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Educator Experiences With Implementing Every Student Succeeds Act Equity Mandates for Students With Autism

Jameelah S. Lewis
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

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Jameelah Lewis

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Walden University
2025

Abstract

Educator Experiences With Implementing Every Student Succeeds Act Equity Mandates for

Students With Autism

by

Jameelah Lewis

MA, Walden University, 2010

BA, The City College of New York, 2002

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Public Policy and Administration

Walden University

November 2025

Abstract

Educating students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in under resourced schools remains a persistent equity concern in the United States. This study addressed a gap in the existing research, as prior studies have examined special education policy and school-level implementation challenges, but few have explored the experiences of general education teachers implementing inclusion in low-socioeconomic public schools. The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to explore the barriers general education teachers encounter in providing equitable education and their recommendations for improving inclusion. The study was guided by Ingram and Schneider's (1993) social construction theory, which explains how marginalized groups are positioned as less deserving in policy design and implementation. Semi structured interviews were conducted with 12 general education teachers at a public middle school in Washington, DC, and data were analyzed inductively using thematic coding. Findings revealed that participants experienced limited autism-specific training, insufficient paraprofessional support, minimal engagement from the school's autism coordinator, and systemic barriers such as food insecurity and staff turnover that disrupted instruction and undermined inclusion. Participants emphasized the need for sustained professional development, consistent paraprofessional staffing, accountability for individualized education program implementation, and culturally responsive practices to address misdiagnosis of English Language Learners. The study may promote positive social change by highlighting the importance of teacher perspectives to guide reforms in training, staffing, and accountability. With this insight, educational leaders may provide inclusion that extends beyond placement to achieve real equity for students with ASD.

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my mom, Jerri Dean Perkins-Henderson, my dad, Yusuf Abdullah, sons, my husband, Aaron (Doc), thank you; to my sons Elisha and Zach and my nieces Regina, Briana, Jordyn and Chloe; I pray Psalm 91, and Jeremiah 29:11 over you all. I love you all.

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In the infamous words of the alien from the movie *Galaxy Quest*, “Never give up; Never surrender”. I would like to thank my husband for forcing me to watch Sci-Fi movies with him, LOL boy, oh boy do I know what it means to “Never give up. Never surrender.” Thank you to my two sons, Elisha and Zacharias, who were truly the reason I live and breathe. When I gave birth to each of you my heart ceased to live in my body, and now walks outside of me, in you both. I pray that you both find and walk in the plan and purpose God had for you both, respectively, and that you never give up, and never surrender. I would like to thank my mother, Jerri Dean Perkins-Henderson who sacrificed her entire life for me to have everything I could dream of, who moved with me and my family for 18 years so my children would never have to experience a babysitter, and who made sure that I never gave up nor did I ever surrender. Thank you to my dad who also gave me everything under the sun and moon, and called me 2-3 times a week, ensuring that I did not give up, nor surrender. Thank you to Cousin Gabe for being the best godfather to our boys, always there and always ready to step in and step-up. If I did not love you so much, I would keeeeeeeey you, and finally thank you to Jen, Jamiyo, Cathy, Karmen, and Robyn for being with me from Day one-A1 and supporting me with my kids, my mom, and giving me a safe place to vent, and finally to Dr. Andrew Rich, Dr. Vincent Boudreau and Dr. John Krinsky for setting the example and expectations of greatness.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

In 2021, approximately 56.4 million students across the United States attended elementary, middle, and high schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). During this time, there was also a documented increase in the number of students diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). As the rate of autistic students rises annually, a corresponding increase has occurred in the number of students with ASD being educated in general education public school classrooms due to the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) mandate. This trend has created a critical need to ensure that all school personnel possess the necessary training, support, and information to provide equitable educational opportunities to this growing student population. Addressing these challenges aligns with the broader goal of promoting positive social change by supporting inclusive educational practices and equitable outcomes for all students.

Public schools located in low socioeconomic status (SES) areas already experience financial constraints, challenges with teacher retention, and limited program support (Durkin, 2017). In this study, the term *low socioeconomic status area* refers to geographic communities in which a significant proportion of students experience economic hardship, typically indicated by eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, low household income, and limited access to resources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2012; Suitts, 2016). It is essential to investigate the challenges educators in these schools face, as such difficulties can significantly hinder the educational progress of students with ASD. This research provided insights that may benefit school administrations, local

school districts, and policymakers. Moreover, it may support the advancement of educational policies that promote equity for students with ASD in inclusive classroom settings.

I conducted this study to identify the needs of general education teachers teaching in low SES area public schools. Recognizing these needs may inform public policy changes and advocacy efforts designed to improve the educational experiences of students with ASD. Addressing the challenges educators face can potentially lead to improved educational policies that reduce inequities and support more inclusive and effective teaching practices in under-resourced schools.

Background

ASD, first identified in 1943, is a neurological and developmental disability that significantly impacts communication and social interaction skills (National Institute of Mental Health [NIMH], 2023). Often diagnosed in early childhood, ASD can also result in repetitive behaviors, and in some cases, limited or absent verbal communication (Lord et al., 2019). The range and variation of these symptoms are the reason the condition is characterized as a spectrum disorder (Morse, 2010). Today, more individuals with ASD are leading integrated lives, living independently in communities (Lord et al., 2019).

Many school-aged children with ASD are educated in general education classrooms alongside their peers without disabilities. This trend is largely driven by the inclusion mandate under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), specifically its provision for the LRE (Busby et al., 2012). This mandate, while intended to provide equity and access, presents a range of challenges for general education

teachers (Busby et al., 2012). With the increasing number of students diagnosed with ASD in general education settings, schools play a vital role in identifying needs, providing appropriate instruction, and delivering necessary services (Durkin, 2017).

Since the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in 1965, later amended as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and now the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), federal policy has emphasized the importance of equitable education for all students, particularly those considered vulnerable (El Moussaoui, 2017; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). ESSA underscores the need for fair, high-quality education and seeks to close achievement gaps, regardless of geographic location or socioeconomic status.

The present study employs a generic qualitative design to explore the challenges experienced by general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms with students diagnosed with ASD. It is especially focused on low SES area public schools, which frequently lack sufficient funding, training, and support. IDEA, the Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) mandate, and the LRE requirement are central policies influencing the educational experiences of these students. Despite amendments intended to improve policy clarity, educators and school systems continue to struggle with implementation (Rozalski et al., 2019).

The debate around LRE focuses on whether the primary purpose should be social integration or academic outcomes (Williamson et al., 2017). While the policy favors educating students with disabilities in general classrooms whenever possible, it also requires that students receive the necessary support to succeed. When low SES area

public schools are tasked with educating students on the autism spectrum, the existing low socioeconomic barriers are often magnified (Browell et al., 2018).

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of these challenges and seeks to support educational policy development that better equips schools to serve students with ASD. The theoretical lens of social construction and public policy, developed by Ingram and Schneider (1993), frames the discussion by highlighting how populations marginalized by disability, income, or location are often underserved in policymaking. Applying this theory, the study explores how general education teachers in low SES area schools experience and interpret the barriers to equitable education for students with ASD. This study aims to contribute to positive social change by informing educational policy reforms that reduce systemic inequities and improve support for both teachers and students in under-resourced school environments.

Problem Statement

There is a persistent problem within educational policy related to the challenges general education teachers face when attempting to provide equitable instruction to students with ASD in low SES public schools. A growing number of students diagnosed with ASD are being educated in public schools located in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas (Busby et al., 2012). These schools often lack the necessary resources, training, and institutional support to fully implement mandates such as the LRE and FAPE.

As the population of students with ASD continues to rise, general education teachers report feeling unprepared and under-resourced to meet their educational needs.

This results in significant consequences for both student learning outcomes and teacher retention. Additionally, educational equity is compromised when policies fail to provide clear, practical guidance for school leaders and educators.

This study addresses a gap in the current literature by centering the experiences of general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms within a low- socioeconomic public school setting. Although previous research has examined special education implementation and school-level challenges, few studies have focused on the educators themselves. These teachers are on the front lines of inclusive education and are essential to their success.

By examining the barriers that prevent general education teachers from delivering equitable education to students with ASD, this study aims to inform policy development, guide resource allocation, and support professional training initiatives. The long-term goal is to improve policy design and implementation so that educational outcomes for students with ASD are not determined by the socioeconomic status of the schools they attend.

By examining the barriers that prevent general education teachers from delivering equitable education to students with ASD, this study aims to inform policy development, guide resource allocation, and support professional training initiatives. Educational policies should result in positive social change by addressing the needs of those who are marginalized. As Duncan (2018) emphasized, education is one of the most powerful tools available to promote advancement and equity. Promoting changes in educational policy may help to dismantle systemic barriers and allow education to serve as a vehicle for

improved outcomes among students with ASD in low SES area public schools (Roberts, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this generic qualitative study was to examine the challenges general education educators encounter when attempting to provide an equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools. This study focused on understanding these challenges from the perspective of general education teachers working at a single public middle school located in a low SES area of Washington, D.C. The central phenomenon under investigation are the barriers that prevent teachers from delivering equitable educational experiences to students with ASD in inclusive classrooms. Data was collected from 12 general education teachers who currently teach in that school.

Research Questions

The research questions (RQs) for this study are

RQ1: What are the challenges experienced by general education educators in providing an equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools?

RQ2: What policy recommendations would assist general education educators in providing an equitable education for students with ASD?

Theoretical Framework

This study was grounded in Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory of social construction and public policy. Their framework focuses on how populations are socially constructed as either deserving or underserving and how these constructions influence the

development and implementation of public policies. According to this theory, individuals or groups that are socially constructed as undeserving, such as those with disabilities, those living in poverty, or those residing in low SES communities, are frequently marginalized or excluded from equitable policy outcomes.

Recent applications of this theory, such as those by Jung & McCormick (2021) demonstrate how social constructions of deservingness influence education policy and institutional responses to marginalized students. In the context of inclusive education, this means that students with disabilities may be perceived through stigmatized lenses, leading to uneven resource allocation, limited training for educators, and policy gaps.

This theoretical framework was selected to explore the central phenomenon of this study: the barriers general education teachers face when educating students with ASD in low SES area public schools. The framework guided the study's design and analysis by offering a lens through which to interpret how systemic inequities and policy failures disproportionately affect this specific population of students and the educators responsible for teaching them.

UNESCO (2020) further described disadvantaged populations as groups at risk of exclusion due to characteristics such as disability, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. In alignment with Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory, this study assumes that current educational policies have failed to equitably support these marginalized groups. Consequently, general education teachers working in inclusive classrooms within under-resourced schools may face structural barriers that inhibit their ability to provide a FAPE and adhere to LRE mandates.

I applied the theory of social construction to highlight the experiences of general education teachers and to illustrate how social perceptions and policy decisions intersect to shape educational inequities. In doing so, it draws on both foundational and contemporary perspectives to support a nuanced interpretation of the data. The findings can contribute to the development of policies that recognize and address these inequities, thereby advancing efforts toward more inclusive educational practices.

Nature of the Study

I employed a generic qualitative research design to explore the experiences of general education teachers who educate students with ASD in low SES area public schools. A qualitative approach was appropriate because it allowed for a deep understanding of how educators interpret and respond to the challenges they encounter. Rather than measuring variables or statistical relationships, the study focused on participants lived experiences, perceptions, and insights.

I selected a generic qualitative approach to provide flexibility in capturing participants' perspectives without committing to the rigid structures of other qualitative traditions such as phenomenology, ethnography, or grounded theory. This design was particularly suitable for gathering descriptive data to inform practice and policy. The goal was to generate rich, detailed accounts that reflect the complexity of inclusive education in under-resourced areas.

Participants included 12 general education teachers from a single public middle school located in a low SES area of Washington, DC. In addition, these individuals who participated in this study had firsthand experience teaching students with ASD in

inclusive classrooms. Each participant had taught at least one student with ASD for a minimum of one academic year, ensuring relevant and informed responses.

Data was collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, conducted via Zoom. This format allowed for consistency across participants while also accommodating individualized follow-up questions that captured unique insights. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data, identifying patterns and recurring themes related to the challenges educators face and the support they believe is necessary.

This study's design and data collection methods were chosen to ensure that the voices of general education teachers were accurately represented. Their experiences provide essential context for understanding how educational policies like LRE, IDEA and FAPE, are implemented at the classroom level and where support systems are lacking. By documenting these challenges, the study aims to inform policy recommendations that enhance educational equity for students with ASD in low SES schools.

Definitions

Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA): A civil rights law enacted in 1990 that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including schools. Under the ADA, public schools are required to provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational programs and services (ADA, 1990, 42 U.S.C. § 12101 et seq.).

Autism coordinator: A school-based staff member, often with special education credentials, responsible for supporting the implementation of individualized education programs (IEPs) for students with autism. Duties may include teacher coaching, service

coordination, and strategy support; however, the role and effectiveness may vary significantly across schools and districts.

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD): As defined by the American Psychiatric Association (2013), ASD refers to a neurodevelopmental condition characterized by persistent deficits in social communication and social interaction across multiple contexts. It includes a range of symptoms, skills, and levels of disability, encompassing individuals who are nonverbal as well as those who were previously diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome. Common characteristics include repetitive behaviors, restrictive interests, and difficulty interpreting social cues (APA, 2013).

Disproportionate representation: The overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a particular demographic group in special education programs, often influenced by factors such as systemic bias, socioeconomic status, or language differences.

Education for All Handicapped Children Act: Enacted in 1975 and later reauthorized as IDEA, this legislation established the right of students with disabilities to receive a free and appropriate public education in the LRE (Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975, § 3).

Equity in education: The principle of fairness in education, which ensures that personal or social circumstances such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status do not hinder access to educational opportunities, resources, and outcomes (OECD, 2012).

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA): The ESSA was signed into federal law by President Obama in 2015 a federal law passed in 2015 that replaces the No Child Left Behind Act. ESSA maintains the federal government's commitment to equal opportunity

for all students and gives states more flexibility in how the State will meet assessment requirements, such as statewide testing in reading, math, and science.

Evidence-based practices (EBPs): Teaching strategies or interventions that are supported by high-quality research and shown to be effective in improving outcomes for students, especially those with disabilities. IDEA encourages the use of evidence-based practices to ensure that students with disabilities receive instruction based on what works. In special education, evidence-based practices are identified as those practices that yield positive outcomes for students with disabilities, including students with ASD, and are recommended for use by educators under mandates such as the IDEA (Cook & Cook, 2013; Odom et al., 2010).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): A provision under IDEA that guarantees special education and related services are provided at public expense, meet state educational standards, include appropriate instruction in regular or special education settings, and are delivered in alignment with an individualized education program (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1401[a][9][A–D]).

