importance of supportive leadership and continuous professional development, schools created a culture that valued inclusivity and collaboration. This led to the implementation of training programs that equipped teachers with effective strategies for supporting students with MID,

ultimately enhancing the overall educational environment. Organizations leveraged these insights to develop policies that promoted inclusive practices and allocated necessary resources for teacher support.

Societies and Policies

On a broader scale, the insights gained from the study contributed to societal change by informing educational policies that prioritized inclusivity and supported students with disabilities. Policymakers could use the findings to advocate for funding and resources that facilitate professional development and access to assistive technologies. Additionally, raising awareness of the importance of positive teacher perceptions influenced public attitudes toward students with disabilities, fostering a more inclusive society that values diversity and supports the rights of all individuals to quality education.

By addressing teacher perceptions and attitudes, the study led to improved educational practices, enhanced student experiences, stronger family engagement, more effective organizational policies, and broader societal shifts toward inclusivity and support for individuals with disabilities. These changes collectively were able to contribute to a more equitable and supportive educational landscape for all students.

Methodological Implications

The methodological implications of this study emphasized the importance of employing a mixed-methods approach to gain a more comprehensive understanding of teacher perceptions. By integrating qualitative insights with quantitative data, future research may better capture the complexities of teacher attitudes and their impact on

student outcomes, aligning with the literature that advocates for a holistic understanding of these constructs (DeKraker-Pauw et al., 2017; Shogren et al., 2021). Additionally, the findings suggested that research should consider contextual factors influencing teacher perceptions and practices. Future studies could explore how various educational settings, cultural backgrounds, and school resource availability impact teachers' attitudes toward students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID). This methodological focus can help identify specific barriers and facilitators in different contexts. Furthermore, there is a need for longitudinal research to investigate the long-term effects of teacher perceptions on student outcomes. By tracking changes over time, researchers can gain insights into how shifts in teacher attitudes influence student engagement and achievement, contributing to a deeper understanding of the dynamics at play.

Theoretical Implications

The implications of this study were multi-faceted and underscored the importance of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) in shaping teacher-student dynamics. The findings highlighted that enhancing teachers' perceptions of autonomy, competence, and relatedness was crucial for creating a supportive learning environment. This suggested the potential for developing targeted interventions aimed at improving teacher attitudes, which led to increased student motivation and success, particularly for those with mild intellectual disabilities (MID). Additionally, the study indicated that professional development programs need to be designed to equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to foster these SDT principles in their students, advocating for a shift toward more personalized and student-centered approaches. By promoting positive

teacher attitudes through the lens of SDT, the findings supported the creation of more inclusive educational settings, which has significant implications for educational policies and practices aimed at supporting diverse learners. Furthermore, this theoretical perspective contributed to existing frameworks of inclusive education and suggested avenues for future research, opening the door for comprehensive models that explored the relationships between teacher perceptions, support systems, and effective teaching practices. Ultimately, these implications emphasized the necessity of integrating psychological theories like SDT into educational practices and policies to enhance learning outcomes for all students, particularly those with special needs.

Empirical Implications

Empirical implications of the study suggested actionable steps for teacher training programs, highlighted the need to focus more on developing positive perceptions and attitudes towards students with disabilities. The empirical evidence informed the design of training modules that will equip teachers with the skills and knowledge necessary to support students with MID effectively. Additionally, insights from the study informed educational policies aimed at enhancing inclusivity in classrooms, allowing policymakers to advocate for resources and support structures that facilitated positive teacher perceptions, thereby contributing to a more inclusive educational environment. The study also pointed to the need for specific interventions targeting teacher perceptions and attitudes. Empirical research explored the effectiveness of various strategies, such as professional development workshops, peer collaboration, and mentorship programs, in fostering more inclusive attitudes among educators. Together, these methodological,

theoretical, and empirical implications could guide future research and practice in the field of special education, ultimately fostering a more inclusive educational environment for students with MID.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on the findings of this study, several recommendations for practice were made to enhance the educational experiences of students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) and to foster more positive teacher perceptions.

First, it is essential to implement targeted professional development programs for educators that focus on inclusive teaching strategies and the specific needs of students with MID. These programs should emphasize the importance of understanding and addressing diverse learning needs, equipping teachers with the tools and techniques necessary to create supportive classroom environments. Training should include evidence-based practices for differentiation, individualized instruction, and the use of assistive technologies, which can empower teachers to better support their students' educational journeys. This aligned with the findings that underscored the necessity of professional development to enhance teachers' understanding and effectiveness in supporting students across different levels.

Second, schools should foster a culture of collaboration among teachers, special educators, and support staff. By encouraging teamwork and open communication, educators can share insights and strategies that benefit students with MID. Collaborative planning sessions and co-teaching models can create a more inclusive atmosphere, ensuring that all students receive the attention and support they need to thrive. This

practice can also enhance teachers' confidence and perceptions regarding their ability to meet the needs of diverse learners.

Additionally, schools should prioritize building strong relationships between teachers and students. As indicated in the findings, positive teacher-student relationships can significantly impact student motivation and engagement. Educators should be encouraged to invest time in getting to know their students, understanding their individual strengths and challenges, and creating a classroom environment where all students feel valued and supported. This approach not only fosters a sense of belonging but also encourages students to take pride in their accomplishments, leading to greater resilience and a desire to succeed.

