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Empowering Students with Autism: An Investigation of School Practices Through the Lens of the Special Education Administrator

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EMPOWERING STUDENTS WITH AUTISM: AN INVESTIGATION OF SCHOOL
PRACTICES THROUGH THE LENS OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION
ADMINISTRATOR

by

JENNY REBECCA MCCLINTIC

(Under the Direction of GRIGORY DMITRIYEV)

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the perspectives of special education administrators employed in three school districts in Georgia regarding the empowerment of students with autism spectrum disorders. Participants were first given a screening survey and later interviewed via telephone in reference to empowering practices present in their individual districts. Participants were given the options to be included in the telephone survey. This study draws on the research from the National Research Council's findings published in as *Educating Children with Autism* (2001) and other leaders in the field of educational interventions. This study provides an analysis of their responses and recommendations for districts to increase the empowerment of students with autism.

The results of this study are based on both the survey and interview questions. Responses indicate that administrators consistently agree that teachers and staff who support students with autism need more specialized and intense training than other special education teachers. Participant also agreed that students on the autism spectrum need specialized social skills instruction. Another recommendation from the study is that students with autism need an increased level of support to increase in their ability to function in their environment. There was a single administrator who consistently

reported a lack of support for students in her district. It was obvious to the researcher that this administrator was, nonetheless aware of their need; however, she lacked the ability to implement practices she felt would provide benefits to the students.

The findings of this study show that in order to empower students with autism districts should invest in training opportunities for both staff and students, incorporate a social skills instruction program, and support their ability to function in their environment.

These recommendations may require additional staff, additional planning time, and/or additional financial resources for full implementation. These conclusions as well as others are presented, along with implications for future research in the area of empowerment of students with autism.

INDEX WORDS: Autism, Empowerment, School practices

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DEDICATION

Above all, I dedicate this work to God, my Heavenly Father, for it is He who called me to the field of special education. It is His will that I bless others through the gifts and talents that He has bestowed upon me.

Secondly, this work is dedicated to my first special education director, Amber Gamble. She empowered me throughout my path of educating students with autism. She provided countless hours of training and support. Amber saw the unique needs of students with autism far before Lord and McGhee (2001) published their recommendations. She desired that our district support these exceptional individuals along their educational journey.

Finally, this research is dedicated to the memory of my dear brother, Lonnie 'Fain' McClintic, Jr., who was lost in this life before its completion. How I longed for each of my family members to be present to celebrate this accomplishment with me. I feared it would be others, but not my strong and youthful brother. As I worked late into the night of February 14, 2012 I heard the wail of the sirens, but had no idea that the tragedy would be so personal. It was very difficult to return to the work of writing and editing. I recall Will's plea, "Please keep working mama, Uncle Fain would want you to finish."

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I am deeply indebted to each family member, colleague, committee member, and personal friend who shared this experience with me. You each endured this task with me. The journey was met with many struggles and trials, but each of you provided continual encouragement and guidance.

I deeply appreciate the commitment of my committee. Their guidance could not be matched! Dr. D remained dedicated to my endeavor despite the obstacles.

A special note of gratitude is owed to Will, my son, who saw my struggles at the dining room table, ate the simplest of meals, and understood that I could not always handle the noise that teenage boys bring.

Thanks to my sister, Hannah, who shared many late nights and early mornings with me to provide a live sounding board.

Mom and Dad, thanks for always supporting me along my journey of being a professional student. I am grateful to never have to hear Dad's deep voice asking, "Jenny, how's that paper coming?" Thanks for keeping tabs on me and bribing me with the after party!

Thanks to my special friends Sue, Kristi-Lee, Karen, and Dee Dee for listening to my concerns and providing constant reassurance. It meant so much to know you were there for me during this experience.

To my students with autism and their parents, I am so grateful for how you have enriched my life and allowed me to serve you. It is your right to have the supports this

work describes. It is my responsibility as an educator to ensure you that you grow to empowerment.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Rationale for Research

Autism. The very word evokes concern. Reports repeatedly show its prevalence is on the rise. The rate of diagnoses is increasing in society as well as in the population of students with disabilities. Schools are faced with unique challenges in serving students with autism. Districts are faced with implementation of appropriate strategies to address the specialized needs of this population. I argue that the implementation of such strategies, methodologies, and interventions should be a collaborative effort between teachers, administrators, and families because of the complexity of the disability.

Fombonne (2005) reports on the epidemiology of autism. He reviewed 40 surveys and data to draw conclusions. He found that between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s rates of autism were found to be four children per 10,000. Asperger's Disorder, one of several forms of autism, was added to the ICD-10 in 1992 and to the DSM-IV in 1994. This additional qualifying area has had an impact on the prevalence reports. He also identifies other reasons for an increase which include "heightened public awareness and more available services" (p.6). His findings at that time revealed approximately 60 children per 10,000 as an estimate for the prevalence of autism.

In 2005, Newschaffer, Falb, and Gurney reported in an issue of *Pediatrics* that Autistic Spectrum Disorders (ASD) were increasing in successive birth year cohorts, while there were no increases in other areas of special education. They attribute this increase to the additional autism classification for special education services which began in 1992. They also report that

diagnosis of autism could be established early as 2 years of age. Being able to diagnose this disability at such a young age could also have an impact on the rate of incidence.

The Center for Disease Control (CDC) monitors the prevalence of autism in society. They publish these findings through the *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR)*, press releases (2007), and through the Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring Network (ADDM). They began monitoring and collecting data on ASD in 1996 and established the ADDM in 2000. The CDC explains that ADDM is “the only collaborative network to determine the prevalence of ASDs in the United States” (p. 5). A 2005 *MMWR* publication explains that “because diagnosis of autism is made only by assessment of developmental patterns and observation of behavioral symptoms, establishing and tracking prevalence is difficult” (p.481). Estimates found in this report indicate approximately 300,000 children in the United States between the ages of 4-17 have been diagnosed with autism from 2003-2004. They acknowledge that this may be an underestimate due to the fact that autism had not been diagnosed prior to the age of 4 during that time. These results were based on the National Health Interview Survey and the National Survey of Children’s Health. The ADDM issued a report in 2007 from 2000-2002 data showing the autism rate to be 1:150 children (CDC News Release, February 8, 2007). Results from 2004 show an estimated prevalence of ASD in children to be 1:125. The most current findings from the CDC and ADDM in December 2009 report based on 2006 data estimate that 1:110 United States children are diagnosed with ASD. Findings also show that males are 4 to 5 times more likely to have a diagnosis of ASD than females. The increase in prevalence was discovered to be found in all gender, ethnic, and cognitive level groups. The rise was attributed to the increasingly broad diagnostic requirements and earlier identification.

Georgia is one of the eleven states included in this research. The CDC (2009), through the ADDM, reported prevalence in Georgia in 2004 was 8.9 per 1,000 children. Of which, 14.1 per 1,000 were male and 3.6 per 1,000 female. Results from 2006 show an increase to 10.2 children per 1,000 identified with ASD. Of these 16.6 per 1,000 were male and 3.4 per 1,000 female.

As reported by the ADDM in 2009, it was estimated that there were 730,000 people with autism under the age of 21 in the United States. The CDC (2009) considers autism to be a serious public health concern. They explain that the previously held notion that autism is a results of poor parenting to be false. It is also reported by the CDC that vaccines are not associated with the rise of ASD diagnosis.

There is an intense focus on the success of students with disabilities in schools as a result of Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB). NCLB requires that school districts narrow the achievement gap in students with disabilities (SWD). SWD are required to be assessed on their grade level standards. These assessment results are included in the school and district data to determine AYP status. Administrators are keenly interested in the success of students with disabilities due to these initiatives. With autism on the rise, school administrators must be equipped to support their unique educational needs. Yell, Drasgow, and Lowrey (2005) report on the impact of NBLB on the education of children with ASD. They state that there have been national efforts, specifically in charging the National Research Council, to identify instructional efforts grounded in scientific research. They explain that results of assessments on students with ASD must be reported and included in determining a school's AYP status.

It is reported that “personnel preparation remains one of the weakest elements of effective programming for children with autistic spectrum disorders” (p. 225). Their recommendations for personnel preparation include consultations providing observations and implementation of best practices in educating students with autism, familiarity with applied behavior analysis, data collection techniques, socialization, communication, adapting the environment, use of technology, language interventions, and generalization of learned skills. Lord and McGhee (2001) have encouraged further research into the practices of educators to more clearly define unsurpassed methods to educate students with ASD. This study explored these practices further and added to the ongoing conversation of educating and empowering this student population.

I share the same opinion as Lord and McGhee. In my experience, in the educational setting, I have found these areas to have significant importance to a program designed for the empowerment of students with autism. I have discovered that many teachers did not receive training of strategies to support students with autism in their teacher preparation coursework or field experiences. Data collection is a vital behavior for both teachers and para-professionals. There are situations in which data collection can be overwhelming. Teachers may require additional support to implement data collection practices with fidelity. Students with autism have unique needs in the areas of socialization, generalization of skills, and communication; therefore, I concur with Lord and McGhee in that teachers need additional support and training to address these specific deficits.

There are current practices that do not support the empowerment of students with autism. An example of such a disempowering practice is when school districts ignore the unique needs

of student with autism in their schools. This places all stakeholders, parents, teachers, and the student, in a state of frustration. The student is not able to develop skills to advocate for himself or learn self-management skills that lead towards empowerment. Notbohm (2005) explains that “children with autism do require accommodation in order to achieve their fullest potential” (p. 3). She continues by stating that students with autism lack “the understanding of when and how to ask for what he needs” (p. 23). A student with autism, in this situation, would not have his/her own voice and would not be empowered.

Who has the power to change this situation? All stakeholders share this control. Parents can advocate and administrators can develop and implement programs of intervention (Ernsperger, 2002). Ernsperger (2002) states “school administrators must actively seek out information regarding autism spectrum disorders and appropriate programming” (p. 142). Stakeholders should take this obligation seriously and commit to implementation of practices which will bring liberation and freedom to students with autism.

Development and implementation of services for students with this disability can be a challenge to school districts. Many schools and districts are not yet fully prepared to meet the needs of this exceptionality. This research extends the conversation of how districts support instruction and empower students with autism. It also explores how special education for students with autism is different from the services available to other disabilities.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to investigate the presence of empowering practices, instructional supports, and the uniqueness of special education services for students with

autism in self selected Georgia districts through the gathering of information from special education administrators.

Thirty-two districts were originally sought as participants. These thirty-two districts were from 4 RESA (Regional Education Services Agencies) districts in the state of Georgia. Middle Georgia RESA, Heart of Georgia RESA, Griffin RESA, and Oconee RESA districts were invited to participate. Of these thirty-two districts, fifteen gave consent for the research project to be conducted in their districts. The special education directors from these districts were asked to complete a screening survey and to participate in the telephone interview. Five screening surveys were completed and returned while three were willing to participate in the telephone interview.

Information gathered from these administrators focused on the presence of empowering practices for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). ASD includes Autistic Disorder, Asperger's Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Rhetts's Disorder, and PDD-NOS (Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified) (Exkorn, 2005).

Definition of Terms

Autism – A developmental disability typically evident by the age of three which negatively impacts an individual's communication and social skills. There may be unconventional responses to sensory input as well as fine and/or gross motor skill deficits. Autism may result in an individual's limited interests and/or their preference to engage in repetitive activities. Autism can manifest itself in isolation or be present along with other disabilities such as an intellectual disability. Self injurious as well as other maladaptive behaviors may be present. Autism is considered a spectrum disorder including mild to exceptionally severe forms.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) – “Encompasses the following five disorders as defined in the DSM-IV-R: Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Rett’s Disorder, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified” (Exhorn, 2005, p. 373).

Asperger’s Syndrome – A developmental disability on the Autism Spectrum. It is generally considered to be on the milder end of the spectrum. Individuals with Asperger’s have deficits in communication and socialization. They may also have difficulty regulating sensory input, be exceedingly rigid in their behaviors and routines, and have a limited set of preferred topics.

Empowerment – The process in which an individual experiences both freedom and liberation from their oppressive environment. Empowerment occurs “when they discover within themselves the yearning to be free, they perceive that this yearning can be transformed into reality” (Freire, 1970, p. 47).