General education teacher: A state-certified teacher responsible for instructing students in core academic content areas. These educators typically do not possess specialized training in special education but may be responsible for teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classroom settings.

Highly qualified teacher: As defined by the NCLB, this refers to a teacher who has earned full state certification or licensure, holds at least a bachelor's degree, and has demonstrated competence in each core academic subject they teach (NCLB, 2001).

Inclusion/mainstreaming: The practice of educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms alongside their nondisabled peers, to the greatest extent appropriate, with the necessary supports and services to ensure meaningful participation (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1412[a][5][A]).

Individualized education program (IEP): A legally mandated document required under IDEA. The IEP outlines special education services, instructional goals, accommodations, and assessment modifications for a student with a disability. It is developed through a collaborative process involving educators, specialists, and the student's family, and it must be reviewed and updated annually in accordance with federal law (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1412).

Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): A federal law ensuring services to children with disabilities throughout the nation. IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible children from birth through age 21 (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1412).

Least restrictive environment (LRE): A key principle under IDEA that requires students with disabilities to be educated with peers without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate. Placement decisions must be individually determined based on the students' needs (IDEA, 2004, 20 U.S.C. § 1412).

Low socioeconomic status area: A geographic area where a significant proportion of residents experience economic hardship. This status is often indicated by high eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch, low household income, and limited access to

educational and community resources (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; OECD, 2012; Suitts, 2016).

Marginalized populations: Groups systematically excluded or disadvantaged due to characteristics such as race, disability, income level, or language status. In this study, it refers particularly to students with ASD in low SES area public schools and the educators who serve them.

No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB): A 2001 federal law that aimed to close achievement gaps by increasing accountability for schools. It emphasized evidence-based instruction and required states to measure and report student performance, including for students with disabilities (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001).

Paraprofessional: A school staff member who provides instructional or behavioral support to students under the supervision of a certified teacher. In inclusive classrooms, paraprofessionals often assist students with disabilities in accessing the general curriculum, managing behaviors, and supporting individual needs, including those outlined in an IEP (IDEA, 2004).

Assumptions

I based this study on several assumptions. First, it was assumed that general education teachers who participated in the study were able to provide honest, reflective, and accurate responses regarding their experiences and perceptions. Their willingness to share genuine insights was necessary for understanding the real-world challenges they face.

Second, I assumed that the challenges reported by these teachers are representative of those faced by general education educators in similar low SES, urban public schools. Although the study focused on a single school in Washington, DC, it was presumed that comparable barriers exist in other low SES school environments across the United States.

Third, I assumed that all participants had taught at least one student with ASD in an inclusive classroom setting and had done so for a sufficient duration to offer meaningful commentary. This experience was essential to ensure that participants could provide informed perspectives.

Finally, I assumed that participants were aware of and operated within the expectations outlined by the IDEA, particularly regarding FAPE and LRE mandates. This understanding was necessary for participants to evaluate whether they were able to deliver equitable education in alignment with federal requirements.

These assumptions were foundational to the study and guided the development of the interview questions, participant selection criteria, and interpretation of findings. Without these assumptions, the ability to explore the central RQs would have been compromised.

Scope and Delimitations

The scope was limited to exploring the experiences of general education teachers who have taught students diagnosed with ASD in inclusive public school in low socio-economic area. This study focused on general education teachers working in a single public middle school located in a low SES area of Washington, DC. The school was selected based on its demographic composition, resource constraints, and history of

inclusive classroom practices. These educators provided insights into the barriers they face in delivering equitable education.

The study was delimited to one geographic location and one type of school to allow for a focused and in-depth analysis. Although the findings may reflect broader systemic issues, the intent was not to generalize to all public schools across the country. Rather, the aim was to provide a rich, contextualized understanding of how educational inequities manifest at public school within a low SES, urban setting. The decision to include only general education teachers and exclude special education teachers, administrators, or paraprofessionals was deliberate. This focus ensured that the experiences of those directly responsible for academic instruction in inclusive classrooms were captured with depth and clarity.

Additionally, I did not evaluate student outcomes, schoolwide performance metrics, or comparative case studies. It also did not explore the effectiveness of specific instructional programs or curricula. The emphasis remained on teacher-reported challenges and perceived needs within their professional context. These delimitations were necessary to maintain a clear focus on the central RQs and to ensure that the findings directly inform policy and practice related to inclusive education for students with ASD in under-resourced public schools.

Limitations

Several limitations were present in this study and should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study was confined to a single public middle school in a low SES urban area, which may limit the transferability of the results. While the

findings provide in-depth insight into the experiences of educators in that specific setting, schools in different geographic or socioeconomic contexts may face distinct challenges or possess different resources.

Second, the data collected was based solely on self-reported experiences from general education teachers. As with all qualitative research relying on interviews, there is the possibility of response bias. Participants may have consciously or unconsciously presented their experiences in ways that align with perceived expectations or personal interpretations. While every effort was made to encourage openness and confidentiality, the subjective nature of the data must be acknowledged.

Third, the exclusion of special education teachers, administrators, students, with and without disabilities, and families limited the study's scope to a single stakeholder perspective. Although this focus was intentional, it restricted the study's ability to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic barriers involved in inclusive education.

Finally, the generalizability of the findings is constrained by the study's qualitative design. While rich in detail, the results do not lend themselves to broad statistical generalization. However, the intent of this study was not to generalize, but rather to illuminate common challenges that may inform practice and policy. These limitations are presented to provide transparency and to guide future research that may expand on the perspectives explored in this study. Despite these constraints, the study offers valuable insights into the barriers general education teachers face and highlights opportunities for policy improvement in inclusive educational settings.

Significance

This study holds significance for educational stakeholders and policymakers by highlighting the lived experiences of general education teachers attempting to serve students with ASD in low SES area public schools. By highlighting their challenges, this research underscores the need for targeted policy reforms, resource allocation, and professional development programs that reflect the realities of inclusive education in under-resourced environments.

The findings of this study have the potential to contribute to the academic literature by addressing a gap that has received limited attention. Much of the current research on inclusive education focuses on student outcomes or administrative perspectives, while the voices of general education teachers, particularly those in socioeconomically disadvantaged areas, remain underrepresented. By centering their perspectives, this study adds an important dimension to ongoing discussions about equity, inclusion, and teacher preparedness.

The study also contributes to the practice of public policy by applying Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory of social construction to identify how students with ASD and the teachers who serve them are often constructed as undeserving or overlooked in policy decisions. By revealing these inequities, the study encourages policymakers to reevaluate the frameworks and assumptions that underlie educational legislation and funding.

From a practical perspective, this research provides school leaders and educational policy decision-makers with data that may inform the design of more responsive support systems for general education teachers. These systems could include

ongoing training, accessible behavioral resources, and clearer guidance on fulfilling legal mandates related to IDEA.

Finally, this study promotes positive social change by drawing attention to the ways marginalized populations, both students and educators, are affected by educational policy. As Roberts (2015) and Duncan (2018) emphasized, education should be a vehicle for advancement and equity. By amplifying the voices of general education teachers in low SES schools, this study supports efforts to dismantle systemic barriers and foster more inclusive, equitable educational environments.

Summary

This chapter provided an overview of the research problem, including the background, purpose, and significance of the study. It introduced the theoretical framework guiding the research and outlined the qualitative methodology used to explore the experiences of general education teachers who educate students with ASD in low SES area public schools. This chapter also presented the RQs, assumptions, scope, delimitations, and limitations, offering a foundation for understanding the study's focus and relevance. In Chapter 2, I will review the existing literature related to inclusive education, autism policy implementation, teacher preparedness, and the theoretical framework of social construction. This review will further broaden the scholarly context and highlight the gaps the study seeks to address.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the existing research related to inclusive education, ASD, and the systemic barriers that impact the ability of general education teachers to provide equitable instruction in low SES area public schools. This review is grounded in the theoretical lens of social construction and public policy, as developed by Ingram and Schneider (1993), which underscores how marginalized populations are often overlooked or underserved in policy implementation.

This chapter begins with a historical and policy overview of autism education in the United States. It then addresses the principles of inclusion, and the legal mandates associated with IDEA, followed by a discussion of teacher preparedness, resource allocation, and the challenges of implementing equitable educational practices. This chapter concludes by identifying gaps in the literature and justifying the need for the current study, which centers the voices of general education teachers serving students with ASD in under-resourced urban schools.

This literature review demonstrates a critical analysis and synthesizing of content as it relates to the constructs of the study. It also highlights the gap in research that the study examined. Previous studies and literature demonstrate a clear gap in the research that revealed the reasoning for this research and a step towards social change for general education professionals federally mandated to provide education, guidance, intervention, and supplementary services to students with disabilities, including ASD, in low-income area public schools. Federal policy that impacts those that are poor and, or disabled, and

educated in high-poverty schools, presents the research with opportunities and unidentified challenges. Public schools in America face various complex and challenging issues, such as funding, classroom size, and providing equitable education to students with learning disabilities, are significant challenges that educators and policymakers struggle with.

The increasing prevalence of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in students adds another layer of complexity to the educational landscape. The statistics from Busby et al. (2012), Maenner et al. (2016), and Biao (2014) highlight the rising numbers of children diagnosed with ASD over time. This trend puts additional strain on schools as they strive to meet the unique needs of students with autism. Schools are the primary setting where children with ASD receive supplementary services and education (Locke et al., 2016). Schools are increasingly under pressure to provide services for these children and to adhere to federal policies, like FAPE and LRE. The increased pressure is met with the additional challenge of funding because low-income area public schools often have limited funds to even provide adequate education for their students without disabilities (Baker, Farrie, & Sciarra, 2018). The challenges and capacity to meet the needs of ASD students are exponential, leaving educators frustrated and the students inadequately prepared. Much research exists about public schools with students diagnosed with ASD and the challenges they face. Research also focuses on educational challenges from a school administrator's perspective. However, there is a gap in the research as it relates to the general education educators who perform this task in classrooms in low-income area public schools. The educators who provide services to this student population have

significant and specific challenges that need addressing, so special education policy is enhanced to embrace this population of students deemed undeserving, according to Ingram and Schneider (1993).

I reviewed the extensive literature with the ideas, concepts, and experiences that I had as a parent of an ASD student to synthesize the research. In addition, I was also a former educator of students with ASD, in an inclusive classroom, located in a low-income public school; therefore, I also gleaned from those experiences. This chapter presents the vast amount of research conducted in this area but is not specific to the teacher's perspective.

Literature Search Strategy

The literature research was collected through various online search engines, including PsycINFO, EBSCOhost Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, ProQuest, and the Walden University Library. I used a variety of word combinations of the following key terms and phrases: autism, autism spectrum disorder, public school funding, education professional, educators, IDEA, FAPE, LRE, education policy, low income, poverty, low socioeconomic status, low-income area, high poverty area, public schools, response to intervention (RTI), and Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS). In addition, I only used peer-reviewed journal articles published within the past five to ten years. In some cases, I deemed it necessary to refer to older books, articles, reports, and government documents to obtain contextual and background information.

Theoretical Foundation

Public policies play an important role in shaping the lived experiences of individuals with autism, reflecting and influencing not only public opinion but also the potential pathways for treatment and support (Masi, DeMayo, Glozier, & Guastella, 2021; Autistic Self Advocacy Network [ASAN], 2023). ASD was largely absent from major federal policy for decades. When the rights of individuals with disabilities were being affirmed through legislative advances such as the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA, Pub. L. No. 94-142, 1975), which ensured a free appropriate public education, autism was not listed as an eligible category. However, in the *Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act* of 1975 (Pub. L. No. 94-103), advocates succeeded in having autism included, opening the door to federal funding and later recognition in subsequent education policies (Silverman & Brosco, 2007).

The theoretical foundation for this study stems from Schneider and Ingram's (1993) application of the theory of social construction to public policy. They argued that marginalized groups often receive fewer resources because policies are rarely designed with their needs in mind. The social constructions of target populations play a critical role in determining the distribution of symbolic and material benefits (Schneider & Ingram, 1993; Schneider, Ingram, & de Leon, 2014). Within this framework, social construction becomes a political mechanism through which policymakers shape public policy in ways that may inadvertently or deliberately disadvantage marginalized populations (Bacchi, 2012). The social construction framework, when utilized as a political tool, helps explain the distribution of political power and why some groups are deemed advantaged or

deserving while others are not. It also illustrates how public policy development not only benefits the advantaged but reinforces existing inequities (Ingram & Schneider, 1993). UNESCO (2020) defines disadvantaged populations as those at risk of exclusion due to characteristics such as sex, poverty, disability, ethnicity, language, migration, or displacement. Based on this definition, students with ASD can be understood as a population that may not fully benefit from educational policies. Investigating this research problem through this theoretical foundation contributes to understanding how policy design may advance or undermine legislation intended to support students with ASD.

Literature Review Related to Key Concepts

Autism

The history of the autistic community is one that has been misunderstood, marginalized, mistreated, and ignored, which has contributed to a current society that offers a lack of support, and accommodations (Jaswal, 2017). Albeit the autistic community is not where it was in the past, the support, accommodations, and understanding of the present day still have a long way to go. Autism is a lifelong neurological condition with no known causes and genetic markers; no known blood test or scan can be performed to identify if a child will have ASD (Jaswal, 2017). ASD is also a heterogeneous disability, meaning the symptoms of ASD vary by person (Jaswal, 2017). Some individuals with ASD cannot speak, and some can; some are very smart with a high IQ, and some have a low IQ. Some autistics are bothered by light, loud sounds, or touch.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders ((American Psychiatric Association [APA], 2022)) validates Jaswal (2017) with a medical description of autism. According to DSM-5 (APA, 2022), autism spectrum disorder is a lifelong developmental disorder that manifests itself early in a child's life and is characterized by social communication and social interaction impairments, restrictive and repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (APA, 2022). Studies conducted in the 1960s - 1970s reported the prevalence of ASD in the range of 2 to 4 cases per 10,000 children (Boat & Wu, 2015). By 2002 the range increased to 6 to 7 cases per 1,000 children (Boat & Wu, 2015). The reasons for the increase are numerous and complex and include, but are not limited to, improved screening and reporting, greater awareness, and changes in diagnostic definitions that now encompass individuals on the high-functioning end of the spectrum who were not previously identified (Maenner et al., 2023; Zeidan et al., 2022). In addition, previously Asperger's Syndrome, or high functioning autism, was not on the spectrum. Since the update, the term Asperger's has been reclassified and is now included on the autism spectrum. American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2022) has recently inserted Asperger syndrome into the spectrum of ASD (Helles, Gillberg, Gillberg, & Billstedt, 2015). There are many experts who think that this re-classification is premature because of biological differences between Asperger syndrome and ASD, thus adding to more heterogeneity of this disability (Helles et al., 2015). New changes in the DSM-5 and the heterogeneity of this disability contribute to the difficulty in screening, providing supplementary services, and impacts each ASD student in receiving a FAPE.

