Article

Earning Your Way into General Education: Perceptions about Autism Influence Classroom Placement

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Abstract: The language used by teachers, school staff, and parents to talk about autistic students can send either positive or negative messages to other school staff, parents, and all students—with or without autism—about autistic students. Ultimately, these messages also extend to autistic people. Using qualitative focus group methods, we talked to parents, teachers, administrators, and other school staff to better understand how people speak about the inclusion of autistic students in general education classrooms in public schools. Overall, we found that many of our participants thought (1) autistic students need to earn their way into general education classrooms, unlike their peers without disabilities, (2) segregating students with disabilities away from their peers without disabilities is acceptable, and sometimes preferable, in school settings, and (3) there is power in inclusive education opportunities for students with and without disabilities in school settings. The findings from this study suggest that inclusive opportunities for autistic students were largely driven by stakeholder mindsets. These results should encourage school staff to think about and reflect on how they talk about autistic students in inclusive settings with the ultimate goal of creating more welcoming inclusive environments for autistic students.

Keywords: autism; autism spectrum disorder; inclusion; inclusive education

1. Introduction

How can one reasonably expect autistic students to succeed in inclusive general education classrooms if their teachers and principals do not believe they can? Teacher beliefs are a strong predictor of student achievement and academic success [1,2]. There is limited research on the beliefs expressed by teachers, parents, administrators, and other educational professionals when talking about inclusive opportunities for autistic students in the public school setting. However, the language used by these educational stakeholders can send powerful messages to other school staff, parents, and students—with and without disabilities—about the value, worth, and belonging of autistic students in public school and general education settings. The current study will explore the messages communicated by educational stakeholders about autistic students in general education settings by analyzing the language they use to discuss this topic.

In the 2012–2013 school year, Sunnyside School District (a pseudonym used throughout this paper) served 12,225 autistic students through a variety of service provisions [3,4]. Amongst a continuum of many possibilities, special education placement for autistic students in this district can include general education classrooms with "designated instruction and supports", Special Day Classes (SDC) specifically for autistic students, or SDC for

students of various disabilities [4]. Within each of these placements, students can qualify for and receive a variety of designated instructional services.

In the United States (US), the services provided by the school to a child with a disability should be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress, appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" [5] (p. 3). Therefore, regardless of placement, students must be provided meaningful and appropriate services to support their educational achievement. Under the US Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [6], students with disabilities, including autism, are eligible to receive both special education services and "related services" such as transportation, occupational therapy, and speech-language therapy, among several others. Type, duration, and frequency of both special education and related services will vary from student to student, based on the individual profile of strengths and support needs.

In inclusive models of special education, students with disabilities (e.g., autism, learning disability, intellectual disability) are educated alongside their non-disabled peers within the walls of the general education classroom, purportedly gaining much academically, behaviorally, and socially [7,8]. In the Fall of 2021, within the United States, 95% of all students with disabilities were served in a 'regular school' [9]. Of those students, 67% spent at least 80% of their school day inside the general education classroom [9]. Due to the federal mandate requiring students with disabilities to be served in their least restrictive environments, across the nation there is an increasing move towards more inclusive models of education to effectively engage students with disabilities [10,11].

Understanding what educational stakeholders say and believe about the ability of autistic children to be educated in inclusive settings will help researchers to know what disconnect, if any, exists between legal mandates and the beliefs that drive—or do not—the inclusive possibilities for and academic achievement of autistic students in public schools.

1.1. Teacher Perspectives

Many teachers support inclusion because they believe that greater heterogeneity of the school and classroom community creates more opportunities for interactions and leads to understanding and acceptance of individual differences [12]. Although most teachers indicated they valued inclusive education, in the same study, a vast majority of teachers (89%) also agreed that students with disabilities are best taught by special education teachers and not by general education teachers [12]. General education teachers note a number of stressors involved in teaching an inclusive class [12–14]. These stressors range from new and complex behavior management challenges because of having students with disabilities in a general education classroom to a lack of disability-specific training and administrator support [12–16]. Teachers reported confusion about their role in and knowledge of strategies to support students with many needs [13]. Teachers report that although they appreciate collaboration with specialists, they need more support and innovative solutions to common student-related challenges, such as what they perceive as unpreparedness for grade-level material and poor school attendance [17]. Although educators value the pedagogical belief of inclusion, the implementation challenges teachers face are often blamed on the students, using deficit-oriented language toward students with disabilities [16].

1.2. Paraeducator Perspective

Very few studies have explored the perceptions of inclusion from the perspective of paraeducators. Within the literature, there is no consensus on the inclusive paraprofessional experience; some paraprofessionals feel confident and prepared in their positions as inclusive classroom aides [18], and some feel quite the opposite [19,20]. These competing perceptions highlight the importance of soliciting the opinions of all educational stakeholders regarding inclusive education for students with disabilities.

Similar to teachers, paraprofessionals who support students in the classroom also believe that inclusion is valuable for students with and without autism and were able to name specific benefits [20], including social modeling for autistic students and increased

tolerance and academic accommodations for students without disabilities. However, paraprofessionals also believed that inclusion was not the best option for all students. Some felt that autistic students with more extensive support needs would be best served in segregated settings [20]. Similar to teachers, paraprofessionals also noted the negative effects of students' challenging behaviors on others, as well as the lack of funding and resources for appropriate support [20].

In contrast, there are situations in which paraprofessionals feel confident when supporting students with diverse educational needs. In one particular study, paraprofessionals saw their role as supportive on three levels: emotional, curricular, and relational [18]. They identified their primary responsibilities as helping students focus on schoolwork, fostering independence, and increasing participation [18]. All participants "spoke confidently" and "with clarity" regarding their role within the inclusive classroom [18] (p. 508). Despite their confidence, the researchers note that participants could not name specific learning strategies to support scaffolding [18]. While it is important that paraeducators feel supported and confident in their role, it is equally as important that they are provided professional development opportunities to learn and then provide appropriate supports for autistic students [21].

