RESEARCH

The lived experiences of teachers working with young students with autism

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Abstract

In the last 5 years, teachers have reported challenging experiences while educating young children with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) as the diagnostic numbers have increased from one in 60 in 2019 to one in 33 in 2021, impacting the classroom ratios and social dynamics (Artigas-Pallarès & Paula, 2020; Maenner et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2021). The increase in the prevalence of ASD diagnosis is impactful, specifically for teachers educating these students in the classroom. Educational psychology and ASD research highlights the issues students with ASD have during the school day, struggling with social skills, social communication, and social exchanges with their peers and teachers (Baron-Cohen, 1988, 2006, 2017; Silverman, 2015; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2021). This trend made a study regarding teachers' lived experiences (i.e., social interactions) essential for informing professional development content for special education teachers working with students with ASD (Baron-Cohen, 1988, 2001, 2006, 2017; Josilowski, 2019; Silverman, 2015). This transcendental phenomenological study, using constructivist research questions, captured teachers' lived experiences of social activities with students with ASD. Educational psychologists, educators, and professionals in the ASD field will benefit from better understanding of the lived experiences, specific knowledge about teacher-student social interactions to inform training practices, and detailed evidence to enhance professional development.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorder, constructivism, teacher-student relationship, social interaction, special education

In recent years, the number of young children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has increased from one in 60 in 2019 to one in 33 in 2021; this change has impacted classroom ratios and social dynamics and created challenges for teachers (Artigas-Pallarès & Paula, 2020; Maenner et al., 2020; Rosen et al., 2021). Researchers in educational psychology and ASD have highlighted the challenges students with ASD face with social skills, communication, and social exchanges with their peers and teachers (Baron-Cohen, 1988, 2006, 2017; Silverman, 2015; Simó-Pinatella et al., 2021).

Social skills training in early elementary classrooms has proven to be a critical intervention for children with ASD, particularly in Grades 1 through 3, when peer interaction and cooperative learning become central to academic and social

development. Structured programs such as the skill streaming model and the Superheroes Social Skills program have demonstrated efficacy in teaching core skills like turn-taking, perspective-taking, and emotion recognition in naturalistic classroom settings (Bellini et al., 2007; Gresham et al., 2006). Teachers who embed social skills training into daily routines using visual support, role-playing, and peer-mediated strategies contribute to improved outcomes in both social reciprocity and behavior regulation (Rao et al., 2008). Additionally, early intervention with social skills training is associated with long-term gains in peer acceptance and reduced disruptive behaviors, especially when supported by trained educators and reinforced across environments (Wong et al., 2015). These findings highlight the importance of implementing developmentally appropriate and evidence-based social skills interventions during the early academic years for children with ASD.

Need for the Study

Despite these indications, previous research offers limited understanding of the lived experiences of teachers working with students in first through third grade during periods of socialization. The growing population of children with ASD and the accompanying challenges in the classroom establish a need to describe the lived experiences of special education teachers who work with young students with autism during socialization (i.e., circle time, instructional periods, and during art projects). Such information has the potential to inform professional development content (Baron-Cohen, 1988, 2001, 2006, 2017; Josilowski, 2019; Silverman, 2015).

Educational psychologists and autism researchers have explored some of the challenges faced by people with ASD. Baron-Cohen (1988, 2001, 2006, 2017) described social and neurological differences and advocated for neurodiversity support. Roth et al. (2010) researched ASD equality in *The Autism Spectrum in the 21st Century*, describing educational effectiveness, documenting bullying rates of 65% against persons with ASD, and highlighting the need for social acceptance in educational systems/institutions. Silberman's (2015) book, *Neuro Tribes: The Legacy of Autism and the Future of Neurodiversity*, covered the history of ASD, the historical development of the phenomena in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (3rd, 4th, and 5th editions; American Psychiatric Association, 1980, 1994, 2013), and social stigma related to the disorder. Finally, ASD research includes teachers' and neurotypical students' social acceptance attitudes and their perceptions of inclusion practices for students with ASD, including the need for on-going training (Derguy et al., 2021; Leifler et al., 2022).

Previous researchers in educational psychology, psychology, and ASD focused on teachers and novice teachers' perceptions and inclusion practices in general education classrooms and the home-school collaboration for students with ASD (Derguy et al., 2021; Josilowski, 2019; Leifler et al., 2022). For example, Stites et al. (2021) reviewed the need for researchers to understand teachers' lived experiences of working with students with different abilities by focusing specifically on pre-service teachers' feelings, ideas, and thoughts relating to the inclusion of students with other abilities. Phenomenological findings also illustrated teachers' training outcomes, students' social-emotional status and academic performance, and teachers' self-efficacy and effectiveness, and researchers explored teachers' need for ongoing training and mentorship support (Jones, 2019; Josilowski, 2019; Juarez, 2024; Stites et al., 2021).

Despite this body of knowledge, a gap persists in the educational psychology and ASD research and literature regarding special education teachers' lived experiences during social interactions with their young students with ASD. Specifically, information about early interventions in ASD and teacher-student social experiences in the classroom is missing. Practitioners in the educational psychology, psychology, and ASD fields would benefit from an improved understanding of the need for training to reduce teachers' anxiety, refine inclusion practices, and increase support for teachers.

A qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was appropriate to generate a description of the lived experiences of special education teachers who work with young students with ASD in the classroom during social

periods (Gallagher, 2022). In such a study, participants and the researcher work together to co-discover and co-construct data from the participants' responses to research questions and the researcher's behaviors (e.g., bracketing, transcending) to reveal authentic lived experiences (Percy et al., 2015). Such a study conducted within the social constructivism paradigm will add to the research on ASD teaching practices (Cihon et al., 2019; Markelz et al., 2019; McNeill, 2019; Sutton et al., 2019). Given the developmental capabilities of young students, this type of study is necessary to inform educational psychologists about effective social teaching practices for first through third graders (Myburgh et al., 2020). This transcendental phenomenological study focused on teachers' perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and ideas regarding their social interactions with students with ASD (Juarez, 2024). The findings highlight the need for teacher training to support teachers' knowledge regarding their students' social needs and to suggest ways to leverage school as a social phenomenon.

More specifically, teachers' training in evidence-based socially relevant practices is essential if schools are to meet the needs of young learners with ASD. M. E. Johnson et al. (2020) and Stites et al. (2021) established that all teachers need ongoing training, support, mentorship within the classroom, and collaboration between home and schools to be effective educators for students with ASD. Other ASD research included teachers' and neurotypical students' attitudes and perceptions of inclusion practices for students with ASD (Derguy et al., 2021; Leifler et al., 2022). These researchers explored the need for inclusion policies and social constructivism practices (i.e., scaffolding and zone of proximal development).

Further, Stites et al. (2021) and Josilowski (2019) offered phenomenological studies of teacher perceptions and training outcomes to improve students' social, emotional, and academic performance while increasing teachers' self-efficacy. The influx of students with ASD in the regular education classroom is likely to continue to increase over the next 5 years. Continued teacher training in social pedagogical practices, such as social constructivism, a learning theory based on interactions between teachers and learners, is necessary for teachers working with students with ASD (Delice, 2023).

Literature Review

> "Human beings, who are almost unique in having the ability to learn from the experience of others, are also remarkable for their apparent disclination to do so."
>
> -Douglas Adams, *Last Chance to See*

Previous scholarly literature indicated that educational psychologists are responsible for training special education teachers who work with students with ASD to ensure teachers can meet the needs of their students with evidence- and research-based practices (Bond et al., 2017; A. Johnson et al., 2021; Josilowski, 2019; Stites et al., 2021). People with ASD experience deficits in social skills, such as difficulty in responding to others' bids for social interactions, limited ability to make eye contact, struggles to provide verbal or non-verbal responses, and learning how to socialize in general (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Leaf, 2017). Young students with ASD in Grades 3 through 5, who are five to eight years old, are in a prime developmental period for positive social exchanges between teachers and students (Mason et al., 2021; Myburgh et al., 2020).

To effectively provide training and professional development content for teachers, educational psychologists need to understand the lived experiences of special education teachers, including those who work with young students with ASD during social periods such as circle time, art projects, and instructional time (Bond et al., 2017). Research describing the lived experiences of special education teachers during these early intervention periods, specifically regarding social exchange opportunities with their young students with ASD, may inform educational psychologists as they design professional development content (Mason et al., 2021; Vincent & Ralston, 2019). One area to consider for inclusion is research that explores the biological functions of social processing for people with ASD.

The Social Brain and ASD

According to the current research in biological framework of ASD, the neurological mechanism of eye tracking plays a fundamental role in explaining the phenotypic genetics of ASD. In a comprehensive study to confirm the neurological mechanics of the social brain in persons with ASD, Mason et al. (2021) mapped brain regions to inform the ASD field of social-genetic profiles. Results indicated human brain regions in the amygdala, ordinal frontal cortex, fusiform gyrus posterior, and superior temporal sulcus are responsible for social information processing. Other findings confirmed that human social cognitive processes help people identify kinematics (body movement patterns) of others, leading to the ability to infer others' emotions and intentions and assisting in productive social interactions (Baron-Cohen, 1995; Roth et al., 2010).

Mason et al. (2021) verified that the social brain's typical function is to prefer biological motion, but persons with ASD 6 to 30 years do not show a preference for biological motion. The implications of this study were that people with ASD social profiles do not evolve over time, and they need help and support to develop their social brains. People with ASD may have less neural connectivity in the social brain, causing them to initiate few social interactions, respond to few social bids, and offer few verbal and nonverbal reciprocal interactions. These detailed findings have the potential to inform professional development content.

Other topics of research include genetic characteristics and psychological features that impact social differences across the autism spectrum, and results point to neurological social features that limit high destiny transmission for social cues and biomotion markers (Baron-Cohen, 2017; Botha et al., 2022; Mason et al., 2021). Young students with ASD have many opportunities to have productive social exchanges with their teachers, which may increase the students' neurological branching in that social area of the brain and improve the quality of life for persons with ASD. Teachers need training and education to understand these features and to design lessons that work for the children with ASD.