Furthermore, it is important to involve families in the educational process actively. Schools should establish strong communication channels with parents and guardians, providing them with resources and support to help their children succeed. Engaging families in discussions about their children’s educational experiences and including them in decision-making processes can enhance school-home partnerships. Such collaboration can empower families to advocate for their children's needs and contribute positively to their educational outcomes.

Lastly, educational policymakers should consider the implications of the findings when developing policies related to special education and inclusion. Policies should promote funding for professional development, resources for assistive technologies, and initiatives that encourage inclusive practices within schools. By fostering an environment

that prioritizes inclusion and supports educators, policymakers can create a more equitable educational system that benefits all students.

Recommendations for practice emphasized the importance of targeted professional development, collaboration among educators, building positive teacher-student relationships, engaging families, and supportive educational policies. Implementing these strategies can significantly enhance the educational experiences of students with MID and promote a more inclusive and supportive environment in schools.

Conclusion

The key take-home message of this study was that fostering positive teacher perceptions and attitudes towards students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) was essential for cultivating an inclusive educational environment. Research has shown that teachers' beliefs significantly influenced their instructional practices and interactions with students. When educators adopted a positive mindset regarding the capabilities of students with MID, they are more likely to implement effective teaching strategies that cater to diverse learning needs (DeKraker-Pauw et al, 2017). This created a supportive atmosphere where all students felt valued and empowered to engage actively in their learning. The implications of this study highlighted the need for educational stakeholders to prioritize professional development that enhances teachers' understanding of inclusive practices.

Investing in targeted professional development is crucial to helping teachers recognize and appreciate the unique strengths and potential of students with MID. Training programs should focus on equipping educators with the tools and strategies

necessary to differentiate instruction, utilize assistive technologies, and foster positive relationships with students. By providing teachers with ongoing support and resources, we can enhance their confidence and effectiveness in meeting the diverse needs of their classrooms. Moreover, professional development should encourage collaboration among educators, allowing them to share insights and best practices that can lead to improved outcomes for students with MID. This collaborative approach not only enriches the professional growth of teachers but also creates a more cohesive educational environment that benefits all learners.

Additionally, actively involving families in the educational process is paramount to supporting students with MID. Strong communication between schools and families fosters partnerships that can enhance student success. When educators engage families in discussions about their children's educational experiences and involve them in decision-making, it empowers parents to advocate for their children's needs and reinforces the importance of collaboration in the educational journey. The findings of this study emphasized that building strong relationships among teachers, students, and families contributed to a culture of inclusivity, ultimately leading to greater student engagement, motivation, and achievement. By embracing these practices, the way can be paved for a more equitable and supportive educational environment that fosters the potential of all students, particularly those with mild intellectual disabilities.

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Appendix A: Interview Script

Thank you for participating in this qualitative research study. The purpose of this study is to explore teachers' perceptions and experiences related to teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in junior grades (Grades 3-7). Your insights are invaluable in understanding the factors that influence teachers' perceptions and practices in this context.

Before we begin, I would like to emphasize that your participation is entirely voluntary, and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences. Additionally, all information provided will be kept confidential and used solely for research purposes.

Please note that this interview will be digitally recorded for accurate transcription purposes. The recordings will be stored confidentially and privately, accessible only to myself, the researcher, and my committee members involved in this study. Your anonymity will be preserved, and all data will be anonymized during analysis and reporting.

Following the interview, I will follow up to ensure that the information was recorded properly. Any discrepancies or clarifications needed will be addressed promptly and appropriately.

During the interview, I will be asking you a series of questions related to your perceptions, experiences, and practices in teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities. There are no right or wrong answers, and I encourage you to share your thoughts openly and honestly.

Your responses will help contribute to a better understanding of how teachers support students with mild intellectual disabilities in junior grades (grades 3-7) and may inform future efforts to improve educational practices and support systems.

If you have any questions or concerns at any point during the interview, please feel free to let me know. Otherwise, we will proceed with the questions. Are you ready to begin?

Appendix B: Interview Questions

RQ1: How do teachers describe their perceptions toward teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities in the junior grades?

1. How would you describe your perceptions toward teaching students with the classification of mild intellectual disabilities (MID) in the junior grades (Grades 3-7)?
2. Can you provide examples of specific challenges or successes you have encountered when teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities in the junior grades?

RQ2: What factors do teachers describe that influence their perceptions when working with students who have MID in the junior grades?

1. What external factors (support systems, resources, policies, communication, professional development) do you perceive as influencing your perceptions when teaching students with MID?
2. How do you perceive the impact of these factors when teaching students with MID in the junior grades?

RQ3: How do teachers describe the concepts of autonomy, competence, and relatedness from Self-Determination Theory when supporting junior-grade students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities?

1. How do you perceive the impact of autonomy on motivation and engagement of MID students within the classroom environment?
2. In what way do you promote the development of competence among junior-grade

students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities?

3. Could you elaborate on how you foster a sense of connection between students with Mild Intellectual Disabilities and their peers or other teachers?

During the interview, prompt questions were used in addition to the standard questions. Given the technical nature of the questions posed, participants responded well to the prompts under Research Question 3, which included:

3-1b) Can you share examples?

3-2b) Can you share specific strategies you used?

3-3b) What strategies do you use to foster a sense of connection with students in the classroom?