As the prevalence of ASD increases, so does the sense of urgency in public schools faced with tailoring equitable curriculums and services to all students, thus supporting IDEA (Lauderdale-Littin & Brennan, 2018). However, IDEA is an ambiguous mandate that leaves many schools in litigation over whether they are providing the students with a FAPE. There exist several autism-specific assessment tools that schools can use that will assist them in developing a targeted curriculum. In addition to the assessment tools, evidence-based practices (EBP) can be implemented in public schools for their ASD students.

Evidence base practices are science-based interventions that have produced positive outcomes for ASD students (Lauderdale-Littin & Brennan, 2018). IDEA and NCLB are specific in stating that teachers must use strategies that are based on science to meet the needs of disabled students. However, research demonstrates that teachers are not using EBPs in their inclusive general classrooms. According to Morrier et al. (2011), less than 5% of teachers use EBP in their classrooms because teachers have difficulty implementing them with precision, because of a lack of training, and the many definitions of EBP (Lauderdale-Littin & Brennan, 2018). Thus, being in direct conflict with providing a FAPE or an accurate IEP for this student population. Individuals with autism are educated in mainstream classrooms unless the LRE deems it necessary for them to be in a special education setting. There are multiple definitions of EBP and will continue to be applied to the education of children with autism, albeit there is a debate over what constitutes EBP for students with ASD (Slavin, 2008); thus, hindering the equitable education of this population because there is no standard that teachers can follow.

Without the proper training and a shared understanding of an EBP, teachers cannot understand ASD or the educational deficiencies accompanying a student with the diagnosis. There is a need for EBPs in public classrooms to educate children with ASD, especially during preschool, an essential time in neurodevelopment. The educational success of an ASD student heavily depends on the teacher's skill and knowledge. In a qualitative study conducted by Lindsay, Proulx, Thomson, and Scott (2022), researchers collected ongoing verbal and written feedback from educators and administrators regarding barriers, facilitators, and professional development needs related to teaching students with autism. Using a grounded theory-based approach, Sulek, Trembath, Paynter, and Keen (2019) identified multiple barriers to implementing evidence-based practices including teacher preparedness, engagement, EBP cohesion and complexity, limited time, insufficient resources, and lack of administrative support. The study also noted that participants varied in their experience with students with ASD, which influenced their perceptions of implementation success and the feasibility of applying EBPs in early childhood settings.

IDEA (2004) and NCLB (2002) have outlined that in order for schools to provide a FAPE for this student population, the education services they provide must be based on science; however, the EBP is as complex as the disability. There has been some success with EBP, but not enough to set a standard. In addition, the many barriers' schools face in implementing EBPs also contribute to the academic struggles of this student population. Studies were conducted to demonstrate these vast barriers; however, they have not focused their concentration on how these challenges manifest in low-income area public

schools or the general teachers that provide education in these areas. The qualitative study I conducted describes ASD and the knowledge of previous research, to see if providing an equitable education to this population has exacerbated challenges in a low SES area or if the challenges are the same.

Historical and Policy Background of Autism and Inclusion

The evolution of autism-related educational policy in the United States has significantly influenced the structure and delivery of services for students with ASD. Before federal mandates, students with disabilities were frequently excluded from public education or educated in isolated institutions with minimal oversight (Yell et al., 2003). The passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, in 1975, marked a pivotal turning point. This legislation, which later became IDEA, established the legal foundation for inclusive education by guaranteeing all students the right to a FAPE in the LRE.

IDEA required that schools not only identify and evaluate students with disabilities but also develop IEPs to ensure their needs were addressed (IDEA, 2004). Over time, the interpretation of “least restrictive” has evolved to emphasize the importance of inclusion, where students with disabilities are educated alongside their peers to the greatest extent appropriate. This shift has placed increasing expectations on general education teachers, particularly in under-resourced schools where access to specialized staff and materials may be limited. Large district-level audits have also documented the inconsistency of IEP implementation. The New York City Department of

Education (2022) reported widespread delays and missed services, revealing systemic weaknesses in ensuring compliance with special education mandates. These findings illustrate how structural barriers prevent even the largest districts from fulfilling legal requirements, particularly in under-resourced schools. National reviews echo these concerns. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (2023) highlighted persistent challenges in delivering school-based IEP services, including missed sessions, delays, and uneven compliance across districts. Such patterns demonstrate that gaps between documentation and implementation are not isolated to individual schools but reflect systemic shortcomings in special education service delivery.

The rise in autism diagnoses has also placed additional demands on public schools. According to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2023), approximately one in thirty-six children in the United States has been identified with ASD. This increase has prompted policymakers to expand special education funding and develop autism-specific initiatives. However, implementation gaps remain, particularly in low SES schools where disparities in staffing, professional development, and classroom support persist (Morgan et al., 2017).

Federal mandates such as No Child Left Behind and the ESSA have further complicated the educational landscape. These accountability-driven policies emphasized standardized achievement metrics, often neglecting the structural inequities faced by students with disabilities and the educators who serve them (Kauffman et al., 2021). As a result, general education teachers are frequently tasked with meeting federal performance

standards while attempting to accommodate the diverse needs of students with ASD, often without adequate training or institutional support.

This historical and policy context establishes the foundation for understanding the contemporary challenges that general education teachers face in implementing inclusive education. While the legislative intent of IDEA and related policies is to promote equity, the practical realities within underfunded and high-need schools reveal a persistent gap between policy and practice.

Inclusive Education and Legal Mandates

Inclusive education is grounded in the belief that all students, regardless of ability, have the right to access high-quality education in general education settings. This principle is reinforced by federal legislation, particularly IDEA, which mandates that students with disabilities be educated in the LRE. According to IDEA (2004), students with disabilities should be placed in general education classrooms with appropriate support services unless their disability is so severe that education in that setting cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

The legal foundation for inclusion extends beyond IDEA. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) prohibit discrimination based on disability and require public schools to provide reasonable accommodations. Together, these laws affirm the educational rights of students with disabilities and establish schools' obligations to implement inclusive practices.

Despite these mandates, inclusion remains inconsistently practiced across the United States. Research shows that while many schools attempt to comply with LRE requirements, implementation often lacks fidelity due to inadequate training, limited funding, and conflicting administrative priorities (Kurth & Mastergeorge, (2010). In low socioeconomic schools, these challenges are magnified by structural inequities, such as overcrowded classrooms, high teacher turnover, and limited access to behavioral support personnel. Kurth & Mastergeorge, (2010) emphasized that sensory integration supports are a prerequisite for meaningful inclusion, underscoring that when these supports are absent, educators are left to improvise or personally fund necessary tools.

Moreover, legal compliance does not always translate into meaningful inclusion. Scholars argue that the presence of students with disabilities in general education classrooms is not sufficient unless those students are actively engaged and provided with equitable learning opportunities (Hehir et al., 2016). The quality of inclusion depends heavily on the attitudes, knowledge, and preparation of general education teachers, yet these factors are often overlooked in policy implementation.

Inclusive education must be understood not only as a legal requirement but also as a matter of educational equity. When students with ASD are placed in general education classrooms without adequate support, their inclusion becomes symbolic rather than substantive. As the next section will explore, the success of inclusion hinges on teacher preparedness, collaborative planning, and the availability of instructional resources that enable all students to thrive.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development

The effectiveness of inclusive education largely depends on the preparation and ongoing professional development of general education teachers. While IDEA mandates that students with disabilities be taught in inclusive settings whenever appropriate, it does not require general education teachers to have specialized training in teaching students with ASD. This gap often leaves teachers feeling unprepared to address the unique learning needs of students with ASD, particularly in low SES schools with limited resources (Roberts & Simpson, 2016; Emam & Farrell, 2009).

Studies indicate that many general education teachers receive minimal coursework or field experience related to special education during their certification process (Conderman & Johnston-Rodriguez, 2009). As a result, they may lack foundational knowledge about ASD, including common behavioral characteristics, communication differences, and strategies for differentiation. Teachers without sufficient training often report lower confidence and higher stress levels when educating students with ASD (Cappe et al., 2015).

Professional development opportunities, intended to fill these gaps, are frequently inadequate. Workshops are often short-term and focus on compliance rather than instructional strategies or behavioral supports. Teachers report that even when training is available, it is not tailored to the real-time needs of their classrooms or include practical applications (Hendricks, 2011). This issue is especially pronounced in under-resourced schools.

Moreover, ongoing support is crucial. Teachers benefit most from sustained, collaborative models of professional development, such as instructional coaching, peer mentoring, and learning communities focused on inclusive practices (Vanderlinde & van Braak, 2010). Yet these models require systemic investment and time, both of which are often lacking in schools serving low SES communities. Webster, A., & Roberts, J. (2022) conducted a multiple case study of three schools in Queensland which implemented a School-Wide Autism Competency (SAC) model, which is a comprehensive approach that builds the overall capacity of a school to create an inclusive and effective learning environment for students with autism through leadership and various evidence-based practices. Their findings showed that consistent leadership engagement, staff coaching, and whole-school planning produced stronger inclusion outcomes than fragmented or compliance-based training models (Webster, A., & Roberts, J. 2022). This evidence underscores that teacher preparedness depends on systemic commitment, not just individual professional development sessions.

The lack of adequate preparation and professional development not only hinders the success of inclusion but also contributes to teacher burnout and attrition. General education teachers placed in classrooms with students requiring high levels of support may feel overwhelmed or isolated, particularly if they do not receive guidance from special education staff or administrators. These conditions exacerbate existing inequities and undermine the intent of inclusive education policies. Recent evidence reinforces this concern. Garwood (2024) found that special educators working in inclusive classrooms reported significantly elevated levels of stress and burnout when systemic supports were

absent. These findings directly tie teacher well-being to classroom stability, indicating that professional development and support are not simply desirable, but essential for sustaining effective inclusive practices. Overall, teacher preparation and professional development remain critical to the success of inclusion, yet they are too often fragmented, short-term, or absent in low SES schools. Even when teachers demonstrate dedication and resilience, individual effort cannot compensate for systemic shortcomings. The next section examines how broader structural barriers, such as chronic underfunding, staffing shortages, and inadequate facilities, further undermine inclusive practices and magnify inequities for both students with ASD and the teachers responsible for their education.

Barriers to Implementation in Low Socioeconomic Status Schools

Implementing inclusive education for students with ASD presents complex challenges in any setting, but these challenges are intensified in low SES area public schools. Systematic obstacles barriers such as funding limitations, staffing shortages, and inadequate facilities directly affect the ability of educators to meet the diverse needs of their students. These barriers often lead to incomplete or superficial implementation of policies intended to support students with disabilities.

One of the most significant barriers is the chronic underfunding of schools in low SES communities. These schools typically operate with fewer resources, which limits their ability to hire qualified support personnel, acquire assistive technology, or provide necessary instructional materials (Morgan et al., 2017). As a result, general education teachers may be required to support students with ASD without access to specialized staff

or tools designed to facilitate learning. Morgan et al. (2018) further demonstrated that systemic underfunding and inconsistent implementation of IEPs disproportionately affect marginalized schools, reducing teacher efficacy and contributing to inequitable student outcomes. Brock and Carter (2017) extended this concern, finding that discrepancies between written IEP requirements and actual classroom implementation further erode teacher efficacy and contribute to uneven student outcomes, particularly in under-resourced schools.

Staffing shortages further hinder the effectiveness of inclusion. In many low SES schools, high rates of teacher turnover, absenteeism, and unfilled vacancies place additional strain on existing staff. Teachers are often responsible for larger class sizes and may lack support from paraprofessionals or special education specialists, which compromises their ability to differentiate instruction among the diverse population of students in the classroom and manage the classroom needs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Administrative and systemic constraints also create barriers. School leaders in under-resourced schools may prioritize compliance with accountability mandates over inclusive practices, due in part to the pressures of high stakes testing and limited funding flexibility (Losen & Martinez, 2013). When inclusion is viewed as a secondary concern, rather than a central component of school culture, the implementation of individualized support for students with ASD is often inconsistent or deprioritized.

Additionally, cultural and linguistic differences may compound these barriers. In schools with high populations of English language learners, language delays are

sometimes misinterpreted as symptoms of autism, leading to overidentification or misplacement in special education (Artiles et al., 2010). Educators in these contexts must navigate not only a lack of training in ASD but also a need for culturally responsive assessment tools and practices.

These institutional and systemic barriers create a disconnect between the promise of inclusive education and its practice in schools that serve marginalized populations. Understanding these challenges is essential for developing policies and support systems that reflect the realities of classrooms in low SES communities.

Social Construction Theory and Educational Inequity

Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory of social construction and public policy provides a critical framework for understanding disparities in inclusive education. This theory emphasizes that public policies are not neutral but are shaped by how target populations are socially constructed, either as deserving or undeserving. These constructions influence how policies are designed, implemented, and enforced. Marginalized populations, including students with disabilities in low SES communities, are often perceived as less deserving of public investment, which results in insufficient institutional support and uneven policy implementation.

Danforth & Naraian (2022) build upon this framework by applying social construction theory to educational contexts, illustrating how deficit-based narratives shape policy decisions. Their work shows that students with ASD, especially those in under-resourced schools, are often constructed as burdensome or beyond the scope of general education. Teachers who serve these students are likewise constructed as

underqualified or ineffective rather than as professionals working within constrained systems. These narratives justify policy neglect, such as limited training requirements, unfunded mandates, or minimal accountability for inclusion efforts.

Sabatier (2014) further supports this analysis through the lens of policy implementation theory. He posits that policy outcomes are not solely determined by formal legislation, but by how local actors interpret and implement those policies within institutional and resource constraints. In the case of inclusive education, Sabatier's framework helps explain the persistent gap between the intent of policies like IDEA and their implementation in underfunded schools. Teachers, administrators, and coordinators act as street-level bureaucrats, making day-to-day decisions that reflect both policy design and local feasibility. When these actors lack time, training, or structural support, the policies lose fidelity, even when legal requirements remain in place.