Teaching Methodologies for Students With ASD

One approach to teaching children with ASD is positive behavioral support (PBS) programs in the classroom; teachers who use this technique aim to reduce interfering behaviors caused by social and emotional problems. One mixed-methods study included data from observations of students in the classroom and teachers' responses to open-ended questions about their perceptions of applying PBS and students' responses to that approach (Alwahbi, 2022). PBS is a three-tiered model; the first tier features whole-group teaching strategies. The second tier is a more intensive level at which educators apply PBS strategies across smaller groups, and the third tier involves using one-on-one individualized PBS teaching strategies to decrease interfering behaviors. The teaching procedures include rewards (with tokens) and verbal praise when students stay on task, pay attention to academic tasks, and respond to teachers' instructions.

Alwahbi (2022) focused on students with autism in Saudi Arabia; the children's diagnoses ranged from moderate to high functioning. The researcher divided students into seven to nine groups based on their grade level and individual needs. Then the children completed six 40-minute lessons in reading, writing, mathematics, social studies, visual arts, and physical education. Teachers implemented the PBS strategy with three to four students in one virtual classroom, and students attended this school twice a week for two hours for individualized instruction. The age range for the participants was eight to 13 years, and the sample included 32 students and nine special education teachers specializing in autism.

Further, to establish fidelity of the findings, the researcher collected baseline data before the implementation of PBS teaching strategies (Alwahbi, 2022). Although this comprehensive study addressed the effects of PBS to mitigate interfering behaviors, leading to more access to the curriculum, it did not feature a specific teaching strategy focused on teaching social skills behaviors. This study focused on students' reactions to teachers' questions (e.g., raising their hand) and whether students responded to instructions within 5 seconds. Because teachers provided or withheld positive praise and

awarded or took back tokens depending on students' behavior, this model aligned with a behaviorist teaching strategy.

The results showed a mild decrease in the frequency of interfering behaviors across three classrooms in various age groups and levels (Alwahbi, 2022). Again, this study was aimed at understanding the impact of PBS on students' interfering behaviors, not on creating social identities, which would benefit them long-term. Also, the mild decrease in interfering behaviors may be attributed to smaller class sizes, and teachers reported the interfering behaviors occurred during unstructured time when the PBS teaching strategies were not applied.

Previous research also reflects the role of emotional intelligence (EI) in mitigating social and emotional difficulties in students with autism. Trevisan et al. (2021) expounded on the specific social-emotional difficulties common among students with autism, including challenges in perceiving, using, understanding, and managing emotions. The researchers reviewed literature on teaching strategies to mitigate difficulties in EI for persons with autism in the areas of picking up on nonverbal emotional cues, emotional regulation deficits, authentic versus deceptive facial expressions, and deciphering emotions in music (Baron-Cohen, 2017).

Researchers also reviewed the implementation of EI in school settings. The EI teaching strategies for students with autism were peer mediated instructions, naturalistic interventions, structured play groups, and adult-directed social skills training. Trevisan et al. (2021) did not suggest EI teaching models should be exclusively used; instead, EI methods should be incorporated with other interventions such as social emotional learning (SEL).

Trevisan et al. (2021) recognized behavioral and biophysiological interventions (teaching strategies) might be more useful in producing EI skill sets in persons with autism. Singh et al. (2019) suggested meditation-based stress reduction (MBSR) strategies and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy (MBCT), which are already a part of SEL curricula for students with ASD. Although these findings highlighted the emotional symptoms of autism and the usefulness of EI teaching methodologies, the results clarified differences and variations in cognitive ability among children with autism, which means only the moderate- to high-functioning persons with ASD were positively impacted by EI teaching strategies. Therefore, EI teaching strategies are not a comprehensive way to increase the social skills or social identities of students with autism.

Written by an advocate for SEL, *Conscious Discipline* (Bailey, 2021) offered a workshop in SEL to assist students in navigating the classroom multidimensional dynamics, academic presentations, and social emotional skills. Reports suggested SEL can help students with autism connect with others appropriately, develop social skills, and regulate their emotions as they learn to solve problems and thrive socially and academically. This two-day workshop focused on the conscious discipline teaching approach, which is a trauma-informed, adult-first methodology, integrating SEL and school culture procedures for students with autism.

Results indicated the conscious discipline methodology decreased aggression, impulsiveness, and symptoms of hyperactivity and reduced discipline referrals for students with autism. These outcomes highlighted the negative aspects of autism but did not depict the co-construction of knowledge between teachers and their students with ASD. Unlike socially mediated learning strategies, conscious discipline approaches are teacher-led, leaving the students with autism to merely comply with instructions.

To explore a more student-centered approach, Abu-Nowar et al. (2024) reported on technology-focused social emotional nurturing and skill enhancement system (SNSES) for persons with autism. This teaching methodology features technology that displays facial emotional expressions to teach persons with ASD to understand nonverbal social cues. Abu-Nowar et al. (2024) researched augmented reality social skills, training specifically for high functioning autistic adults with cognitive and sensory differences. Findings indicated that persons with autism have deficits in responding to paralinguistic cues, and the use of technologies other than augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) can simulate appropriate social interactions. Computer vision assisted

technology (CVAT) combines deep learning modalities and machine learning applications. These types of AI might be applicable in teaching social emotional skills, emotion recognition, and facial recognitions in persons with autism (Abu-Nowar et al., 2024). In fact, this teaching strategy uses facial expression recognition algorithms based on the facial action coding system or FACS, to help persons with autism understand and define more nuanced facial expressions and give them a name.