Maladaptive Behaviors – A set of behaviors that include self injurious, aggressive, atypical, and/or repetitive acts that do not typically occur in the natural environment. These behaviors interfere with an individual’s ability to participate in the activities within their environment.

Discussion of Research Questions

In this study, the researcher addressed the following broad research question: What are schools implementing that positively impacts the empowerment and academic success of students with Autism? The specific research questions were:

What is different about the special education services for students with autism versus other special education students? How do special education administrators in self selected Georgia school districts support instruction and empowerment of students with autism?

Students with autism can become empowered through the acquisition of freedom and liberation. Paulo Freire (1970) motivates the oppressed and their teachers through the many insightful words lifted from the pages of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. He teaches that freedom is “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (p. 47). The acquisition of such freedom is a fearful process. Students with autism will have to be willing to accept the risks associated with this quest and maintain responsibility throughout the journey leading them to this autonomous state. “Liberation is thus a childbirth, and a painful one,” (p. 49) enlightens Freire. The path a student with autism will take to become empowered will certainly be a hazardous one. They will encounter oppressors, who are dehumanized due to their dehumanization of others, who will attempt to thwart this process. The journey to empowerment will also require the individual to engage in “reflection and action” (p. 51) to break loose from the bands of the oppressors. Empowerment will occur “when they discover within themselves the yearning to be free, they perceive that this yearning can be transformed into reality” (p. 47). “A profound rebirth” (p. 61) occurs as the empowered student with autism accesses the world in a self-reliant state and leaves the fatalistic behind.

The path to empowerment is particularly individual. Students with autism may have similar characteristics, but the way in which they manifest may be distinctly different. Thus, the word ‘spectrum’ is included in the label. These students, while having similar characteristics, can react and interpret events quite differently and require individual strategies. As we know, there are some strategies that work for students across the spectrum, but many have to be tailored to the student. There are many strategies that can be accessed in an attempt to prevent the

negative reaction or maladaptive behavior and will lead to a greater level of understanding on the part of the neurotypical individual. Several of these suggestions were reviewed.

There is much debate as to which interventions yield successful results and should be implemented for students with this particular disability. Lord and McGhee (2001) report that there is no evidence to support one intervention over another in the education of an individual with autism. Their conclusions state that the educational goals of students with and without autism are the same and include personal independence as well as social responsibility. They continue to explain that “these goals imply continuous progress in social and cognitive abilities, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, adaptive skills, amelioration of behavioral difficulties, and generalization of abilities across multiple environments” (p. 216). Appropriate interventions should be tailored to the individual child’s needs. They found the following to be crucial aspects of an autism program: early intervention, year round programming, progress monitoring, family involvement, low student/teacher ratios, and “repeated, planned teaching opportunities” (p. 219). Specific to the progress monitoring of an intervention, it is recommended that the documented lack of progress over a 3 month period should be followed by a change in the child’s program. Some strategies may include the incorporation of discrete trials, incidental teaching, structured teaching, peers as partners, floor time, and environmental modifications. Interventions selected as a priority in an autistic child’s education, according to Lord and McGhee, include functional, spontaneous communication; social instruction, play skills, cognitive development, behavior intervention, and functional academics.

I appreciate Lord and McGhee’s suggestions for the education of students with autism. I believe they recognize the skills that will lead a student to liberation and freedom. They support

strategies that will increase independence and promote communication. These are vital behaviors leading toward empowerment.

The National Standards Project (2009) reviewed autism interventions and categorized them into four categories including Established, Emerging, Unestablished, and Ineffective/Harmful. For an intervention to receive the Established rating, evidence would show positive outcomes across multiple studies involving children with autism. Treatment options in the Emerging category also show positive outcomes, but through fewer studies. Any interventions found eligible for the Unestablished category showed scarce evidence of effectiveness. For an intervention to be found Ineffective/Harmful, there would be a significant amount of evidence to show that it is such. From their findings, 11 interventions were found to be Established. These include Antecedent Package, Behavioral Package, Comprehensive Behavioral Treatment for Young Children, Joint Attention Intervention, Modeling Naturalistic Teaching Strategies, Peer Training Package, Pivotal Response Treatment, Schedules, Self-Management, and Story-based Intervention Packages. There are many specific methods within each of these Established intervention sets. Within the Antecedent Package, there is found an array of supports from the schools of applied behavior analysis (ABA) and positive behavior supports (PBS). These include practices such as priming, preferential seating and providing choice. The Behavioral Package includes interventions such as reinforcement, task analysis, and token economies. Comprehensive Behavioral Treatment can include discrete trial or incidental teaching. Joint Attention Intervention “involves teaching a child to respond to the nonverbal social bids of others or to initiate joint attention interactions” (p. 13). Modeling can include videotaped models or live models of peer and/or adults. Naturalistic Teaching Strategies include

incidental and embedded teaching. Some common names for Peer Training Package may be buddy groups, circle of friends, or lunch bunch. Pivotal Response Treatment teaches students the skills needed for self-management. Schedules as an intervention can be presented to students in the form of pictures, written, or with objects. Self Management promotes independence and may include checklists. Story-based Intervention Package can include social stories or other written descriptions of social situations. These 11 intervention sets come highly recommended for use in programs for students with autism by the National Autism Center's National Standards Project.

Murray, Ackerman-Spain, Williams, and Ryley (2011) state that student programs are strengthened and empowerment takes place when parents and professionals are able to form partnerships. Project PACE (Partnerships for Autism through Collaborative Community Choice and Empowerment) was designed to enable stakeholders by providing training and educational opportunities. They found that many stakeholders, including parents and teachers, may not have the skills or confidence to create and maintain such powerful relationships. I agree that forming partnerships will increase the success of students with autism. It can be difficult for stakeholders to engage dialogue on the impact autism has on their student or child. Fostering these relationships can create an environment of trust where true dialogue can take place.

Theoretical Framework

Critical pedagogy allows the researcher to explore and analyze the presence of oppression and distribution of power that is present in public education (Smith and McLaren, 2010). It also creates a platform in which to expose the social conditions and privileges, or lack thereof, awarded to individuals of marginalized groups. Through the lens of critical pedagogy, the

researcher is able to challenge “the conditions in which people live, and in which schools operate” (p. 332). These factors create an ideal fit for research of the empowerment and support of students with autism in the public school setting.

In order to empower students with autism, specialized supports and opportunities for dialogue are required. This is “not pseudo-participation, but committed involvement” (Freire, 1970, p. 69). This requires a teacher-student to be available to the student-teacher on an as-needed basis. This will allow the oppressed to be supported through their pain and struggle towards obtaining the freedom and liberation that is being sought. This framework promotes shared responsibility in the liberation process. In this environment, problems may be presented, analyzed and resolved. In this classroom, “there are only people who are attempting, together, to learn more than they now know” (p. 90). The goal is education through meaningful communication and dialogue. With supports for communication and socialization, the student with autism will be able to receive this true education.

It is easy to identify physical suffering in some people residing in the United States and around the world in regards to a lack of basic needs, but the type of suffering endured by students with autism is not typically this visible. Kincheloe explains that “in the United States; suffering is often well hidden” (2005, p. 12). As a student stares without response, due to communication deficits, into the face of another individual, whether it is a peer or a staff member, it may be difficult for the suffering to be understood. The required accommodations are not as easily identified and implemented as with other disabilities. I have found them to be highly individualized. An example of this may be a specific social story written for the student with the student included as a character in the story. The expectation, according to Kincheloe, of

the critical theorist is for teachers “to develop distinct practices to help particular students flourish in schools” (p. 7).

Social skills instruction is not a typical part of the curriculum in schools, but as an advocate of critical pedagogy, I believe that “dimensions of everyday life” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 7) are valued. How to greet others, interact, ask questions, and advocate for self are all vital behaviors to be taught in social skills instruction for those with autism. We are aware that social skills weaknesses are a distinct characteristic of the disability and because school is a social environment, these skills are of considerable importance.

Due to the nature of the disability, it is my belief that students with autism are subject “to personal humiliation by teachers, administrators, and other students” (Kincheloe, 2005, p. 24). This may be because of a lack of information on the part of the perpetrator. They may not be aware that environmental conditions have created an uncomfortable setting for the student’s sensory integration system. The student may need something as ordinary as a visual prompt to understand the expectations and then be able to engage in dialogue and make a contribution to the class discussion. In critical pedagogy, “teachers understand the anger, depression, and anxiety” (p. 24) that can be created in the victim. If the teacher-student understands this, there will be a higher likelihood for successful liberation for the student-teacher.

Students with autism deserve equal access to educational opportunities. With appropriate opportunities to contribute, these students have so much to offer society. Kincheloe (2005) explains that “love is the basis of an education that seeks justice, equality, and genius” (p. 3). He further suggests that teachers should push students in both social and cognitive areas. This combination of social encouragement in the academic setting is what students with autism

require. Schooling has a significant impact on the lives of students with autism by providing them with both of these opportunities. Kincheloe encourages teachers to think beyond what is typical in education. Teachers should determine what knowledge is vital for acquisition. This will empower the student to be successful in both the school and community. He states “we want empowered, learned, highly skilled democratic citizens who have the confidence and the savvy to improve their own lives and to make their communities more vibrant places in which to live, work, and play” (p. 8). With this being the goal of education, we cannot simply address academic achievement. We must also foster growth and achievement in the areas of socialization and communication. This will equip these student-teachers with the ability to go forward from the halls of education to the world with the ability to express their wants, needs, and opinions.

The battle a student with autism faces each day as they walk into the schoolhouse must be minimized for them to graduate as liberated individuals. In order for this to occur, systems of support must be implemented. These systems of support may include friendship groups to practice dialogue or in depth explanations of idioms that do not have a clear meaning to a student with autism. Critical pedagogy supports that position that this suffering does not have to be present in schools. Nor should students have to come to school with the feeling that they are failures. Teachers should engage in meaningful dialogue with students and pay attention to the problems they are facing. This allows the teacher to act as the researcher. Teachers who implement this strategy will be able to make meaningful connections with students by guiding them through the steps of resolution of their problems.

Cognitive assessments can be quite social as explained by Kincheloe (2005). These tests are developed and are administered in social contexts and situations. Administrators of cognitive measures may mistake social weaknesses as cognitive weaknesses unless there is an understanding of the impact that social situations have on cognitive processes. This can place the student with autism at a great disadvantage, as they may be penalized with a depressed cognitive score due to their social weaknesses. This can impact the student's access to the appropriate level of instruction. This could in turn lead to stress and behavior problems.

Kincheloe (2005) further states that disempowered students often "don't have the confidence to continue" (p. 99). Freire (1970) agrees that dialogue is necessary for communication and ultimately, education. He (1998) explains that teachers have the ability to be role models. I believe it is essential for students to be empowered by those present in their educational environment. Students need to have access to adults in their environment and the confidence to engage in dialogue which leads to the development of meaningful relationships.

A student's emotional health can also have an impact on their ability to function in the academic setting. An objective of critical pedagogy is to empower an individual to manage their own emotions. It is purported by Kincheloe (2005b) that teachers should be aware of their students' emotional status. He further explains that teachers are the experts of their classroom and will employ differing strategies and methods to support the needs of their students. Teachers can serve as protectors by not allowing others to belittle and serve as oppressors to students with autism. Freire (1970) explains that oppression produces people who are emotionally dependent. Freire teaches that the oppressor wishes to isolate individuals to increase the level of oppression. I am of the opinion that students with autism should neither be excluded nor

contained. They deserve to be in the mainstream and participate in general education coursework. Empathy training may be necessary to provide support to nondisabled peers.

Freire (1998) believes that teachers must equip students with the tools to be successful. Teachers are encouraged to allow students to engage in reading and writing opportunities. He teaches us that “knowing is a social process” (p. 92). Through the exploration of reading and writing, they will have the opportunity to develop stronger social understandings. This will also increase their ability to engage in dialogue and communicate with those in their community.

There are many ways in which power is evident in the school environment. I would assume that most people immediately think of discipline issues with this association. This type of power could be the teacher having authority over the students or the power the administration has over the students. This would be in direct opposition to the position of critical pedagogy in that teachers and administrators serve as students and students serve as teachers.