Together, these theories help illuminate how students with ASD in low SES area public schools are doubly marginalized, first by their disability status and second by the context in which they are educated. The present study draws upon this theoretical foundation to explore how teachers experience and respond to this layered marginalization. By examining the perspectives of general education teachers, the research captures how social constructions influence not just the content of policy, but its lived experience in the classroom. This lens also frames the analysis in Chapter 5, where the study's findings are interpreted in relation to the ways marginalized students are systematically underserved by policies that fail to account for classroom realities.

Summary and Conclusions

The literature reviewed in this chapter highlights the complex and multifaceted challenges associated with providing inclusive education to students with ASD, particularly in low SES area public schools. Federal mandates such as the IDEA and the Americans with Disabilities Act affirm the rights of students with disabilities to receive a FAPE in the LRE. However, the implementation of these mandates is often compromised by systemic barriers including inadequate funding, insufficient teacher preparation, and the absence of ongoing professional development.

The historical and legal foundations of inclusive education establish a framework for equity, but it is not realized in many schools serving marginalized populations. General education teachers are frequently expected to fulfill complex instructional and behavioral responsibilities without sufficient support, leading to reduced instructional quality, increased teacher burnout, and inconsistent student outcomes. The rise in students diagnosed with ASD has only intensified these challenges, especially in schools that are already burdened by resource limitations and high student needs.

Social construction theory further contextualizes these inequities by illustrating how policy decisions are shaped by societal perceptions of deservingness. Students with ASD and the general education teachers who educate them are often constructed as low-priority stakeholders, resulting in policies that lack the depth necessary to drive meaningful change. This theoretical lens underscores the need for research that examines not only policy intent but also the lived realities of those tasked with implementation.

Despite the breadth of literature on special education and inclusion, several critical gaps remain. Few studies have focused specifically on the experiences of general education teachers educating students with ASD in low SES area public schools. Even fewer have explored how these educators interpret and navigate their responsibilities in the context of systemic inequities and limited institutional support. Additionally, while much of the existing research examines student outcomes or administrative practices, the perspectives of teachers remain underrepresented.

This study seeks to address these gaps by focusing on the voices of general education teachers in a low SES area, urban public middle school. Through a qualitative exploration of their experiences, the study aims to inform educational policy, support the design of professional development programs, and contribute to a more equitable understanding of inclusive education. The next chapter will outline the research methodology used to conduct the study, including the research design, participant selection, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

Chapter 3: Research Method

In this chapter, I outline the research methodology I used to explore the challenges general education teachers face in providing equitable education to students with ASD in a low SES area public school. The chapter describes the research design, role of the researcher, methodology, participant selection, instrumentation, procedures for recruitment and data collection, data analysis, and issues of trustworthiness. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a detailed and transparent account of the processes used to ensure the study's rigor and credibility.

Research Design and Rationale

I employed a generic qualitative research design to examine the challenges general education teachers face in delivering equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools. This design was appropriate for exploring participants lived experiences and for identifying patterns and themes related to inclusive education in under-resourced settings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The flexible nature of the generic qualitative approach aligned with the study's aim of understanding the specific barriers encountered by teachers working with students with ASD in inclusive classrooms.

The central RQs underpinning this study were What are the challenges general education teachers face in providing an equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools? What policy recommendations would assist general education educators in providing an equitable education for students with ASD?

The intent of the study was to understand educators' perspectives and experiences within their school environments. A qualitative approach aligned with the theoretical

framework of social constructionism, which recognizes that people construct meaning based on their social experiences and interactions (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Because this study involved educators' interpretations of their roles, responsibilities, and challenges, the qualitative method provided a means for capturing these interpretations through in-depth interviews.

The research design allowed the collection of rich, detailed data that would not be obtainable through quantitative methods. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews supported participant reflection, while the generic qualitative approach allowed the study to remain grounded in the data and responsive to emerging insights. The focus on educators in low SES area public schools ensured that the findings were situated within the specific socioeconomic context of under-resourced educational settings.

This study design was also consistent with the goals of positive social change. By capturing and analyzing the perspectives of teachers who work with students with ASD in these challenging contexts, the research aimed to provide practical insights that could inform teacher preparation, professional development, and policy reform. The qualitative design thus supported the overall aim of advocating for a more equitable and inclusive educational environment for students with ASD.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative study, my role as the researcher involved serving as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis. I was responsible for identifying and recruiting participants, conducting all interviews, transcribing the recordings, and coding and interpreting the data. As the researcher, I remained actively engaged in ensuring that the

data collection process reflected the participants' authentic voices and that their experiences were represented accurately and respectfully.

My background as both a parent of a child with ASD and a former public-school teacher informed my understanding of the educational landscape. However, I approached this research with intentional objectivity. I was mindful not to impose my own beliefs or experiences during the interviews or data analysis. To reduce the risk of bias, I employed strategies such as reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and member checking.

During interviews, I used open-ended questions and followed a semi-structured interview protocol to ensure consistency while allowing participants the freedom to share their unique experiences. I made a concerted effort to maintain a neutral tone and refrain from leading participants in any direction. I also bracketed my own assumptions by recording personal reflections before and after each interview to separate my thoughts from the participants' narratives.

I did not have any supervisory, professional, or personal relationships with the participants. Additionally, the interviews took place in locations selected by the participants to support their comfort and confidentiality. Participants were informed of their rights, including the right to withdraw at any point without penalty, and were assured that their identities would remain confidential with pseudonyms and secure data storage protocols.

As the sole individual conducting data analysis, I immersed myself in the transcripts to identify emergent patterns and themes. I ensured that my interpretations were firmly grounded in the data by engaging in constant comparison and returning to the

original transcripts as needed. My goal throughout the process was to honor the lived experiences of educators while upholding the trustworthiness and credibility of the study.

Researcher Positionality

I have a child with ASD, which could be considered a source of potential bias. However, my child's educational experience differs significantly from those represented in this study. He was homeschooled through elementary school and part of middle school and later attended private middle and high schools that were both aware of his diagnosis and committed to supporting his educational, emotional, and social development. Although private schools are not legally required to implement any IEPs, as mandated under IDEA, the institutions he attended voluntarily offered similar supports, including clearly defined goals, inclusive strategies, and tailored interventions (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). These efforts were reinforced by consistent administrative engagement, formal procedures, and adequate staffing. As such, while I bring a personal connection to ASD, my child's experience occurred in a setting with advantages not typically available in low SES area public schools.

My decision to pursue this study was motivated by the recognition that my son's educational experience is not the norm for many students with ASD, particularly those in low SES area public schools. To mitigate potential bias related to my personal connection to ASD, I remained aware that my son's experience does not reflect the population being studied. I was careful to ensure that the interviews reflected the participants' perspectives. To maintain the validity of the research, I allowed interviewees to review their transcribed responses and any notes I recorded (Maxwell, 2012).

In addition, I taught for 5 years in public schools serving marginalized communities, where I had students with ASD and other learning disabilities in my general education classrooms. While I have lived experience as a public-school teacher in low SES area, I did not conduct this study in schools where I had previously taught. My teaching experience was in Miami, Florida, and in Takoma Park, Maryland, whereas the study site was in Washington, DC. This geographic separation, along with the absence of any personal or professional relationships with participants, further reduced potential bias and enhanced the credibility of the research.

Throughout the research process, I engaged in regular reflexive journaling to remain conscious of my assumptions and to ensure that my interpretations of participant responses were grounded in their experiences rather than my own. Reflexivity is an essential component of qualitative research, helping researchers acknowledge their positionality and minimize bias during data collection and analysis (Berger, 2015). I was also mindful of the inherent power dynamics between researcher and participant. I approached each interview with humility and openness, striving to create a conversational and respectful space where participants felt safe and empowered to speak freely.

My dual roles as a parent of a child with ASD and an educator in low SES area public schools positioned me uniquely to pursue this study. However, it was essential that my passion for educational equity did not influence the authenticity of participants' responses. My role was to listen, document, and reflect on the experiences of others, not my own.

Methodology

Participant Selection Logic

I used purposeful sampling to recruit general education teachers who had experience educating students with ASD in inclusive classrooms located in low SES area public schools. Purposeful sampling is commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who can offer rich, relevant insight into the central phenomenon under investigation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Eligible participants met the following criteria: (a) current employment as a general education teacher in a public school located in a low SES area, (b) a minimum of 1 year teaching in an inclusive classroom setting, and (c) experience educating students formally diagnosed with ASD. Teachers were excluded if they worked solely in special education roles or served as substitutes.

Twelve participants were selected and interviewed for this study. They represented a range of teaching experience, from early career to veteran educators, and all were employed at public middle schools in economically disadvantaged areas of Washington, DC. The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, which was reached after the ninth interview, when no new themes or categories emerged. The additional interviews helped confirm the consistency and depth of the patterns identified.

Instrumentation

In this qualitative study, I served as the primary instrument of data collection, consistent with the role of the researcher in generic qualitative research (Merriam &

Tisdell, 2016). The primary tool used was a semi-structured interview protocol that aligned with the RQs and the theoretical framework of social constructionism.

Interview questions were developed based on a review of the literature and included open-ended prompts designed to explore participants' experiences, perceptions, and challenges in educating students with ASD (see Appendix). Topics included training and preparation, school-level support, access to resources, implementation of IEPs, and policy and procedural recommendations. Follow-up questions were asked when necessary to clarify or expand on responses.

To enhance credibility and dependability, a pilot interview was conducted with one eligible teacher who was not included in the final study. Feedback from this pilot interview informed revisions to the question wording and overall flow of the protocol. This process ensured the final interview instrument was clear, relevant, and appropriately structured to allow participants' unique experiences to emerge.

In addition to conducting interviews, I maintained a reflexive journal to record observations, analytic memos, and reflections during the data collection process. This practice supported the bracketing of my assumptions and preserved the authenticity of participants' voices. All interviews were audio-recorded with participant consent, transcribed verbatim, and returned to participants for member checking. This allowed each participant to review their transcript for accuracy and to clarify or expand on any portion of their interview, contributing to the trustworthiness of the data.

Procedures for Recruitment, Participation, and Data Collection

Following approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (no. 06-13-25-0069632), I began the recruitment process by contacting two principals at public schools located in low SES areas of Washington, DC. I requested permission to post recruitment flyers in teacher lounges. These flyers included eligibility criteria, an overview of the study, confidentiality assurances, and my contact information.

Interested teachers contacted me directly. Once initial interest was expressed, I conducted a brief eligibility screening via email or phone. Teachers who met the inclusion criteria were provided with an informed consent form outlining the purpose of the study, procedures, risks and benefits, voluntary participation, and confidentiality protections. Consent was obtained prior to scheduling interviews.

Data collection consisted of one-on-one, semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom to accommodate participants' schedules and maintain flexibility. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 min. With permission, all sessions were audio-recorded using Zoom's built-in recording feature, and recordings were stored securely on a password-protected external hard drive.

Transcripts were created from the audio recordings and sent to participants for member checking. Participants were encouraged to review their responses, clarify any points, and make corrections or additions as needed. Immediately following each interview, I recorded field notes to capture contextual observations and preliminary analytic impressions.

Recruitment and interviews continued until data saturation was achieved, which occurred after the twelfth interview. The participants' contributions formed the foundation for identifying patterns and themes regarding the challenges of providing equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools.

Data Analysis Plan

After collecting and transcribing the interviews, I used a hands-on, inductive approach to analyze the data and identify key themes. I began by reading each transcript multiple times to become deeply familiar with the participants' responses. I then manually coded the data using open coding, highlighting and labeling significant phrases, ideas, and patterns that aligned with the study's RQs.

Once initial codes were identified, I grouped similar codes together and organized them into broader categories. This iterative process allowed me to begin constructing emergent themes that captured the shared and divergent experiences of participants. I created a working codebook to document the major themes and associated data excerpts, ensuring that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' own words and perspectives.

To assist with data management and organization, I used the free version of Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool. While the software provided a centralized space for uploading transcripts and applying tags, it did not conduct any automatic coding, highlighting, or theme generation. Instead, I manually tagged and highlighted content within the platform. The tool functioned more as an organizational

aid than an analytic engine, and all thematic development was researcher-driven and based on manual analysis.

To enhance credibility and trustworthiness, I incorporated member checking by returning transcripts to participants for review and clarification. I also maintained a reflexive journal and audit trail throughout the analysis process, documenting coding decisions, memos, and reflections. This helped ensure that the findings were transparent, dependable, and authentically represented the participants lived experiences.

This approach allowed participant voices to remain at the center of the analysis and supported the development of meaningful themes regarding the systemic and practical challenges of inclusive education for students with autism in low SES area public schools. These themes serve as the foundation for the findings presented in Chapter 4.

While software such as NVivo or MAXQDA offered advanced features such as auto-coding, word frequency analysis, and thematic visualizations, I intentionally selected the free version of Taguette for this study. Taguette served as an organizational tool, allowing me to upload transcripts, highlight text, and manually apply tags. It did not provide automated coding or theme generation. My goal was to remain closely engaged with the data by manually reading, tagging, and interpreting each transcript. This approach allowed me to stay directly connected to the data, building themes step by step from participant responses rather than relying on automated coding. By manually reviewing and tagging each transcript, I ensured that the findings reflected the voices of participants and the intent of the study rather than patterns generated by software. While

other software may have supported additional analytic options, the use of Taguette supported an inductive, researcher-guided process aligned with the purpose and scope of this study.

Issues of Trustworthiness

Establishing the trustworthiness of this study was critical to ensuring the credibility and integrity of its findings. I applied multiple strategies aligned with qualitative research standards to address credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To establish credibility, I used member checking by sharing interview transcripts with participants and inviting them to review, clarify, or expand their responses. I also engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the research process, recording my thoughts, assumptions, and decision points to remain aware of how my positionality might influence interpretation.

To promote transferability, I included detailed descriptions of the study setting, participant backgrounds, and school context in my reporting. These contextual details provide readers with enough information to assess whether the study's findings may be relevant or applicable in other educational environments with similar characteristics.

For dependability, I maintained an audit trail that documented each phase of the research process, from participant recruitment to data analysis. This included memos, coding decisions, methodological adjustments, and field notes. These records offer transparency into how findings were developed and support the replicability of the analytic process.

Finally, to ensure confirmability, I grounded all findings in the participants' actual statements and experiences. My interpretations were consistently compared to the original data to prevent bias, and I retained coded transcripts, analytic memos, and journal entries as evidence that themes emerged from the data, not personal assumptions.

Together, these strategies helped support the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative study and ensured that the voices of participants remained central throughout the research process.