Similarly, Mason et al. (2021), who studied the social brain and persons with autism from 6 to 18 years old, found people with autism have a lower propensity to focus on the biomechanics of a body or a character in a scene they are watching. Again, this method appears to be a one-sided teaching methodology which is not necessarily applicable in real life and certainly not geared to creating an individualized social identity as social constructivism can. The results for this study revealed persons with autism who had more severe symptomology did not have improved outcomes (Mason et al., 2021).

However, Mason et al.'s (2021) results indicated persons with higher functioning autism were better at interpreting emotional states in speech and facial expressions after 10 to 20 hours of training over 10 to 15 weeks. Finally, the algorithm captured the data of persons with autism correctly classifying emotions (e.g., neutral, fear, sad) as they viewed the technology. This strengths-based approach for emotional training has potential benefits for persons with autism. Conversely, the AI teaching model did not account for maintaining social connections and interactions with real people in real time to increase social skills in persons with ASD.

Educational Psychologists, Teacher Training, and Students With ASD

In addition to exploring the social brain and a variety of educational approaches, previous researchers have examined how training and professional development impact the performance of special education teachers. Educational psychologists are responsible for developing ongoing training for special education teachers who assist students with ASD (Bond et al., 2017; Josilowski, 2019). Bond et al. (2017) researched whether educational psychologists train teachers for communities of practices and provide consistent support across school personnel to advance the development of engagement skills for students with ASD. Further, Vignato et al. (2021) identified that special education teachers need more awareness of how to identify effective strategies and how best to implement those strategies to enhance the development of social skills, and educational psychologists have the knowledge to train teachers. Bond et al. (2017) and Josilowski (2019) studied teachers and students with ASD and concluded the teachers benefitted from support and training personally, in the home, and with school collaboration.

Teacher training is essential to give teachers the strategies needed to help young students with ASD increase social skills and engage in productive social interactions with their teachers and peers. In fact, developing teacher training specifically for students with ASD and increasing productive social exchanges with their teachers and peers is necessary because these students experience high rates of bullying and isolation (Mason et al., 2021; Myburgh et al., 2020; Roth et al., 2010). Students with ASD have difficulty interpreting emotions; responding to social-emotional cues; and developing, maintaining, and understanding relations, and these social skills are not consistently addressed in K-12 educational institutions; therefore, teacher professional development can demonstrate how to help young students with ASD develop these skills (Myburgh et al., 2020).

Also, Hall (2020) and Bond et al. (2017) clarified professional teacher training is a multilayered, complex process that includes development of teachers' skills, knowledge, and educator characteristics. Mason et al. (2021) added that insufficiently trained teachers may experience confusion and a lack of knowledge of the characteristics of students with ASD. These deficits inhibit teachers' ability to modify curricula and engage with their students effectively (Myburgh et al., 2020). Some teachers attempt to create their own programs for students with ASD, but their lack of training and knowledge in the field limits their success in these efforts (Myburgh et al., 2020).

Well-designed training and professional development improve teachers' ability to help students with ASD bridge the gaps in social skills and increase engagement with their teachers, peers, and others (Baron-Cohen, 2001; Roth et al., 2010; Silverman, 2015). Teachers who work with students with ASD are concerned specialists, and their position requires a range of knowledge of interventions, the ability to translate research results to practical applications, and the skills to work with other professionals and the students' parents (Bond et al., 2017; Josilowski, 2019). Also, educational psychologists are responsible for updating training for special education teachers with young students with ASD as the ASD research is always evolving to better align with necessary supports and teaching strategies (Josilowski, 2019; Myburgh et al., 2020).

Bond et al. (2017) examined how educational psychologists support and train teachers to educate students with ASD in social communities of practice, highlighting the benefits of consistency of care (Hall, 2020). Additionally, Bond et al. (2017) researched the effects of communities of practices on students with ASD development and the responsibility of educational psychologists to tailor teacher training to benefit students with ASD (Myburgh et al., 2020). Specifically, researchers assessed teacher efficacy before and after training with the following questions:

1. Do you have the skills to instruct a child with ASD?
2. If further training was available, how likely would you be to attend?

Results of the study indicated high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.995) and therefore trustworthiness, and teachers reported increased teacher efficacy after training.

Previous researchers advocated determining who is responsible for training teachers, who will benefit from healthy teacher-student interactions, and the long-term impact of such teachers upon their students with ASD. Bond et al. (2017) documented a statistically significant increase in efficacy in 30 teachers who trained in collective learning practices and the emergence of a successful autism-friendly environment to meet the needs of students with ASD. Stites et al. (2021) reviewed the need for researchers to understand teachers' lived experiences of working with students with different abilities. Analysis of preservice teachers' feelings, ideas, and thoughts about the inclusion of students with other abilities revealed the teachers felt benefits from their training and enthusiasm for working with students with ASD.