When reading the work of Foucault (1977) on punishment, I was reminded how punitive acts have different meanings for different people. This is another way the school has power over students with a social disability such as autism. An example of this in today’s schools is a student with ASD being sent to In School Suspension (ISS). ISS can be a relief for students with ASD. It removes the social element the natural school environment provides which is so difficult for the student with autism to understand. Thus, it is not a punishment, but a relief. Another example of the oppressor (teacher or administrator) seeking punitive measures is forcing a student with autism to make eye contact during the act of discipline. Many staff members will demand that the student look them in the eye during a punitive experience. Critical pedagogy does not support the implementation of such painful practices in the educational setting. After

reflecting on these examples, it is evident that punishment is not an effective means to foster the development of an empowered individual. Who the person is should be taken into consideration when problems occur and as dialogue is pursued. This will promote a greater understanding of how to face any problems and arrive at a solution.

Critical pedagogy would support that student with autism would receive direct instruction about the hidden curriculum. This knowledge is a key factor in their empowerment. Wink (2005) describes the hidden curriculum as “what is assumed to be important” (p. 46). Nondisabled persons in the education environment possess the information derived from the hidden curriculum. The unspoken rules of conduct are followed and highly regarded. It is evident where they should be seating themselves in the cafeteria, where they hang out before and after school, and what clubs they are expected to join. What if an unsuspecting peer crosses those boundaries evident in the hidden curriculum? Trouble may begin to mount. Students of different peer groups these powers over each other. A student’s power can also be displayed through body language, clothing, talents, and control of pop culture language. As a result, those possessing the power squelch their peers, create conflict, and certain others become easy targets for such power groups. Wink (2005) reminds us that there will always be enough power for each of us. I believe it is the responsibility of the teacher-students in the environment to watch for these occurrences, teach students tolerance, expose the rules of the hidden curriculum, and prepare students to resolve conflict successfully.

I believe that critical pedagogy provides the foundation necessary for the research of an individual’s pursuit of freedom, liberation, and empowerment. Freire (1970) defines freedom as “the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion” (p. 47). He also teaches us that

many “prefer the security of conformity with their state of unfreedom” (p. 48). This contradiction would not occur if power and oppression were not so evident in the world of ASD. It is difficult for me to know that people are dehumanized to the degree that they lack desire for their freedom. Through the lens of critical pedagogy, I am able to challenge the current practices in the educational environment. It also allows me to seek “new answers for new questions” (Wink, 2005, p. 91).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

History of Autism

Kanner (1943) first published findings of a new disorder he called “inborn autistic disturbances of affective contact” (p.250). In this 1938 study, he noted discovery of a specific set of characteristics in children. In this publication, he reported on 11 children, eight male and three female, that were 11 years of age or younger. He documented several characteristics in this group of children that include the “inability to relate themselves in the ordinary way to people and situations from the beginning of life” (p. 242), the ability to make speech meaningful, strong rote memory, panic type reactions to loud noises and moving objects, and rigidity in daily life. He also found that these children were not interested in other people or conversations that were ongoing. They appeared to remain alone and be more interested in pictures of people. He explained that “pictures, after all, cannot interfere” (p. 247). Awkwardness in gait and gross motor activities was also seen as a commonality. Kanner found it immensely fascinating that each of these children came from families of highly intelligent and successful people. Fathers included psychiatrists, lawyer, chemist, pathologist and writers while nine of the mothers held college degrees. His findings did not match the diagnostic criteria for other disorders of the time that included schizophrenia, dementia praecocissima or dementia infantilis. He stated that further studies would need to be conducted to determine the specific criteria of their disorder. It appeared to Kanner “that these children have come into the world with innate inability to form the usual, biologically provided affective contact with people, just as other children come into

the world with innate physical or intellectual handicaps” (p. 250). It was at this time that Kanner founded the disorder of “innate autistic disturbances of affective contact” (p. 250).

Autistic Disorder Today

Today, in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV), it is known as Autistic Disorder. The criterion for this disorder includes impairment in social interaction, communication impairments, and “restricted repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, and activities” (DSM-IV). IDEA defines autism as “a developmental disability significantly affecting verbal and nonverbal communication and social interaction, generally evident before age 3, which adversely affects a child’s educational performance. Other characteristics often associated with autism are engagement in repetitive activities and stereotyped movements, resistance to environmental change or change in daily routines, and unusual responses to sensory experiences.”

Autism can manifest from mild to severe; therefore, it is considered a spectrum disorder. It is commonly referred to as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD). This spectrum includes the five diagnoses of Autistic Disorder, Asperger’s Disorder, Childhood Disintegrative Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Delay – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS), and Rett’s Disorder (Exkorn, 2005). Rett’s Disorder or Syndrome is sometimes omitted in the body of research due to its unique characteristics. This was the case when the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs requested the National Research Council to structure a committee to develop a “framework for evaluating...educational interventions for young children with autism” (Lord and McGhee, 2001, p. 2). The committee was able to establish goals for educational services and define the characteristics of effective programs. The primary focus of

the study was on education and interventions of children with autism from birth to eight years of age.

The committee determined the most appropriate goals for education for students with autism are the same as for other students and encompass personal independence and social responsibility. The committee explained this further by explicitly stating this implies services for “social and cognitive abilities, verbal and nonverbal communication skills, adaptive skills, amelioration of behavioral difficulties, and generalization of abilities across multiple environments” (p. 216). It was determined that the following interventions should be established as a priority: functional, spontaneous communication; social instruction; play skills; cognitive development; interventions for problem behaviors, and functional academic skills.

Separate findings for the preparation of personnel were included in the committee’s report. It was stated by the committee that personnel preparation was one of the weakest areas in effective programs for autistic students. Knowledge of this disorder is primary for special education and general education administrators as well as for all services providers. In particular, the committee found that “administrative attitudes and support are critical in improving schools” (p. 225).

The committee did not find one method as superior in the instruction and support of students with autism. In my experience, I found many professionals and parents were in disbelief that a specific methodology was not endorsed as superior. I have found that an eclectic approach is beneficial to students. This approach allows the students to be exposed to a variety of methods and interventions. By varying the instruction or intervention, students seem more

engaged. Using the eclectic approach allows the teacher to determine the strategies based on current behaviors and needs instead of being forced into the delivery of one specified measure.

I have found that children with autism, while having similar characteristics, can have remarkably different needs and behavioral manifestations. In my experience with educating students with autism, they do not all respond positively to the same methodology.

I would like to see this committee revisit their work from a decade ago. It would be helpful to know if they would continue to endorse the eclectic approach. Extending their work beyond the age of 8 would also be helpful to educators and students.

Administrative Support

Administrators have a vital role in the success of educational programs for students with autism (Ernsperger, 2002). These programs require the support of building level administrators as well as county level administrators. There are numerous ways for this support to be provided. These include the hiring of personnel, providing the appropriate materials, advocating, building space, implementation of strategies, behavior intervention plans, and the ability to maintain a proper perspective.

Ernsperger (2002) states that some administrators may feel inadequate to supervise programs for students with autism due to lack of training. Even if this is the case, they still have the supervisory role to evaluate the teacher. They do possess the training and expertise to establish a vision, set standards and expectations, work collaboratively, provide operational assistance, and conduct evaluations.

Students with ASD may need a combination of services that include self contained special education programs, interrelated special education services, consultative special education

services, speech and language, occupational therapy, and/or social skills instruction from a trained staff member. Some students may manifest sensory impairments necessitating a dedicated room for the use of sensory equipment. They may also be a need for services to support maladaptive behaviors.

Children with ASD may have maladaptive behaviors. If so, these behaviors will occur during the school day. It is essential for administrators to maintain the philosophy that behavior has a function and is a form of communication. Notbohm (2005), a parent of a child with ASD, explains that we may have to take the role of a behavior detective. She also maintains the belief that maladaptive behaviors are not a form of retribution. Many individuals are quick to judge a negative display of behavior as a form of retaliation. She explains that persons with ASD often lack the “ability to perceive or imply the motivations and feelings of others” (p. 27) and, therefore; are not exhibiting negative behaviors for this reason. When disciplining a student with ASD it is necessary for administrators to use simple words and short phrases. It would also be best to pair the oral with a visual representation. A physical copy of the behavior intervention plan can be used to redirect students. This can be presented as a chart with words and pictures. Many times administrators will have to ask questions as a portion of an investigation. They should ask concrete questions (Notbohm, 2005) in order to achieve the best communication possible.

Potter and Whittaker (2000) explain that it is “critical to provide on-going support, training, and supportive review (p. 37).” Administrators can effectively aid in the implementation of a program by providing training for staff members. They may need to advocate for these needs to district level administrators. Cohen (2001) states that administrators

need to support the effective implementation of inclusion programs in their schools. This suggested support would come from the district superintendent all the way to down to principals and other relevant supervisors.

Freschi (2004) shares common mistakes teachers make in teaching students with autism and gives guidance on how to prevent them. This information is beneficial for administrators to know as they guide staff in these roles. One recommendation is for staff members rehearse behavior intervention plans, to work out potential problems, and make sure all are prepared for the behaviors when they do arise. It is also recommended that the plan be simple. Additionally, it is recommended to use classroom data to guide decisions. Data will show if a lesson is a success and if maladaptive behaviors are becoming less frequent. Administrators and staff can effectively practice data collection techniques by implementing a variety of methods such as frequency counts or logs.

Staff members at the building level will need materials to support a program for students with ASD as well as adequate space to implement interventions. Staff will need access to computers, color printers, specific computer programs, and laminators to create visual supports for their students. They will also need classroom space for social skills groups, sensory needs, and for safe spots during any crisis situation.

Zepeda (2003) believes that effective principals support instruction by being present in the classroom. She continues to state that they are committed to learning and understand change. They also work with teachers to determine “what is working, what is not working, and how modifications can be made given the characteristics of the students” (p. 18). These are essential habits of an effective principal in a school where students with autism are educated. It is evident

that the role of the administrator can have a significant impact on the effectiveness of an autism support program. There are many areas their support can be found such as flexibility in scheduling and supplying materials. The entire school team can be impacted by this role. When the principal and other administrators show support of students with autism, they set an example and establish the expectation that all staff members will do the same.

It is found, in the United States, that the more effective a school leader is the higher the student achievement will be (Marzano, Waters, and McNulty, 2005). It is hoped that these findings will cause leaders to reflect on their practices and strive to maximize their effectiveness. Their research led them to identify 21 responsibilities every school principal should magnify. The characteristic found to have the greatest bearing on student achievement is that of situational awareness. A school leader possessing a strong sense of situational awareness is able to predict what could go wrong in the school setting. This can be an extremely valuable characteristic of the school leader in a school where students with autism are educated. Being able to predict what could go wrong and hopefully eliminate it, will result in reducing stress and allow students the optimum opportunity to access the curriculum.

In 2006, the Georgia Department of Education published *Students With Disabilities Can Make AYP: What Every School Leader Should Know*. In this publication, it is recommended that the special education administrator, as well as special education teachers, should be included in the school leadership team. Special education administrators are encouraged to become more involved with the instructional leadership of the schools in which they serve. Levels of support should be developed for special education students. To begin this work, Individual Education Plans should be reviewed. During this review, it can be determined if the recommended program

will result in the student meeting academic success. This review will also allow the school to be able to develop systems of support for these specific students. This support should have multiple levels in the event the student requires additional support to meet success. It is relevant to note that historically, special education teachers were not always included in professional development activities as general education teachers have been. In this publication it is recommended that “special education teachers be full participants in the training and coaching activities” (p. 94). It also encourages school leaders to continuously monitor student performance and adult practices. It is suggested that effective monitoring of special education student performance is conducted at least every three weeks. When school administrators spend time in classrooms to ensure proper implementation is in place and provide support it is obvious that this initiative is valuable. A final recommendation for school leaders is to celebrate the successes of both staff and students. The school leader should commit to taking time each month to identify areas of progress and provide a commemorative activity. Students should also be reinforced for their accomplishments.

I have found that by implementing these strategies, staff members appear to have a greater sense of responsibility for the success of special education students. They become actively involved in monitoring growth and the creation and implementation of strategies as they participate in regularly scheduled progress meetings. This provides students with multiple mentors. I have found that students are better able to generalize skills when multiple people are involved with implementation of strategies. Mastery of skill sets and generalization to multiple environments and people lead to a more liberated student.