Undefined relationships between paraprofessionals and teachers can make addressing challenging behavior in inclusive classrooms particularly difficult. In one study, paraeducators felt that a boundary existed between teachers and the paraeducators and it was important for paraeducators not to cross this boundary [19]. When addressing challenging behavior, paraeducators felt that they were vital in managing behavior, but also needed to support the teacher without undermining them. This led to the paraprofessionals feeling a lack of autonomy and authority when responding to challenging behavior. Paraprofessionals in this study also identified a lack of role clarity and confusion about their 'place' in the classroom.

1.3. Administrator Perspective

Previously conducted studies have explored the perceptions of inclusion from the perspective of school administrators. Naraian and colleagues [22] found consensus among administrators that inclusion for students with disabilities first starts with their placement in a general education setting. Within the general education setting, school leaders identified collaboratively taught classrooms as essential to inclusion. In the inclusive models described by the administrators in this study, two teachers develop and provide appropriate supports and accommodations to all students in the classroom regardless of ability. Additionally, school leaders have identified inclusion as a "whole-school process" dependent on strong school organization and respect [16] (p. 1126). To be fully inclusive, administrators in this study contended that the child must feel a sense of belonging in both academic and social settings.

Perceptions held by teachers and administrators on inclusion differ. With the aim of understanding the changing attitudes towards inclusion over a 3-year period, Chepel and colleagues [23] found that administrators personally felt inclusion was important in a school setting more than teachers. This trend was present at the start of the study and maintained throughout. Despite seemingly more willingness to include students with disabilities, some school leaders share a concern with teachers about including students with significant needs in inclusive programs and settings [16]. Both principals and teachers expressed concern that inclusion may not be the appropriate setting for all students and educating students with significant disabilities in inclusive models may negatively impact other students learning in the classroom [16].

1.4. Parent Perspective

Similar to paraprofessionals, the parent perspective of inclusion in the literature is limited and varied [22,24]. Parent perceptions of inclusion differ based on their expectations of the school [22]. Parents support or reject inclusion for a myriad of reasons [24]. Some

parents feel like students with behavioral challenges would benefit from peer models in an inclusive classroom, while other parents want their child to have "special teaching" in a more restrictive setting [24]. Additionally, some parents felt that inclusive classrooms could support the academic growth of a child with disabilities, while others thought they simply could not learn from the lessons presented in the inclusive setting. Despite some hesitations about inclusive models and services, when children make progress, parents have more positive views of inclusion [25].

Previous literature has explored perspectives of various stakeholders regarding inclusive education. However, these studies did not specifically focus on autistic students of color in a low-income school district and may not have included multiple stakeholder perceptions in the same study. The current study explores how various educational stakeholders speak about autistic students and inclusive educational opportunities for these students in a low-income district. This study is guided using the following research questions: What messages are school personnel and parents sending about the ability of an autistic child to thrive in a general education classroom? What underlying messages do their words ultimately convey?

Prior studies on inclusion either do not report socio-economic status and racial or ethnic demographics [12,13,20] or focus primarily on a White and/or affluent demographic [18,21,26]. Our study, however, took place in an under-resourced and underfunded school district, in which the majority of students qualify for free or reduced breakfast/lunch programs and are students of color. This study served as a preamble to conducting an intervention study based on what stakeholders thought was important for autistic students (i.e., social skills).

2. Materials and Methods

This study explores how various educational stakeholders speak about autistic students and inclusive educational opportunities for these students.

2.1. Participants

To recruit participants for the initial study, the research team first contacted a district-level administrator who oversaw autism programs throughout the district and with whom a relationship was already established. Per the research team's request, the district-level administrator identified schools with multiple autism programs and where most students qualified for free and reduced lunch, the latter being a proxy for low socio-economic status. Three school sites were selected. Notably, many autistic students across the district were bussed to these three school sites because of the autism programs offered by the schools. The study received IRB approval from the university and district prior to the start of recruitment.

After selecting the three school sites, the research team met with school-level administrators at each of the schools. Research personnel provided recruitment flyers to the school administrators who distributed them to staff and parents. Additionally, school administrators engaged in other site-level recruitment to gain participants for the study.

Parents who identified as the primary caregiver of at least one autistic child, who was currently attending one of three participating schools, met inclusion criteria. Teachers, paraprofessionals, and related service providers needed to have experience working with autistic students for at least 1 year to meet inclusion criteria. Finally, administrators, both at the school level and the district level, who were involved in special education programs serving autistic students, were included in the study.

The sample consisted of 54 educators and 14 parents. Of these 54 educators, 25 were classroom teachers, 17 were paraprofessionals, and 5 were related service providers (e.g., speech and language therapist, occupational therapist). The educator sample also included seven administrators from either the district office or individual schools (see Table 1).

Table 1. Sample Description.

Characteristic	Educators, *n* = 54	Parents, *n* = 14
Ethnicity	Latinx (*n* = 24) African American (*n* = 2) Asian (*n* = 1) White (*n* = 18) Other (*n* = 9)	Latinx (*n* = 14) African American (*n* = 0) Asian (*n* = 0) White (*n* = 0) Other (*n* = 0)
Median Age (years)	40.7	35.4
Gender	Female (*n* = 48) Male (*n* = 6)	Female (*n* = 13) Male (*n* = 1)

The sample in this study was primarily composed of female participants, both in the parent focus groups and the educator focus groups. Specifically, only one male parent attended and participated in a focus group session. By design, this research focused on under-resourced, urban settings, where the student population largely identifies as Hispanic or Latinx, as consistent with the district population. Each of the three schools where focus groups and interviews took place are located in low-income areas and have a majority Latinx student population (>95%). Therefore, the parent sample, containing only Latinx parents, is largely representative of the student population in these schools.

2.2. Measures

Participants in the study either participated in an in-person, semi-structured focus group interview or an individual interview. Interview questions were designed to last approximately 2 h. Participants were asked interview questions addressing three topics (See Appendix A). First, researchers asked participants to describe the programs and services for autistic students. Participants were also asked about specific strengths and challenges related to their communities, academics, and daily routines for autistic children. Finally, participants were asked to provide ideas to improve the current practices for autistic students.