Ethical Procedures

Ethical considerations were paramount in this study, particularly given the nature of qualitative research involving human participants and the focus on potentially sensitive experiences within under-resourced educational settings. Prior to beginning data collection, I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (no. 06-13-25-0069632). To ensure informed consent, I provided each participant with a written consent form that explained the purpose of the study, procedures, potential risks and benefits, voluntary nature of participation, and measures taken to protect confidentiality. I reviewed the consent form verbally with each participant and addressed any questions before they digitally signed. All participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, for any reason, without penalty.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the study. I used pseudonyms for all participants, and any identifying details, such as school names or specific job titles, were modified or removed from transcripts and the final report to protect participant identities. All digital recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and data

files were stored securely on a password-protected external drive accessible only to me. Any printed materials were kept in a locked file cabinet in my home office. After completion of the study and the required retention period, all physical and digital data will be securely destroyed.

Because I had prior experience as a public school teacher in low SES areas, I was careful to ensure that no participants were drawn from schools where I had worked or had existing personal or professional relationships. This precaution helped mitigate potential power dynamics or conflicts of interest.

I remained committed to protecting participants' emotional well-being during the interviews. Although the subject matter was not inherently traumatic, discussions of inequity, inadequate support, and professional stress could elicit frustration or emotional discomfort. I monitored for signs of distress and reminded participants that they were free to skip questions or discontinue the interview at any point.

These ethical procedures were designed to uphold the integrity of the research and ensure the dignity, autonomy, and safety of all participants. By adhering to these protocols, I sought to foster a respectful and trustworthy environment in which participants felt heard, valued, and protected.

Summary

Chapter 3 presents the methodology employed to examine the challenges general education teachers encounter while attempting to provide equitable education to students with ASD in low SES area public schools. The study utilized a generic qualitative design, which allowed for a nuanced exploration of the participants lived experiences. This

approach is aligned with the theoretical framework of social constructionism, which emphasizes the influence of societal context on individual interpretation.

Twelve general education teachers from Washington, DC. were selected through purposeful sampling. Each participant had at least 1 year of experience teaching students with ASD in an inclusive classroom within low SES public schools. Semi-structured interviews served as the primary data collection method, allowing participants to reflect on challenges such as lack of training, insufficient resources, limited administrative support, and unclear or poorly implemented policies.

The researcher served as the main instrument for data collection and analysis. Reflexive journaling, member checking, and an audit trail were employed to mitigate potential bias due to my dual role of being a parent of a child with ASD and a former educator in low SES schools. The data was transcribed, coded manually, and analyzed thematically using an inductive approach. Taguette, a free open-source software, was used to assist with organization.

To establish trustworthiness, the study addressed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability through established qualitative research practices. Ethical procedures, including informed consent and data confidentiality, were rigorously followed. Participants were granted autonomy and protected from harm throughout the research process.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter builds upon the methodological foundation established in Chapter 3 by analyzing participant data through thematic analysis. Guided by the lens of social constructionism, the analysis and reporting of results reflect how participants described and made meaning of their experiences teaching students with ASD in inclusive classrooms located in a low-SES public school. Social construction theory suggests that individuals' perceptions and interpretations are shaped by societal norms, institutional structures, and cultural expectations (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). This framework informed the interpretation of teacher experiences in a resource-constrained educational setting.

A total of 12 general education teachers participated in the study. Their perspectives provided insight into the systemic and institutional challenges that affect their ability to deliver equitable education to students with ASD. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and analyzed inductively to identify patterns in the challenges they encountered and the policy recommendations they proposed.

This chapter is organized into five sections. It begins with a description of the research setting to contextualize the findings, followed by participant demographics, data collection procedures, and data analysis. The final section presents the emergent themes, supported by participant quotations, in alignment with the study's central RQs.

Setting

All interviews were conducted via Zoom with staff members from a single low SES area public middle school in Washington, DC, a community characterized by high

levels of poverty, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare and social services, housing instability, and limited access to healthcare and social services. The school serves a student population that is predominantly Hispanic and Black, with more than 90% of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. These indicators reflect the broader systemic challenges faced by the surrounding community and shape the educational environment in which teachers operate.

The school has a longstanding commitment in serving students with diverse learning needs, including those with ASD. However, it continues to experience significant structural limitations that impact the implementation of inclusive education. These include persistent staffing shortages, high rates of teacher turnover, and overcrowded classrooms. Although the school has adopted inclusive practices by placing students with ASD in general education classrooms, the support necessary to ensure successful implementation, such as consistent paraprofessional assistance and mandatory autism-specific training for teachers, are largely absent.

General education teachers at this school are often expected to meet the individualized needs of students with ASD without adequate preparation or resources. Autism coordinators are present in name but are not consistently engaged in providing direct support to teachers. In many cases, teachers must rely on self-directed learning and personal resources to meet the demands of inclusive instruction. These conditions made the site an appropriate and compelling setting for exploring how educators experience and respond to the systemic inequities of inclusive education in a low SES area public school.

Demographics

Twelve general education teachers participated in this study. All were employed at a single public middle school in Washington, DC, located in a low SES area with a high percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch. The participant group was purposefully selected to reflect a diverse range of teaching experiences and perspectives related to inclusive education. Purposeful sampling allowed the selection of participants who had direct experience teaching students with ASD in general education classrooms and who could provide rich, detailed insights into the challenges and supports associated with inclusive teaching.

Among the 12 participants, there was a mix of early-career, mid-career, and veteran educators. The years of teaching experience ranged from one to over 20 years, with inclusion experience spanned from newly assigned inclusion, in the teacher's classroom, to over a decade of working with students diagnosed with ASD in general education classrooms. Participants taught a variety of core content areas, including English Language Arts, mathematics, science, and social studies. None of the participants held formal special education certifications, although several had received informal coaching or had engaged in self-directed learning related to autism.

All participants had firsthand experience teaching at least one student with ASD in an inclusive classroom during the current or recent academic year. Several had instructed multiple students with ASD, often without dedicated paraprofessional support or autism-specific training. This range of experience provided a strong foundation for understanding the challenges and recommendations described in the data. Table 1

presents an overview of the study participants, outlining their years of teaching experience, grade levels taught, and professional backgrounds. The table also includes columns for training received and notable notes, which provide additional context for interpreting each participant's perspective.

Table 1*Participant Characteristics*

Participant	No. of years teaching	Experience with ASD (years)	Role	Formal and/or informal training	Note
A	15	8+	Veteran general education teacher	None (self-taught from books and articles)	Buys own materials, believes in inclusion.
B	2	2	New general education teacher	None (self-taught from articles and YouTube videos)	Suspects language barrier over ASD.
C	12 (7 in role)		Autism coordinator	Special education certified	Overwhelmed by workload.
D	3	2	General education teacher	None (YouTube, self-learning)	Feels like a crisis manager.
E	12	7	Veteran teacher	One school sponsored professional development session (5 years ago)	Strong cultural awareness
F	6	3	Reserved general education teacher	None (learned from peers)	Feels isolated.
G	7	5	Midcareer teacher	None (self-taught from books, articles, and YouTube videos)	Resourceful and hopeful
H	1	1	1st-year teacher	None	Keeps snacks for hungry students.
I	15	12	Veteran teacher	None since a self-paid development course in 2016	Concerned about misdiagnosis.
J	4	2	Confident newer teacher	None	Creates own visuals and resources.
K	8	7	Midcareer Teacher	None	Critical of systemic gaps
L	21	10+	Veteran Teacher	Unknown timeline; had some school sponsored training, but was mostly self-taught from books, articles, and self-paid workshops and trainings.	Deeply reflective and culturally aware

Note. The Training Received column indicates whether participants reported formal, school-sponsored autism-specific training, general special education training, or informal

self-directed learning. The Note column highlights unique contextual details and personal feedback shared during the interviews. All participants were general education teachers except Participant C, who served as the autism coordinator. ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews with 12 general education teachers. Each participant taught in a low SES area public middle school and had current or recent experience instructing students with ASD in inclusive classrooms. Participants were recruited through school-based outreach, and all volunteered to participate in the study. Informed consent was obtained prior to the start of each interview.

Interviews were conducted virtually via Zoom to accommodate participant availability and ensure convenience. Each interview lasted between 45 and 70 min and was audio recorded with participant permission. A consistent interview protocol was used to ensure uniformity across sessions while allowing for probing questions based on participant responses. The questions were open-ended and designed to elicit rich, descriptive narratives regarding each teacher's experiences, challenges, and perceived needs related to inclusive education for students with ASD. The protocol was intentionally designed to support meaning-making, in alignment with social constructionist principles that emphasize the role of social and institutional context in shaping participant perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and reviewed for accuracy. Transcripts were then uploaded into Taguette software for coding and analysis. Participants were assigned coded identifiers (e.g., Participant A, B, C) to maintain confidentiality. Field notes were recorded during and immediately after interviews to capture contextual details and researcher observations relevant to data interpretation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using an inductive thematic coding process consistent with a generic qualitative design. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach, I systematically read and reread the transcripts, generated initial codes, organized these codes into broader categories, and developed themes that reflected patterns across participants' experiences. The analytic process began with transcription. I personally transcribed each interview, which allowed me to become deeply familiar with the data, observe early patterns, and reflect on participant tone and emphasis. This initial engagement facilitated a grounded understanding of the experiences shared by participants and guided the development of early analytic memos.

After transcription, I reviewed each transcript in full to ensure accuracy and completeness, and participants were also invited to review their transcripts to verify accuracy as part of the member checking process described in the Trustworthiness section. The transcripts were then uploaded into Taguette, an open-source qualitative analysis tool selected for its security, transparency, and capacity to manage multiple documents simultaneously. Taguette allowed me to apply descriptive codes to segments of text by highlighting passages and labeling them with emergent keywords. The

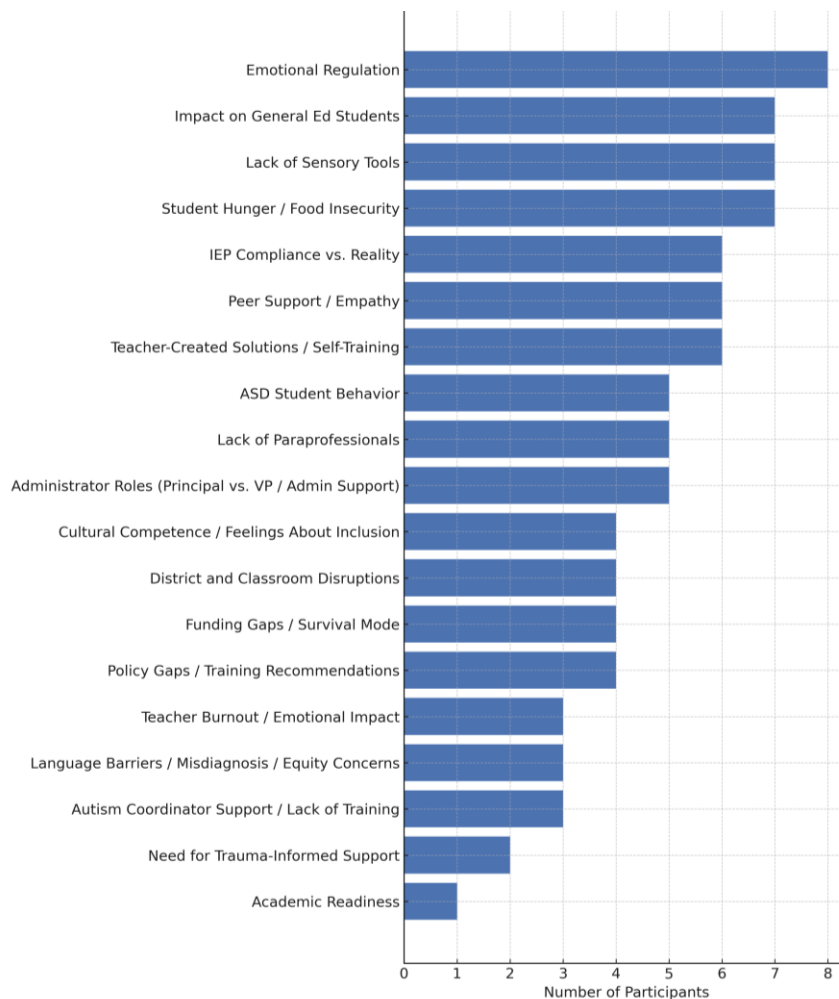
platform also enabled me to search for recurring codes across participants, organize excerpts into collections, and track code frequency by participant or concept. This supported consistency and transparency across the data set.

The initial round of coding was conducted manually and involved line-by-line analysis using descriptive codes, process codes, and in vivo codes, the latter capturing participants' exact words to remain close to their language. Codes reflected ideas related to inclusion practices, emotional responses, institutional supports and limitations, peer dynamics, training gaps, and teacher-initiated strategies. In the second cycle, I used axial coding to compare and cluster similar codes into broader concepts. Through this iterative process, overlapping or redundant codes were collapsed, and themes were refined to represent the most salient patterns across the data set. I used the constant comparative method throughout the process to examine patterns within and across participant responses. Codes that captured similar meanings or experiences were grouped into unified categories, such as classroom-based adjustments, systemic constraints, or social-emotional barriers. Themes began to emerge through this process as conceptual clusters that captured shared experiences across multiple educators. Coding decisions and analytic reflections were documented in analytic memos and updated after each round of review.

Codes that appeared in six or more transcripts were considered high frequency and most likely to represent patterns of shared significance. However, less frequent codes that offered important contextual depth or alternative perspectives were also retained to preserve the complexity of educator experiences. Final themes were developed through multiple rounds of coding and reflective notetaking. Related codes were grouped together

to form broader concepts that captured recurring patterns across participants. These themes reflected both shared challenges and diverse experiences in navigating inclusive education in a resource-constrained environment.

The development of themes was informed by the social constructionist lens guiding the study, particularly in how participants made sense of student needs, institutional expectations, and their role within the system (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To illustrate this process, Figure 1 displays the frequency of codes identified during analysis. The figure highlights the relative prominence of certain challenges, such as limited support from the autism coordinator, which appeared 15 times, compared to language and cultural barriers, which appeared four times. These frequencies demonstrate which issues were most consistently described across participants, while still acknowledging that less frequent codes added depth and nuance to the overall findings.

Figure 1*Code Frequency by Theme*

Note. Higher frequencies, such as limited support from the autism coordinator and systemic and structural barriers, suggest that these were especially prominent challenges in participants' experiences. Lower frequencies, such as language and cultural barriers, indicate that while less frequently mentioned, they remained significant concerns for educators. ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

Evidence of Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in this qualitative study was addressed through specific strategies that ensured the findings reflected the authentic experiences of participants. The research process was designed to be consistent, transparent, and grounded in the voices of general education teachers. The study incorporated detailed documentation, reflexive practice, and participant validation, to verify participant input, and to maintain fidelity between the data collected and the findings presented. The components of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were each addressed in ways appropriate to the design and context of the study. The four components used to establish trustworthiness, credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability, are addressed in the following subsections.