Allies in Empowerment

Stakeholders of the empowerment process include parents, educators, administrators, and most importantly, the student. Simone (2010) coined herself an “Aspergirl” and described her road to empowerment. Her hope “is to help other Aspergirls feel validated; to be de-stigmatized if not esteemed” (p. 17). She provides advice to others on the spectrum as well as to their families. Simone encourages individuals around those with autism to provide praise and encouragement while minimizing criticism. Her journey through the halls of education led her to a physical beating in front of a cheering audience, extreme bullying, sensory pain, and alienation. Advice she shares with fellow Aspergirls is to not suffer in silence and to seek help. She also encouraged fellow Aspergians to join extracurricular activities. This will provide an avenue to meet others with similar interests and make socialization somewhat easier. Disclosing your diagnosis to people who are potential allies is a way to advocate for yourself. This allows others the opportunity to learn and accept who you are. Simone encourages the use of internet social sites to develop and maintain friendships. She also warns of the dangers of false personas that can happen when socializing on the internet. Her advice to families is to provide BALLS for their girl with Asperger’s. BALLS stands for Belief, Acceptance, Love, Like, and Support. Simone asserts that girls with Asperger’s can successfully find their niche in the workplace and in the world with support.

Another individual with Asperger’s, Schwarz, shares his recommendations on the subject of empowerment. Schwarz (2004) believes there are many misconceptions about autism and Asperger’s. He stresses the importance of educating society on the truths of autism spectrum disorders. Schwarz states that the autism community has much to learn from the gay and deaf

communities and should build on their strategies used for educating the general public. He purports that qualities found in allies may include an individual who listens, one who is willing to deliver the message, and a person who is nonjudgmental. Talking points are suggested for use in delivering the message on the facts about autism. The development of a training manual is recommended by Schwarz.

Nachshen (2004) discusses the significance of the empowerment process for parents of children diagnosed with developmental disabilities. She explains that “one way to incorporate the concept of empowerment into research is by examining the factors that predict or cause it” (p. 70). As a result of her research, she believes that children of empowered parents make greater gains. Further research on empowerment is recommended. This will identify what factors these families believe support the empowerment process.

It is necessary to reflect on the voice of the individuals with this disability as their empowerment is sought. The message is clear that these individuals wish to have allies in society who understand and accept them. Their experiences serve as a powerful indicator of how much support should be available to them as well as how much education is needed.

Empowerment Through Intervention

“What Knowledge is of Most Worth?” (Pinar, 2004, p.19).

Students with autism can become empowered when school districts implement effective interventions. This allows students to have opportunities to learn more about their disability and how they can successfully navigate their environment. For the purposes of this research project, all interventions are considered equally applicable to any students on the autism spectrum. Some authors report on strategies solely in reference to Asperger’s Syndrome (AS) and others simply

speak to Autism. May (2010) tells us that “although AS differs from Autism in regards to language acquisition and early cognitive development, they do have similarities. These similarities in the areas of social impairment, impairment in reading social non-verbal language, inflexibility, and persistent preoccupation allow for some of the research involving teaching strategies for Autistic students to be applied to AS students as well.” I agree that these methods can be used for all students across the autism spectrum. There may be minor changes in the presentation to allow for differentiation between students or ability levels, but all can be utilized regardless of where the student is placed on the spectrum.

McAfee (2002) tells us that “programs designed to address social and pragmatic skills and the management of emotions and stress are few and far between. This shortage has put school districts in the difficult position of attempting to fulfill their mandate to provide appropriate individual educational plans without the availability of suitable programs for these students” (p. xx). This knowledge coupled with having a daughter diagnosed with AS, led her to write a curriculum centered on pragmatics and social skills that would expose the hidden curriculum.

In order to counteract the negative effects the hidden curriculum has on students with AS, many schools have begun to incorporate a social skills program. The most traditional model for this is the consultative model. This is when the student can meet with a teacher or counselor for a few minutes each week to discuss current issues. This is usually not adequate. As Wilkerson and Wilkerson (2004) found, students need more support when faced with the effects of AS. With this in mind, some schools have implemented a curriculum to address the hidden curriculum and have given it equal weight to other elective classes such as P.E. In this class the students are directly taught and can role play different scenarios they encounter in the school

structure and routine. This may range from waiting in the lunch line to proper etiquette for the upcoming school dance. Schools have found that students involved in this approach have been able to handle teasing by peers and are able to seek out help when needed.

It has been observed by Wilkerson and Wilkerson (2004) that socialization problems are much more involved in the middle and high schools. This is when there is an increase in social expectations. These demands come from teachers and peers alike.

Preparation for these situations can begin during the elementary years. This would provide them with practice and experience to build their confidence in their abilities to solve the problems they will encounter with the hidden curriculum. I have observed differences in social interaction between elementary school students and those of the middle and high school. Elementary age students appear to be more tolerant of individual differences. I concur with these authors that social problems are much more significant in middle and high school. As students get older, it appears that teachers put more responsibility on the students for their social engagement.

Teachers expect that students already have the skills needed to work in cooperative groups. It does not seem that teachers provide direct instruction on how to interact in these small groups. There are also different social interactions that these students have never been exposed to such as locker room behavior as well as between class locker breaks. These are a few examples of how social problems are much more extensive in the upper grades versus the lower grades.

Empathy training can be conducted in classes of students who are mainstreamed. This is conducted by a member of the autism support staff and can be delivered to the neurotypical peers, teachers, occupational and physical therapists, speech and language therapists, school support staff, school nurses, parents, and/or administrators. Neurotypical peers refer to those

peers in the educational setting without disabilities. This empathy training can be conducted in any grade throughout a school district and is easily altered for age appropriateness. There are hands on activities that place the neurotypical individuals in the position of one with difficulty inferring social cues, sensory defensiveness, mind-blindness, and motor difficulties. In essence, these activities take away their power. Characteristics of the disability are then explained. The empathy training is concluded by talking about ways to help. Ideas presented include an increased degree of tolerance, prompting by a peer in a social situation, and volunteering to join a friendship group. Faherty, through the Asheville TEACCH Center, developed an empathy training program to address the needs and characteristics of individuals with autism spectrum disorders. Her program is titled *Understanding Friends* and is designed to focus on each of these areas. I have used this program with success at all grade levels. Students enjoy exploring how the hands on experiments put them in the position of the individual with the disability. Students are typically exceptionally responsive to the call for participation in the friendship group following the session. Staff members have also been more willing to support the friendship group following such an activity.

Friendship groups are another suggested intervention to practice social interaction as well as reveal the hidden curriculum through direct instruction. As Wexler (2000) explains, there are always “new social practices” (p. 15) and as educators, we can keep students apprised of these in this group situation. These groups are usually held before the school day begins, during break or lunch, or at recess time. This is to avoid any interruption of academic instruction. A student experiencing difficulties with the hidden curriculum is paired with a couple of neurotypical peers from their general education setting. They are able to work directly on turn taking, establishing

and maintaining eye contact, exchanging greetings, conversational exchange, idioms and conflict resolution. These skills can empower students with Asperger's Syndrome.

Moyes (2001) gives us pros and cons for using this method. Some of the advantages she claims includes the opportunity to provide the student with hands on practice and improved social skills. She also supports this practice because it provides the teacher with an ideal setting to more readily identify deficits that need an increased amount of support. An additional reason Moyes applauds this method is because the teacher can create an environment of success through the way it is structured, who is involved and with individualized supports. This ultimately provides a way to introduce a social skill, practice it in small group settings where the skill can be monitored, and then strengthened prior to its application and generalization.

Moyes also warns the instructor on the disadvantages associated with this model. It is possible that parents of neurotypical students will object to their child being pulled from class to participate in the group. I recommend that these groups operate during non-instructional times such as recess or lunch. Another hazard may be the possibility of embarrassment for the child with autism if he/she is not able to satisfactorily complete the goals of the lesson. Teachers should be aware of this and plan for some success with each lesson (pp. 137-8). I recommend starting the session with a previously mastered social skill to provide the student with autism with immediate success. This may be paired with praise or other appropriate recognition to reinforce its use.

Britzman (2003) explains that "something difficult occurs in helping relationships. We are apt to forget our differences" (p. 6). I have seen this come to fruition as a result of the implementation of friendship groups. Prior to the implementation of friendship groups, teachers

have shared with me their desire for the child with autism to receive an increased level of acceptance and tolerance from their peers. Following the execution of empathy training and friendship groups, teachers have noticed that neurotypical students are more willing to include the disabled students in their groups. Suggestions include having books available for nondisabled students to read as concerns arise and to have more follow-up training. One teacher reported that students have referred to the training through the course of the school year and have related their experiences to others. Also, a teacher shared that one of the students with autism participating in the friendship group has been able to overcome her physical symptoms that typically developed as she faced a social situation with peers. This team of teachers, speech and language pathologists, and support staff has been able to take this technique to this level of empowerment.

While educators of students with autism strive to provide a structured and predictable environment to increase the likelihood of success for students on the spectrum, change is inevitable (Hume, 2006). Priming is a method of preparing the student with autism for change. Priming can prepare students for weather drills, substitute teachers, school assemblies, or for the start of a new school year. Priming can be conducted through modeling, social stories, schedules, or PowerPoint presentations. This method presents the change that will occur and prepares the student for what they can expect. The teacher and student can then engage in dialogue or role play. This is also an excellent opportunity for the team to identify any problems that may occur.

I have found that priming can be especially useful when students transition into a new school year. Students who participate in priming for a new school year could be engaged in activities

such as walking through their schedule, meeting the teacher(s), and practicing locker combinations. This exposes students to the hidden curriculum of the school without the added distraction and over stimulation from hundreds or even thousands of confused students during the first days of the school year. Students can also observe evidence of school ethos by viewing postings. They can become familiar with the personalities of the teachers and receive copies school handbooks and teacher/classroom expectations. This has proven especially helpful for those students transitioning from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school.

The National Research Council's (2001) recommendations for educating student with autism includes "intensive educational programming for a minimum of the equivalent of a full school day, 5 days (at least 25 hours) a week, with full year programming" (p. 219). Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 section 300.106.b requires that special education programs consider extended school year (ESY) for all students with disabilities. ESY is explained through IDEA as educational services outside of the typical school calendar. It can include any break from the school calendar such as a vacation, holiday, or summer. IDEA states that ESY is determined on an individual basis and is to be provided to the parent at no cost. Students must be found eligible for ESY through their IEP. While one of these is a recommendation to school districts for the education of students with autism, the other requires the consideration for services beyond a typical school year. Interventions for students with autism can extend to a full calendar year if they are found eligible for ESY. These can include any of the interventions previously discussed. Priming for a new school year is one example of an intervention implemented when school is not in session. A benefit of ESY services for

students with autism is that social and communication goals can be addressed without the added pressure of academics.

Assessment of Student Progress

In order for teachers to know if students with autism are making progress, data will need to be collected. There are many ways to gather the information needed to make these determinations. The National Research Council (2001) that districts monitor progress frequently and adjust the goals as determined needful. It is specifically recommended that the “assessment of student progress in meeting objectives should be used on an ongoing process to further refine the IEP. Lack of objectively documentable progress over a 3 month period should be taken to indicate a need to increase the intensity by lowering the student/teacher ratios, increasing programming time, reformulating curricula, or providing additional training and consultation” (pp. 220-221).

This progress can be monitored through a variety of data collection forms or by means of formal instruments. Some districts may prefer to monitor student progress through specific scales such as the *Adaptive Behavior Assessment System II*, *Vineland Adaptive Behavior Scale* or the *Walker McConnell Scale of Social Competence and School Adjustment*. These scales can be given at different times of the school year or school career to monitor progress and to make program changes and recommendations. Frequency charts are an easy way to assess progress. These can be implemented to show the number of exchanges in dialogue, how often the student seeks help, or successful attempts to work in a cooperative learning group. These charts can be completed on a rotating schedule and filled in by teachers or other school staff. Data will guide teachers in making future recommendations for the student’s IEP, BIP, and ESY needs.