2.3. Procedures

This study is a secondary analysis of transcription data as part of a larger research project. Interviewers conducted a total of nine focus groups and seven individual interviews in Sunnyside School District. The research team conducted semi-structured focus groups at three school sites and the district office at Sunnyside during the 2012–2013 school year. When necessary, researchers allowed for individual interviews at the three school sites. Individuals were selected for interviews based on their unavailability to attend the focus group or because they were the only staff member in their role willing to participate in the study (e.g., Speech and Language Pathologist). Educator focus groups contained only participants who shared the same role (e.g., paraprofessional groups were separate from teacher groups). Each focus group consisted of 4 to 10 participants and lasted approximately an hour and a half. All educator focus groups were facilitated in English, while all parent focus groups were held in Spanish. Focus groups and interviews were transcribed verbatim for a qualitative analysis. Participants all received a $25 gift card for their participation. Participants had access to childcare and public transportation vouchers provided by the research team. Prior to focus group and interviews taking place, the research team successfully sought IRB approval from UCLA and the participating district. All participants signed informed consent forms.

A facilitator from the research team led the focus group and interview conversations using a discussion guide. The facilitators included five females (one White, one Black fluent in Spanish, two Latinx fluent in Spanish, and two Asian American). At the start of the focus group or interview, the facilitator provided information on the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. Participants were notified of the voluntary nature

of their participation and the confidentiality measures being taken by the research team. Before asking the focus group questions, the facilitator reviewed the rules of the focus group session (e.g., use first names only, do not put others down, etc.) with participants. After brief introductions of the facilitator, participants, and translator, if necessary, the facilitator began asking pre-formulated questions of the participants using the discussion guide. Facilitators started with broad, open-ended questions and then asked more specific, probing questions to have participants elaborate on their original comments.

Each focus group session and interview were audiotaped and later transcribed by a professional transcription company. Spanish transcripts were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated to English by a member of the research team who observed and took notes during parent focus group sessions. After receiving the transcripts, the facilitators checked them for accuracy.

2.4. Data Analysis

The first author independently coded the deidentified transcripts from the focus groups and individual interviews. To confirm the coding validity, a second coder who conducted some of the focus groups from the original study [27] double coded 3 of the 16 transcripts (18% of total transcripts), each representing a different stakeholder group (i.e., one parent transcript, one paraprofessional transcript, and one teacher transcript). This aligns with the literature recommending that a second coder codes 10–25% of transcript data to ensure inter-coder reliability [28].

Using a modified grounded theory approach, the first author read each transcript and then began the process of open coding. Open coding yielded eleven initial codes to deductively code the entirety of the transcripts. While using the deductively developed codes, the first author began memoing as additional patterns began to emerge from the data. From the patterns found within the memos, two additional codes were added to the codebook and used when coding the transcripts. Throughout this process, the second coder was a collaborative partner, particularly in helping to develop and define codes.

Ultimately, a total of thirteen codes were used to code the transcripts, line-by-line. For this study specifically, two codes, "Inclusion" and "Disability Messages", were analyzed deeply. Using the sentences and phrases provided by participants related to "Disability Messages" and "Inclusion", "significant statements" were identified [28] (p. 79). In this study, significant statements were considered participant quotations from the transcripts that allowed the research team to understand perceptions of inclusive services for autistic students.

After all transcripts were coded, the research questions were narrowed and revised to the version in the current study. All coded statements from both the "Inclusion" and "Disability Messages" codes were reviewed, and patterns began emerging from the data. Four patterns became clear through reviewing the coded statements. Four themes were developed out of the four patterns. However, theme four was collapsed into a sub-theme of theme two, as there was substantial overlap. Three themes ultimately emerged from the data analysis process that directly answered the research questions. Using a table—one column for each of the three themes—all significant statements from both the "Inclusion" and "Disability Messages" codes were clustered into each of the three themes. Some of the significant statements related to one theme, while others related to two or all three of the themes. Ultimately, all three of the themes contained significant statements from both the "Disability Messages" and "Inclusion" codes. Within each theme, sub-themes emerged when a pattern of statements clustered into the theme was particularly salient. The three themes and their sub-themes provided the necessary data needed to develop various theories about stakeholder beliefs of autistic students and their assumed ability to access and benefit from inclusive educational opportunities.

3. Results

Three major themes were identified across the sample schools from Sunnyside School District: (1) autistic students need to earn their way into general education classrooms, unlike their peers without disabilities, (2) segregating students with disabilities away from their peers without disabilities is acceptable, and sometimes preferable, in school settings, and (3) there is power in inclusive education opportunities for students with and without disabilities in school settings.

3.1. Autistic Students Must Earn Access to General Education Settings

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, access to general education was repeatedly considered a reward, instead of a right, that autistic students must earn by displaying "good" behavior and academic competence. In comparison, students without disabilities always have a right to general education, despite their challenging behaviors or academic gaps (see Figure 1).
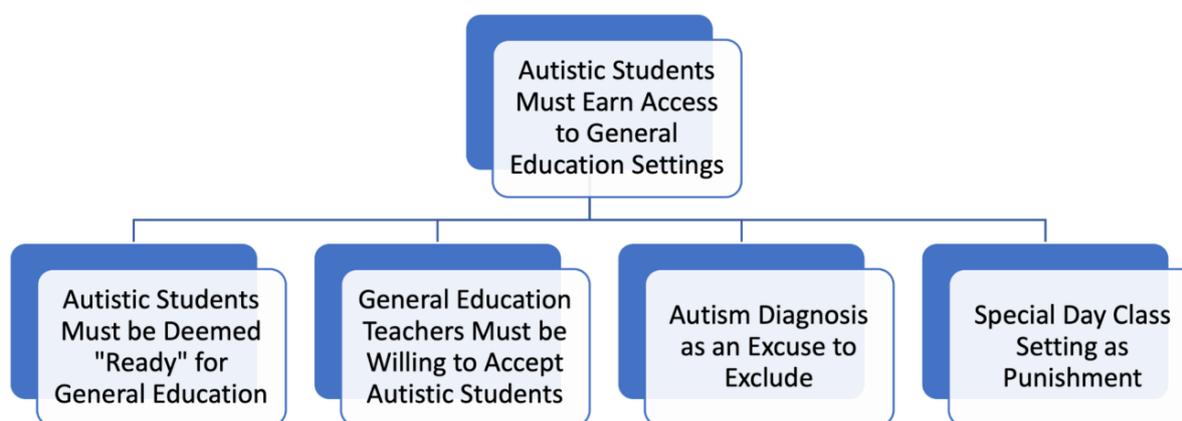
Figure 1. Theme "Perception that Autistic Students Must Earn Access to General Education Settings" and subthemes.