This study was an attempt to capture the lived experience of first through third grade teachers of children with ASD. Including their perceptions, experiences, and suggestions for improvement had the potential to fill in the gaps in scholarly knowledge about how interactions with well-trained teachers during school activities could support and benefit students with ASD who may struggle to develop social identities and social skills they would use for the rest of their lives.

Methods

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to capture teachers' lived experiences of interacting with students with ASD during social activities. Detailed descriptions of the experiences of special education teachers who work with young students with autism in Grades 1 through 3 may increase understanding of the challenges students face and inform professional development content for teachers. Educational psychologists, educators, and professionals in the ASD field may gain specific knowledge about teacher-student social interactions and use that information to enhance training practices to improve circumstances for this population of children. This methodological approach allowed for the use of qualitative research questions with the goal of representing the essence of the lived experiences of participants. The research question, "What are the lived experiences of special education teachers working with students with autism during social periods?" guided this effort to depict the lived experiences of special education teachers working with young students with ASD.

Research Design

The theoretical framework for this study was constructivism, and Vygotsky's concepts of scaffolding and zones of proximal development (ZPD) provided structure

for the research question (Gauvain, 2019; Volkmar, 2021). Transcendental phenomenological research includes theory development through data matching and analysis (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Golafshani, 2003; Salamon, 2018; Wallace & Kuo, 2020). A study conducted within a social constructivist framework may help explain the lived experiences of respondents (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Josilowski, 2019; Stites et al., 2021). This study included sociocultural research questions focused on teachers' ideas, thoughts, and feelings about their young students during social activities (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer et al., 2019; Salamon, 2018):

Participants

This research study included eight special education teachers who worked in classrooms that were not exclusively autism classrooms, although most of the students had ASD. Typically, special education teachers teach in general education or special education classrooms with students with ASD or/and a mixed-ability classroom in the United States (Bond et al., 2017). The participants were all members of a special education teachers' Facebook group. Participants responded to a recruitment flyer I posted in the Facebook group (one of several groups in which I posted) describing the study and requesting teacher participants (Juarez, 2024). All the participants volunteered as a group in a carry-over effect. All participants were women working in the same school district in a rural area of a Western state.

The participants were all special education teachers working with young students with ASD or undiagnosed students with ASD ages 5 through 8 years in classrooms alongside typically developing students. All of the participants self-identified as Native American, and seven of them had been working in the school district for between 2 and 5 years; one participant had worked at the district for 10 years. This outlier's lived experiences with their young students with ASD paralleled the other teachers' lived experiences.

Data Collection

The first steps for this study were to collect data through Zoom interviews, while I focused on bracketing and listened without bias to capture the essence of this phenomenon. Participants answered open-ended questions in one-on-one interviews (audio- and video-recorded with their consent) to describe their lived experiences of working with their students with ASD (Josilowski, 2019). The interview questions were (a) What are your lived experiences working with your young students with ASD during social periods? (b) What are the difficult lived experiences of teachers educating young students with ASD in the classroom during social interactions? and (c) What are the positive lived experiences of teachers educating young students with ASD in the classroom during social interactions?

I did not prompt or guide the teachers as they explained their lived experiences. Instead, I made reflective comments such as "Let me share what I hear you saying" to clarify the meaning while they explained their lived experiences (Neubauer et al., 2019). I recorded the interviews on video and then transcribed from video to print-out and cleaned up the transcripts only to distinguish between mine and the participants' words. Once all transcripts had clear speaker attributions, I began thematic coding by looking for reoccurring phrases or words across participants.

As the investigator, I assumed phenomenological perspectives and practices and developed an attitude of transcending my own beliefs, ideas, and thoughts regarding special education teaching practices, teachers' attitudes, and teachers' perceptions of young students with ASD, to reveal the true essence of a phenomena (Wei, 2020). I remained open to the lived experiences of special education teachers in pure truth while checking my own bias about teachers' positive or negative perceptions of their young students with ASD and their social skill differences, throughout the research process (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Neubauer et al., 2019). This qualitative research model with transcendental phenomenology methodology was best suited to accurately depicting the lived experiences of special education teachers working with students with ASD during socialization periods.

Data saturation is an essential concern in any qualitative methodological approach. Data saturation can be found in inductive or deductive logic as it relates to data

collection, data analysis, and theorizing (Saunders et al., 2017). For my research study, I ensured data saturation was met by interviewing the 8 to 10 participants typical in transcendental phenomenological studies to ensure viability and reliability of data collected. Data saturation was also likely because the research questions, theoretical position, and analytical framework were consistent with features that ensure coherence and potency of data (Saunders et al., 2017).

Finally, I performed member checking, and participants were able to review and confirm that the transcripts were accurate to ensure the integrity of the study (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Josilowski, 2019; Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological methods are renowned for their ability to foster trustworthiness in data collection and analysis procedures, and member checking serves as a cornerstone in ensuring the credibility and validity of the findings. Through member checking, participants are actively engaged in the research process by reviewing and confirming the accuracy and interpretation of their own experiences as captured by the researcher.