While autism has become a popular topic in the literature, there are a variety of ways to widen the discussion. From the 2001 findings of the National Research Council to the 2011 results of Project PACE, the recommendations for supporting students with autism remain largely the same. Research has not yet declared a superior method for providing instruction for socialization and communication deficits. A significant portion of the research is directed at early intervention. It would be helpful to have more discussion on the recommended supports for young adults and adults with autism spectrum disorders. There appears to be an abundance of information solely dedicated to one specific area of Autism Spectrum Disorders, specifically Asperger's. There are many students on the spectrum of autism who do not have Asperger's. These are ways in which the discussion of the supports for individuals with ASD could be expanded in current literature.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Overall Approach

As a critical theorist, I believe that a qualitative approach was the most appropriate method for conducting this research project. This approach best supports the researcher's quest to discover the 'nature of reality' when exploring the support for students with autism in the identified districts. Marshall and Rossman (1999) explain that qualitative research examines events that take "place in the natural world" (p.3). This body of research also allows for discoveries to emerge rather than being predetermined and tightly configured. They teach us that qualitative research is ideal for investigations involving power and marginalized groups and explain that "traditionally conducted social science research has silenced many groups marginalized and oppressed in society by making them the passive object of inquiry" (p. 4). They further describe a goal of qualitative research is to bring about change and increase democratization. Given these characteristics, qualitative research was chosen for this research. This research method allowed the researcher to explore and describe the empowering practices that are available to students with autism in the selected districts. The goal of this research study was to obtain inside information from school districts, therefore; making qualitative research the most appropriate approach over that of quantitative research.

A qualitative approach was used during the implementation of this study which explored educational practices for students with autism through the lens of the special education administrator. The researcher utilized a series of open ended questions

conducted through an interview of willing participants who first completed a screening survey. This open dialogue produced valuable information to be analyzed.

A letter was sent to each school district to obtain district consent and give an explanation of the study. The participants received a brief explanation of the project. A screening survey comprised of qualitative inquiries was distributed along with participant consent both via US Mail and electronically by email. The survey was used as a screening tool for potential participants. Potential participants were asked if they currently had a system of support in place for students with autism and if they would be willing to participate in an interview. They were also asked about their familiarity of the National Research Council's findings. Results of the screening survey were used to give the researcher insight into the special education administrators' interpretation of how their district empowers students with autism. Only districts willing to participate in the interview process were included in that phase of the research study.

The interview portion of the project was conducted via telephone. The use of the telephone as a resource was a more effective use of time and money. The researcher did not have to travel to obtain the in-depth answers being sought. Participant consent was obtained at the onset of the interview. The interview consisted of in-depth questions. It was recorded and transcribed.

Qualitative Research

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) explain, in qualitative research, that the researcher is interested in "securing rich descriptions" (p. 16). This is different from the view of the quantitative researcher who is seeking generalizations. Powell and Renner (2003) warn

the qualitative researcher against generalizing information. In selecting qualitative research, it is the insight that is being sought instead of a generalization. This research project gathered information through the lens of professionally trained personnel about the educational supports for students with autism.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) continue to explain, in qualitative research, that the researcher is seeking to “study things in their nature settings” (p. 5) and to “make the world visible” (p. 4). In this study, the researcher desired to study the supports for students with autism in schools and clearly describe those interventions that are in place for their empowerment.

In conducting a qualitative study, the researcher had a closer relationship to the data being gathered. Being able to have open dialogue with other professionals, allowed the researcher to develop and foster relationships. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) believe that this type of relationship between researcher and their project is a portion of what is necessary to have a well formed inquiry.

Instrument

A screening survey, found in appendix A, comprised of qualitative questions was used in the first phase of this research project. This screening survey was be distributed both via US Mail as well as through email. Participant consent for participation was included along with the survey. A follow up email was sent after a period of two weeks to the potential participant who had not yet responded. Questions were asked about the familiarity with the National Research Council’s recommendations for educating students with autism. Additional questions were asked about how social

skill deficits are addressed and measured for students with autism in their district. Those completing the screening survey were asked if they would be willing to report on the empowering practices their district is implementing through a telephone interview.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) support the use of surveys in conducting qualitative research. A strength of survey research is the ability to gather the information with ease. Another positive attribute is that it allows the researcher to gather “a small amount of information from a large number of subjects” (p. 130). They also encourage that surveys be tested by a small group to ensure their effectiveness and consistency. This survey was tested on a small group of special education administrators who were not participants in the survey. The test group included current administrators of special education who previously supervised programs involving students with autism or previously taught students with autism.

The districts willing to participate in the interview portion of the research were asked additional questions about the type of support that is provided for their autism population. Interview questions can be found in appendix B. Participants were asked about their role in supporting empowering practices, asked to describe the empowering practices, and how success is measured in their districts. They were specifically asked about instruction in the areas of executive functioning, social skills, and self regulation. Additionally, they were asked for their personal beliefs on the empowerment of students with autism as well as their recommendations of empowering practices that should be implemented.

Questions were reviewed by a panel of administrators in the Houston County School System. Each of these administrators hold advanced degrees, including five doctoral degrees, and have experience conducting research. The special education administrator who completed the survey for the district was not included in this review. During this process, questions were reworded, eliminated and created. The panel also participated in mock interviews with the researcher. This allowed the researcher the opportunity to become comfortable with the questions, practice verbalizations, and identify potential problems with the interview questions. The mock interviews also provided the researcher practice with recording equipment. This role playing opportunity allowed the researcher to be more efficient during this portion of the research project. Both structured and unstructured interviews were considered by the researcher. The telephone interview was conducted as an unstructured interview. This form of the interview was found to be most appropriate and allowed the researcher to ask open ended questions. Denzin and Lincoln (2003) state that “unstructured interviewing can provide a greater breadth of data than the other types” (p. 74). They explain that in structured interviewing the researcher asks each participant predetermined questions only yielding responses from a limited set. This type of research has little to no flexibility and would not benefit this research study.

Participants

The state of Georgia is divided into sixteen RESA districts. The selected 4 include Middle Georgia RESA, Heart of Georgia RESA, Griffin RESA, and Oconee RESA. In this study, special education administrators from thirty-two counties in 4

central Georgia RESA (Reaching Educational Standards for All) districts were asked to complete a screening survey and participate in an interview. These 4 RESA districts were selected due to their location in central Georgia. A large number of districts were included to provide the researcher with a large sample size.

The districts' special education administrator who most closely supervises the autism program was asked to participate. Depending on the organization of the school district, this could have been the assistant superintendent, special education director, special education coordinator, or program specialist.

Thirty-two districts were asked to participate in this research project. Of those thirty two districts, fifteen gave consent for the research to be conducted. It was found that many districts only allow employees of their district to conduct research in the said district. Fifteen special education administrators were asked to participate in a screening survey. Five screening surveys were returned from participants and 4 indicated their willingness to be interviewed.

Ethical and Political Considerations

The researcher was honest with the participants in regards to the nature of the study and its intended purpose. As the researcher sought answers to the questions of empowerment, deception was avoided. The researcher did everything possible to ensure that each participant did not experience any emotional or social suffering. Marshall and Rossman (1999) remind researchers that their interpersonal skills are essential to the success of a qualitative study.

Participants' privacy was protected during this research project. Their personal names nor the district names were included in the results of the research. Identification information was used in the screening survey. This information was necessary for the researcher to be able to contact those willing to participate in the telephone interview. Informed consent was obtained from each school district as well as each participant. A letter for each purpose was prepared and is included as Exhibit E and Exhibit F. Oral consent was obtained again at the onset of the telephone interview. Interviews were recorded using a recording device designed for use with telephones.

I am an employee and a special education administrator of a participating district. I am not the special education administrator currently supervising the autism services. One of my fellow administrators was asked to complete the survey and participate in the interview. I had no personal communication with her in regards to her participation in this research project.

Data Collection

A screening survey and telephone interview were utilized for this qualitative research study. The screening survey was distributed via US Mail and electronically through email. Results of the screening survey were analyzed through the use of a rubric. Districts indicating their willingness to participate in the interview, received a scheduling email and/or telephone call.

Telephone interviews were conducted as the second phase of the research project. As recommended by Denzin and Lincoln (2003), the researcher gained the trust and established rapport at the onset of the interview. Factual questions, a statement of the

purpose of the research, and oral consent were obtained at the beginning of the recorded telephone interview. Open-ended questions followed. During this portion of the research, telephone conversations were recorded. During the conversation, the researcher took field notes. This allowed the researcher to make notes to aid with follow up on answers as needed. At the conclusion of the interviews, a transcript was made of each recorded interview.

Denzin and Lincoln (2003) also recommend for the researcher to avoid getting in to a conversation with the participant. This prevents the researcher from sharing personal experience and opinions. Should participants have questions about the terms used in the telephone interview; the definitions of terms from chapter one will be utilized.

Data Analysis

The screening survey was analyzed through the use of a rubric. Participants were asked a series of questions about educational practices for students with autism as well as an invitation to participate in a telephone interview. As a result of this screening survey, participants for the telephone interview were identified.

The telephone interviews were recorded and transcribed. A five step process, developed by Powell and Renner (2003), was implemented to analyze the transcribed interview data in this potential study. Each response was analyzed following the five steps. The steps include *Get To Know Your Data*, *Focus the Analysis*, *Categorize Information*, *Identify Patterns and Connections Within and Between Categories*, and *Interpretation – Bringing It All Together*.

In step one, *Get To Know Your Data* the researcher read and reread responses in order to gain utmost familiarity with the text. During this step in the process, the researcher considered the quality of the data as it was read. The researcher wrote down any thoughts as the data was read, as this was useful later.

Step two is used to *Focus the Analysis*. Data from each question was put together. This allowed the researcher to determine similarities and differences in the responses.

In the third step, *Categorize Information*, the researcher had the opportunity to isolate recurrent themes or ideas. The researcher paid specific attention to the terminology used in responses in this step. It became needful for the researcher to use color codes and assign to them to identified categories for responses that recurred. The researcher did not use any preset categories in this process. Instead, she allowed the categories to emerge as the results were read and reread. These emergent categories were determined as a product of working through the responses. Subcategories were not implemented as a result of the analysis.

During step four, *Identifying Patterns and Connections Within and Between Categories*, the researcher analyzed the responses to discover connections across the responses to each of the questions. The researcher sought out similarities as well as differences in the responses. Relationships between the similarities were identified. In the final step, *Interpretation – Bringing It All Together*, the researcher was charged with connecting meaning to the analyzed data. The findings were stated and discussed. During this step, the researcher asked reflection questions as recommended by Powell

and Renner (2003) that included: “What are the major lessons? What new things did you learn?” (p. 5).

Chapter Summary

A qualitative method was the method selected for this research study. Qualitative research involves events that occur in the natural environment, as well as the phenomenon over the struggle for power of oppressed groups (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). These characteristics allowed this research project to lend itself to the ideals of critical theory. Qualitative research also allows for an exploratory approach to research. This was beneficial to the plan for this research as the researcher explored information from the districts in a variety of ways. The combination of a survey and an interview allowed for participants to respond in a variety of ways. A rubric was used to analyze the data from the surveys and a series of five steps were implemented to analyze the data gathered from the interviews (See Appendix B).

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Review of Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the presence of empowering practices, instructional supports, and the uniqueness of special education services for students with autism in self selected Georgia districts through the gathering of information from special education administrators. Fifteen districts gave consent for this research project to be conducted in their system. Participants consisted of special education administrators who most closely supervise their district's autism services. Of the fifteen potential participants, 5 returned the screening survey. Of the 5 participants who returned the screening survey, one declined the opportunity to participate in the telephone interview. Of the 4 who were willing to participate in the telephone interview, 3 responded to the scheduling attempts.

This research was conducted to answer the following broad research question: What are schools implementing that positively impacts the empowerment and academic success of students with autism? The specific research questions were: What is different about the special education services for students with autism versus other special education students? How do special education administrators in self selected Georgia school districts support instruction and empowerment of students with autism? This study included a screening survey comprised of 5 questions. The responses were analyzed through the use of a rubric (See Appendix B). All respondents willing to

participate in the telephone interview were contacted to schedule and conduct the telephone interview of consisting of 8 open-ended questions.