3.1.1. Autistic Students Need to Be Ready

Whether behaviorally, academically, or both, school staff frequently noted the importance of autistic students being "ready" before being included in general education classrooms. The definition of "ready" was clearly subjective and varied from person to person. School staff spoke about how students mainstreamed during subjects that were deemed their strengths or if they had proven themselves to be academically competent. One teacher shared, "If we do have any students that are high enough to go into the general education classroom, then we just modify the curriculum there. But, right now, I don't have any students that are mainstream".

At one school, if a child was not deemed "ready", they were still able to mainstream, but not at their grade level, as that would be a "waste of time" for the student. Speaking about an upper elementary student, the Assistant Principal overseeing Special Education stated, "… For maybe language arts, that child may have to go, maybe to…you know, first-grade class, or second-grade class".

Across the three school sites, autistic students who were seen as having distracting or disruptive behaviors were unwelcome in general education classrooms. School-level administrators, paraprofessionals, and teachers, both general education and special education, agreed that autistic students with challenging behaviors did not belong in the general education setting. A special education teacher shared the following:

> But at some point, we had to look at who he was, and I can't, just to say it on a piece of paper, that he's there, what was, he was gonna mess up her class, right. Hurt her or one of the other children.

Even if an autistic student is allowed to mainstream in a general education classroom, their access to general education remains tenuous. Repeatedly, paraprofessionals noted how they would remove autistic students from general education classes for behavior-related issues. One paraprofessional noted, "I had to pull them out from the second-grade class because they were being a distraction". The behaviors for which autistic students would be removed from general education classrooms ranged from autistic students "distracting" general education peers by walking around or making noises to aggressive behavior, such as throwing chairs or pencils at other students.

3.1.2. General Education Teachers Must Be Ready

Another consistent theme throughout the focus groups and interviews was the necessity for the general education teachers to be "ready". In this context, "ready" predominately refers to both a teacher's positive attitude about receiving autistic students in their classrooms and sufficient training and assistance. For many general education teachers, this means that autistic students sent to their classrooms to mainstream must come with support, often in the form of a special education paraprofessional. If a student does not have what the general education teacher deems adequate support, the child is likely to be turned away from the general education setting. One general education teacher notes "The year before, I got into trouble because I wasn't mainstreaming. 'Cause I didn't have the support", stressing that autistic students cannot mainstream unless the general education teacher feels supported.

Special education staff repeatedly raised concerns over general education teachers needing to be convinced to accept autistic students into their classrooms. Some staff believe negative attitudes are due to a lack of training. An Assistant Principal overseeing the school's Special Education program noted "But I think a lot of teachers feel ill-prepared or they feel like, 'Oh, I'm a general ed teacher. I don't deal with [students with disabilities].'" Other staff speculate that general education teachers are simply opposed, pedagogically or otherwise, to students with disabilities learning in general education classrooms. When speaking about the difficulty in trying to get an autistic student mainstreamed, a paraprofessional states

> You've got to ask them a bunch of times, and then you have to go to administration, and then administration has to tell them, 'Hey, it's not a choice, you know? You have to do it.' And, then they'll do it.

Paraprofessionals from a different school echoed a similar sentiment:

> Para 1: Well, some of the teachers are, they, if they ask them if we can go in from mainstream, they're like, they're [General Education Teachers] rolling their eyes, and then, then they allow us to come in. But even then...

> Para 2: But they have to.

3.1.3. Autism Diagnosis as Excuse to Exclude

Throughout this district, students with an eligibility of autism could be excluded from general education classrooms simply because of this special education eligibility, without the opportunity to 'earn' the access to general education. A district administrator recounts the following:

> The last five cases that I've worked on, were parents who didn't want the eligibility of autism, and the school was trying to impose it. Because they just wanted them out of the general ed and into a Special Day Class.

Being labeled as a student receiving special education services can also have other implications for exclusion. Beyond being unable to gain access to the general education classroom, paraprofessionals at one school note that the Special Day Classes are physically segregated from the rest of the campus. When asked about how their program could be improved, a paraprofessional states

> For us, it would be more, more... our classrooms would be better if our classrooms would be combined with the general population... 'cause we're segregated... we're not part of the rest of the building. We're by ourselves.

3.1.4. Special Day Class as Punishment

For students without disabilities, general education settings are the default. However, even students without disabilities can, at times, find themselves in segregated, special education classrooms. At least one focus group from each of the three schools noted that sending students without disabilities to Special Day Classrooms was a punishment tactic used by general education teachers or school administrators. Students without disabilities were sent to Special Day Classrooms for "community service" after doing "something wrong" or because they were "not behaving" in their general education class. Paraprofessionals from two of the three schools spoke about their school's participation in this practice, while a parent from the third school spoke of this happening to her child at his previous school. One of the paraprofessionals explained the following:

> They [students without disabilities] don't learn anything because they're here, because they're being punished, okay? And they see it as punishment. They take it, take it as punishment, and most of them, when you hear them talking outside, they go, 'Oh, we have to go to the [slur for person with an intellectual disability] class.' That's the first thing you hear.

While students with disabilities must earn their way into general education, Special Day Classes are seen as a punishment for students without disabilities.