This iterative dialogue between researcher and participant not only enhances the authenticity and richness of the data but also mitigates potential biases or misinterpretations by providing an opportunity for participants to offer corrections or clarifications. By involving participants in the validation of findings, phenomenological researchers prioritize transparency and accountability, ultimately bolstering the trustworthiness and credibility of the research outcomes (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Josilowski, 2019; Moustakas, 1994; Roberts, 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020). *Data Analysis*

Data analysis processes began with assigning codes and themes to words and phrases that recurred in participants' responses and placing those into transcendental phenomenological software to be analyzed (Roberts, 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020). I read the entire transcript to achieve a sense of the whole lived experiences of special education teachers in first through third grades and then began the process of reductionism (sorting and shortening sentences and phrases to words) to render data in psychological terms (Stites et al., 2021). I completed memoing (quality sampling checks), coding (theoretical propositions), and initial coding (fracturing the data) to create a theory and report the findings, limitations, and assumptions (Chun Tie et al., 2019). The transcendental phenomenological processes, such as theming and coding, had occurred with six and then eight teacher participants as the carry-over effect occurred over a few months (Chun Tie et al., 2019; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016; Josilowski, 2019; Moustakas, 1994; Roberts, 2020; Rose & Johnson, 2020).

Results and Discussion

Data analysis revealed the lived experiences of special education teachers who worked with young students with ASD. Teachers described challenges such as the lack of diagnosis for students coming into the classrooms; stressful social interactions in the classroom compounded by a lack of administrative support; and shortages of knowledge, training, and professional development. Students with ASD have varying learning and socialization profiles, and as educators, participants wanted students with ASD to be accepted at school and in the community. The participants also expressed their desire for improvements to the education system to support healthy social interactions for students with ASD.

Lack of Diagnoses and Administrative Support

Participants shared that students arrived at their classrooms with no identifying paperwork, diagnostic paperwork, or psychological reports of learning differences. Participant 4 (P4) shared, "So when I get them [students with ASD], I am starting at zero information." This initial deficit of information caused teachers to experience the psychological state of diagnostic knowledge stress, and participants reported symptoms consistent with the psychological state of emotional impact recognition, which is a process through which individuals, particularly teachers in an educational context, consciously acknowledge and express the emotional consequences of insufficient information about students' diagnoses or learning differences. P1 shared,

> I was scared and did not feel informed about autism. I did not understand what I could do to have better experiences with my students with autism. I was scared when I was unsure of what the student would do.

Stressful Social Interactions

Students' behaviors played a role in the challenges arising from social interactions in the classroom, as well. Participants described incidents of anti-social, maladaptive, or inappropriate exchanges between students. P1 related complex social dynamics between students with ASD and their peers: "The peers would tease him. He did not understand what the students [were saying or what] general education students were discussing and could not follow their humor."

Social experiences between the teachers and students were difficult at times. P3 stated, "Before last year, the student was shy and kept to himself." The teachers shared their passion and desire to help improve the social interactions skills of their students. P7 said, "I would have moved mountains to help them."

Teachers' distressed responses to these interactions suggested they experienced the psychological state of affective disquietude. This term encapsulates the teachers' psychological discomfort and emotional turbulence resulting from daily social challenges in the educational setting. P1 attributed her distress to the fact that she received no professional training or ongoing support for challenging social behaviors. P2 portrayed her stress and desire for more support and training: "The problematic experience was when I had no help and no aid, and the child was undiagnosed, so the student had no social skills to play with same-aged peers, no verbal responses to questions, and limited speech."

Lack of Knowledge, Resources, and Training

Along with administrative support and training, participants revealed they needed classroom materials, sensory items, picture exchange communication systems, visual communications devices, and resources to help their students with ASD socialize and learn more effectively. The shortage of knowledge, resources, training, and administrative support limited the extent to which they could help their students. P2 described a student who "had hand flopping during socialization periods and was very physical, hitting other students when he was supposed to be taking turns with the talking stick [an object passed around during circle time to signify the student's turn to answer the teacher's question or share]."

The teachers wanted school administrators to acknowledge that a lack of continuous training equals a lack of knowledge; similarly, a lack professional development and administrative support leads to feelings of inadequacy among teachers. They were unsure or unequipped to help, manage, assist, or teach students with ASD when the students had not met developmental milestones such as how to wipe their nose, refrain from touching genitals, or cope with changes in schedule. P5 reported, "I just did not know" when confronted with new, limited behavior and social skills. P8 expressed the distress of not having ongoing support and training: "Okay, I know being comfortable with anything that comes through, and then to get a different classroom, I must work everything differently, and so I feel like I'm starting over all this."

Teachers who reported an inability to help their students with ASD experienced the psychological conflict of cognitive and experiential dissonance. This conflict arises from the disparity between the teachers' theoretical knowledge (gained through reading, learning, or professional development) and the actual experiences they encountered in a specific context, such as during social interactions with their students. This dissonance can lead teachers to feel overwhelmed, under-prepared, and physically exhausted. P5 shared, "I did not know how to help her, and it was distressing." In contrast, P7 expressed relief when she discovered viable strategies and resources that helped her student: "When I gave [sensory toys, chair bands, bracelets, and necklaces] to my two little guys, oh man, I have never, I have never seen them sit still."