The purpose of the screening survey was to provide the researcher with increased awareness of the participants' current practices to support the empowerment of students with autism. The participants also indicated whether they were willing to engage in a more in-depth dialogue with the researcher about such practices. The screening survey was comprised of five questions and evaluated using a rubric (see Appendix B). Questions two, three, and four, participants were given one point per question that had a response, another point for including an example(s), and an additional point per response for elaboration of examples and ideas. Questions two, three and four could yield a maximum of three points each. Questions one and five were yes/no questions and earned a single point for a yes response. Scores earned for this portion of the study include zero, two, five, five, and 11, with a range from zero to 11. A score of at least five would indicate that the administrator has the adequate knowledge base of the subject to be able to engage in successful dialogue during the telephone interview.

The purpose of the telephone interview was to discover current practices being implemented in the districts to support the empowerment of students with autism. The researcher conducted a test of both the screening survey and telephone interview questions with special education administrators from her school district. The special education administrator who would be asked to participate in the research was not included in the test. The questions were refined to minimize bias and socially desirable

responses. The order of the questions was carefully chosen to maximize participant input and build upon the complexity of dialogue.

The surveys were distributed to the participants both electronically and via US Mail. Telephone interviews were scheduled individually, recorded, and transcribed. Neither district nor participant names were used as a means of providing anonymity. Through analysis of responses, themes and connections were discovered.

Question 1. This question asked: “How do you, as a special education administrator, support your staff to empower students with autism?” All participants shared guidelines, models, and standards that were established to provide this support in their districts. All respondents acknowledged the implementation of professional learning was a significant part of their systems of support. Professional learning was referred to as workshops, on the job training, and staff development classes.

Two administrators explained that providing appropriate materials was how they were able to support their staff to empower students with autism. Specific materials included social stories, assessment tools, and behavior intervention plans. One administrator explained that she supports her teachers by going into their classroom to help with environment modifications. Examples of environmental modifications included reducing sensory stimuli such as lighting or providing visual schedules. Other responses included sharing the most current information in reference to the disability and being “on call” for teachers to help with problem solving as situations arise. This administrator reported that teachers frequently called her during the day to assist with severe behavior.

Question 2. The question posed: “What does your district do differently to empower students with autism from other special education students? Again, two of the participants indicated that they provided more training for staff who support children with autism than any other area of special education.

One district maintains an effective means of support is providing an autism itinerant teacher and para professional who supports both staff and students as needed in each school throughout the county. The services they provide included social skills training and visual schedules. These are supports that are not offered for other exceptionalities. The frustrations of one administrator were manifested through her statement explaining a lack of services her district provides. She stated, “I think our county provides less services in order to stay out of trouble.” She further explained that her district did not implement all suggested methodologies in order to avoid the litigious ramifications of educating this population.

Question 3. The question stated, “What are the practices in your district to address social skills?” Two administrators described different avenues to approach social skills instruction. One utilizes a mental health counselor, available at each school, to implement social skills groups, while the other district has autism staff who are specifically trained in providing natural environment training and in depth social skills groups. The later described their social skills groups as incorporating video and audio taping of peers and social situations. When asked to define natural environment training, she disclosed that a member of the itinerant autism support staff would come into the child’s natural environment, whether that be the play ground, classroom, lunchroom, or

any other location in the school setting to observe and make recommendations to increase appropriate social interactions.

Other examples of social skills supports given during the interviews included specific social skills programs for Georgia Network for Educational and Therapeutic Support (GNETS) classes, discrete trials, coaching, and use of peers as partners. When asked for the names of specific social skills programs, the administrator could not recall the specific strategies or approaches. One participant declared that there were no specific supports in their system for social skills instruction for students with autism. It was stated that, “each teacher has to come up with whatever their own thing is.”

Question 4. This question inquired, “How do you address executive functioning skill deficits?” Two of the participants explained that they assist the acquisition of this skill set by teaching specific strategies. One example included recording the amount of time it took the student to complete an assignment or project and comparing it to what was projected by the student. They also use goal setting strategies. Specific materials suggested through educational evaluations of executive functioning deficits were used in one district as revealed by another participant. When asked for examples, the contributor clarified that these were individualized and she could not predict what they would include. One participant stated, “That is not addressed at all.”

Question 5. This question solicited, “How do you address self-monitoring in regards to sensory needs and maladaptive behaviors?” Two of the respondents expounded on forms of data collection sheets such as charts, goal sheets, and tallies being used to assist with self-monitoring in their districts. One district representative purports

that students collected their own data on the sheets and compared results with a staff member during a debriefing session. Other examples that address self-monitoring included teaching replacement behaviors and the use of itinerant staff to collect data and make recommendations. One contributing participant described her districts' support of students in this deficit areas as, "It's the same thing. It is by teacher and whatever techniques the teacher knows or whoever they get help or from."

Question 6. The researcher raised the question, "What are your personal beliefs about the empowerment of students with autism?" Two contributors indicated their belief that students with autism were capable of becoming fully functional adults as a result of empowerment. They asserted that students with autism were also able to "blossom" and "do wonderful things" due to empowerment. Still, two other administrators explained how students who were once placed in self contained special education program were able to transition into the general education setting with minimal supports as a result of empowering practices. One participant maintained, "By not offering this type of support is detrimental not only to them but to society." She continued to explain that, "once they have been engaged in social skills and other activities that have helped them compensate for their disability or communicate more effectively their needs and wants, they have just blossomed!" A different reaction was noted by one of the contributors as she stated, "When you have teachers who don't know how to teach children with autism, teachers are frustrated and the children are frustrated."

Question 7. This question requested, "What practices would you recommend be sustained?" Social skills and training for staff were both included by two administrators

participating in the telephone survey. It was stated by one that, “they really need more in depth training.” This was in reference to staff members who specifically education students with autism. Another recommendation included the following, “I like the teachers and parents and students to be armed with as many possible tools in their social skills tool bag or other compensating tool bag as they can possibly have. I think social skills is imperative to their success.” Other suggested practices included creative scheduling, flexibility, progress monitoring, consistency, ABLLS (Assessment of Basic Language and Learning Skills), TEACCH (Treatment and Education of Autistic and Communication related handicapped CHildren, PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System), sensory integration, and executive functioning strategies.

Question 8. This question petitioned, “What program recommendations do you have for empowering students with autism?” Two respondents maintained that training is paramount. A strong social skills program was advocated by two of the participants. One expressed exceeding joy by stating, “Seeing those children bond with one another and actually have friends that they have never really had before and being able to work together and have some sort of friendship with two people that understand each other’s quirks and accept them for who they are. I have had kids say to me before that I have never had kids invite me to their birthday party before and now I have friends in lunch bunch and I got invited to a birthday party. That to me is a powerful piece of evidence that that is important to the program.”

Another participant endorsed autism support programs for all grade levels. This respondent explained that this is a missing element from most districts’ programs. She

described it as a support classroom specific to the needs of students on the spectrum. It is equipped with a autism trained teacher and at least one para professional. They monitor the student's progress in classes, provide a safe environment conducive to de-escalation of stressed students, offer sensory integration activities, and teach social skills at various times of the day. She purports that, "some kids require more support and some interrelated teachers are not as equipped as an autism teacher nor do they have the flexibility in their schedule as an autism teacher can have."

Another recommendation included the incorporation of a model classroom. This contributor is responsible for providing staff development for educators of students with autism in her district. She described this model classroom as a pristine environment where she could train teachers and students collaboratively. This would provide hands on opportunities for those in the field.

Themes

Several themes arose following a thorough analysis of the responses. These themes emerged as a result of the adopted procedures. Answers were aligned from each question and similarities and differences were identified. Categories materialized as patterns and connections were discovered. Ultimately, these led to several significant themes. The identified themes included training, social skills instruction, and increased functionality through implementation of empowering interventions.

Training

Training was referenced by all participants. *Staff development, workshops, on the job training*, and *training* were specific examples included in responses from at least two

participants across four of the eight interview questions. One administrator explicitly stated that staff working with students with autism need more in-depth training and that they do in fact provide more training for these staff members than those who work with other exceptionalities.

The researcher was tempted to label this theme as *professional development* until further analysis of the use of the word revealed that it was not solely used in relation to staff members. The term *training* was also used to describe student based interventions by the interviewed administrators. Such student based *training* included social skills training and natural environment training. The researcher determined *training* as the emergent theme as it relates to both students and staff, while *professional development* limited the inclusion of both parties.

Lord and McGhee (2001) found that the preparation of personnel was a weakness in program design and development for student with ASD. While all participants indicated that training for staff was essential, two responded that their districts were actively incorporating personnel preparation and aggressively seeking these opportunities for their staff.

Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction was mentioned in responses across five questions and emerged as the most prominent answer of two questions. Special education administrators consistently reported social skills instruction as a vital part of an empowering program for students with autism. Some explained that social skills lessons were being taught in small groups led by counselors and others noted groups were being

led by teachers. One disclosed that a specific curriculum for social skills was being utilized in their GNETS autism program, but she could not recall its name. Another participant described a method of teaching social skills as the incorporation of audio and video tapes of social situations. Methods for teaching social skills also included natural environment training as well as discrete trial training. It was also declared by one respondent that, “each teacher has to come up with whatever their own thing is” in relation to social skills instruction. Participants shared their excitement related to student successes with developing and experiencing friendships following direct social skills instruction. Statements given by these professionally trained personnel indicated the extreme importance they place on social skills instruction and its empowering impact.

The administrators involved in the interview portion of this study strongly recommended social skills program as a significant piece of an empowering educational program. Students with ASD do not naturally develop social skills and require direct instruction that lead to the acquisition of these skills (Myles & Southwick, 1999). This weakness can be referred to as *mindblindness*, or the inability to recognize that others think differently than they do, and thus requires social skills support (Sicile-Kira, 2004). Sicile-Kira (2004) agrees with the participants that “a well structured social skills group can be beneficial” (p. 108). Exhorn (2005) concurs with participants in his description of social skills training as including “social skills groups, on-on-one social skills therapy, peer modeling, and video modeling (p. 110). Social skills training can be recommended as a viable part of a program for students with ASD.

Increased Functionality

Respondents consistently made reference to a student's increase in functionality as a result of their participation in the empowering practices that were reviewed during the interview. Two administrators specifically expressed their belief that students with autism can become fully functioning adults. Other benefits of a student's increase in functionality were in reference to students being educated in the mainstream instead of a more restrictive special education setting. They described this as occurring following the implementation of empowering interventions.

Attwood (2007) discusses long term outcomes of individuals with Asperger's. He describes this process as the building of "a mental library of social experiences and social rules" (p. 92). Increasing an individual's functionality is a result of building these skill sets. Exhorn (2005) explains that "early intervention can improve the overall prognosis for children with ASDs" (p. 88). He maintains that intervention "can help minimize or eliminate problem behaviors: (p. 89) and that "possibly half of all children with ASDs can recover enough to develop friendships, be mainstreamed in school, have jobs, and lead productive lives if they partake in early intensive intervention" (p. 88-89). The participants in this study describe that through intervention, ASD students were able to increase in their abilities to develop friendships and participate in more mainstream classes.

Chapter Summary

This chapter presents the findings from the screening survey and telephone interviews. Administrators willing to participate in the telephone interview indicated

their willingness on the screening survey and were contacted. Three special education administrators who supervise the autism program in their districts were interviewed. They were asked a series of eight questions regarding practices they consider empowering to students with autism. Responses were analyzed to find themes across respondents and questions. It was found that these administrators feel training and social skills instruction are key elements of a program working towards the empowerment of students with autism. They indicated through their responses that increasing functionality of students was also an important aspect of empowerment.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of the Screening Interview

The purpose of this study was to investigate practices which empower students with autism spectrum disorders through the lens of the special education administrator. Qualitative data was collected via a screening survey as well as an in-depth telephone interview. Special education administrators from four districts participated in the screening survey and three participated in the in-depth telephone interview. This chapter is a discussion of those findings.

A screening survey was utilized to provide the researcher with insight into the special education administrators' interpretation of how their district empowers students with autism. Potential participants were asked to take part in a telephone interview at the conclusion of the screening survey. One respondent indicated that they did not wish to participate in the interview. Four stated they were willing to take part in the telephone interview. Surveys were scored through the use of a rubric. The researcher hoped for scores of five which would indicate participants had a foundation and could engage in a more in-depth dialogue concerning the empowering of students with autism. Scores from the screening surveys included zero, two, five, five, and 11. The data revealed that one administrator scored a perfect 11 and another scored the lowest possible. This exposed a significant disparity among administrators participating in the screening survey. Scores of five or higher indicated that those administrators would likely have more to contribute to the in-depth telephone interview.