3.2. Segregation Is Acceptable

As will be explored below, a commonly held belief among Sunnyside District educational stakeholders is that it is preferable, or at least acceptable, for students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers to remain in separate classrooms (see Figure 2). Their words indicate that students with disabilities belong in Special Day Classes, while students without disabilities belong in general education classes.
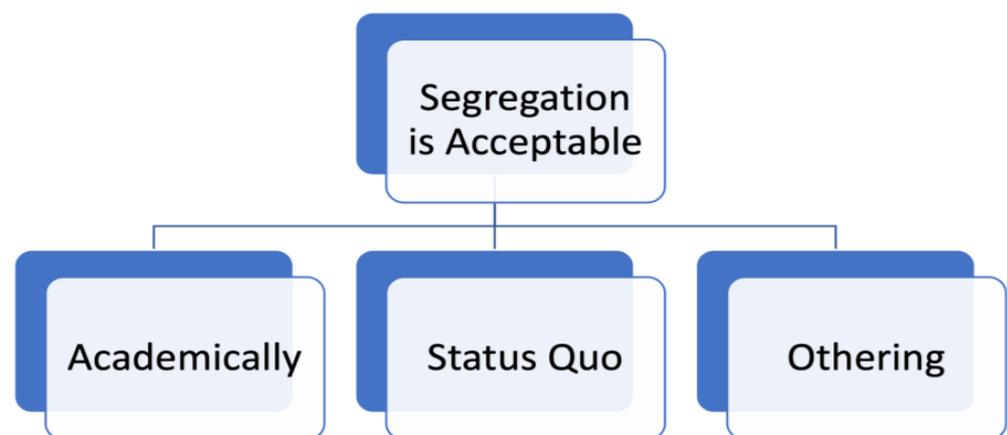
Figure 2. Theme "Perception that Segregation is Acceptable" and subthemes.

3.2.1. Academically

At times, parents and school staff in Sunnyside agreed that segregated settings were superior for autistic children. One parent reiterated multiple times throughout the focus group that she preferred the Special Day Class setting for her child, saying "But our school has a better program for children with autism, because our children have a special class, only for children with autism. And this is really good!" At one school, the principal thinks autistic students might not even belong on his campus, let alone in general education classrooms:

> Um, I've had, you know, the thought: 'Wouldn't these students with autism do better in a smaller school?' You know, for instance, where the administrator, um, or the administrative team could give more time to their needs? And not just administration, but I think the smaller setting would be better, but that's not the policy (laughs), okay?

Despite the barriers autistic students can face trying to be included in general education classrooms, sometimes, an autistic student will be included in the general education setting. However, the student may continue to remain segregated from their non-disabled peers, now within the walls of the general education classroom. A general education teacher spoke about the difficulty he experienced with including an autistic student, saying

> My students were very accepting, and you know, they were very good with. . . with the student that came in, but because of the number of students I have, he was sitting by himself, not part of a group, not that I do a lot of group work anymore. Uh. . .But, it, it was hard to include him, hm. . . logistically.

3.2.2. Status Quo

In some ways, the segregation of students without disabilities from their peers with disabilities is a passive act perpetuating the status quo within special education across the country. At each of the three schools in this study, Special Day Classes are seen as programmatic necessities. At one school, there were no autistic students with less restrictive "Resource" services, where students spend most of their day in general education with special education staff pushing-in to the student's general education classroom to provide additional support. In Sunnyside District, there is no universal preschool. Although some inclusive preschools do exist within Sunnyside, many will have only Special Day Classes and serve only students with disabilities. Therefore, in this study, autistic students as young as four years old were in special autism programs and were without access to the general education classroom or their non-disabled peers in an inclusive setting. As a principal at one school states, "So a student who's in kindergarten can be here through fifth grade being served in a special day program or a general education program". Some autistic students continue to be segregated in Special Day Classes because they always have been.

Even special education paraprofessionals, who had previously spoken about the persistent need to convince general education teachers to include autistic students, also expressed the importance of Special Day Classes for teaching alternate curriculum: "That's why they're in these [Special Day] Classrooms, because if they were able to learn core curriculum they would not be here."

3.2.3. Exclusion and Othering

While segregation of autistic students happened most frequently in academic classroom settings, autistic students and special education staff members were also regularly 'othered' on their campuses. Per Rohleder [29] (p. 1306), "'othering' refers to the process whereby an individual or groups of people attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them". Throughout the focus groups, teachers and paraprofessionals described the concept of othering when they spoke of being forgotten about or believing their administrators thought less of their program and students than general education teachers, classrooms, and students. One group of paraprofessionals explained the apparent lack of attention given to the special education program by administrators at their school by noting the following:

> Para 1: I would say, well, part of it's kind of confusing, too, because administration, they won't give us a hard time. But at the same time, they won't do anything.

Para 2: They're not supportive.

Para 1: They're not supportive in a way that if we need help, or we need something, like they won't do it. But, you know, the other hand is, they won't give us a hard time.

Teachers at another school explained how they had to work with parents to fundraise and obtain technology for their Special Day Classrooms:

Teacher 1: "But, they also told us that we weren't gonna get any funds. So... that's why we did a lot of fundraising".

Teacher 2: "And, our parents really helped push to get technology in our classrooms".

A teacher at the same school, spoke about how they waited for months to receive the support staff promised to them:

Teacher 1: "That was why I had to go above him [administrator] to the higher people, to get my third [paraprofessional], 'cause I asked last year, and I didn't get anybody for three months. And, I asked him to take care of it, and I never got anybody, so then I finally talked to somebody higher up.

When asked where on the list of priorities a school principal ranks their autism programs, the Assistant Principal (AP) at the school said "I said it's low... I don't know how else to say it".

From district administrators to paraprofessionals, multiple school staff members across the three study sites provided numerous examples of othering—from students with disabilities not being invited to whole-school assemblies ("Like they don't call us for assemblies") to Special Day Classrooms not having necessary educational materials for months at a time ("We didn't have curriculum for the first couple months, in our classroom. We didn't have books... for months.").