Teachers sought their own solutions to the extent they were able. Following harmful psychological lived experiences based on a lack of knowledge and experiential dissonance, teachers undertook a practical pedagogy quest to relieve their stress. Such a quest is the psychological drive for practical tools and guidance in

teaching practices for young students with ASD. P1 shared, "I took the classes, behavioral analysis, [teaching] practices, and coursework and learned a lot. After training, I also learned to help students with autism adapt to changes or unexpected changes in routines and use visuals."

The teachers also tried to find ways to save time, create opportunities, and maximize instructional time while eliminating the use of hit-and-miss methods. Some participants wanted tools to help their students with ASD succeed in daily tasks. P3 described her frustration: "After my students with autism returned to school [after the COVID shutdown], we had to teach them how to get in line, listen, and sit at the table all over again." Teachers conveyed their belief that professional development and practical pedagogical training could decrease their distress and improve relations and results in the classroom.

Need for Community Neurodiversity Awareness

Along with their desire for students with ASD to be accepted and respected at school, the teachers described their desire for community neurodiversity awareness (CNDA), which encompasses the psychological and social dynamics of acknowledging and embracing neurodiversity as an integral part of the community fabric. The teachers indicated that ASD acceptance would help them effectively teach and avoid feelings of psychological distress that occur when they do not know how to attend to their students' needs and when they want to emphasize their potential to others in the classroom and the wider community and do not have the support to do so. P3 explained that her lived experiences would be less stressful with more CNDA:

> In school, pre-K, early K, and general education integration, kids should be asked questions about peers with autism, and they should be supported to play with him or her. The teacher should be saying, It's okay to play with her or him.

Teachers explained that CNDA is a viable way to develop a positive social acceptance community, inside and outside the classroom, for all its members. P6 stated, "I do not like isolating [students with ASD]. I feel like they should be a part of the group."

Parents, teachers, students, and community members can unite to dispel misconceptions about ASD, according to participants. P2 communicated that students with ASD have the capacity for growth and cognitive connection: "There are misconceptions about autism that they should live up to what we want and that they do not have the potential. We do not give them enough credit, and they are stigmatized as handicapped." P7 described the need to model empathy and promote understanding as a way of reducing stigmatization of young students with ASD:

> We are just, you know, we are all different, we are all unique in our ways. It makes a big difference for kids on the spectrum for us as a community to have a learning environment, making it a positive instead of looking at difference as a negative.

Participants asserted that improvements in the educational system could not only support teachers in addressing the diverse needs of students but also serve as a model environment of CNDA. Teachers expressed the need for improvements in the processes of admissions, assessment, and identification of students with special needs. Accommodations might include provision of pre-packaged teaching materials (visuals, PECS), sensory toys (rubber bracelets, necklaces, weight vests, rubber bands for chairs, chair wages), aprons, and materials for teaching hygiene routines P2 shared,

> I want them, the students with autism, to be comfortable, and I think that they are going to catch on. I do not want them to feel like they must move at their other students' pace but at their own pace. I do not want them to feel like they're in a forced situation. I want them to be comfortable with this. I want them to think, I am going to get it.

Another way to create an atmosphere of acceptance is through social constructivist interactions, as described by participants. P2 shared her experience of viewing students with ASD as active learners, co-creating knowledge via social interactions, and supporting them in meaning-making: "Because of the [one student's] emotional outbursts, I changed how I distributed crayons." Another participant described the process of learning to communicate with a student who had ASD and was

nonverbal; the student stood against the wall, crying and looking at the teacher. The teacher responded to the social cues of the student, engaged her with a toy, and praised her for that engagement. These social exchanges made the teachers and students feel connected. In addition to building rapport, these interchanges helped students develop cognitive skills and begin to form a social identity. P5 explained, "I had to learn to talk positively to her to avoid massive meltdowns and recognize that she was susceptible to "no." She … would run in response to being told no." These examples clarified the power of the teacher-student relationship and the potential to co-create knowledge through social interactions.

Assumptions and Limitations

General Methodological Assumptions

The general methodological assumptions of a qualitative transcendental phenomenological study are that the participants will tell the truth as they see it; in this way, the common lived experience can emerge collectively from the descriptions of participants (Sebele-Mpofu & Serpa, 2020). Another assumption is that participants have a sincere interest in participating in the research study with no ulterior motive to compromise the integrity of the research process and this study's outcomes (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020). Another assumption of transcendental phenomenological study is that the researcher will complete bracketing and work to disregard their own biases throughout the study (Gallagher, 2022; Neubauer et al., 2019). With the first two assumptions in mind, I endeavored to trust and believe the participants and worked to set aside my own preconceptions and beliefs and engage in authentic interactions with them.

Theoretical Assumptions

The theoretical assumptions of constructivism include that knowledge is constructed between the teacher and the learner. The social constructivist model of teaching and learning also holds that learning is a social phenomenon because learners do not merely passively receive information; instead, the knowledge derives from the interactions and exchanges between students and teachers (Gauvain, 2019; Hall, 2020; Volkmar, 2021). Additionally, Vygotsky's learning theory explains that zones of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding (teaching only what students need, meeting them where they are) are the foundations of social engagement between teachers and students to create new knowledge (Gauvain, 2019; Hall, 2020). Research questions created under the theory of social constructivism supported exploration of the lived experiences of special education teachers working with young students with autism during social periods (Gallagher, 2022; Gauvain, 2019; Hall, 2020).