Whereas Figure 1 provides a visual overview of code frequency, Table 2 demonstrates the analytic process by outlining the codes generated during data analysis, their operational definitions, and their connections to broader themes. Participant quotes are included to illustrate how raw data informed the development of themes.

Table 2*Codes, Definitions, and Connections to Themes*

Theme	Code	Definition	Interview excerpt
Lack of autism-specific training	Self-taught strategies	Teachers relied on personal research (books, peers, online sources) to support ASD students.	Everything I know is self-taught or learned in the moment..." (Participant A)
	Absence of formal PD	No structured or mandatory ASD-specific training was provided by the school/district.	Nope. Nothing. I would love something at the beginning of the year..." (Participant B)
Lack of paraprofessional support	Alone in classroom	Teachers described being responsible for ASD students without paraprofessional support.	There's no para in my room. I begged for one, and they said we're on a list." (Participant D)
Limited support from autism coordinator	Minimal engagement	Autism coordinators were described as unresponsive or providing generic strategies.	I got one email with a PDF... That was it." (Participant B)
Language and cultural barriers	Misdiagnosis	Teachers believed language delays/cultural factors were misinterpreted as ASD.	I honestly think this student may not even have autism. His home language is Spanish..." (Participant B)
Systemic and structural barriers	Food insecurity	Hunger directly disrupted student regulation and learning.	If they are hungry, they are not learning." (Participant F)
	Underfunding	Insufficient budgets for training, staff, and sensory resources.	I brought in my own sensory items, but they disappeared." (Participant C)
Instructional disruption and teacher impact	Emotional exhaustion	Teachers reported burnout and feeling unsupported in inclusion.	I feel more like a bouncer and a babysitter than a teacher some days." (Participant D)
	Classroom interruptions	ASD-related behaviors disrupted lessons and instruction time.	Sometimes I have to choose between continuing the lesson or supporting the student in distress." (Participant G)
Classroom strategies and resilience	Teacher-initiated solutions	Teachers created their own visuals, routines, and calming techniques.	I made my own picture charts because nothing was given to me." (Participant J)
IEP implementation gaps	Paper vs. practice	IEPs were often completed in writing but not implemented in practice.	The IEP says small group, but I have no one to pull them out." (Participant A)
Policy and procedural recommendations	Training needs	Teachers recommended mandatory ASD-specific	At least give us a real training, not just

Theme	Code	Definition	Interview excerpt
	Accountability	PD tied to school calendar. Teachers wanted oversight to ensure supports and IEP goals were followed.	compliance stuff.” (Participant K) We get told what will happen in the meeting, but then nothing happens in practice.” (Participant I)

Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder; PD = professional development; IEP = individualized education program.

Building on the coding process outlined in Table 2, Table 3 presents a summary of the nine consolidated themes that emerged across participants. This table provides a concise description of each theme and captures the shared challenges and recommendations reported by teachers.

Table 3

Consolidated Themes Across Participants

Theme	Description
Lack of autism-specific training	Absence of formal training; reliance on self-teaching and peer collaboration
Lack of paraprofessional support	Insufficient classroom support for ASD students
Limited support from autism coordinator	Minimal guidance or inconsistent follow-through from the autism coordinator
Language and cultural barriers	Misdiagnosis due to language delays; lack of culturally competent evaluations
Systemic and structural barriers	Underfunding, food insecurity, and administrative gaps
Instructional disruption and teacher impact	Classroom interruptions; teacher exhaustion and burnout
Classroom strategies and resilience	Adaptive methods used by teachers and peer empathy
IEP implementation gaps	Discrepancy between documented accommodations and practical application

Policy and procedural recommendations	Suggestions for reforming training, funding, and evaluation policies
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Note. ASD = autism spectrum disorder.

Credibility

Credibility was ensured by using a consistent and systematic interview protocol during each participant interview. All participants were asked the same core set of open-ended questions, which allowed for comparability across responses while still permitting individual reflection and elaboration. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Each transcript was reviewed for accuracy, and minor corrections were made to remove filler words or transcription errors that did not alter meaning. This process helped maintain the integrity of participant responses.

To further strengthen credibility, member checking was used. Participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts and provide clarification or additional context. Although only a few participants submitted edits, those that did contributed to a clearer understanding of their responses. Reflexive journaling was also employed throughout the study to monitor my assumptions and minimize personal bias during interpretation. Quotations from participants were included throughout the findings to illustrate themes and ensure that the results were rooted in the voices of those who participated.

Transferability

Transferability was addressed by providing detailed contextual information about the research site and participant backgrounds. The study was conducted at a public middle school located in a low SES area of Washington, DC. The school served a predominantly Hispanic and Black student population, with more than ninety percent of students qualifying for free or reduced lunch. The surrounding community faced challenges such as economic hardship, housing instability, and limited access to supportive services. These conditions were described in detail to allow readers to determine the relevance of the findings to other similar educational settings.

Participants in the study had varying years of teaching experience and grade-level assignments. Some were early-career educators, while others had been teaching for more than a decade. This diversity of perspectives enriched the data and allowed for a broader understanding of the challenges faced by teachers in general education inclusive settings. Descriptions of the setting, instructional challenges, and participant roles were included, also, to allow readers to assess the relevance of findings to other educational environments. By offering thick description and varied participant insights, the findings may be applicable to other public school environments with similar demographics and resource limitations.

Dependability

Dependability was addressed by applying consistent procedures and documenting the research process in detail. The same interview protocol was used with each participant, and the same methods were used to record and transcribe each session. All

interview transcripts were processed using Taguette, a qualitative data analysis tool that supported organization, coding, and retrieval of key phrases and patterns.

I created and maintained an audit trail that included interview logs, coding memos, analytic notes, and a chronology of decisions. Codes were generated inductively and refined based on multiple passes through the data. Peer debriefing was used to enhance dependability. A trusted colleague reviewed selected codes and themes and provided input on whether the conclusions were supported by the data.

Confirmability

Confirmability was supported by documentation of the analytic process, consistent use of participant language, and reflexivity in interpretation. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study to track assumptions, emotional responses, and analytic decisions. My journal was used to examine how my personal experiences may have shaped the interpretation of findings and to separate my beliefs from participant data. Together, these strategies demonstrated that the study's results were both trustworthy and aligned with the authentic perspectives of the teachers who participated. Credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability were not abstract principles but directly influenced how themes were developed and supported across Chapter 4.

Evidence of trustworthiness was established through credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability, each of which directly supported the results presented in Chapter 4. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, as participants confirmed that the transcripts and interpretations accurately reflected their experiences. Dependability was supported through the consistent application of the coding process.

across all 12 transcripts, as outlined in Tables 2 and 2a, which demonstrated that the results were stable and repeatable. Transferability was reinforced by the use of thick description and direct participant quotations in each theme, enabling readers to evaluate the applicability of these findings to other low SES area public schools. Confirmability was achieved through reflexive notetaking during coding and theme development, which documented analytic decisions and ensured that the findings were firmly grounded in participant accounts. Together, these strategies demonstrated that the study's results were both trustworthy and aligned with the authentic perspectives of the teachers who participated.

Findings were directly tied to participant statements using quotations. This approach allowed participants to evaluate whether the conclusions were supported by the data. Member checking added another layer of validation, as participants were invited to verify that their perspectives were accurately captured. The following section presents the findings of the study, organized by RQ and supported by tables, figures, and direct quotations. Table 4 extends this analysis by showing the frequency of references for each of the nine themes and their alignment with the guiding RQs. This table highlights how the emergent themes were distributed across RQ1 and RQ2, further demonstrating the rigor and consistency of the analytic process.

Table 4

Frequency and Alignment of Themes by Research Question

Theme	<i>f</i> of references/codes	Research question alignment
Lack of autism-specific training	5	RQ1, RQ2

Lack of paraprofessional support	5	RQ1
Limited support from autism coordinator	15	RQ1, RQ2
Language and cultural barriers	4	RQ1, RQ2
Systemic and structural barriers	9	RQ1, RQ2
Instructional disruption and teacher impact	6	RQ1
Classroom strategies and resilience	7	RQ2
IEP implementation gaps	8	RQ1, RQ2
Policy and procedural recommendations	6	RQ2

Note. RQ = research question; IEP = individualized education program.

Results

Findings Related to Research Question 1

RQ1 was, What are the challenges experienced by educators in providing an equitable education in a low SES area public school to students with ASD? Participants described a wide range of instructional, behavioral, institutional, and environmental challenges that influenced their ability to provide equitable education in inclusive settings. The analysis revealed six major themes connected to these challenges: lack of autism-specific training, lack of paraprofessional support, limited support from the autism coordinator, language and cultural barriers, systemic and structural barriers, and instructional disruption and teacher impact. These themes reflect both systemic limitations and classroom conditions that shape how inclusion is carried out in practice.

Theme 1: Lack of Autism-Specific Training

Across the data set, teachers emphasized that they lacked sufficient autism-specific training to meet the needs of students with ASD. While all had received general education professional development, they described these sessions as inadequate for preparing them for the complexity of inclusive classrooms. Several explained that they

relied on self-teaching or peer advice because there was no formal training. Participant B reflected, “No one trained me. I just Googled, watched some videos, and tried to figure it out on my own. There was no support.” Participant F echoed this concern, explaining, “I learned from experience and from watching what worked for other teachers. Nothing formal was ever offered. We just kind of had to figure it out as we went, and that is not fair to the students or us.”

This finding reflects the way teachers are socially constructed as responsible for solving systemic problems without institutional support. Schneider & Ingram’s (1993) framework emphasizes how marginalized groups are often framed as undeserving of resources, and in this context, teachers themselves were positioned as implementers expected to self-train. Newer teachers described entering the classroom with little preparation, often feeling overwhelmed, while veteran teachers described feeling the same but were sometimes able to draw on prior classroom experience. Despite these differences, both groups described frustration that autism-specific training was never prioritized at the institutional level. This theme was described explicitly by five participants, demonstrating its significance and prominence across the participants’ experiences. Teachers expressed frustration that the absence of structured, ongoing training left them underprepared and contributed to stress, burnout, and inconsistent support for students.

Theme 2: Lack of Paraprofessional Support

Teachers consistently reported that paraprofessional support was either absent or inconsistent, which left them solely responsible for managing behavioral and

instructional challenges. Several participants described the strain this created in their classrooms. Participant D explained, “There’s no para in my room. I begged for one, and they said we’re on a list. A list? This is a kid, not a shipment.” Participant I described a similar experience, stating, “I was told during the IEP meeting that the student would have a paraprofessional, but she never showed up. I asked about it, and the answer kept changing. Meanwhile, I’m trying to meet the goals on my own.” Participant F added, “It feels like we are constantly promised help that doesn’t come. We are left to manage everything ourselves, and the students lose out.” These accounts illustrate how systemic neglect reinforces the construction of teachers as solely accountable for inclusion, even when promised support does not arrive.

Consistent with social construction theory, the absence of paraprofessionals signals that institutional responsibility is shifted downward, leaving teachers to absorb the consequences. For newer teachers, this often meant heightened stress and feelings of failure, whereas veteran teachers reported exhaustion and resignation at a pattern that had persisted across their careers. This theme was described by five participants, who noted that without paraprofessionals, they often had to choose between addressing the needs of the student with ASD or continuing instruction for the rest of the class. The lack of paraprofessional support was identified as a structural barrier that directly undermines equitable education.

Theme 3: Limited Support from the Autism Coordinator

The autism coordinator role was perceived as largely absent or ineffective in supporting general education teachers with inclusive classrooms. Across the data set,

participants described receiving generic strategies or no response when seeking assistance. Participant B recalled, “I got one email with a PDF. That was it! No follow-up, no coaching, nothing to help me in real time when I was struggling. I felt like the message was basically, ‘Here’s some information, figure it out on your own.’ That’s not the kind of support that helps in the middle of a classroom meltdown.” Similarly, Participant H explained, “I can’t remember the last time I saw the autism coordinator in my classroom. We need someone who can walk with us through these situations, not someone who just pops in once a semester. When you’re facing a tough day and have no one to call on, it feels like you’ve been abandoned. That level of absence sends the message that inclusion is our burden alone.” Participant E summarized this frustration succinctly, stating, “I’ve asked for guidance and get told to look at a website. That’s not support.”

This theme highlights how the role of support personnel can be symbolically acknowledged while practically absent, reflecting a social construction of teachers as self-sufficient actors. The reliance on generic strategies and minimal follow-up aligns with Danforth and Naraian’s (2022) argument that institutional roles often exist more as compliance measures than as genuine supports. Veteran teachers emphasized that this lack of collaboration left them isolated, even when they occasionally offered peer support to newer colleagues. Although helpful in the moment, this reinforced the sense that teachers could rely only on one another rather than on institutional support. Newer teachers described the lack of guidance as destabilizing and demoralizing, while veteran teachers reported being somewhat accustomed to self-reliance despite ongoing

frustration. Across the 12 participants, this theme was referenced 15 times, making it the most frequently coded challenge. Teachers described feeling isolated, noting that the absence of consistent collaboration with the coordinator contributed to frustration and a lack of confidence in implementing support effectively.

Theme 4: Language and Cultural Barriers

Teachers identified misdiagnosis and misunderstanding of bilingual students as a recurring issue, particularly for Spanish-speaking children. Four participants emphasized that some behaviors attributed to autism may have stemmed from language barriers or cultural differences. Participant B reflected, “I honestly think this student may not even have autism. His home language is Spanish, and a lot of the struggles I see look more like he is still learning English. But the system didn’t account for that. Instead of giving him extra language support, they labeled him. That’s a life-changing label.” Participant G shared a similar concern, noting, “Sometimes it’s not autism, it’s a language gap. The child is quiet, doesn’t respond quickly, and suddenly people assume a diagnosis. That’s not fair to the child or the family.” Participant K summarized the issue succinctly, stating, “We need better cultural training, because language and behavior are not the same thing as autism.”

These findings connect directly to social constructionism, because bilingual students were sometimes misdiagnosed with autism when their challenges were really related to learning English. In these cases, being bilingual was treated as a problem instead of as a normal developmental process. This reflects Ingram and Schneider’s

(1993) point that marginalized groups are often labeled in ways that limit their access to the resources they actually need.