3.3. Power of Inclusion

Despite beliefs that autistic students do not always belong in general education settings, educational stakeholders within the study also held views that speak to the power of inclusion for students with and without disabilities (see Figure 3).
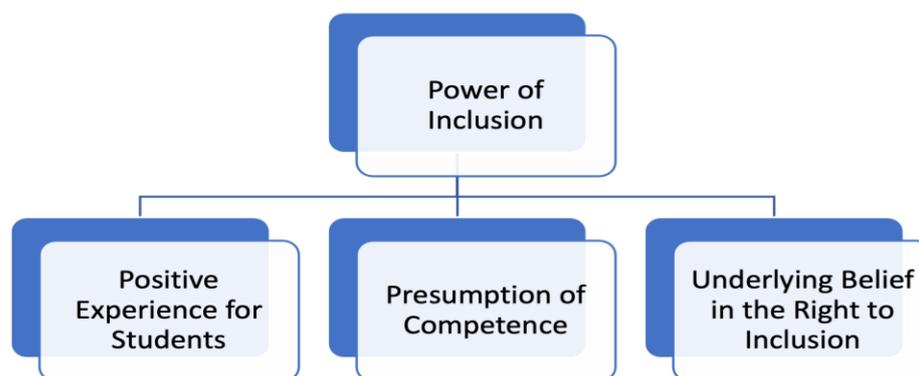
Figure 3. Theme "Perception of the Power of Inclusion" and subthemes.

3.3.1. Positive Experience for Students

Across all school sites in this study, participants noted the positive impact of inclusion for all students, both socially and academically. Speaking about an autistic student who is included in general education for one subject, a special education teacher shared the following:

He's a really friendly kid. He's extremely talkative, you know. He's, he's, he tends, he has learned to become more social... kids, all the time, say, "Hi Sean! Hi Sean!" Do you guys ever see that? ... Because there's even some kids that will high five... "High five, high five!"

In addition to increased positive social interactions for autistic students, teachers also noted the impact inclusion had on students without disabilities:

Edward... who was, who was diagnosed in second grade. I mean, he's never, he's never been in, in a special ed. He's got an IEP [Individualized Education Program], but he's always been with a general ed teacher, and you know, the children, the children at this school are truly kind. They're nice... My students will stand up for, get in a fight over... you know, if somebody's picking on their classmate, or you know, somebody, that's just their nature... So, I think it's great to have a lot of [students receiving special education services]. I think it's good for the gen ed kids.

Academically, educational stakeholders shared anecdotes of autistic students thriving within inclusive settings. A paraprofessional recounts a successful academic moment for an autistic student in a general education mathematics setting:

In fourth grade, like I'm impressed ...with one of the students, this particular teacher she, she is plotting points, so instead of just making it boring and just giving numbers, she found out a way of like things that the students like, in general, and, and it's, it's Angry Birds. So, when they're plotting points, they're coming up with this picture, the Angry Birds picture, and they're really excited about it. And, I was working with this student with autism, and he's, he's there. He, he already completed most of the stuff, almost at the same time as the other children.

While many educational stakeholders still share concerns over and hesitancy about including autistic students in general education classrooms, stakeholders across all three school sites provided examples of students benefiting socially or academically from being educated in a general education classroom.

3.3.2. Presumption of Competence

Juxtaposed to the negative messages school staff and parents shared about the ability of an autistic child to excel academically and behaviorally in a general education classroom are more supportive and positive ones. At times, autistic students were praised as competent and able to succeed in a general education classroom. Sometimes, school staff expressed the competence of autistic students by comparing them to students without disabilities. A group of paraprofessionals recounts, "Para 1: And they go eventually, two of our kids Para 2: General... Para 1: Went to a general ed. So, they are just like... Para 3: Mixed. Para 1: Regular student". Some school staff even went as far as to say that their autistic students were superior to students without disabilities. In one such instance, a group of paraprofessionals recalls the following:

Para 1: Some of our kids [autistic students] are better than the....the regular kids. (group laughter)

Interviewer: In terms of behaviorally or socially?

Para 2: Behaviorally

Para 3: Behavior

Para 1: Yes! Mentally too! (group laughter) I'm telling you, if we...we go there and they are more advanced, like Mario is more advanced than that kid.

Para 4: Yeah, Mario!

In the face of opposition, allies of inclusion continued to affirm the competence of autistic students and advocate for their continued access to the general education classroom. An administrator speaks about the importance of inclusion even if it bothers teachers:

> I think the policy of mainstreaming the students spending, you know, as much time as possible in general education I think it's a real great thing. I've seen that, I think of—we have two students in general education in, who are autistic in a general education setting. And I can see that sometimes it can be frustrating for the teachers, but at the same time, I could really see these children succeeding.

3.3.3. Underlying Belief in the Right to Inclusion

Despite the challenges, lack of resources, and tension among school staff about including autistic students in the general education classroom, participants across all three study sites demonstrated an underlying belief that all children deserve access to the general education classroom, at some point in their academic careers. Teachers and paraprofessionals spoke of inclusion allies who welcomed autistic students into their general education classrooms. A paraprofessional said the following about a general education teacher:

> She's really good about, you know, making sure that her students, yeah, understand that they're also part of the class. Whether they're there for 2 h or they're there the whole day. She makes sure she makes all her students understand that they're also, you know, a student in that class, and they need to play with them, and get along with them.

Most sentiments of support for inclusive education were subtle or implicit—a general education teacher inviting a Special Day Class to a presentation on emergency preparedness, administrators pressuring teachers to mainstream students with disabilities, and students with disabilities participating in school performances. However, one Assistant Principal was explicit about the necessity of including autistic students in general education settings, saying the following:

> And I think more and more we're um, we're expecting students with autism to function in a general ed class, and I think in the general society, I think when you go out into the real world, you're not going to have, um, a special place, a store, or a, you know, go to the amusement park- 'ok, this section is only for people with autism'. Everyone is integrated, so I think that's kind of my idea just to have to begin here in the school environment and think of ways to support students with autism in the general ed environment.

4. Discussion

As the number of public school students with autism rises and the rate at which autistic students drop out of school holds steady, it is imperative we find a way to ensure academic belonging and thus success for autistic students in our public schools [30]. The findings from this study suggest that inclusive opportunities for autistic students were largely driven by stakeholder attitudes and mindsets. While there were certainly allies of inclusive education for autistic students, more often than not, inclusion was met with resistance from administration, teachers, school staff, and parents.