Limitations

Limitations of this study included having a small sample of participants. The restricted sample size might compromise the generalizability of findings, as the experiences and perspectives of a few participants may not adequately represent the diversity within the broader population of special education educators (Delice, 2023). This limitation can constrain the applicability of research findings to a wider context, potentially limiting the utility of the study's conclusions for informing practice or policy beyond the specific group studied. To mitigate this effect, I employed member checking, a method wherein participants review and validate the researcher's interpretations of their experiences, enhancing the validity and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

Limitations also included the potential for researcher bias, as personal beliefs are difficult to negate entirely for data analysis procedures (Wallace & Kuo, 2020). Phenomenological researchers are required to apply bracketing (suspending judgment) and to mitigate the influence of personal biases and to remain open to the lived experiences of others. This is an imperfect process as researchers' opinions, ideas, and thoughts may taint their interpretations of the data and therefore shape the depiction of the lived experiences of special education teachers working with young students with ASD during social periods. Additionally, I made efforts to minimize researcher biases through reflexivity, acknowledging and critically reflecting on my own assumptions and perspectives throughout the research process (Juarez, 2024).

Another limitation associated with interview data was accuracy of recall. Participants may not have been able to

recall events, situations, and feelings exactly as they occurred. Despite these limitations, the study offered valuable insights into the lived experiences of special education teachers, providing a nuanced understanding of their challenges, successes, and unique perspectives within the educational landscape.

Delimitations

Certain delimitations impacted the design of this study. Restrictions on the specialty focus of the teachers who could participate, the grade level of teachers and therefore their students, and the level of severity of ASD in participants' students established the scope of the study and produced relevant and detailed data to answer the research questions. This study featured a narrow population of special education teachers of first through third graders with moderate to high-functioning ASD.

The decision to exclusively include special education teachers, rather than general education teachers, in the study stemmed from the specific focus on understanding the unique challenges and experiences faced by educators working with students with diverse learning needs. Special education teachers are often at the forefront of supporting students with disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorder, and thus possess specialized knowledge and experiences that are particularly relevant to the research objectives. Narrowing the participant pool to special education teachers supported the goal of delving deeply into the nuanced practices and perspectives specific to this population and accessing participants who could provide insights that might not be fully captured by including general education teachers.

Focusing on first through third grade teachers was deliberate as well; children in these grades are in a developmental stage that marks a critical period in their social and emotional development. During these years, children are beginning to navigate social interactions, develop social skills, and establish foundational understandings of social identities. Special education teachers at this level are uniquely positioned to observe and support students' social and emotional growth. Therefore, these teachers' insights were invaluable to the study's exploration of inclusive educational practices and interventions (Hall, 2020).

Finally, only teachers of students with moderate to high functioning ASD were eligible to participate in this study. This decision was a deliberate effort to stay within the specific research focus on understanding social interactions within inclusive classroom settings. While interviews with teachers whose students had severe or moderate ASD could have offered valuable insights into the challenges and dynamics of supporting individuals with varying levels of functioning, focusing on teachers of moderate to high-functioning students aligned best with the scope of this study.

Teachers of moderate to high functioning ASD students are often tasked with facilitating social exchanges and supporting the development of social skills within their classrooms. By focusing on this subgroup of teachers, I aimed to explore the strategies, successes, and challenges specific to fostering social interactions among students who possess greater communicative and social potential. Furthermore, teachers who work with moderate to high-functioning ASD students have the experience to highlight effective practices and interventions that could offer tangible successes in the classroom, thereby providing valuable support and encouragement to less seasoned teachers who may be navigating the complexities of inclusive education (Koegel et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Educational psychologists are primarily responsible for teacher training, teacher support, teacher development, and professional development, so they need to understand special education teachers' lived experiences to improve students' socialization outcomes through informed practices (Cihon et al., 2019; Markelz et al., 2019; McNeill, 2019; Sutton et al., 2019). Young students with autism suffer from social, communication, and attention deficits, and the classroom is the setting for many social interactions between the teachers and their students (Baron-Cohen, 1988, 2001, 2006, 2017; Josilowski, 2019; Roth et al., 2010; Silverman, 2015; Stites et al., 2021). This transcendental phenomenological study was an exploration of the lived experiences of special education

teachers conducted with the goal of generating a depiction of their experience that will inform educational practice, policy, training, and professional development content.

Data analysis revealed the ways special education teachers' experiences impacted them psychologically. Participants described experiencing symptoms of diagnostic knowledge stress, emotional impact regulation, affective disquietude, and cognitive-experiential dissonance. The teachers embarked on their own practical pedagogy quests, depicted the social obligation to challenge misconceptions about ASD, and extolled the needs for educational improvements and training to nurture ASD acceptance. Teachers described their desire for systematic educational changes, ASD acceptance in the community, and ongoing training in ASD pedagogy. They provided examples of social constructivist interactions with their students with ASD, which can serve as models and goals of discovery, acceptance, and equity for educators, administrators, and educational psychologists.

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