Rather than receiving appropriate language support, these students were placed in special education, which added stigma and failed to address their real needs. Teachers noted that newer colleagues sometimes struggled to separate language differences from autism, while more experienced teachers could recognize the misdiagnosis but still felt powerless to challenge the system. Teachers described these instances as deeply concerning, as mislabeling could lead to inappropriate interventions and additional stigma.

Theme 5: Systemic and Structural Barriers

Participants described systemic barriers such as food insecurity, poverty, and underfunding of classroom resources. Nine participants explicitly referenced these structural challenges, which often prevented students from being ready to learn and teachers from being able to provide needed accommodations. Participant F explained, “If they are hungry, they are not learning. I see it all the time. Some students come in without breakfast, and by mid-morning they are shutting down or acting out. It is not a matter of motivation; it is a matter of basic needs not being met. How can I focus on teaching algebra when a child is worried about food?” Participant C described the lack of sensory tools, stating, “I brought in my own sensory items, but they disappeared quickly. There is no budget line for these things, so teachers are expected to either go without or pay out of pocket. That is not sustainable.” Participant H summarized the issue clearly: “The reality is that poverty shapes everything that happens in our classrooms.”

Hunger was frequently linked to behavioral outbursts or disengagement. Teachers also emphasized that the absence of sensory tools created additional barriers, noting that they often purchased items such as fidgets or weighted materials with their own money. Both hunger and the lack of resources illustrate how systemic underfunding forced teachers to improvise rather than rely on consistent institutional support.

Theme 6: Instructional Disruption and Teacher Impact

Across the data set, participants reported that the presence of unmet needs often disrupted classroom instruction and placed additional strain on teachers. Six participants described emotional exhaustion and feelings of being unable to balance the needs of all students. Participant G explained, “Sometimes I have to choose between continuing the lesson or supporting the student in distress. Either way, someone is losing out. If I keep teaching, the student who is upset does not get the help they need. If I stop, then the entire class is left waiting. It feels like an impossible choice.” Participant K described the toll this took, stating, “There are days I go home completely drained because the disruptions never stop. It is not the students’ fault, but it wears you down. You are trying to teach, manage behaviors, and reassure other students all at the same time.” Participant E summarized the collective classroom impact succinctly: “When one student is struggling, the whole room feels it.”

The disruption of instruction shows how the lack of systemic support turned classrooms into unstable environments where teachers were left to manage every competing need. From a social constructionist perspective, this shows how accountability shifted downward, framing teachers not only as educators but also as crisis managers.

Newer teachers described these moments as overwhelming and destabilizing, while veteran teachers acknowledged the same strain but emphasized the exhaustion that built up over years of repeated disruption. Teachers noted that when students with ASD were unable to self-regulate, entire lessons were halted, leaving both the student and their peers at a disadvantage. This theme reflected the personal toll that inadequate systemic supports had on teachers' well-being and instructional capacity.

Findings Related to Research Question 2

RQ2 was, What policy recommendations would educators petition for to assist them in providing an equitable education for children with ASD? In response to the second RQ, participants were asked to reflect on what policy changes or institutional supports they would recommend to improve inclusive education. Their insights revealed three major themes: classroom strategies and resilience, IEP implementation gaps, and policy and procedural recommendations.

Theme 7: Classroom Strategies and Resilience

Despite systemic challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience and initiative in supporting students with ASD. Across the data set, participants described developing their own visual schedules, calming routines, and peer support to address student needs. Participant C explained, "I joined a Facebook group for teachers working with students on the spectrum. That was where I found real, practical advice. It should not be that way, but that is how I survived. I learned more from other teachers online than I did from any training at school." Participant F emphasized learning from peers rather than formal training, stating, "I learned from experience and from watching what worked for other

teachers. Nothing formal was ever offered. We just kind of had to figure it out as we went, and that is not fair to the students or us.” Participant H summarized the variability across classrooms: “Everyone is doing their own thing. What works in one classroom might not be happening next door.”

These strategies demonstrate how teachers took on responsibilities that schools did not formally support. From a social constructionist perspective, this reinforced the idea that teachers were expected to compensate for systemic gaps, often at personal cost. Newer teachers described their approaches as trial and error, while veteran teachers framed their strategies as survival techniques developed over years. Seven participants emphasized that these strategies were self-taught and not formally supported by their schools. Teachers highlighted this as evidence of their dedication, while also noting that relying on personal resilience was unsustainable in the long term.

Theme 8: IEP Implementation Gaps

Participants consistently described a disconnect between what was promised in students’ IEPs and what occurred in practice. Eight participants reported that while accommodations were outlined, they were not implemented due to lack of resources, paraprofessionals, or realistic planning. Participant D explained, “I was told during the IEP meeting that the student would have a paraprofessional, but she never showed up. I asked about it, and the answer kept changing. Meanwhile, I am trying to meet the goals on my own. It makes the whole document feel meaningless when there is no follow through.” Participant A described the same frustration, stating, “The IEP will say things like give extended time or pull for small group instruction, but I have no one to pull them.

It just sits in the document, but it is not happening.” Participant E summarized the sense of unfairness felt by teachers: “We are held responsible if things are not followed, but no one gives us what we need to make it happen.”

These findings demonstrate the disconnect between policy promises and practice, reflecting a symbolic focus on compliance rather than actual implementation. From a social constructionist perspective, teachers were treated as a negatively constructed group: they were assigned more burdens, such as legal responsibility for IEPs, while benefits such as staffing, training, and resources were withheld. Teachers described how IEPs often promised support that never materialized, such as paraprofessionals or small-group instruction, creating an impossible gap between what was legally required and what could actually be implemented. Newer teachers described being unprepared to navigate these gaps, while veteran teachers expressed frustration that the disconnect between compliance and practice had remained unresolved for decades.

Theme 9: Policy and Procedural Recommendations

Teachers articulated specific policy recommendations aimed at addressing the barriers they faced. Six participants highlighted the need for mandatory, autism-specific professional development tied directly to the school calendar. Participant K explained, “I should not have to figure this out by myself. These students deserve teachers who are trained, not just teachers who care. Professional development should not be optional or generic. It should be ongoing, autism-specific, and built into the school year so that every teacher knows how to support these students.” Others emphasized the need for accountability systems to ensure that IEP requirements and school-level supports were

implemented as written. Participant F stated, “There needs to be accountability when IEPs are not followed. Right now, the responsibility falls on the teacher, but the system does not back us up. There should be a process to make sure that what is written actually happens.” Participants also recommended stronger cultural competence training to reduce the risk of misdiagnosing bilingual students. Participant G summarized this recommendation: “We need cultural training, or else language and difference keep being mistaken for disability.”

From a social constructionist perspective, teachers were positioned as carrying the burdens of inclusion without receiving benefits such as training and resources (Schneider & Ingram, 1993). Their recommendations for professional development, accountability, and cultural competence challenged this unequal distribution of burdens and benefits. Both newer and veteran teachers agreed on the need for reform, although veteran teachers were more skeptical that change would occur without stronger accountability. Collectively, these recommendations reflected teachers’ desire for systemic reforms that move beyond symbolic policies toward actionable change.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented the findings from interviews with 12 general education teachers working in inclusive middle school classrooms within a low SES area public school in Washington, DC. The results were organized by RQ and supported with direct quotations to preserve the authenticity of participants’ experiences.

In response to RQ1, which asked about the challenges educators experienced in providing an equitable education to students with ASD, six themes emerged: lack of

autism-specific training, lack of paraprofessional support, limited support from the autism coordinator, language and cultural barriers, systemic and structural barriers, and instructional disruption and teacher impact. These themes demonstrated how systemic conditions and daily classroom challenges intersected to undermine teachers' ability to meet the needs of all learners and provide an equitable education.

In response to RQ2, which asked what policy recommendations educators would make to improve inclusive education, three themes emerged: classroom strategies and resilience, IEP implementation gaps, and policy and procedural recommendations. These findings revealed both the adaptive strategies teachers created in the absence of institutional guidance and the systemic reforms they believe are required, including professional development, accountability, and cultural competence training.

Taken together, these nine themes illustrate how teachers were positioned to carry significant burdens without corresponding institutional benefits, consistent with social constructionist perspectives. The findings show that while educators remain committed to inclusion, meaningful progress requires structural changes in training, staffing, accountability, and policy to ensure that inclusion moves beyond aspiration and becomes a lived reality for students with ASD.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

This chapter presents an interpretation of the study's findings in the context of the two RQs, relevant literature, and the theoretical framework of social construction and public policy. The findings are discussed in relation to both the structural and instructional barriers teachers face, as well as the systemic conditions that influence those challenges. Each of the nine themes identified in Chapter 4 is analyzed here with attention to how the findings confirm, extend, or challenge prior research. These interpretations also draw explicitly on the framework of social construction to demonstrate how teachers and students with autism are positioned as underserved and burdened populations.

Interpretation of the Findings

Theme 1: Lack of Autism-Specific Training

Teachers consistently reported feeling unprepared to support students with autism because their professional development had been limited, generic, or absent. Participants described relying on self-teaching, peer advice, or internet searches, which contributed to stress and a sense of being underqualified. These findings confirm Hendricks' (2011) conclusion that training is too often focused on compliance rather than equipping teachers with practical skills for managing behavior and supporting learning. Garwood (2024) further demonstrated that the lack of targeted preparation contributes to heightened stress and eventual burnout, especially for teachers in inclusive classrooms with limited institutional support.

This study extends prior research by highlighting how unpreparedness was particularly acute in a low SES area school where teachers faced compounded resource constraints. While some veteran teachers drew on years of general classroom experience, both newer and experienced teachers acknowledged the absence of systematic autism-specific training. Webster and Roberts (2022) provide evidence that schools which adopt structured models, such as the School-Wide Autism Competency framework, improve teacher confidence and inclusion outcomes when leadership ensures consistent coaching and embedded professional development. In the present study, the lack of such structures meant teachers were left to improvise, often to the detriment of both themselves and their students.

From a social constructionist perspective, this theme reflects Ingram and Schneider's (1993) assertion that negatively constructed groups are assigned more burdens and fewer benefits. Teachers were expected to deliver inclusion without the benefit of specialized training, while students with autism were implicitly framed as undeserving of investment. This construction rationalizes a policy landscape in which minimal training is acceptable, despite the known challenges of inclusion.

Theme 2: Lack of Paraprofessional Support

Participants described how paraprofessional support was absent or inconsistent, leaving them solely responsible for both instruction and behavior management. Several teachers recounted instances where paraprofessionals promised in IEP meetings never materialized, or where shortages meant that no assistance was available. These findings confirm earlier studies, such as Giangreco, Suter, and Doyle (2010), which documented

how staffing shortages undermine the fidelity of inclusive education. They also extend Douglas, Chapin, and Nolan's (2016) findings that paraprofessional scarcity directly contributes to inequitable classroom experiences and diminished learning opportunities for students with autism. The absence of paraprofessionals was not only a logistical challenge but also a symbolic message to teachers that their needs were secondary. Participants repeatedly emphasized the impossible choice of either supporting one student in crisis or maintaining instruction for the entire class. This aligns with Garwood's (2024) evidence of how systemic understaffing exacerbates teacher stress and burnout in inclusive settings.

Social construction theory helps explain these dynamics. Ingram and Schneider (1993) argue that negatively constructed populations receive more burdens while resources are withheld. Teachers in this study were given the burden of legal responsibility for implementing IEPs without the benefit of paraprofessional support, while students were denied the accommodations promised to them. This reflects the social construction of both teachers and students as undeserving of full institutional investment.

Theme 3: Limited Support From the Autism Coordinator

Teachers perceived the autism coordinator role as ineffective or absent in practice. Participants described receiving generic strategies, website links, or one-off documents rather than hands-on guidance. Some noted that the coordinator was rarely present in classrooms, contributing to a sense of isolation. These findings align with Giangreco's

(2013) analysis that specialized support roles are often underutilized or treated as compliance positions rather than genuine instructional partners.

Webster and Roberts (2022) provide a counterexample, demonstrating that schools which embedded autism leadership roles into daily practice achieved more consistent inclusion outcomes. In the present study, the failure to institutionalize this role meant that teachers relied instead on peer mentoring, often informally and inconsistently. While this provided some relief, it also reinforced the notion that teachers were ultimately responsible for solving systemic problems on their own.

Ingram and Schneider's (1993) framework highlights that deserving groups are constructed to receive institutional benefits, while undeserving groups are left unsupported. The lack of functional autism coordinator support exemplifies this process, as teachers were denied access to the very expertise designed to make inclusion effective. Students with autism, in turn, were denied the systemic scaffolding needed to thrive.

Theme 4: Language and Cultural Barriers

Participants raised concerns about bilingual students, particularly Spanish-speaking children, being misdiagnosed with autism. Teachers reported that language acquisition struggles were often conflated with developmental delays, leading to inappropriate labeling. These findings confirm Kover and Tager-Flusberg's (2019) work showing that bilingualism is often misinterpreted in diagnostic processes and extend Zarate and Smail's (2021) study, which documented how English learners with autism face distinct service trajectories due to systemic misunderstanding. This study adds depth by situating these barriers within a low SES area context where evaluators lacked cultural

training and resources to distinguish between language and disability. Teachers recognized the injustice of labeling bilingual students with autism when their needs were primarily linguistic, but they felt powerless to challenge systemic practices.

From a social constructionist perspective, this reflects how marginalized groups are framed as undeserving of nuanced assessment. Ingram and Schneider (1993) argue that categorization processes influence who is seen as deserving of resources. Here, bilingual students were socially constructed as problems to be managed rather than learners requiring tailored support. Teachers, likewise, were burdened with navigating misdiagnoses without institutional backing.

Theme 5: Systemic and Structural Barriers

Teachers described systemic barriers such as poverty, food insecurity, and underfunding of resources as persistent obstacles to inclusion. Hunger was linked to behavioral outbursts and disengagement, while the absence of sensory tools left teachers improvising support with personal funds. These findings mirror UNICEF's (2023) evidence that hunger undermines classroom engagement and Alaimo, Olson, and Frongillo's (2001) demonstration that food insecurity has widespread consequences for school-age children. Pfeiffer, Koenig, Kinnealey, Sheppard, and Henderson (2011) further established that sensory-adaptive environments improve outcomes for autistic children, yet participants in this study reported that such supports were rarely available.