4.1. Summary of Findings

The most salient theme from the data indicated that autistic students need to earn their right to inclusive education. In Sunnyside School District, autistic students were only able to mainstream (i.e., have access to the general education classroom and their age/grade-level peers) during the periods of their strengths. Comparatively, students in the district without a special education eligibility had access to the general education classroom throughout the entirety of their school day. They did not have access only to the subjects in which they were high-achieving, but received access to the general education classroom even when subject areas were academically challenging. Legally, IDEA indicates that students with IEPs do

not have to "earn" access to general education, and the preference is that students with disabilities should instead start in general education before moving to a more restrictive placement [6]. Furthermore, the ruling in Board of Education, Sacramento City School District v. Holland [31] established the precedent that students with disabilities can and should be educated in a general education setting if they can make satisfactory progress, academically or non-academically, with "supplemental aids and services". Students with disabilities can only be removed from the general education setting if their behavior is too disruptive or the placement is too costly. However, in the current study, students continue to have to prove their academic readiness for general education.

Autistic students also had to prove their behaviors were appropriate for the general education classroom before being able to spend time in it. Their peers without disabilities, however, did not have to meet this behavioral standard before being placed in general education classrooms. A student's school belongingness impacts, for better or worse, student behavior [32]. Relying on Osterman's work, one might consider that an autistic student's behavior might improve as a result of spending more time in a general education classroom, if the student felt they belonged there. In the current study, however, the behavior of autistic students segregated in special education classes was used against them in order to preclude them from being included in general education settings.

The disturbing theme of segregation and othering of autistic students within Sunnyside conveys the message that students with and without autism are inherently different from one another, with autistic students being described as inferior to students without disabilities. Throughout our interviews, we found numerous examples of egregious exclusion for autistic students, such as being given less access to high-quality instructional materials, such as books and curriculum, and being routinely left out of school assemblies, grade-level field trips, and even fire drills. Reeves' and colleagues [33] recent research with school-age children also finds that students with disabilities are othered often, specifically when compared to the "typical" child, and seen as divergent from this norm. The study provided examples of othering similar to those mentioned in the current study, such as a disabled child being asked to leave a general education art class because she could not perform the tasks asked of non-disabled children.

Many times, the rationale behind the academic segregation of autistic students was purportedly rooted in both good intentions and ableism. Parents in the current study preferred the segregated autism-only classes, presumably because they thought well-trained staff would cater instruction specifically towards their autistic child, resulting in higher academic and behavioral success. This finding has previously been illustrated in research about inclusion for elementary-aged students with disabilities [24]. Additionally, school staff defended segregated classrooms, citing that general ed teachers were ill prepared to teach autistic students, and so, the autism-only classroom, with trained special education teachers and aids, was the best place for autistic students. This sentiment is aligned with previous research, illustrating that school staff believe children with disabilities are best served by special education teachers [12]. Oftentimes, in the current study, the academic and social segregation of autistic students was seen as neutral or simply the way it has always been done, as the segregated autism-only classes preceded many administrators and teachers at the school. Despite the varied reasons for the segregation of autistic students in school settings, the outcomes are clear. Ultimately, the findings in the current study illustrate that administrators, teachers, school staff, and parents have decided that this segregation best serves the school community, indicating a sharp distinction between students with and without disabilities. While many stakeholders may have had good intentions in suggesting segregated learning environments for autistic students, these beliefs are fundamentally rooted in ableism.

Regardless of the continuous challenges advocates of inclusion for autistic students in Sunnyside School District faced, some bright spots prevailed. In this study, when autistic students were included in general education settings, overwhelmingly, the data illustrated that the experience was positive for the autistic student. Indeed, research has

repeatedly demonstrated that students with disabilities who were included in the general education classroom academically outperformed their peers in segregated special education classrooms [34,35]. Additionally, in our study, stakeholders spoke about how inclusion led to increased socialization among autistic students and students without disabilities. This result is aligned with previous research findings that students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms had more positive social and emotional behaviors and stronger peer relationships as compared to their peers in segregated, self-contained classrooms [34,36].

Perhaps the most important finding from this study is the underlying belief held by some participants, that all children deserve access to the general education classroom, at least at some point in their academic careers. Previous studies have indicated that students who are included and feel like they belong in their school and classroom are more likely to be both motivated and academically engaged [37]. Additionally, school belongingness in late adolescence can predict better outcomes in terms of social and emotional well-being [38]. Academic belonging is defined by Goodenow and Grady [37] as "the extent to which they [students] feel personally accepted, respected, included, and supported by others—especially teachers and other adults in the school social environment" (pp. 60–61).

When educational stakeholders presume competence about autistic students and include them in general education classrooms, these students are more likely to reap the benefits of academic belonging. This theme ultimately conveys the message that students with disabilities are inherently worthy of being included and valued, just as students without disabilities would be.

4.2. Implications

The results of this study demonstrate the urgent need for teacher education and credentialing programs to identify implicit biases educators may have about autistic students and/or including them in general education settings. Innovative approaches to stigma reduction around autism have been employed in different settings with success. In their study, Gillespie-Lynch and colleagues [39] found that providing brief, online training to college students (mean age = 19.9 years) increased knowledge about and decreased stigma of autism. If these issues can be successfully addressed with a college population, it is possible that the results of Gillespie-Lynch and colleagues' study [39] can be replicated in teacher training programs. In the 2020–2021 school year in Sunnyside District, 10% of all K-12 classroom teachers were 30 years old or younger, which is aligned to the most recent (2017–2018 school year) data nationally [40,41]. If, moving forward, our newest credentialed teachers, often just graduated college students, can increase knowledge and reduce stigma around autism, the impact of this training may be felt for generations.

A recent study (2021) found that when Latinx parents of children with autism are provided with just 3 h of support from an Advocate Parent Mentor, they increase their IEP knowledge [42]. This intervention was designed with the intention of developing the parents' advocacy for their child with autism, particularly in relation to the IEP [42]. The participants in Luelmo and colleagues' study (2021) were similar to the participants in the current study. Both studies primarily include Latinx participants, many of whom speak Spanish. Therefore, it is plausible that the intervention described in the article written by Luelmo and colleagues [42] can support the parents of Sunnyside School District. In doing so, parents of autistic children in this district will be more able to knowledgably discuss elements of their child's IEP, including placement in a general education setting.