Discussion of the Telephone Interview

Three special education administrators who supervise programs for students with autism were interviewed. The interview consisted of eight open-ended questions relevant to empowering practices for students with autism. The interviews were transcribed for analysis. Analysis of the transcripts showed connections and patterns that emerged into themes. It was evident, following analysis of the responses, that the administrators support specialized training for staff and students alike. Five of the eight questions yielded responses that acknowledged training in some variety. At least two participants referred to training in four of the eight interview questions.

An individual administrator indicated that their district was concerned about implementing empowering practices for students with autism and provided less in hopes of staying out of trouble. She continued by explaining that her district has no specific methods to address social skills, self monitoring, or executive functioning skills.

All administrators participating in the telephone interview agreed that students with autism could more fully participate in the academic setting through the implementation of empowering practices. There were similarities across responses from all questions. At least two participants, and once all three, agreed on a portion of their response to each of the interview questions. The differences existed when administrators gave specific examples and methods for empowering this population.

Responses indicated that each administrator desired for students with autism in their district to be empowered. Comments indicate personal beliefs that this population can be successful and become functional adults.

Discussion of the Themes

Following an analysis of the data, three themes arose. A discussion of each of these themes follows.

Training

Administrators who participated in this study, along with professionals such as Lords and McGhee (2001) appear to share the opinion that it takes specific and ongoing training on current strategies to be able to support students with autism. Training was the most frequently used or referred to term throughout the transcripts. It was mentioned by each participant as a portion of a response for at least three questions. One administrator reported training as part of five answers given during the interview. This shows the significant level of impact these participants believe training has on the implementation of a program that will empower students with autism. The term training was most frequently used in conjunction with social skills interventions. This indicated that training for social skills interventions would be the highest recommended type of training according to this set of professionals. Other types of training that were recommended for students included natural environment, life skills, and general training about the disability. Training was also referred to as; workshops, on-the-job-training, and staff development. Twice, participants stressed the rigor of the training. Examples of this include “highly trained” and “more in-depth training.” Again, this indicated the significance of training as a major part of a program designed to empower students with autism.

Social Skills Instruction

Social skills instruction resulted as a major tenet of the responses from these professionals. The importance of social skills instruction is confirmed by Trevarthen, Aitken, Papoudi, and Robarts (1998). They stress that social skills instruction should begin as early as possible in children with ASD. They purport that such intervention will minimize difficulties that typically interfere with learning.

Two of the three participants consistently referred to social skills during their responses. One included it five times and another three occasions. The other participant only referred to social skills when directly asked about it. The number of incidents the majority of respondents referred to the use of social skills instruction indicated the strength of its empowering impact. The absence of social skills is one of the characteristics of autism; therefore, it is not surprising that it was mentioned frequently. The two administrators who referred to the positive impact of social skills instruction listed many specific examples. These examples included; video and audio taping social situations, discrete trails, coaching, peers as partners, social skills groups, and lunch bunch. These practices are supported by the review of research. It should be noted that this study discovered one district had no specific practices in place to address social skills.

Increased Functionality

Equally important, the participants in this study commonly referred to the increase in functionality of students with autism as a result of implementation of empowering practices. Some referred to it as participation in a less restrictive setting while others

used it as a way to describe the end results after and generalized into adulthood. Students were described as being able to transition to general education settings once empowered. They were also not as likely to need as much support. Other examples included the ability to express wants and needs. They expressed that increasing the child's ability to communicate in this manner was exceptionally rewarding and empowering to the staff as well as the student. The ability to develop and maintain friendships was also used as an example of increased functioning. The administrators were able to witness and hear student testimony of gaining true friendships and their excitement of being included in activities such as birthday parties. This administrator stated, "That to me is the most powerful piece of evidence that this is important to the program."

Trevarthen, Aitken, Papoudi, and Robarts (1998) explain that "many autistic persons have gained a richer, more rewarding life after receiving sympathetic and well-informed therapy or education early in life" (p. 136). It is the belief of the researcher that this "richer, more rewarding life" is the desired outcome of the interviewed administrators.

Conclusions

The results of this study revealed answers to the research questions. When asked about practices in schools that support the empowerment of students with autism, these administrators agreed that teachers of and students with autism require additional training, students need specialized social skills instruction, and it is requisite that students increase their ability to function in their environment. It was obvious to the researcher that the administrator from the district void of these practices was, nonetheless aware of

their deficiency; however, she lacked the ability to implement what she felt was imperative to an empowering program. She described teachers and students as ‘frustrated’ when instructors did not have the necessary skill sets. She also indicated that her district was not interested in delving into the world of autism support in an effort to stay out of legal turmoil. This participant presented her districts’ approach to supporting students with autism as no different than that of other disabilities.

The findings of this study point out that in order to empower students with autism, districts should invest in training opportunities for both staff and students, incorporate a social skills instruction program, and support the increased functionality of students with autism. This may require additional staff, additional planning time, and/or additional financial resources for full implementation.

Limitations of the Study

Limitations are present within this study. Limitations specific to both survey research and interview research conducted via telephone are recognized by the researcher. An additional limitation is comprised of the personal and professional experiences of those participating in the study. Self selection is yet another limitation identified during the implementation of this research project.

Ryan, Coughlan, and Cronin (2009) describe types of interviews. They purport that interviews are typically conducted in person. This method allows the researcher to gain access to “non-verbal cues through observation of body language, facial expression, and eye contact and thus may be seen to enhanced the interview understanding of what is being said” (p. 310). They do acknowledge a growing trend in conducting interviews via

telephone and email; thus, requiring the researcher to travel less and reducing the cost of research. By conducting this in-depth interview via the telephone, the researcher was not privy to the non-verbal cues of the participants. The researcher did not have access to such non-verbal cues as facial expressions, posture, and body language. If the researcher had received access to these non-verbal cues, it could have led to further questions during the non-structured style of interview that was used.

Questions asked by a researcher have the potential to evoke socially desirable responses. It was possible that some participants stated their knowledge of current issues surrounding autism services instead of their actual experiences. They could also respond by stating what they perceive the researcher hopes to elicit. The researcher attempted to minimize this occurrence, but is aware of its potential as a limitation.

The researcher is aware that the participants have had various experiences with educating students with autism. Many school districts have faced legal action brought on by parents and various organizations in regards to educating students with autism, this may lead to such districts being reluctant to participate in open dialogue and share their experiences on this topic. They may not feel comfortable revealing information about their methods or practices.

Another limitation as described by Potter and Whitaker (2000) is “adults may hold particular attitudes or beliefs which conflict (p. 42).” Personal experiences or beliefs can have an impact on how a special education administrator answers the questions in the screening survey and/or the telephone interview. It is necessary to keep this in mind as research is conducted and findings are analyzed.

This research project contains the limitation of participant self selection. At the onset of the project, the researcher requested the participation of thirty-two school districts. From the thirty-two requests, fifteen permissions were obtained by the researcher. Five administrators from the set of fifteen returned screening surveys. The researcher was able to conduct 3 telephone interviews. One respondent to the screening survey did not wish to participate in the telephone interview. Self-selection was a significant limitation of this study. Ten potential participants neglected to respond to the screening survey. A single administrator declined participation in response to question five of the screening survey.

Implications for Practice

This study's findings have significant implications for practice. These findings can assist administrators in planning for appropriate services to support student with autism on their journey toward empowerment. It is hoped that these results will empower special education administrators to enhance their knowledge of these systems of support and strengthen their desire to implement such practices in their school districts. Providing this support will benefit the student, teachers and para-professionals of students with autism as well as their families. This will be accomplished by increasing the student's ability to function in their environment and enhancing their ability to engage in dialogue as they develop social skills.

Incorporating the characteristics and needs of students with autism at the teacher preparation level would improve the ability for teachers to serve this population of students. One respondent specifically stated that the teachers and students in her district

were frustrated due to the lack of preparation. Lord and McGhee (2001) also addressed personnel preparation as a weaknesses and recommended its implementation. This could be provided for all teacher candidates if it were provided at the exceptional child course level. More in depth preparation could be provided in specific special education courses. Teachers and students should be provided with continual training opportunities, students need direct social skills instruction, and students should have increased functionality as a result of the interventions. There are several factors to consider when providing students with social skills instruction. First, the staff members will require training. Additionally, there will have to be flexibility and creativity in fostering opportunities within the school day. The school day is full of academic rigor, so finding time to implement social skills instruction may be a challenge to all staff members.

Students should be provided the opportunity to practice learned strategies in a variety of contexts to allow for an increase in functionality. As they learn skills, they need to be able to practice them in the general education classroom, lunchroom, and any other location in the school environment. This will promote the fully functional and empowered student. This may also pose scheduling challenges. Other staff members may not be willing to take the risks associated with having student with a disability practice skills in their environment. Administrative support will be needed to promote this practice throughout the school environment.

Students with autism should be valued and viewed as an asset in the educational environment. Teachers and staff should seek opportunities to allow their strengths to work in a positive direction. Part of the definition of autism is that these individuals can

have a limited set of preferred topics. Teachers can allow students to present their in-depth knowledge of their preferred topic, as appropriate, to the class or share what they have researched or developed to the group. This will empower students with autism and serve as an example of what they can contribute to our society.

Implications for Critical Theory

Critical pedagogy created the foundation for this research study and permitted an exploration of practices that allow students with autism to be empowered and liberated. It was encouraging to report that the majority of districts interviewed did have a plan for empowerment and implemented strategies that would support the individual's quest for liberation. However, it was also discovered that not all students with autism are given the opportunity to develop their ability to access their environment or engage in meaningful dialogue. One district reported that they did not support this group on their journey towards empowerment. The lack of such practices should be challenged in the educational environment. This is a clear indication that the work of critical pedagogy continues to be relevant in our society.

The charge of disciples of critical pedagogy is to continue to work towards the abolition of oppression. Autism creates many oppressive factors for an individual. One with autism will struggle to communicate, and will become alienated due to the deficits typical of their condition. Friere (1970) stated that, "In their alienation, the oppressed want at any cost to resemble the oppressors, to imitate them, to follow them," (p. 62). Students with autism experience alienation and oppression repeatedly. They may need to communicate through an alternate route or with prompting, but the oppressor does not

have the patience for their voice to be heard. It is in these situations, the student with autism needs the advocate that critical pedagogy purports.

Implications for Future Research

Given the current statistical prevalence and rise of students with ASD as reported by the Center for Disease Control (2009), schools are faced with educating an increasing number of students with ASD. Therefore, there is a substantial need for administrators to know how to support the empowerment of students with autism.

Results of this study indicate several areas of need for future research. One recommendation is to research and determine the most effective trainings for staff and student participation. Training was found to be an integral part of an empowering program, therefore; effective training should be sought out. Research can reveal these effective trainings and make recommendations to school districts.

Another implication is the identification of the most effective practices for the instruction of social skills. Social skills instruction was a common response among the participants in this study as well as the literature sighted. Social skills deficits are a significant part of this particular disability. The most effective means to provide students with instruction in this area would be a relevant research topic.

Furthermore, the identification of practices possessing the most significant impact for supporting students in increasing their functionality in the school structure and routine and for generalizing said skills in a variety of settings should be researched. In this research project, participants included increased levels of communication as one of the relevant ways to promote this. Further research will reveal additional practices.

Further research should include the formulation of a standard definition of the term functionality. Respondents in this student made reference to increasing functionality in a number of contexts including the transition from special education classes to the general education setting and developing the ability to express wants and needs. As further research is conducted more in-depth questions could assist in formulating a definition of the term. Independence and self reliance should be terms included in questions developed to further define what functionality represents.

Following an analysis of the telephone interviews, additional questions could have provided more insight to empowering practices. It is recommended that further research seek out how district monitor progress and how changes are made to student's plan as a result of the progress monitoring. Additionally, it would be beneficial to know what districts do when students do not respond to interventions. It may also be helpful to have greater insight to how schools schedule interventions such as social skills programs while attempting to address the rigor of the standards.