The findings extend Kurth & Mastergeorge's (2010) conclusion that sensory tools are necessary for inclusion by documenting how teachers in low SES schools bore the financial burden of providing them. This also confirms Morgan et al., (2018) research on

systemic underfunding and the inequities it creates in marginalized schools. From the lens of social construction, these findings highlight how both students and teachers were constructed as undeserving of investment. Ingram and Schneider (1993) assert that negatively constructed groups are assigned burdens rather than benefits. Teachers in this study absorbed financial and emotional burdens, while students experienced unmet basic and sensory needs, further entrenching inequity.

Theme 6: Instructional Disruption and Teacher Impact

Participants reported that unmet needs led to frequent classroom disruptions and emotional exhaustion. Teachers described having to choose between supporting a student in distress or continuing instruction for others, creating a sense of failure regardless of their choice. This is consistent with Hendricks' (2011) findings on the absence of behavioral management training and Garwood's (2024) evidence of heightened stress and burnout in inclusive classrooms.

This study extends prior literature by documenting how disruptions in low SES schools disproportionately harmed both academic momentum and classroom community. Teachers emphasized that when one student struggled, the entire classroom felt the impact. This reflects Hehir et al., (2016) concept of symbolic inclusion, where the placement of students with disabilities in general classrooms is not matched with meaningful instructional support.

Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory helps explain why these conditions persist. Teachers were socially constructed as responsible for managing every crisis, while institutional actors withheld the benefits of staffing, training, and structural support. This

burden-benefit imbalance illustrates how inclusive education, without systemic investment, becomes conditional rather than equitable.

Theme 7: Teacher Strategies and Resilience

Despite systemic challenges, teachers demonstrated resilience and initiative in developing strategies to support students with autism. Participants described creating visual schedules, calming routines, and peer support systems without formal training. These findings align with Florian and Beaton's (2018) review of teacher-initiated adaptations in inclusive education and confirm that teachers often compensate for systemic gaps through personal resourcefulness. The findings also extend Webster and Roberts (2022), who demonstrated that resilience is more effective when supported by institutional frameworks rather than left to individual teachers. In this study, teachers recognized their creativity as a necessity but also expressed frustration that resilience had become a survival strategy rather than a celebrated strength.

From a social constructionist lens, this finding illustrates how teachers were constructed as self-sufficient actors who must bear responsibility for system failures. Ingram and Schneider (1993) highlight that negatively constructed groups are expected to absorb burdens without institutional benefits. Teachers' reliance on resilience exemplifies this dynamic, where their dedication masked systemic neglect.

Theme 8: IEP Implementation Gaps

Teachers consistently described a disconnect between what was written in students' IEPs and what occurred in practice. They reported accommodations being promised but never delivered due to staffing shortages and lack of resources. These

findings confirm New York City Department of Education's (2022) audit data documenting missed or delayed IEP services, and Johnson, C. D. C. (2023) evidence of uneven compliance across schools.

This study extends Brock and Carter (2017) findings by showing how the implementation gap not only erodes teacher efficacy but also undermines students' trust in the system. Teachers expressed frustration that they were held legally responsible for compliance despite having no control over whether resources were provided.

Ingram and Schneider's (1993) theory provides direct insight. Teachers were framed as a negatively constructed group, assigned the burden of legal responsibility without the benefits of staffing or resources. Students with autism were similarly constructed as undeserving, as their access to services remained conditional and inconsistently enforced.

Theme 9: Policy and Procedural Recommendations

Teachers articulated several policy recommendations, including mandatory autism-specific professional development, minimum staffing ratios for paraprofessionals, culturally responsive diagnostic practices, expanded nutrition programs, and systemic accountability for IEP implementation. These findings confirm Skiba, Arredondo, and Rausch's (2014) conclusion that marginalized populations experience inconsistent policy enforcement and extend Danforth and Naraian's (2022) analysis that deficit-based narratives shape resource allocation. This study adds to the literature by showing that teacher-driven policy recommendations emphasize not only instructional needs but also systemic reforms such as food access and diagnostic equity. These recommendations

highlight teachers' recognition that inequity cannot be solved at the classroom level alone but requires structural change.

From the perspective of social construction, these recommendations represent teachers' resistance to being framed as unsupported implementers. Ingram and Schneider (1993) argue that marginalized groups may attempt to shift policy narratives to demand benefits rather than accept burdens. Teachers in this study sought to reframe themselves as deserving of investment and students with autism as entitled to systemic support.

Taken together, these nine themes demonstrate how inclusive education is undermined when both teachers and students are socially constructed as undeserving of investment. Each theme reflects a consistent pattern: teachers were given the burden of implementing inclusion without the benefits of training, staffing, or resources, while students with autism were provided symbolic inclusion rather than equitable opportunities. These findings confirm that without systemic reform, inclusion remains conditional. The following section outlines the study's limitations before presenting recommendations and implications for practice, policy, and future research.

Limitations of the Study

This study was subject to several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the research was geographically bound to one low SES area public school system in Washington, DC. While this focus provided in-depth insights into a specific context, it may limit the transferability of findings to other geographic regions or school systems with different demographic and policy environments.

Second, the sample size of 12 participants was appropriate for a generic qualitative design, but it may not capture the full range of perspectives among general education teachers. Although participants varied in years of experience and grade levels taught, the findings cannot be assumed to represent all teachers working in inclusive classrooms across diverse settings.

Finally, the study reflects the perspectives of teachers at a single point in time. Because data were not collected longitudinally, the findings do not account for how teacher experiences might change in response to new policies, professional development, or shifts in student demographics. Future research using longitudinal or mixed-methods approaches could provide deeper insight into how inclusive practices develop and adapt over time.

Recommendations

The recommendations that follow are grounded in the perspectives of participants and supported by relevant literature and policy analysis. They are presented in three categories: policy-level, school-level, and classroom-level recommendations. This structure provides clarity and aligns the proposed reforms with the levels of authority responsible for implementing them.

Policy-Level Recommendations

At the policy level, reforms must prioritize structural investments that ensure equitable inclusion across all schools. First, autism-specific professional development should be made annual, mandatory, and aligned with evidence-based practices. Training should not remain voluntary or generic but rather embedded within district and state

requirements to guarantee consistent access for all educators. Second, policymakers must mandate minimum staffing ratios for paraprofessionals in inclusion classrooms. These ratios should be determined by the documented needs of students with autism rather than by overall enrollment numbers, thereby ensuring that the most vulnerable students are not overlooked. Third, systems of accountability for IEP implementation must be created and enforced. This includes the designation of oversight personnel at the district level and budget allocations tied directly to compliance with IEP requirements. Fourth, policies must require culturally and linguistically responsive diagnostic procedures to avoid the misidentification of bilingual students. Evaluations should differentiate between language acquisition needs and developmental disabilities in order to provide appropriate services. Finally, food access should be integrated into inclusion policy. Expanded nutrition programs must account for the sensory sensitivities of students with autism and guarantee that hunger does not interfere with learning or behavior. These policy-level reforms would address the systemic inequities that participants described and move inclusive education beyond symbolic compliance.

School-Level Recommendations

At the school level, leadership must assume responsibility for embedding inclusive practices into daily operations. School leaders should ensure that autism-specific professional development is scheduled within the academic calendar, that it is ongoing and interactive, and that it addresses real classroom scenarios such as behavioral regulation, sensory integration, and culturally responsive strategies. Principals and coordinators should allocate dedicated budgets for sensory tools and adaptive resources,

recognizing these as essential rather than optional. Schools should also implement structured social-emotional curricula that emphasize neurodiversity awareness and peer support. By doing so, schools can cultivate environments in which inclusion is both understood and practiced at a cultural level. The role of the autism coordinator should be redefined from a compliance-based position to one focused on instructional coaching. Coordinators should provide regular classroom visits, hands-on guidance, and sustained collaboration with teachers. These school-level recommendations would bridge the gap between policy mandates and classroom realities by creating a culture of accountability, preparedness, and shared responsibility.

Classroom-Level Recommendations

At the classroom level, teachers require practical support that allows them to meet the daily demands of inclusion without sacrificing instructional quality. Teachers should receive ongoing instructional coaching to strengthen classroom management strategies that support students with autism. Collaborative planning time must be built into the school schedule so that general education and special education teachers can co-design lessons and accommodations. Such collaboration ensures that the responsibility for inclusion is not borne by individual teachers in isolation. Teachers should also have structured opportunities for resilience-building through peer mentoring, professional learning communities, and reflective practice. Finally, classrooms should be equipped with sensory-friendly spaces, such as quiet corners, that provide students with autism the opportunity to regulate emotions and re-engage with instruction. Even modest adjustments of this nature can have a significant impact on classroom stability and

student success. These classroom-level recommendations directly reflect the strategies teachers described as both necessary and lacking in their current practice.

Collectively, these recommendations underscore the need for reform at multiple levels of the educational system. Policies must set clear expectations and provide resources, schools must embed those expectations into practice, and classrooms must be equipped with support that make inclusion sustainable. Only through alignment across these levels can inclusive education move from symbolic compliance to meaningful practice.

Implications

The findings of this study hold important implications for advancing social change in education, particularly in low SES area public schools where inequities are most pronounced. Teachers described systemic barriers that undermined their ability to deliver equitable instruction, including inadequate training, limited staffing, food insecurity, and cultural misdiagnosis. These challenges are not isolated to individual classrooms but reflect broader patterns of underinvestment in marginalized communities. Addressing these barriers requires policies and practices that directly confront the intersection of disability, poverty, and systemic neglect.

At the policy level, this study highlights the need for reforms that prioritize equitable resource allocation. Ensuring that autism-specific professional development, paraprofessional staffing, and culturally responsive diagnostic procedures are mandated and funded would reduce disparities in access to high-quality education. Such reforms

can shift the social construction of teachers and students with autism from “undeserving” to “deserving,” thereby challenging deficit-based narratives that perpetuate inequity.

At the school level, these findings demonstrate the potential for meaningful change when leadership invests in inclusion as a cultural practice. Embedding neurodiversity awareness, providing sensory support, and redefining coordinator roles as instructional leaders can transform school environments into places where both teachers and students feel supported. This change fosters not only better educational outcomes but also stronger communities in which diversity is valued rather than stigmatized.

At the classroom level, teachers’ experiences underscore the importance of practical support that allows inclusion to succeed on a daily basis. Quiet spaces, collaborative planning time, and resilience-building practices empower teachers to sustain inclusive environments that affirm the dignity and potential of students with autism. These classroom practices extend beyond individual students and contribute to cultures of empathy, patience, and equity that benefit all learners.

Taken together, the implications of this study extend beyond educational practice to broader questions of social equity. When inclusion is implemented with fidelity, schools in low SES communities can disrupt cycles of marginalization by providing students with autism equitable access to learning opportunities. Teachers, in turn, are positioned not as unsupported implementers but as professionals deserving of investment and collaboration. By reframing inclusion as a systemic responsibility rather than an individual burden, this study contributes to the ongoing movement for educational equity and social justice.

Conclusion

In this study, I explored the challenges faced by general education teachers in low SES area public schools as they sought to provide equitable education for students with autism. Through interviews with 12 teachers, nine major themes emerged, reflecting barriers in training, staffing, and systemic support, as well as the adaptive strategies and policy recommendations that educators identified as essential. These findings reveal not only the daily struggles of teachers working in under-resourced environments but also the systemic inequities that persist when inclusion is pursued as a matter of compliance rather than as a matter of justice.

The application of social construction theory provided critical insight into these dynamics. Ingram and Schneider (1993) argued that negatively constructed groups are assigned more burdens and fewer benefits, while positively constructed groups receive resources and support. This study confirmed that both teachers and students with autism were positioned as negatively constructed populations. Teachers were burdened with the legal and moral responsibility of implementing inclusion without the benefits of training, staffing, or resources, while students were denied consistent access to the supports promised by policy. The persistence of these inequities underscores how policy design and implementation reflect broader social values about who is considered deserving of investment.

The recommendations advanced in this study illustrate a path toward change at multiple levels. Policies must mandate and fund autism-specific professional development, paraprofessional staffing, diagnostic equity, and food access initiatives.

Schools must embed inclusive practices into daily routines by allocating resources, redefining leadership roles, and fostering cultures of neurodiversity awareness.

Classrooms must be equipped with practical supports that empower teachers and affirm the dignity of students with autism. Together, these reforms can shift inclusion from a symbolic aspiration to a lived reality.

The implications for social change are clear. When inclusive education is implemented with fidelity, it has the power to transform schools in low SES communities into equitable spaces where all students can thrive. Teachers who are supported rather than burdened are able to sustain their practice, build resilience, and foster learning environments that benefit both students with autism and their peers. By reframing inclusion as a systemic responsibility rather than an individual challenge, this study contributes to the scholarly conversation on educational equity while offering practical strategies for reform.

At its core, this study affirms that inclusion cannot rest on the heroic efforts of individual teachers. It requires structural investment, cultural commitment, and institutional accountability. Only by addressing inequities at the policy, school, and classroom levels can society ensure that students with autism are not merely present in classrooms but are fully included in meaningful ways. In this way, the study underscores that inclusive education is not only an educational mandate but also a moral imperative for advancing equity and social justice.

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Appendix: Interview Questions

General

1. Tell me how you see your role as a teacher in an inclusive general classroom?
2. Do you feel equipped to provide an equitable education to your ASD students?
3. What was preventing you from providing an equitable education?
4. Does having an inclusive class take away or add to the educational experience of your general ed student?
5. Tell me about how you feel about having an inclusive classroom?
6. Tell me about how a typical classroom day was structured?
7. How long have you been a teacher?
8. How long have you had an inclusive classroom with ASD students?
9. How prepared did you feel your ASD students were to advance to the next grade level?
10. Tell me how you feel about having an inclusive classroom with ASD students?

Training

11. Have you received any formal training for having an inclusive classroom?
12. What training did you think would helped you in having ASD students in your classroom?
13. How long did you think the training should be?

Policy and Procedure

14. What policies and procedures exist in your school for having children with ASD in a general classroom?

15. What policies and procedures does the school have in place to ensure students with ASD receive an equitable education?
16. Do you think the policies and procedures helped you as a general education teacher with an inclusive classroom with students who had ASD?

Resources

17. What resources do you utilize in the school to assist you?
18. Do you receive supported from the administration at your school?
19. Tell me how you feel regarding support from the school administration.
20. What supported services did you feel you needed to assist in providing an equitable education to your ASD students?

Recommendations

21. What recommendations would you make that would assist you in providing an equitable education to your ASD students?
22. At what level: local, state, or federal did you feel could provide the most impact on assisting teachers in providing an equitable education to ASD students?
23. What policy recommendations would you make at the local, state, and federal levels?
24. What procedural recommendations would you make that would assist you in providing an equitable education?