Currently, neither Sunnyside School District, nor the United States as a whole, has invested in free, universal pre-k with inclusion for students with disabilities. This means that placement in segregated educational settings for autistic preschoolers can start early and will often continue throughout their K-12 educational journey. Previous research has demonstrated that high-quality, inclusive preschool experiences for students with disabilities can lead to academic gains in literacy [43] and social communication and integration [26,44]. Students do not have to be academically or socially "ready" for the general education classroom in order for it to be the LRE for a student. However, in

the current study, not being academically ready was a major excuse as to why autistic students were not spending more time in the general education classroom. With high-quality inclusive preschool experiences, autistic students can be more academically and socially prepared when starting elementary school, and perhaps school staff would be more inclined to include them in general education settings.

Although codified into law in 1975 and reauthorized in 2004, IDEA [6] continues to be, at times, inappropriately implemented by educators both at Sunnyside and around the United States. Particularly, the Least Restrictive Environment clause states that students with disabilities can only be segregated from general education classes and peers when the "nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily". Additionally, the ruling in the Holland case requires schools to educate students with disabilities in a general education setting if they can make academic or non-academic progress with "supplemental aids and services" [31]. The only time a school or district can remove a student with a disability from a general education classroom is if the child has been given supplemental services and supports in the general education classroom and the child is still "disruptive" in this setting or if the cost of placing a student in the general education setting is too high.

As indicated in the current study, LRE is not always understood correctly or implemented appropriately. Despite the law's preference for students with disabilities to be educated in the general education setting, in 2019, only 40% of autistic students in the United States spent at least 80% of their school day in a general education classroom, while one-third of autistic students spent less than 40% of their school day in general education settings [45]. In part, this may be due to school leaders (i.e., administrators) only superficially understanding the laws that they are to implement. O'Laughlin and Lindle [46] found that school principals had difficulty describing and defining the LRE clause in IDEA [6] and lacked clear protocols for determining if students were in their LRE. Additionally, Giangreco [47] argues that the misapplication of LRE in schools is, in part, due to an incorrect interpretation of LRE. He notes that a student's disability label often corresponds to their educational program placement (e.g., the autistic student is educated in the autistic class), instead of placement teams applying the principle of LRE. As all school staff have a duty to follow the law and satisfactorily educate students with disabilities, future studies should continue to investigate why school staff lack a concrete understanding of IDEA [6], and particularly LRE, as well as if they have protocols to determine if a student is in their LRE.

4.3. Future Directions

Future research in this area should be expanded to explore if the language and sentiments expressed by educational stakeholders in this study exist in other contexts. Researchers in this study intentionally sought out schools in low-income neighborhoods, with diverse student populations, in a district with significant budget constraints. This sample is highly unique, as most studies in inclusive education are conducted in high-income districts and among White participants. Nevertheless, future studies should be conducted in districts with more robust budgets and adequate resources to determine if school staff and parents at these schools have a stronger belief in autistic children to thrive in a general education setting. It is also important to understand the contributing factors to both the positive and negative beliefs educational stakeholders hold about inclusion for autistic students. Understanding if general education teachers, for example, are hesitant to include autistic students in their classrooms because they feel underprepared may call for a different solutions-based approach than if the general education teacher believes autistic students are not academically competent enough to be in general education settings. Furthermore, understanding why some educational stakeholders have a strong presumption of competence about autistic students is important in order to replicate these beliefs in educational stakeholders around the country.

Currently, while several articles exist exploring ableist experiences or how ableism manifests for children with disabilities [48–50], no studies were identified in which an

intervention was provided to school staff or parents to target ableist beliefs or language. Future researchers should explore the development of an intervention that can support education professionals in both identifying their own ableist beliefs and language and in creating a more positive image of disability. Creating a school-based intervention to target and eliminate ableist language from school staff may lead to increased positive beliefs about children with disabilities and their abilities in the school setting.

4.4. Limitations

Despite being grounded in research and having appropriate methods, no studies are without limitations. The lack of male participants (total, $n = 7$; educators, $n = 6$; parents, $n = 1$) could indicate that not all perspectives were adequately voiced during this study. It would be important to understand if males and females have different perspectives, as most teachers in elementary schools in the United States are White women. Additionally, it is possible that school staff, particularly the administrators overseeing special education, spoke more highly of autistic students or inclusion than their current practices would seem to indicate. Social desirability may have encouraged the masking of one's true beliefs in order to appear competent, legally compliant, and/or favorably to the research team. Furthermore, at one of the three schools, a parent focus group was not conducted, as participants did not show up to a scheduled meeting. The parent voices from this school may have contributed additional information that was not shared within other focus groups. Finally, a limitation of this study is that the focus group and interview data were gathered a decade ago, in 2012.

5. Conclusions

As inclusive services for autistic students become increasingly more popular within the public school system in the United States, ensuring that stakeholders believe in their students' ability to succeed, as well as their inherent worthiness of belonging in these spaces, is paramount. Additionally important are efforts to dismantle ableism in the education context. How can a student succeed if their teacher, parent, or Assistant Principal believes that they do not belong in an inclusive setting? When an administrator declares that mainstreaming autistic students is "not appropriate" or "the right thing to do", what message does this send to students, parents, and other school staff about autistic students, and ultimately the autistic person themselves? Ultimately, we are hopeful the results of this study can lead to more intentional and effective implementation of inclusive services for autistic students, in a way in which all students have worth, feel like they belong, and thrive in inclusive settings.

Appendix A

Focus Group and Individual Interview Questions
What do you think are the strengths of the current services for students with ASD?
What are the strengths your community offers that may be different than other communities?
What do you think are the challenges of the current services for students with ASD?
What are the challenges in your community that may be different than other communities?
What are your challenges specifically related to academic engagement?
What are your challenges specifically related to daily routines?
What are your challenges specifically related to social engagement?
What do you think would generally improve children's social experiences with peers at your school?
What are the challenges specifically related to social functioning:
In the classroom?
In the cafeteria/lunchroom?
On the playground?
In general, what is staff responsible for:
In the classroom?
In the cafeteria/lunchroom?
On the playground?
Given your current strengths and challenges, what are your ideas to improve your current programs?

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