There should be further studies conducted on how to empower students with autism. Rates of identification of students with autism have been on the rise in recent years. School systems need to equip themselves to serve this population. Many agencies are actively involved in the identification of the best practices for implementation among students with autism. We need to stay aware of the most current recommendation as to promote the empowerment of these unique individuals.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY

Are you familiar with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs request to the National Research Council to form the Committee on Educational Interventions for Children with Autism and their findings?

If so, how have you used these findings to aid in the development of your districts' services for students with autism?

How does your district address social skills deficits of students with autism?

How does your district measure the social success of students with autism? If specific tools or procedures are used, please indicate.

Would you be willing to participate in a brief telephone interview about your districts' autism program and services?

Best Phone Number:

Preferred time of day/day of week:

APPENDIX B

SCREENING SURVEY RUBRIC

Screening Survey Rubric

CATEGORY	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
Clarity of Response					
Includes Examples					
Elaboration of Examples/Ideas					

Total Score:

Fabricated Example

CATEGORY	Question 1	Question 2	Question 3	Question 4	Question 5
Clarity of Response	Responded in the affirmative - 1 point	District does not use findings – 0 points	Reported in the affirmative – 1 point	Reported in the affirmative – 1 point	Responded in the affirmative – 1 point
Includes Examples	N/A	0 points	Use of staff to directly teach social skill lessons – 1 point	Tools included progress monitoring of IEP goals and formal evaluations – 1 point	N/A
Elaboration of Examples/Ideas	N/A	0 points	Stated several models that are used such as itinerant teachers and counselors – 1 point	Evaluations included BASC, Rethink Autism assessment – 1 point	N/A

Total Score: 8

APPENDIX C

TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

How do you, as a special education administrator, support your staff to empower students with autism?

What does your district do differently to empower students with autism from other special education students?

What are the practices in your district to address social skills?

How do you address executive functioning skill deficits?

How do you address self monitoring in regards to sensory needs and maladaptive behaviors?

What are your personal beliefs about the empowerment of students with autism?

What practices would you recommend be sustained?

What program recommendations do you have for empowering students with autism?

APPENDIX D

FREQUENCY RESULTS OF TELEPHONE INTERVIEW

Question #

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Response								
Training	2	3					2	2
Materials	2			1				
Social Skills	1		2			1	2	1
Strategies				2				
Data Collection					3			
Functional Adults			1	1		2	1	
General Education Setting						2		
Blossomed or Wonderful Things Happened						2		

Key

1 = 1 participant

2 = 2 participants

3 = 3 participants

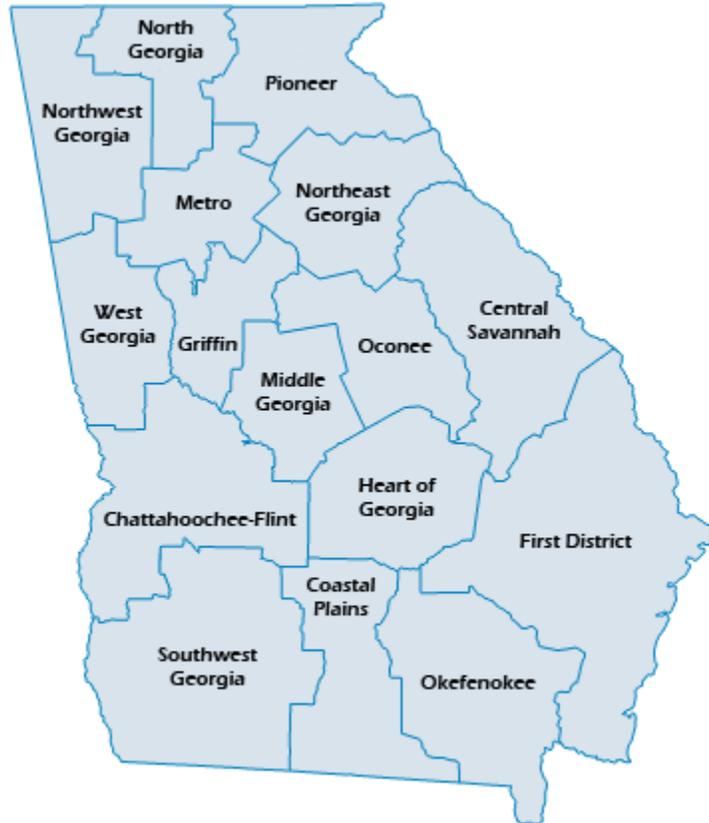
APPENDIX E
GEORGIA RESA INDEX

GEORGIA RESA's	
RESA	Serves the following counties:
Chattahoochee-Flint RESA www.cfresa.org	Chattahoochee, Clay, Crisp, Dooly, Macon, Marion, Muscogee, Quitman, Randolph, Schley, Stewart, Sumter, Talbot, Taylor and Webster
Coastal Plains RESA www.cpresa.org	Ben Hill, Berrien, Brooks, Cook, Echols, Irwin Lanier, Lowndes, Tift and Turner
Central Savannah River Area (CSRA) RESA www.csraresa.org	Burke, Columbia, Emanuel, Glascock, Jefferson, Jenkins, Lincoln, McDuffie, Richmond, Taliaferro, Warren and Wilkes
First District RESA www.fdresa.org	Appling, Bryan, Bulloch, Camden, Candler, Chatham, Effingham, Evans, Glynn, Jeff Davis, Liberty, Long, McIntosh, Screven, Tattnall, Toombs, Wayne and Vidalia City
Griffin RESA www.griffinresa.net	Butts, Fayette, Henry, Lamar, Newton, Pike, Spalding and Thomaston-Upson

<p>Heart of Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.hgresa.org</p>	<p>Bleckley, Dodge, Laurens, Montgomery, Pulaski, Telfair, Truetlen, Wheeler, Wilcox and Dublin City</p>
<p>Metro RESA</p> <p>www.mresa.org</p>	<p>Clayton, Cobb, DeKalb, Douglas, Fulton, Gwinnett and Rockdale</p>
<p>Middle Georgia RESA</p> <p>http://www.mgresa.org</p>	<p>Bibb, Crawford, Houston, Jones, Monroe, Peach and Twiggs</p>
<p>North Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.ngresa.org</p>	<p>Cherokee, Fannin, Gilmer, Murray, Pickens, Whitfield and Dalton City</p>
<p>Northeast Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.negaresa.org</p>	<p>Barrow, Clarke, Elbert, Greene, Jackson, Madison, Morgan, Oconee, Oglethorpe, Walton, Commerce City, Jefferson City and Social Circle City</p>
<p>Northwest Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.nwgaresa.com</p>	<p>Bartow, Catoosa, Chattooga, Dade, Floyd, Gordon, Haralson, Paulding, Polk, Walker, Bremen City, Calhoun City, Cartersville City, Chickamauga City, Rome City and Trion City</p>

<p>Oconee RESA</p> <p>www.oconeeresa.org</p>	<p>Baldwin, Hancock, Jasper, Johnson, Putnam, Washington and Wilkinson</p>
<p>Okefenokee RESA</p> <p>www.okresa.org</p>	<p>Atkinson, Bacon, Brantley, Charlton, Clinch, Coffee, Pierce and Ware</p>
<p>Pioneer RESA</p> <p>www.pioneer.resa.k12.ga.us</p>	<p>Banks, Dawson, Forsyth, Franklin, Habersham, Hall, Hart, Lumpkin, Rabun, Stephens, Towns, Union, White and Gainesville City</p>
<p>Southwest Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.sw-georgia.resa.k12.ga.us</p>	<p>Baker, Calhoun, Colquitt, Decatur, Dougherty, Early, Grady, Lee, Miller, Mitchell, Seminole, Terrell, Thomas, Worth, Pelham City and Thomasville City</p>
<p>West Georgia RESA</p> <p>www.garesa.org</p>	<p>Carroll, Coweta, Harris, Heard, Meriweather, Troup and Carrollton City</p>

APPENDIX F
GEORGIA RESA MAP



APPENDIX G

DISTRICT CONSENT FOR RESEARCH

To the Superintendent of _____ School District,

I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University in the field of Curriculum Studies. I am researching how schools empower students with autism spectrum disorders. I would like to further the discussion of what educators are actively doing while working to increase the success of this population of students in our schools.

The special education administrator who most closely supervises the autism program is asked to complete a screening survey to be delivered via email. In this screening survey, your special education administrator will be asked if they are willing to participate in a brief telephone survey if they are selected. Screening surveys will be analyzed. Respondents with the highest rubric scores and who indicate their willingness to participate in the telephone interview will be contacted to participate in the telephone survey. All participants will remain anonymous.

Participants in this study include the special education administrator who most closely supervises the autism program from each school district in 4 RESA districts. The selected RESA districts include Middle Georgia RESA, Oconee RESA, Heart of Georgia RESA, and Griffin RESA. Participants are not required to participate in this project and may decide not to respond to the survey or participate in the telephone interview. There are no incentives, risks, or benefits for participation in this research study.

Your district has the right to ask questions in reference to this study. Should you have questions, please contact me or the faculty advisor supervising this project. Contact information can be found at the end of this consent form.

If you agree to allow me to include your special education administrator in this research project, please sign the bottom of this consent form. Your consent to allow this study to be carried out with information from your district is very much appreciated.

Sincerely,

Jenny McClintic

Title of Project: Empowering Students With Autism

Principal Investigator: Jenny McClintic
111 Chris Drive
Hawkinsville, GA 31036
478-319-1176 cell
jenny.mcclintic@windstream.net

Faculty Advisor: Grigory Dmitriyev
Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading
Georgia Southern University
P. O. Box 8144
Statesboro, GA 30460-8144
912-681-5545 office
gregodmi@georgiasouthern.edu

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

Your signature below indicates that you permit Jenny McClintic to conduct the above described research project in your school district. Please return one copy of this form and keep a copy for your records.

Signature of District Administrator

Date

For questions or concerns about your rights you may write or call:
Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Georgia Southern University
P. O. Box 8005
Statesboro, GA 30460-8005
912-681-5465

APPENDIX H

PARTICIPANT REQUEST LETTER

Dear Special Education Administrator,

I am a doctoral student at Georgia Southern University in the field of Curriculum Studies. I am conducting my dissertation on how schools empower students with autism spectrum disorders. I would like to further the discussion of what educators are actively doing while working to increase the success of this population of students in our schools. Participants for this study include the special education administrator most closely supervising the autism program in each school district in the RESA Districts of Griffin RESA, Oconee RESA, Middle Georgia RESA, and Heart of Georgia RESA. Your superintendent has given permission for your participation.

Participation in this study includes the completion of a screening survey to be delivered via email. Your participation in a brief telephone interview to obtain a more in-depth analysis of your autism program will be requested. Through the completion of this survey and interview you will be able to share what your district is doing to help students with autism have a successful experience. Your responses will be kept confidential. Neither your name nor your districts' name will be used in the results of this research study.

If you are not the administrator most closely supervising your district's autism program, please forward this survey to the appropriate administrator.

If you have any questions or concerns about this research project before you decide to participate, you may contact me at 478-319-1176 or jenny.mcclintic@windstream.net.

Electing to participate in this study is implied by accessing the screening survey.

Participation in the telephone interview will be indicated on the screening survey.

Jenny McClintic
111 Chris Drive
Hawkinsville, GA 31036
478-319-1176 cell
jenny.mcclintic@windstream.net

Faculty Advisor:
Grigory Dmitriyev
Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading
Georgia Southern University
P. O. Box 8144
Statesboro, GA 30460-8144
912-681-5545 office
gregodmi@georgiasouthern.edu

APPENDIX I
IRB APPROVAL

Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs		
Institutional Review Board (IRB)		
Phone: 912-478-0843		Veazey Hall 2021
		P.O. Box 8005
Fax: 912-478-0719	IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu	Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Jenny McClintic
Grigory Dmitriyev
Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Vice President for Research and Dean of the Graduate College

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Initial Approval Date: June 30, 2011

Expiration Date: June 30, 2012

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H11440** and titled "**Empowering Students with Autism: An Investigation of School Practices Through the Lens of Special Education Administrator**," it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to a maximum of **15** subjects.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

If at the end of this approval period there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period. Total project approval on this application may not exceed 36 months. If additional time is required, a new application may be submitted for continuing work. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,



Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer