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**Teachers' Perceptions About Their Preparedness to Teach and Include  
Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder in the Regular Classroom**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Of  
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## **Abstract**

This research explored five primary school teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to teach and include students with Autism Spectrum Disorder in a regular classroom. Taking a qualitative approach, these teachers were interviewed individually using semi-structured interviews, whereby the research methodology followed an appreciative inquiry framework. The use of this framework allowed for the positive aspects of their practices to be revealed. The research discovered that through a combination of prior knowledge and teaching experience, these teachers were able to develop and practice an inclusive pedagogy with strategies that could be utilised, not just for those with a disability, but for all children in their classrooms. While there were some areas where the teachers felt they could do with more support, these were taken on as challenges. The teachers involved demonstrated that inclusion of students with ASD in the regular classroom is possible and that this can be a positive experience that benefits the student with ASD, other students, the teachers themselves, the school, and the wider community.

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*Two roads diverged in a wood and I, I took the one less travelled by,  
and that has made all the difference*

*- Robert Frost.*

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*Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It's not.*

*- Dr Theodor Seuss Geisel*

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## Chapter One: Introduction

*“Far back to the earliest moments of human memory, we’ve broken ourselves down into small tribes of inclusion, only so that we could treat others with exclusion...it’s such a waste to look at all others, and hope only to see ourselves...Ignorance, fear, hatred, we teach it to our children, they teach it to their children...Unite instead of divide...heal instead of harm, wouldn’t it be something if those were the things we taught to our children? To look at someone different, wonderfully different, and see something beautiful”*

- Seth Andrews

The *New Zealand Education Act 1989* states that all children, regardless of disability, have the right to be taught in their local school. New Zealand’s implementation of the Success for All Policy in 2010 set the goal for all schools to have implemented a range of inclusive practices by 2014. The *United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities’* findings in September 2014, however, indicated that there are still areas for improvement around inclusion for students in New Zealand.

Children with disabilities such as ASD often require support in the regular classroom to learn and to participate socially. The most critical of these supports are classroom teachers who are aware of what works best for these students. This awareness is crucial to ensure that not only are children and young persons with ASD receiving the best learning opportunities as possible, but that they are also included within their classroom environment to learn alongside their peers. The *New Zealand Disability Strategy* highlights the importance of teacher education around disability. Since teachers’ knowledge and experience is dependent on many factors, including the context in which they work, the nature of professional development they have had, and their personal life experiences, I have chosen to explore these aspects in depth.

### Background

As a parent of a child who has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), I have had the experience of viewing the different ways in which ASD is understood within the education system. These different understandings have often impacted on the inclusion of my child and made me consider, and at times question, individual teachers’ approaches, expectations, and their knowledge of ASD. I have since come to appreciate the position of teachers from a slightly different perspective. Rather than “why **doesn’t** that teacher know about ASD?” I now wonder “what **do** teachers know

about ASD and why?”. This has formed some more expansive questions such as - Do teachers know about how to teach a child with ASD? If not, why not? Are they taught about ASD or inclusion before graduating? Do they feel experienced and supported to teach someone with ASD? What strategies do they find helpful/effective? As a response, I chose to explore primary teachers’ understandings of ASD, where their knowledge comes from, and how this knowledge influences their pedagogy.

With these questions in mind, qualitative research using an appreciative inquiry framework was employed to interview five teachers who are currently teaching, or who have recently taught, a child with ASD. These interviews sought to gain an insight into the strengths that teachers may bring to teaching students with autism; the information and supports they feel they need, and the barriers they may experience when it comes to teaching a child with ASD in an ordinary classroom setting. Understanding these experiences and what has formed their knowledge has hopefully contributed to a better appreciation of what might be considered best practice in the area of teacher training, professional development (PD) and support.

### **Language Used**

Many who have ASD do not see that the word ‘disorder’ fits with their definition of ASD, choosing instead to see ASD as part of who they are, and that it is a ‘difference’ in terms of what it means for them in their day to day life (Endow, 2014). The UK is increasingly using the phrase ‘Autism Spectrum Condition’ or ‘ASC’ as a response to ‘disorder’ being an unfitting representation of autism (Ministries of Health and Education, 2016). While using the word ‘condition’ to describe ASD is recent, this was originally how it was regarded (Baron-Cohen et al., 2009). Taking into consideration that the word ‘disorder’ has stigmatising effects, and that while using ‘condition’ or ‘ASC’ is gaining popularity, it may still be fairly unfamiliar and this research will only use the acronym ASD when referring to autism.

People with ASD may also prefer to use ‘*Identity First Language (IFL)*’, referring to themselves as ‘*autistic*’ as opposed to ‘*a person with autism*’ which is commonly used with ‘*Person First Language (PFL)*’ (Sequenzia, 2016a, 2016b). Some feel PFL may discriminate, in that the speaker is required to see the person before seeing the person’s diagnosis or disability, inferring that there is something wrong with being autistic or disabled. As ASD is a huge part of who they are as a person, it should not be viewed in a negative way (Pryde, 2015). PFL however takes the view that strengths lie within the individual rather than placing an emphasis on their disability, seeing their disability instead as a part of what makes them who they are. Linguists have proposed that the way language is spoken or written affects the audience’s perception about the

world and suggests using PFL as a type of 'disability etiquette' (Cowan & Gentile, 2012). As someone who does not have a disability I have chosen to acknowledge that IFL is often preferred by adults, however as I am discussing children, I will use PFL when mentioning their disability.

Other words can have negative connotations, such as '*special needs*' or '*special education*', as can viewing disability as a '*deficiency*' or '*impairment*'. These words and views can give a sense of being less than normal, and as Booth et al. (2011, p. 41) suggest, the term "individual educational needs" should instead be used, which has the benefit of being able to be applied to any student in the class. This can limit the segregation felt by students and helps to see them in a positive way, focusing on abilities rather than what they cannot do. Using a language that is more inclusive is also crucial to achieving an inclusive environment (Ministry of Education, 2014b).

In this research, with the exception of the definition section for ASD and added quotations, I will attempt to use language that avoids and acknowledges the stigma and deficit thinking that is associated with the words described above.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

### Introduction

This chapter examines teachers' understandings about and perceptions of Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and of inclusive education in general, and explores the literature relating to teachers' preparedness to teach students with ASD in ordinary classroom contexts.

This review firstly considers the current information regarding ASD, including definitions, diagnostic criteria/symptomology, and the incidence of people with ASD in Aotearoa/New Zealand (NZ). A discussion of inclusive education follows, with an emphasis on contemporary understandings within a broader context of international and NZ policy and practice. The research on teachers' perceptions of students with ASD and those with disabilities is reviewed, with consideration given to the influence of perceptions on pedagogy, teacher expectations and on their students' learning. Finally, teachers' preparedness to teach based on their knowledge of ASD and inclusive education will be examined.

### Autism Spectrum Disorder/Condition (ASD)

**Definition.** From a medical model perspective, ASD has been defined as a neurodevelopmental and pervasive developmental disorder (PDD) (Ministries of Health and Education, 2008). The latest NZ ASD Guidelines have defined ASD as a "condition that affects communication, social interaction and adaptive behaviour functioning" adapting the DSM-5 definition of ASD being an "impairment in social communication or social reciprocity, and impairment in restricted, repetitive patterns of behaviour" (Ministries of Health and Education, 2016, p. 25). Known as a spectrum disorder, ASD diagnosis covers a wide range or continuum of behaviours in varying severities (Smith, 2012). This includes Classic Autism, Asperger Syndrome, Rett Syndrome, or other Pervasive Developmental Disorders – Not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS)/Atypical Autism. Another approach to defining ASD comes from an early pioneer of ASD identification, Hans Asperger, who defined ASD as being a "polygenetic disability... on a diverse continuum that spans an astonishing range of giftedness and disability" (Silberman, 2015).

**Diagnostic Criteria/ Symptomatology.** According to the guidelines for diagnosis in the latest *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5)*, people with ASD generally experience challenges with their social communication and social interactions. They may have restricted and/or repetitive patterns of behaviour,

obsessive interests or routines, sensory and motor challenges from an early age which may limit or impair some aspects of their everyday lives (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Often detected early in development, children with ASD may exhibit a wide range of symptoms depending on the severity in each individual. ASD can be identified and diagnosed as early as three years of age and is life-long (Manson, 2008). Some may find it more challenging when forming relationships, expressing their emotions, sleeping, or may have monotropic attention (unable to divide attention) and hyper or hypo sensitivities (Evans-Love, 2011; Manson, 2008; Smith, 2012). It is estimated that half of those diagnosed with ASD do not develop verbal language, so many may use visual cues or signs to communicate (Albright, Crothers, & Kolbert, 2013). Symptoms differ in each individual and may change over their lifespan.

With varying estimates of those who lie on the spectrum, it is difficult to know exactly how many have ASD. Many agree however that the overall incidence of ASD sits at approximately 1 in every 88 people (Albright et al., 2013). Boys are diagnosed with ASD at a higher rate than girls at a rate of 4:1, although this is thought to be due to subtle differences expressed by girls on the spectrum, and misdiagnosis or under diagnosis (Albright et al., 2013).

### **Inclusive Education**

**Definition.** Defining inclusive education is not a simple task. Inclusion can mean something different depending on the context or even the country in which it is being employed (Ainscow, 2008; Mitchell, 2010). These diverse views can make explaining inclusion difficult, as the definition must be relevant for their environment and society. Different definitions over time have included things such as age appropriateness and ensuring supports (Mitchell, 2010). Due to the complexity of inclusion however, definitions have moved from stating basic conditions, to ensuring that they include conditions that ensure fairness, equity and social justice distributed to all in education.

While the original ideology of inclusive education is founded on the rights of those with disabilities being included, there is a general consensus that there should be no requirement restricting inclusive education to those considered to have disabilities (Higgins, MacArthur, & Morton, 2007). Inclusive education is further described as a “response to global concerns that all children and young people have the right to access and complete a free and compulsory education that is responsive to the needs and relevant to their lives” (Carrington et al., 2012, p. 5)

Inclusive education can be described as promoting and supporting the rights of all children for their entitlement to receive an equal, safe, positive and efficacious

education within their regular community environment (Margrain & Macfarlane, 2011). With the core values of “equality, participation, community, respect for diversity and sustainability” (Booth & Ainscow, 2011, p. 21), it is suggested that inclusive classrooms focus on these values to create an environment where students gain a feeling of belonging, actively participating in the school curriculum (Ainscow, 2008; Evans-Love, 2011; Ministry of Education, 2014c). Inclusion also works best when it is meaningful and alert to the needs of the individual whilst actively reducing the barriers that limit participation in their environment (Carrington et al., 2012).

Inclusive classrooms include teachers who have a responsibility for all of their students, with the belief that all can achieve within a shared educational experience (Farrell, Howes, Jimerson, & Davies, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2014b, 2014c). Teachers, as part of this responsibility, will have the same high expectations for any child (Ainscow, 2008).

**History and Policy.** The United States (US) with their ‘*Education for All Handicapped Children Act*’ in 1975 and the ‘*Warnock Report*’ in 1978 in the United Kingdom (UK) argued for inclusion of those with individual educational needs be included in mainstream education, yet it was not until the Salamanca statement in 1994 addressed inclusion that ‘*Education for All*’ was really promoted (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; UNESCO & Ministry of Education and Science Spain, 1994; United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)).

The Salamanca Statement emphasised the necessity of ensuring all children with disability were included in regular education, and that this should become the ‘norm’ stating:

“Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system.” (Centre for Studies on Inclusive Education (CSIE), 2016).

There were suggestions made in this conference to incorporate these recommendations into the laws and policies of the countries that adopt this framework. While the Salamanca Statement discusses inclusive education, it only dictates that education should be available to all regardless of disability, rather than receiving the same quality of education (Slee, 2011).

**New Zealand.** NZ policies and law is supportive of the right to an inclusive education. The Picot Review and Tomorrow's Schools in 1988, saw major changes to the ways schools were run with the adoption of new principles which included equity in education (Fraser, Moltzen, & Ryba, 2005). The main legislation used is the Education Act of 1989 which ensures that equal rights be given to all children, regardless of their needs, to attend school and receive education at state level schools (*Education Act*, 1989. 8.1). While these reviews and reports were well intentioned, they have been subsequently criticised for their lack of performance in achieving the equity sought (Openshaw, 2014).

NZ has also adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) as a constitutional policy for human rights in 1990, which highlights the right to an education and uses UNESCO's definition of what constitutes inclusion (Rieser, 2012). Further legislation in the form of the *Human Rights Act* of 1993, has also made it unlawful to deny a student access to education, especially for any reason deemed discriminatory, and this education must be given under the same conditions given to others (*Human Rights Act*, 1993. 57.1 (a),(b),(c),(d)). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD) also defends the right for disabled people to an inclusive education, whereby the students are included (The United Nations, 2006). By opting to ratify these policies, NZ has shown our dedication to changing our attitudes towards people with disabilities, increasing awareness and preventing exclusion.

Many policies and guidelines are set to address building inclusive schools. The National Educational Guidelines (NEGs) and National Administration Guidelines (NAGs) for example, work to encourage schools to reduce barriers to education (Ministry of Education, 2015d). Special Education Policy Guidelines promote equal rights in education for those with individual educational needs as well as aiming for the same high standard of education in the same settings as those who did not have these same requirements (Ministry of Education, 2003). They also aim to address the barriers for children with disabilities, which includes collaboration with and support for families, and allow for choice of placement to be in the hands of the family (Ministry of Education, 2003).

Special Education 2000 (SE2000) was implemented in an attempt to step away from the medical and dualistic model of individual educational needs, to that of an ecological and inclusive model. It also aimed for better outcomes for learning at local schools, and for more flexible learning programmes. A large part of this policy was to

ensure equity of resources. It was considered that by using a combination of positive attitudes, skilled teachers and suitable resources, inclusive schooling would result, however the complexity and the constantly changing resources available noted in the Ministry of Education's (MoE) independent review of the policy, it seems that achieving this result is not as simple as it appears (Massey University, 2002). The way the resources were divided up also caused concern, with the potential for ending up with 'fractured' services (Wylie, 2000).

Currently under review, the NZ Disability Strategy was implemented under requirement of the *New Zealand Public Health and Disability Act* in 2000. The vision of the strategy is to have a fully inclusive education system that supports the development of an inclusive society. They deem that this will be possible only when disabled people can say that they live in "A society that highly values our lives and continually enhances our full participation" (Office for Disability Issues, 2001). Funding has once again been referred to as an issue with implementing any processes to encourage inclusion, in a review through the Office of Disability Issues (2007). What appears to be the most limiting aspect to/of change however is peoples' attitudes towards those with disabilities.

NZ has aimed to have a range of inclusive practices employed in its schools by 2014 through the implementation of the 2010 '*Success for All*' policy (Ministry of Education, 2014a). This collaborative policy/framework is positive and seeks to eventually achieve an inclusive education system in New Zealand. This policy highlights the importance of having involvement from the school as a whole (administration, teachers and family/whanau) and the importance of collaboration to create an inclusive culture within a school (Carrington & MacArthur, 2012; Kearney, 2009).

Another key approach to reducing barriers for disabled people is the recent *Disability Action Plan 2014-2018*. Created as a collaborative venture, the plan has five ideal outcomes and areas for change in creating inclusive and equal experiences (Office for Disability Issues, 2014). These included safety and autonomy, wellbeing, self-determination, community, and representation of disabled people. While this is still ongoing, the most recent update has, amongst other things, prioritised ensuring successful transitions for students with a disability into tertiary education (Office for Disability Issues, 2015).

One of the steps towards inclusive education is to ensure that there is an inclusive curriculum. Inclusion is listed as one of the foundation principles in the NZ

Curriculum, along with high expectations, learning to learn, the Treaty of Waitangi, community engagement, cultural diversity, coherence, and a focus on the future (Ministry of Education, 2015b). The NZ Curriculum requires that all students are valued and that diversity is respected. There is also a focus on providing an equitable education while still acknowledging and addressing the needs of all the students (Ministry of Education, 2015c).

The flexible nature of the NZ Curriculum allows teachers to adapt and mould their lessons in a fashion that can meet the requirements of all the learners in their classroom, regardless of whether they have a disability or not. If teachers hold a perception that students have a limited or fixed ability to achieve, they will be unable to see the flexibility of the curriculum to include all learners (Hart, Drummond, & McIntyre, 2007). As noted, presence is an important part of inclusion, however participation is also key to receiving an inclusive education - you must have both, and the learning must be meaningful (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Simply having a student present, yet denying them full access to the curriculum, is still exclusion (Kearney, 2009).

The NZ Curriculum also indicates the importance of collaboration to achieve learning for all. The NZ Curriculum framework recognises that for an effective pedagogy to be developed and practiced, the student, the family/whanau and the teacher must work together (see figure 1 below). The framework places this collaboration at the heart of the learning process, as this overlap is key to the child receiving a '*rich knowledge*' as part of their achievement (Ministry of Education, 2015a).

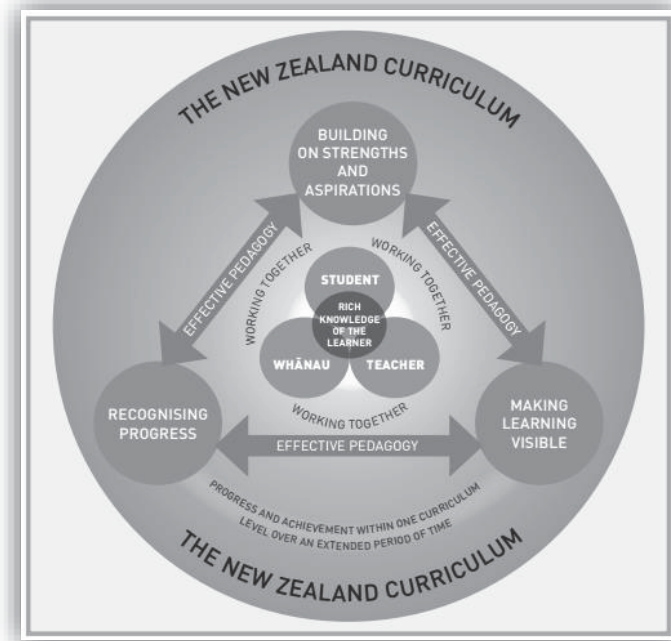


Figure 1. New Zealand Curriculum framework – progress and achievement for all (New Zealand Ministry of Education, 2015a).

**Progress towards inclusive education in NZ.** There are suggestions that while the policies and guidelines advocate for inclusive education, these aims may have fallen short, as some families report feeling excluded in the decision making process with their child, and inclusion may not occur (Higgins et al., 2007; Macartney & Morton, 2011). The Education Review Office (ERO) (2013) reported that the number of schools reviewed that demonstrated mainly inclusive practices had risen from 50% in 2010, to 77% of reviewed schools in 2012. However, these two reports are based on small numbers of schools. The first reviewed 229 schools, where the second used reviews from only 81 primary schools. This review set to determine the inclusion of those with high needs, and there is no suggestion of how these same schools fared with inclusion of those students with low and moderate needs. The same figure of 50% of mostly inclusive schools was mentioned recently as being a figure identified in 2009 and a goal of 80% by 2014, with no mention of the supposed increase to 77% in 2012 as reported by the ERO (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). There are, unfortunately, no further in-depth reviews undertaken questioning these statistics.

Other reviews of the progress to date include that of the *United Nations Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*' (CRPD) findings in September/October 2014. This review has indicated that there is still room for improvement around the implementation for inclusive education in NZ, and has made recommendations for achieving this improvement. The committee insists that

addressing areas of equity is still a concern, and while there are efforts to increase inclusive primary and secondary education, they are still concerned about the bullying of disabled students in regular schools, and highlights that “there is no enforceable right to inclusive education”, to which they made the recommendation to “implement anti-bullying programmes and to establish an enforceable right to inclusive education”(United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014, p. 6). They also suggested “provision of reasonable accommodation in primary and secondary education, and to increase the levels of entry into tertiary education for persons with disabilities” (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2014, p. 6). The NZ Government has responded to these recommendations by highlighting the implementation of the New Zealand Disability Strategy and the Disability Action Plan, and stating their determination to introduce anti-bullying programmes (New Zealand Government, 2015). It was also noted that the *Education Act* of 1989 is sufficient to enforce rights to be included in regular education.

**Barriers to Inclusion.** Due to the many challenges that also arise during implementation of inclusion in the education system, it can appear as a controversial and an often misunderstood subject. Teachers’ perceptions are deemed to be a significant barrier to inclusion (Hart et al., 2007), which will be discussed in greater depth further into this literature review. These are some of the more common barriers and misconceptions experienced when trying to achieve inclusion.

One common misconception that inclusion in general just means placing a child with a disability in regular education (Higgins et al., 2007). However, inclusion is never just purely about location; it is much more than this. Previous use of the words ‘*integration*’ and ‘*mainstreaming*’ were used to describe the act of including those with individual educational needs in regular education, however these did not refer to the quality of this education (Farrell et al., 2009). Rather than just being included, a student should feel like part of the school, and have a sense of belonging (Farrell et al., 2009). Children of all race, gender and social status have the same rights to attend and be included within the school and classroom.

Inclusive schools focus on removing barriers and supporting diversity, changing a culture rather than appearing to accommodate for the few. It is suggested that the whole school culture should be steered towards inclusion, not just individual teachers or classrooms (Ainscow, 2008; Ministry of Education, 2014a). Any form of segregation within schools will be noticed by the other children. Seeing children with disabilities

being treated differently will encourage the other students to do the same. The attitudes towards those with disabilities must change on a greater scale than just the school too, however change at the school level can influence the attitudes of the wider community. This in turn can affect wider society (Carrington, 1999). Florian's (2014) study of what counts as inclusive education found that while the definition of inclusive education is contextual and constantly evolving, the practice itself appears to be lagging. Whilst the research shows that there is a desire for progress towards inclusive practices, there is often no guidance in how to change attitudes towards an inclusive practice.

All students have a right to receive extra support to achieve, and that this is what should be focused on, in terms of a child's learning, rather than their diagnosis. It is suggested that for students to feel included and that they belong, they must not be segregated within the school which may occur when taken out of class for extra assistance, or taught solely by a teacher's aide for example (Rutherford, 2012). Students need to contribute to the class as with their peers, and they need to be challenged by high expectations and follow the curriculum with the rest of the class, not just alongside them. The use of teacher's aides, while helpful in the classroom for the teacher, can also at times be detrimental to the child. For example, if a teacher's aide is used purely for the child rather than for the teacher, the child will be still be segregated or excluded within the classroom (Rutherford, 2012). A feeling of belonging results in a higher chance of a student to be successful in school (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2009). This can be achieved partly through teachers knowing the needs of their student, and partly by knowing them as a person, but mainly through the teacher having a sense of responsibility for teaching the child.

Another barrier that teachers have indicated as a reason for inclusive failings are limited resources. The difficulty with citing this as a barrier to inclusion however, is that some schools with inadequate funding still manage to perform inclusive practices to a high standard (Rutherford & MacArthur, 2015). This can also lead to a form of prejudice against students who have extra needs and disabilities (Kearney, 2009).

### **Including students with ASD**

With the estimates of high numbers of people having ASD in NZ, it stands to reason that there will be large numbers of students with ASD who will need to be educated within the regular classroom, given their right to receive education regardless of disability and the subsequent move towards inclusive education.

It is suggested that students be both academically and socially included in their local schools, and also widely appreciated that positive social interactions are more likely to occur in inclusive classrooms where there is a diverse student group (Smith, 2012). Masten and Motti-Stefandi (2009) found that the classroom is the ideal place to promote social skills and gain the ability to experience positive relationships with mentors outside the home. Ballard (2001) also claims that keeping children with a disability segregated and in special schools fails to produce as many socially prepared graduates as mainstream education does for students who have a disability. Research has shown that peers are also a large influencer in the ability to learn social skills and academics due to the innate need to monitor the environment for cues as to how to problem solve, both from one's peers and their teacher (Doll, LeClair, & Kurien, 2009; Gettinger & Stoiber, 2009). Peer relationships also have a significant correlation with how a student does academically (Doll et al., 2009). The more social support they receive from their peers, the better they perform academically.

Inclusion of children with ASD can also be beneficial to other students in the classroom. If the school and teachers hold perceptions that value inclusion, then the students without a disability will pick up on this and learn how to be tolerant and accepting of diversity (Lindsay, Proulx, Scott, & Thomson, 2014). Smith (2012, p. 25) however states that even though there are benefits to both the students and their peers, students with ASD can still face difficulties if they are "not really included in any meaningful way", and notes that students with ASD are often secluded from activities in the classroom by being placed with teacher's aides, or completing tasks not relevant to the curriculum.

Experience with children who have ASD appears to give teachers more confidence to teach others on the spectrum (McGregor & Campbell, 2001). A willingness to participate in developing skills in the area of inclusion is also a strong factor in whether a teacher feels confident to teach a child with ASD (Sinz, 2004).

### **Teachers Perceptions of ASD and Inclusion**

Teachers, like most people, are likely to form their perceptions about ASD and inclusion based on a number of things, such as experience, training, support, and what society tells us about ASD and disability in general. These beliefs, attitudes and perceptions about students with a disability have a large impact on students as to whether they receive an inclusive education (Ainscow, 2008; Daane, Beirne-Smith, & Latham, 2001). It is therefore important to determine what teachers' perceptions are both to promote inclusive practice (and therefore impact in a positive way on children's learning), and to avoid negative or detrimental experiences and exclusion for children

with ASD (Stone, 1987; Stone & Rosenbaum, 1988).

**Teachers' perceptions of inclusion.** While inclusive education is much bigger than simply including students with disability, those with disabilities are often discriminated against in terms of accessing an equitable education (Rutherford, 2016). Some teachers, whether due to teaching experiences, training or prior experiences, may perceive children with disabilities as not their responsibility, and those that conclude that there is no place for inclusion for students with disabilities in regular schools, will of course be a major barrier to inclusion and will have a severe impact on the education of those with disability in their classroom (Ainscow, 1999; Kearney, 2009).

Kearney (2009, p. 39) found that those who considered themselves responsible for all the children in their class were those who were more likely to be “engaged in productive pedagogy”. This is where it has also been noted that those who work well with a diverse range of students are more likely to have positive experiences (Rutherford & MacArthur, 2015). This highlights the importance of clarity of the teachers' role, and the need for them to inquire, be critical and reflective of their beliefs towards inclusion (Ainscow, 2008; Hutton, 2008; Kearney, 2009; Ministry of Education, 2014c). This reflection can be instrumental in changing attitudes, as one's assumptions and comprehensions may have formed deep beliefs about disabilities and how this affects their practices.

Due to the almost 35 hours a week that a teacher is with a child in their class, strong relationships are crucial (Doll et al., 2009). Students may adopt the values that teachers hold, and in addition, children and young people's learning has been shown to improve when relationships between a teacher and their students is strong and positive (Doll et al., 2009). When teachers have a deficit view of their students, it is likely to result in a negative outcome for both the student and the teacher, and vice versa (Bishop & Berryman, 2009). Students may begin to believe these views towards them and start to “live up to, or down to expectations” (Hart et al., 2007, p. 501).

**Teachers perceptions of ASD.** As children with ASD represent a diverse group, some children's behaviours can be viewed as disruptive and intentional and children may be labelled as acting inappropriately. Some studies reveal, for example, that teachers may view students with ASD as lazy, disobedient, vulnerable, aggressive and defiant (Engelhardt, 2014; Evans-Love, 2011). As mentioned earlier, a label or a diagnosis is not necessarily of value to a teacher in terms of their understanding of a

student's educational experiences either (Ministry of Education, 2014b). There may also be a perception that because a child has a disability or is considered '*special needs*' that they have difficulty learning, where this may not actually be the case (Ministry of Education, 2014b).

A teacher is unlikely to be aware of all behaviours present in a child with ASD, however the beliefs and knowledge that a teacher holds can have a major impact on the teaching-learning process (Gettinger & Stoiber, 2009), with research indicating that teachers' knowledge about ASD is often inaccurate. Williams, Schroeder, Carvalho and Cervantes (2011) found that only about half of what teachers knew was deemed to be correct. Teachers are also more likely to have negative beliefs about students when they are diagnosed with ASD if they already have a negative view of ASD generally (Engelhardt, 2014).

While social skills are often noted as lacking in children with ASD, this is not always the case. There is a common misconception that "individuals with ASD prefer to be alone and do not notice others" (Causton-Theoharis, Ashby, & Cosier, 2009, p. 84). Some argue that students with ASD should receive social skills training over and above an academic education (Syriopoulou-Delli, Cassimos, Tripsianis, & Polychronopoulou, 2011). Others suggest that students with ASD lack the ability for social interaction and indicate that these students set themselves unrealistic goals and expectations about their future (Wortman, 2013). However, the best way for social skills to be developed is by being in an inclusive environment with their peers (Cassimos, Polychronopoulou, Tripsianis, & Syriopoulou-Delli, 2015).

### **Preparedness to Teach Inclusively**

Teachers' knowledge and experience of inclusive education will be dependent on many factors, such as the context in which they work; the nature of their own initial teacher education and PD; and their own personal life experiences.

Teaching requires an immense amount of knowledge, action, and belief in their work to know how best to support a diverse range of children (Florian & Spratt, 2013; Graham, Berman, & Bellert, 2015). Teachers may come to their practice with different levels of understanding and experience. If either one - knowledge, actions, or beliefs of inclusion are able to be achieved then the other factors will follow. For example, if teachers hold the belief that students with individual educational needs can be included in the regular classroom, then inclusive practices (actions) will develop (Florian, 2008). If teachers begin their teaching career with a decent amount of prior knowledge and

positive beliefs about teaching, they are more likely to learn from their teaching experience and develop a pedagogy reflect of this.

It has been noted by researchers and families that teacher training is key to ensuring that children with ASD are included in regular classrooms (Booth & Ainscow, 2011; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Jindal-Snape, Douglas, Topping, Kerr, & Smith, 2005). Quality teacher training is also an important determinant of success in terms of student achievement (Musset, 2010). The *New Zealand Disability Strategy* also highlights the importance of teacher education around disability, indicating that having an understanding of the child with a disability can assist teachers in meeting the child's individual needs (Office for Disability Issues, 2001). Initial teacher education has the potential to influence the perceptions around teaching those with disabilities in the classroom (Loreman, Sharma, & Forlin, 2013). The deficit thinking that may occur due to the 'miseducation' around disability in teacher education can cause discrimination, leaving it up to the teacher educators to step up and teach new teachers to challenge their beliefs and perceptions, rather than allowing this cycle to continue where it can impact children in their classrooms (Rutherford, 2016).

Initial teacher education programmes have been criticised for their lack of progress in developing their programmes within an inclusive framework (Kearney, 2009). Separate classes discussing inclusion and disability are often not compulsory, leaving teachers without the knowledge which would assist them to be inclusive and being able to teach students with additional needs appropriately, while at the same time giving teachers the perception and expectation that children with disabilities will not be their responsibility (Kearney, 2009).

Fraser and colleagues (2005) state that teachers in regular classrooms who implement inclusive practices frequently state that they believe the level of training that they have undertaken is not adequate to teach students with disabilities. Apart from the many challenges that a teacher can face within the classroom, such as large class sizes, covering a broad curriculum, and the lack of time allowance for planning course material, teachers are also expected to know about student diversity and to teach inclusively (Fraser et al., 2005). A lack of knowledge is another barrier to inclusion (Kearney, 2011). When educating future teachers, an understanding of inclusion and what it is like to work with students with a disability prior to entering the workplace can be beneficial, and with this, a realisation that this is an expected part of their role (Shade & Stewart, 2001). It is emphasised that having an understanding of inclusive practices is relevant to all students, not just students with disabilities, and that it does

not necessarily mean that they have to teach in different ways in the classroom, 'regular' and 'special' (Black-Hawkins, 2012; Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014). Lack of preparation and support for teaching those with disabilities are some of the main causes of failure to provide an inclusive education (Buell, Hallam, Gamel-McCormick, & Scheer, 1999; Gunnþórsdóttir & Bjarnason, 2014; MacArthur & IHC New Zealand., 2009). Any training, prior to and during teaching, can benefit from having a supportive environment (Daane et al., 2001). Establishing what guidance a teacher requires is a crucial aspect of producing a truly inclusive environment where the needs of all the children in the class can be addressed (Loreman et al., 2013).

Having ongoing professional development for teachers and other members of a school's community helps to ensure that inclusive education becomes a goal (Inclusive Education Action Group, 2010). Professional development is beneficial when it considers how to create a different mind-set towards students with disabilities and their inclusion in the regular classroom, along with adequate guidance and support as part of professional development for these changes in attitudes to occur (Carrington, 1999). Giving teachers a chance to reflect on their current practices can be very helpful in creating these attitudes (Kearney, 2009). This change of mind-set can also give the teachers the opportunity to become an agent of social change, whereby they show their students how to respect diversity, and their students follow this example, leading to a change of the mind-set of society overall (Hart et al., 2007).

Finally, a sound knowledge of ASD and other disabilities can be extremely valuable to a teacher and their students. While it is impossible to know about everything they need to know about all disorders, students with ASD are found to be more likely to benefit from teachers that have gained an in depth knowledge both of the nature of ASD; how students with ASD see and experience the world; and how to effectively teach someone with ASD (Evans-Love, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Definitions of ASD and inclusion are constantly evolving, which can lead to misconceptions and barriers arising. Determining what inclusion looks like in an educational setting seems to differ from what policy and guidelines dictate.

With larger numbers of children on the autism spectrum moving into regular classrooms, it is important to understand what ASD is and how this is perceived by those who are responsible for teaching them. Understanding teachers' perceptions can give us some insight into what teaching a child with ASD is like in a regular classroom, and can reveal what effects a lack of clear explanations and knowledge around ASD

and inclusion mean for both the child and the teacher. It is also important to determine how prepared teachers are to teach a child with ASD and what barriers there are to this being successful, in terms of inclusion and pedagogy.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Introduction

The following chapter details the processes undertaken to best understand teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom. The aims of this research are outlined along with the justification for the methodology chosen. The methodology employed a qualitative approach to research following a constructivist epistemology and using an interpretivist paradigm. A combination of interpretative phenomenological analysis and aspects of the positive framework of Appreciative Inquiry was used to analyse a set of semi-structured interviews with five participants. The complete appreciative inquiry action research cycle was not completed due to the time restraints of this thesis, however the key principles of this approach provided an insight into teachers' perceptions and aimed to identify strategies they have developed and incorporated into their pedagogies. The analysis involved the use of both comparative and exploratory methods to gain a clear representation of the ideas discovered in the interviews. The methods chosen and procedures for selecting participants, including consent, ethics and confidentiality are discussed.

### Aim of the Research

The overall objective of this study was to gain an understanding of teachers' preparedness to teach students with ASD in a regular classroom. To discover this the following research questions were formed:

1. What knowledge do teachers have of ASD and of teaching those with a disability in general?
2. How have teachers' experiences in teacher education and professional development shaped this knowledge?
3. How have the professional supports they have received in teaching students with ASD, and disabilities generally, shaped this knowledge?
4. What personal factors have impacted on their understanding of teaching, ASD and disability?
5. If personal factors have impacted their understanding of teaching children with ASD and disability, how have they done so?

Appreciative inquiry is a collaborative strengths based methodology that identifies the ways in which practices are socially constructed, and as the name indicates it does this from an appreciative perspective (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011).

This method not only highlights the positive aspects of the processes, but it also seeks to understand how they come about, and the potential that these hold to encouraging further constructive and positive outcomes. The appreciative inquiry framework was used to support a positive approach in which research questions aim to identify teachers' perceptions, with a desire to create an awareness or insight into the strengths that teachers may bring to teaching students with autism and other disabilities, as well as determine the nature of support they may need to increase their knowledge and capability in this area. The questions also considered possible barriers that teachers may have experienced when it came to teaching a child with ASD and other disabilities in a regular classroom. Understanding these experiences of teachers can lead to a better appreciation of effective practices and also contribute to the growing literature on preparing teachers for diverse learners and their ongoing professional development.

## **Methodology**

**Qualitative research.** This project used qualitative research approaches to investigate teachers' perceptions and experiences. Qualitative research pursues understandings rather than proving a theory or testing a hypothesis. As a naturalistic, holistic and subjective approach, qualitative research seeks rich data from within naturally occurring phenomena and from the participants' perspective (Coolican, 2009; Richards, 2009). Qualitative research is generated through in-depth communication such as interviews, followed by an interpretation of the data (Smith & Osborn, 2008). This interpretation is then used to gauge perceptions and understandings about a topic or event. Qualitative research can also be used to help direct positive change (Atkins, Wallace, & British Educational Research Association., 2012). The figure below explains the research process used.

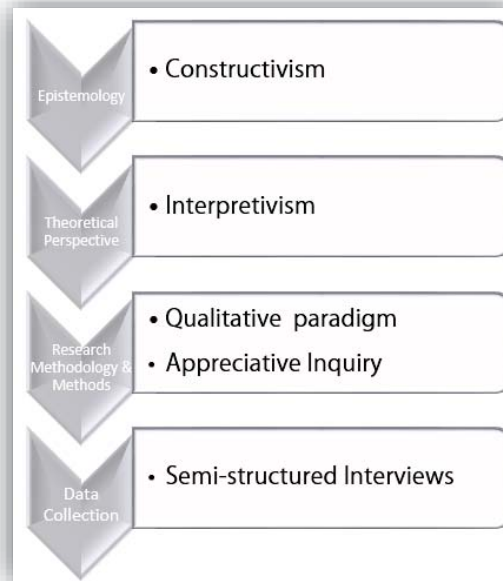


Figure 2. Research process

**Epistemology- constructivism.** Epistemology is the theory concerned with what it is that sits behind our knowledge, and the processes that form this knowledge. Constructivism is a subjective approach that takes the view that knowledge is actively constructed from interactions in and with our environment and our experiences, and that these interactions will in turn also be reflected in our research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). This belief also follows that “Truth and meaning do not exist in some external world, but are created by the subject’s interactions with the world” (Gray, 2014, p. 20). Gaining an understanding that peoples’ experiences are dependent on the context in which they live, through cultural, social and historical means, helps to identify how different perceptions are formed and how we make sense of the world. Constructivism seeks to show the connection between what we as the researcher know, with what we are seeking in our research (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Constructivism holds that there can be many differing perspectives towards a subject; that these are all equally valid; and that these perceptions have meanings that can be discovered within data. Mallory and New (1994) suggest that constructivism is an appropriate and relevant paradigm to use in terms of understanding and aiding the move towards inclusion in schools. With these key points in mind it seemed justified that a constructivist approach should be taken with this research.

**Theoretical perspective- interpretivist.** An interpretivist paradigm seeks to discover participants’ experiences, perspectives and views, using inductive processes to determine what these may mean (Gray, 2014). This approach also attempts to

ensure that the research acknowledges participants' subjectivities (Atkins et al., 2012; Mutch, 2005). Being a mother of a child with ASD and being a postgraduate student in education, it would be impossible to be fully objective through the course of this research. As Corbin (2008, p. 11) highlights, it is impossible to "separate who I am as a person from the research and the analysis that I do". Finlay (2014, p. 125) explains how it is a mistake to think that a "researcher is being called upon to be rigorously objective and to eliminate all bias" and preferably be "open and fully attentive and not objective and disengaged...managing subjectivity...rather than seeking to eliminate it". It is necessary to acknowledge that the findings of this kind of approach are interpretive. The conclusions made are based on the researcher's interpretations of the data, but does not mean that this is the only possible interpretation (Finlay, 2011). Attempts were made, however, to obtain reliable research via accurate accounts (transcriptions) and to do a full critical analysis of the interviews in an effort to remain as impartial as possible.

## **Method**

The overall research approach chosen is inductive in nature. A bottom up process, in inductive reasoning the process moves from a set of data seeking answers to specific questions and to a more general understanding (Burney, 2008). This approach does not seek to determine a theory, or try to discount a theory that already exists, but rather seeks to find meaning from the data through identifying patterns and common themes (Gray, 2014). One form of interpretivist research method is interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). A subjective approach, IPA seeks to determine perceptions held by the participants and gain an understanding of these (Coolican, 2009; Mutch, 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Through in-depth interviews and analysis, IPA sees the researcher as an important and active part of the research, in a sense seeing the researcher as a tool used to explore and gain an insider's perspective (Smith & Osborn, 2008).

A strengths-based approach, appreciative inquiry has its foundations grounded heavily in the social constructionist principle, whereby knowledge is created through shared social communications (Lyons, Thompson, & Timmons, 2016). While relatively new to use with educational research, appreciative inquiry focuses on the more positive aspects of the data, trying to determine what good can be taken and used to make positive recommendations. Appreciative inquiry works with the belief that there are positive aspects such as procedures and processes that work well within every group. Appreciative inquiry concentrates on these positive aspects and builds on them to encourage positive change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008; Nayar & Stanley,

2015). Therefore, rather than just seeking the challenges or problems highlighted by the participants, appreciative inquiry seeks to find positive themes in the data which can be valued and utilised moving forward. Appreciative inquiry was also chosen for its desire to “counterbalance the perceived predominance of a deficit discourse” (Lyons et al., 2016, p. 891). Appreciative inquiry follows a process of *discovery*, *dream*, *design* and *destiny* or *delivery* (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

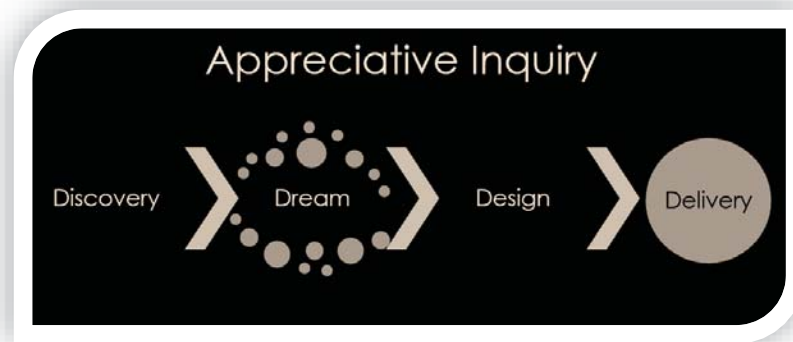


Figure 3. Appreciative Inquiry process

The discovery phase sought to find the positive aspects of their experiences. When forming the initial interview questions and throughout the interviews, care was taken to ask questions that would seek out teachers’ experiences of teaching students with ASD in positive ways. The dream stage was also used for questions in the interview, where the participants were asked what they would like or imagine as being helpful in terms of support to achieve inclusion for all children. As mentioned, the design and delivery phase was not utilised in this research.

**Participants.** Participants included five primary school teachers who were teaching, or had previously taught students with ASD. Participants were practicing teachers from a wide range of schools in a large metropolitan district, and were sought with the assistance of the local Ministry of Education (MoE) Office.

**Participant selection criteria.** The criteria for selecting participants for the study were as follows:

1. Teachers who either currently, or in the past two years, taught a student with ASD and/or other disabilities, for a period of at least one year.
2. No more than two teachers from each school, to ensure a wide range of schools including decile rankings were reflected.

An attempt was made to interview participants with a range of different ages taught, different years of experience and a range of decile ratings to give an overview of different teaching environments. An overview of the participants has been arranged into these different categories accordingly, along with their pseudonyms on Table 1 below.

Participant	Year Finished Teacher Training	Number of Years Spent Teaching	Role	Year Groups Taught	Current Year Group Teaching	Number of Children with ASD Taught	School Decile Rating
April	1989	24	SENCO/Teacher	0-6	0-2	12	4
Brian	1994	21	Teacher	3-6	4-5	5	4
Cathy	2014	1.5	Teacher	0-1	0-1	7	4
Dianne	1999	16	SENCO/Teacher	0-8	0-4	3	10
Emily	1998	17	SENCO/Teacher	3-8	7-8	6	1

*Table 1: Participant demographics*

### **Data collection**

**Interviews.** Qualitative Interviews were chosen as a method for gathering information. Interviews allow for rich and deeper discussion of a topic, whilst allowing for participants' perspectives to be expressed (Mutch, 2005). Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then analysed. Interviewing had the benefit of allowing me to revisit the data for reflection and reanalysis throughout the research.

Semi-structured interviews were used to gather teachers' perceptions of ASD about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom. Structured and prepared open-ended questions with appreciative inquiry in mind were set in advance for the interviews. Set questions were given to all participants, however there was the opportunity to further elaborate on answers if desired, whilst still directing the interview towards the research topic. Individual interviews were used which gave the participants the opportunity to speak freely. This was especially important for this research, as the research was ultimately seeking teachers' perceptions as to how they each personally felt about the inclusion of children with ASD in the regular classroom. Interviews were digitally recorded for transcription and analysis purposes and were face to face at an agreed location or via Skype video calls.

## Ethics

**Ethical considerations.** The research was reviewed by Massey University Human Ethics Committee (MUHEC). This application contained information regarding minimising risks, confirming a lack of deceptive methods, consent processes, rights of the participant and an assurance of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research. The application was approved before any communication with the MoE, schools, and participants took place (see Appendices).

**Informed consent.** Informed consent was requested and obtained from those willing to participate during an initial meeting. A copy of the interview questions was provided to the participants in preparation for the interview, and to determine that their cultural needs were met. It was also made clear to the participants that participation would be purely voluntary. There was no move to coerce participants to participate and advised of their right to withdraw their participation from the research at any stage.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity.** Confidentiality was assured at all times throughout the research. While some examples were used in the interpretation of the interviews, every effort has been made to remove any identifying features or clues in their statements. The transcripts have been verified by the participants for use prior to interpreting the data.

**Transcription.** These transcripts were transcribed by myself, the researcher. As mentioned, the transcripts were then returned to the participant for confirmation that they were happy for their interview to be analysed.

**Data analysis.** IPA uses a method of thematic analysis as it identifies understanding through the themes identified during the analysis process. It allows the data to “speak for itself” with the key themes and ideas identified (Mutch, 2005, p. 130). Realising that a teacher’s perspective about teaching a student with ASD in a regular classroom is a unique one, it seems justified that this is a method fit to analyse the data in this research.

After an initial browse of the data, there was a focus on identifying and discovering positive aspects and potential advantageous strategies that the teachers discussed. These key findings were highlighted. The transcripts were read several more times and any further key ideas and notes were made. These findings were then sorted into developing categories and then overall themes by coding them (by colour). An interpretation of findings was then undertaken. Employment of inductive processes allowed for all of the themes identified to develop an overall perspective of the

teachers' perceptions. Specific examples from the transcripts are included to help to further demonstrate how they have interpreted.

**Generalisable.** While this research involves interpreting data from these five teachers, it is impossible to guarantee that these findings are generalisable to all teachers or even all locations in New Zealand. Qualitative research does not claim to be generalisable, instead seeking to develop ideas from these unique experiences. Qualitative research can however ensure that we “benefit from the richness in the diversity of ideas and experiences” that are revealed within the study (Coolican, 2009, p. 564).

**Reflexivity.** While it is the role of the researcher to communicate as clearly and accurately as possible the interpretations made, there is an awareness that the interviews may be influenced by my own preconceptions. As the researcher, I attempted to highlight any possible biases, explain my values and experiences.

### **Summary**

The main aim of this research was to determine teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD and other disabilities in the regular classroom. To do this, a list of questions around teachers' knowledge and experiences and the supports they receive were generated. These questions also included how teachers' knowledge was shaped through experience and how this affected their understanding of including children with ASD and disabilities.

To gain a genuine understanding of teachers' perceptions, a qualitative methodology was used. Following an overall constructivist epistemology and an interpretivist perspective, this research used an inductive approach with the use of appreciative inquiry and IPA methodology. Qualitative research and the use of interviews has the benefit of allowing participants, in this case teachers, to have a voice and to share their knowledge of teaching children with ASD and other disabilities and the nature of supports that were useful in strengthening their practice. Although the sample size was small and findings are not generalizable, the varying personal and contextual factors can inform existing literature on ways of supporting teachers more effectively to improve outcomes for children and young persons with ASD and other disabilities in regular classrooms.

## Chapter 4 – Results

*“It’s not about the limitation, it’s about, how do I best cater for this child for them to access learning”*

*- Emily (Participant)*

The research sought to gain an understanding of teachers’ perceptions of teaching and including students with ASD in the regular classroom, by exploring various factors that may have influenced their perceptions and pedagogy. The main factors that were investigated maintained a focus on what knowledge the teachers had about ASD/disability and inclusion and how their experiences had shaped this knowledge. The influence of personal and teaching experiences was considered in developing their understanding of ASD and inclusion. There was also the aim to determine what other supports were conducive to acquiring this knowledge. The main themes identified through appreciative inquiry included the development of teachers’ knowledge of and understanding about ASD, inclusion, teaching and learning, pedagogy for all and areas for extra support.

### **Development of Teachers’ Knowledge of and Understanding about ASD and Inclusion, Teaching and Learning**

Teachers discussed their understandings of ASD and inclusion, and how this knowledge evolved and developed through different avenues. It was apparent that these understandings came with an acknowledgement that every student, regardless of their disability, had the right to receive an inclusive and equal quality education.

All participants had a comprehensive understanding of ASD and inclusion. They were aware that children with ASD may see the world in a different way to others, and that this difference was not a negative trait, but rather an opportunity for the teachers themselves to learn about human diversity. The teachers all agreed that inclusion was possible to achieve, and that it was a right for every child to have an inclusive education. There was also an overall perception that educational quality should not be compromised because of their disability.

**Understanding of ASD.** Teachers had made use of the NZ Curriculum’s suggestion to get to know the learner well, to gain a deep understanding of ASD (Ministry of Education, 2007). The ability to recognise the strengths and challenges of a child with ASD was seen as a significant advantage in being able to tailor their learning within the class and the curriculum as best as possible. The important step in taking the time to knowing the child first was accomplished through a variety of means.

Participants discussed the need to develop a different perception or mind-set about teaching students with a disability. Teachers commented on the importance of not making assumptions about a student's behaviour, instead stepping back and thinking, "What else could be going on in this situation?". April was able to look at situations differently after learning how to understand escalation of a behaviour. She described how teaching children with ASD has enabled her to be more understanding and patient. She also spoke of the importance of changing one's perceptions, stepping up and realising that it is not the fault of the child.

April: You have to understand also that it's not them being naughty, its them not coping... and that's a mind-set that you really have to work on

Emily also spoke of the importance of changing one's perception as a way to understand behaviours and a way to stop them from escalating. She also noted that there may be anxiety surrounding her students' interpretation of events in the classroom, and that what may seem like small difficulties in their routine may produce a behaviour indicative of not coping with these difficulties at a much later stage:

Emily: ... often the end action to something is a result of what's happened three or four steps back... so it's being able to recognise... and I think intervene early... reading the situation and being aware...

The teachers recognised that students with ASD see the world in a different way. Emily discussed considering the position of the child by putting yourself in their shoes and understanding that they don't see the world in the same way as you. She recognised that new things could be seen as being foreign in their eyes and chose to "work with that premise of fear", indicating that if you "think of how you might feel", there can be understanding. She discussed the intricacies of these differences with her class:

Emily: ...so what we say to our year seven and eight's is its around children who are not able to interpret the world in the same way that you interpret the world... there are different things, sometimes its language, sometimes it's around those social skills, that it is different from how we interpret something to be... not recognising some of those facial expressions... also around some of the behaviours that might be considered unusual, stimming for example.

With each child being unique, teachers discussed the importance of understanding and embracing this uniqueness. Emily discussed the fact that "we're all unique" and that for all people to function they often require things a certain way. Some

people were “very high functioning” and some were “struggling” at the other end, but that it is important to acknowledge this and progress accordingly.

April found that knowing the child first was crucial and spoke of “using children with ASD as a starting point” to help the child into their learning. She also emphasised that there is “no such thing as a naughty child”, and that it is more to do with a behaviour at that time. It was clear that Cathy took time to know the child as she explained how she would assess sensory issues; try to avoid situations that might contribute to sensory challenges; and how she might respond if children experienced sensory difficulties:

Cathy: ... what bothers them most, like it might be the lighting in here... how can it affect them... What can we use in the area to distract if there's meltdowns and that kind of stuff happening?

She also spoke of learning about the child's needs. At times a child may need to calm themselves down, and she saw this as an important step in the child learning how to self-manage their needs. Emily also spoke of the importance of knowing the child and building a relationship with them:

Emily: you know the fear is in the unknown, and the reality is to get to know the child, know them as a child first... then know them as a learner...so I guess the best thing is to build that relationship and because a child needs to know that you care and that they matter and that they are just as important as everyone else.

Emily emphasised that sometimes it is difficult for a child with ASD to communicate what they mean, so knowing the child is an important step in working with that child. Behaviours could be easily misinterpreted if this was not understood. One child she taught found communication difficult when he was overwhelmed, yet was very honest about behaviours he was more in control of:

Emily: ... some people might say “Oh, that's violent behaviour”, but in actual fact it's not, it's a response to how I'm feeling and I can't communicate verbally, so I'm going to lash out... and it's not intentional that the lash out has happened, it's the only way I can communicate my frustration... there are times when I'm lashing out intentionally to hurt... and he will say “Sorry, I did that on purpose... I was being horrid”

The teachers spoke of finding what will hook the children, and how this was “powerful” and beneficial to their learning. Dianne stated that if something isn't working

one had to think of something else, even if it was something small, like distraction. Emily, also in an effort to ensure that the deaf children in their school felt accepted and included, said the junior children are learning to sign along with their Deaf peers and the whole school has learnt to sign the national anthem:

Emily: ...it's not about the limitation, it's about, how do I best cater for this child for them to access learning

**Understanding of Inclusion.** The general perception of these teachers was that including students with ASD in their local school and in the ordinary classroom had positive results. April was concerned that not all schools held the "right to be included" as important. Cathy's overall view was acceptance of differences and saw inclusion as "common sense" and was nothing new to her. She also discussed inclusion from a personal perspective:

Cathy: I reckon it's the making of them actually... incorporating them into games. He's (her son) always been a part of everything, and they all played team sports

Dianne and her school also had a strong appreciation for inclusion and importance of school culture, which will be discussed further within the 'Pedagogy for All' section below:

Dianne: ...there's that understanding that they have just the same right, just...that they had a right to be included in everything and anything they do, and as part of what we believe as our school, ...one of our school strengths is that we really push and promote inclusion and we've talked to the children about what inclusion means...so really no, there is no area that a child should not be included

Brian discussed the benefits that teaching in an inclusive environment has given him:

Brian: ...overwhelmingly it's been a positive experience, because um it makes you more aware of individual differences

An ORS funded child was provided extra assistance one-on-one for his learning outside the classroom at Dianne's school, but she noticed the disadvantages of removing the child, as it became "challenging" to have him out of the classroom environment. With this realisation, it was advocated for the child to be moved back into the classroom.

The teachers also wanted inclusion to be meaningful, so that all the students received the same quality of education. Teachers understood that inclusion was not simply a matter of the child being present at school, but that high quality learning was also taking place. April mentioned how quality of education was a right and how teachers should have an awareness of this when teaching:

April: ...everybody has the right to a quality education... no matter what that looks like... every child has the right to a quality education... that's really something you've got to keep in your head

This quality and equity was highlighted by Dianne as she gave a recount of a discussion she had with staff in the Ministry of Education, Special Education (SE). SE's focus was on having the child's presence at school as a priority, whereas Dianne was concerned with both presence and participation, simply being there was not enough:

Dianne: "We can get to participation and that's brilliant, but we just want them to be present", and it's like "No, but that goes against everything as a teacher" ... you know you want them present and participating and so you've got to find the medium for some of these children...

Emily also discussed her desire to ensure that all children be included in regular classroom programmes. She spoke of how parents would want their child to experience success, and she expressed the importance of involvement for all:

Emily: ...every child in our hub needs to have the same experiences and the same opportunities... there is no reason why a child shouldn't be included in any school...

**Development of Knowledge.** Teachers' knowledge was developed through a combination of previous knowledge and new knowledge gained through their teaching experiences. Teachers discussed examples of how this occurred through Collaboration, Teacher Education, Teacher Experience and Personal Experience.

**Collaboration.** Interprofessional collaboration and learning was discussed as being highly beneficial (Mentis, Kearney, & Bevan-Brown, 2012). Collaboration was seen as involving the child, their family and staff, with honesty and openness valued as particularly important in understanding the experiences of children with ASD. This ability to be honest allowed teachers to build mutually beneficial relationships between the home and the school, and also extended to benefit the wider community. Sharing knowledge and having other staff on board was a positive and important aspect of gaining understanding.

All the teachers found that an interprofessional approach was essential to gaining an understanding of ASD. Recognising that no one can possibly have all the solutions or knowledge to teach a wide range of unique children, these teachers had built up networks of professionals which they could learn with and from to enhance their own knowledge about teaching and their teaching practice. Networks included members such as parents/whanau, teachers, Special Education Needs Coordinators (SENCOs), and support workers.

Teachers specifically discussed the importance of collaborating with others in the school. Cathy spoke of not being able to see an immediate solution to a problem sometimes, but knowing that someone outside the classroom who has an understanding, could offer one that she may not have considered. This sharing reduced the sole responsibility on Cathy to come up with a solution and she was able to learn new strategies to support the child's learning. The teachers also discussed the importance of sharing and learning from the child's previous teachers. This taught them beneficial strategies and gave teachers the chance to, as Dianne said, time to "process the information" they had learnt, to provide the best matched supports for the child.

Collaboration with the family was a topic that all participants discussed. April discussed the need for collaboration in terms of achieving success for the child's education:

April: ... it's not just the child, the family is so important and if you are ever going to get anywhere... you would have to get the parents on board... child, their extended family, everybody is so important, that's something that it has really taught me

Emily saw parents and teachers working together as a partnership where they could all be open and honest with each other. With this partnership Emily was able to not only discuss things frankly with them, but she was provided an opportunity to gain understanding. She spoke of one family in particular that have set up a local support group for Pasifika families:

Emily: I think we are in a really lucky position... we have access to really great open parents... having or tapping into their expertise, saying hang on here, are we missing the mark here, is there something were missing and being able to kind of have that open dialogue with parents... because they know their child best... I think the biggest resource we have to be frank is our parents... "A" and "B" are really great because...anything that comes through, um any new research that they've looked at they send through to us as well, so I read it and

then send it through to staff and so we have that um support material...the biggest resource really that teachers have to tap into is the parents, because parents know their child best

Emily also discussed the importance of ensuring that the family was supported in gaining an understanding too. She spoke of a student who was very suddenly losing his vision and wanted to know that the child had support and that the family had the ability to be able to support the child at home. While not always easy to be frank with families about difficulties their child might be experiencing, April stated:

April: Honesty is the best policy about the child. To the parents, if they've had a bad day, they've had a bad day...but don't worry tomorrows another day... and we'll deal with whatever comes tomorrow...so that honesty is really...a huge thing

Dianne, unfortunately, had one negative experience where the parents of a child with ASD did not convey some of the complexities of their child's learning and behaviour. This left the school in a situation where the child's needs were not able to be immediately met, which made planning around the child's needs difficult, which not only resulted in a negative experience for the child but for the school as well.

Participants in the study indicated that having strong and open lines of communication between school and families benefited the whole school community. Parents of all children at Emily's school are invited to visit each hub where it is mentioned that children with a range of disabilities attend these classes. The ability to see their children working alongside those with disability had a remarkable and surprising result. A recent parent survey asked which values parents considered were most important for their child at the school, and the number one value chosen was tolerance. Emily was incredibly proud of this result stating:

Emily: ...that shows to us that our community recognises the nature of what our school is all about

**Teacher Education.** Teachers mentioned the importance of learning about ASD and teaching students who have ASD through teacher education. All participants, except Cathy, had been teaching between 16 and 24 years. However, none of the teachers felt that they had come to the job with expertise learned through their initial teacher training course. This is most likely due to the fact that special schools were still in operation during the time of their study, yet Cathy mentioned that it was not a

compulsory part of her recent refresher course. Teachers did however discuss the benefits of PD.

The teachers felt that teacher training should require compulsory papers to be able to gain an understanding of ASD and inclusion. Many felt that there was simply not enough training around how to include all children, what to expect, and teaching them some strategies for ensuring all children were able to learn. April mentioned the lack of training generally in the area of teaching children with disabilities:

April: ...no education for me whatsoever, because there were special teachers, you didn't have to deal with that on a day to day basis... I think compulsory courses at teacher college (training)

Brian mentioned this too:

Brian: ...the initial teacher training, in terms of special education, very, very limiting...there's not much, there's maybe a quick overview I think, that's is we only probably had at the most a semester ... not enough, and in terms of ASD, I don't remember anything on that... you had to find out about it on the job

April had just completed her teacher training where her training had prepared her for a "mainstream classroom" when the Tomorrow's Schools education reform came into practice. She indicated that this was a "whole new ball-game" and while it was different, it did fit with her thoughts at the time that everybody should have the right to a quality education. She also mentioned that while new teachers do have a little more understanding of inclusion and disability, this seemed to be due to the teachers themselves taking on extra papers. Emily also had extra training which added her understanding. This training was in speech language supports, speech language therapy and a diploma in ESOL (English as a Second Language).

Teachers mentioned professional development courses that had been of particular value to their practice. These included Sue Larkey's seminars, TIPs for Autism, and Incredible Years for Teachers. Many had utilised the knowledge and strategies gained through these courses and highlighted the benefits for students with ASD and the classroom as a whole. Their schools had taken the initiative and organised for all staff, including support staff, to attend these professional development workshops on a regular basis to ensure that they had up to date information about ASD and strategies to support students' learning. Emily described these courses as "important" as they provide an "insight" into the child with ASD. Brian found attending these sorts of professional development training days and having staff meetings was

the better approach to take than sitting with a “pile of stuff to read”. Cathy mentioned a recent seminar that she attended and the advantages of sharing at these events:

Cathy: ... it's always good to go for a refresher... it was interesting listening to the doctor talk, and it...just keeps you up with it and keeps your mind full of what goes on for other people and other children we don't see

April mentioned the new Inclusive Education webpage set up by the MoE. While not a course or professional development as such, she commented positively on the content and the opportunity to learn from this:

April: ... so inclusive education has got lovely books and how to differentiate learning and all that sort of thing. It's the stuff that teachers have been doing for years finally put on to paper...basically, and it's a wonderful resource, wonderful, wonderful resource.

**Teaching Experience.** The teachers' understandings of ASD were generally gained through their experiences on the job, rather than through their training. A range of teaching experiences formed these perceptions such as teaching students with a range of different disabilities including physical disabilities - students who were Deaf, students who were Blind, had Cri-du-shat Syndrome, Downs Syndrome, severe behaviours, brain injuries, ADHD and ADD. Part of these teachers' experience showed that understanding was gained through the successes they had had with their many students over their careers.

Dianne felt that her teaching experience allowed her to build up an understanding and a range of strategies and successes that could really only come from being on the job as a teacher:

Dianne: What works one day, doesn't work the next and you've got to have this... infinite bag of tricks, and I guess for the teachers that are very new in their career, it's very hard for them to pull those out of thin air...

Brian and Emily spoke of being guided by the successes that they have had in their teaching. Emily also spoke of the importance of reflecting on your mistakes.

Emily: ...teachers need to be highly reflective, and if they're not looking at themselves first...cause you can't go on the blame of the child, cause ultimately you're the adult...you're the adult that has the ability to regulate

Cathy, while only a primary school teacher for just over a year, had a wealth of knowledge that she gained through her previous ten years' experience as a play

specialist at a centre for infant, child and adolescent mental health working with many children with ASD. Her further work as a teacher aide in early childhood and primary school settings and her current teaching role meant that Cathy's teaching experience with children who have ASD was quite substantial.

**Personal Experience.** Many of the teachers had come to some understanding of ASD and inclusion through their personal experiences. For example, Emily also had personal experience with ASD and with a sibling who acquired a disability following an accident. Another example was Cathy's son being diagnosed with ASD and ADHD in childhood. While she now believes ASD was a misdiagnosis, this as well as her years of experience on the job may have had a large impact on Cathy's perception of ASD as she has a very accepting view of ASD and disability in general.

Cathy: And I suppose having my own child with um, pretty full-on ADHD because he had some traits um, you know things that had to be certain shapes and sizes...but he actually got over all that...and I'm a mum of four kids...so I've got all those perspectives...I suppose I have a very open, flexible idea about children in general, and autism just fits in with that, because they are children, ...I just see them as kind of characteristics that kids come with, and you've got to manage that...it's just part of their personalities, is how I see it...I suppose because I've seen so much in different situations

Cathy also acknowledged that while a diagnosis was helpful in terms of getting assistance for her child, it also changed **others'** perceptions of him. Cathy described what occurred after receiving a diagnosis:

Cathy: ...in actual fact it made things worse, to the point where they kinda said "Don't bring him back" ...but it was their shift in how they managed him, so if they'd just kept treating him like a normal kid it would have been fine...but then they decided to treat him as special

Dianne also had a personal experience with disability as her brother had Downs Syndrome and ASD. She spoke of being "very protective" of her brother and felt a strong empathy for siblings of children with a disability. She made sure that siblings retained their own identity and were not relied on as someone who can "deal" with the child with the disability at school and elsewhere. She explained it was the teacher's responsibility to "formulate a support network" for the child with disability, not that of their sibling. Her experience also included growing up with a mother who is a strong campaigner for educational equality and supporting families in the disability sector.

## Summary

Overall, it was clear that these teachers had developed a sound awareness and understanding of the kind of unique needs of children with ASD how these children may see the world in a differently to neurotypical peers. They had also developed an appreciation of the children's uniqueness by embracing these differences and taking time to identify the children's strengths, without assuming their capabilities based simply on their diagnosis or label. There was also an understanding of the importance of inclusion and they held the belief that it was a right and a benefit for all to have a quality inclusive education. The influences on their perceptions, which was unique for each of the participants. While initial teacher training did not involve much in the way of understanding inclusion and ASD for these teachers, most had personal experiences with ASD or disability, had undertaken further study, or used interprofessional collaboration to gain this understanding. Regular access to professional development kept them updated with current knowledge and strategies to work with children with ASD. This leads on to how they incorporated this knowledge into their pedagogy.

## Pedagogy for All

It was clear that the teachers had taken the knowledge that they had gained through knowing the child; collaborating with others; through personal and professional experiences, and used this knowledge to develop teaching methods and strategies to include the children with ASD in their classrooms. They felt that their overall school culture and values supported this endeavour, and that ultimately this process benefited all children in their classrooms. As well as gaining an understanding of inclusion from being in an inclusive environment, the school culture was built on through the teachers' practices. The teachers expected, and were able to maintain, High Expectations for the children with ASD in their classrooms and their schools. Adaptations were identified as another important part of their teaching practice as both the environment and the curriculum were adapted to facilitate inclusion. The Supports that aided their practice and discussed. I will now consider the roles played by these factors.

**School Culture.** The principle of inclusion was considered to be supported and reflected school-wide. Teachers discussed how their own increased understanding of difference/disability worked to enhance their acceptance of student diversity generally. In an effort to educate other students about the differences that children may have and what to expect, April showed them the DVD '*In my Shoes*' supplied by the MoE.

April: ...the kids love it...they sit there and talk about it. They go “Ooo I am a bit like that” or “this” or um the kids who are diagnosed “that’s what I do, now you know why” ...

She indicated that there was a perception ‘out there’ that you shouldn’t point out differences, however, rather than “sweeping it under the carpet” and ignoring difference, everybody is already aware things are different - they just don’t understand why - and that acknowledging and celebrating differences is the only way they can start to understand and accept these differences. Emily also demonstrated, through honesty, that she was able to educate her classroom about differences:

Emily: ...we share it with children because we are open with our kids because our students need to recognise that we are a whanau hub...We don’t sugar coat it for our senior children cause they should understand you know “G” is stimming because he’s distressed...when he goes out into the fresh air and has a bit of a run around and swings his hands and head he comes right...sometimes we’re in the middle of teaching a group and he starts to stim, one of the children says “Come on G” and just take him...G comes back in and there’s no conversation needed to be had...because the students recognise in order for “G” to keep working he needs this time.

**Strategies.** Participants had compiled a range of strategies to get to know the child and assist their learning. They all spoke of having many strategies in their ‘*bag of tricks*’. These strategies were often unique to the child and the environment that the child was in at the time. A few of the different types of strategies mentioned included *Visuals, Behaviour Strategies, Transitions* and *Digital Assistance* and *Other Strategies* that were helpful.

April explained how she had learnt that strategies must be unique as they may not work for every child. April felt that strategies had to be approached in a different way and had to use “flexibility” and spoke of the “fluidity” of the approaches taken. While she stated no specific strategies, she did employ strategies that were useful for behaviour management. These types of strategies helped to keep situations calm, stress levels down and helped her in recognising when situations were escalating and intervening early. It was, however, noted by most of the participants that while often strategies were set in place to be for the child, they had found that these same strategies could benefit all the children in their classroom and vice versa as Brian and Emily explained:

Brian: ...strategies that are put in place for children with behaviour difficulties or with higher learning needs also work with ASD students as well...

Emily: ...every child responds to things differently and its recognising what is different for different children

**Visuals.** Visuals such as photos, flash cards, social stories and routine boards were commonly used strategies. Cathy used flash card visuals for all of the children in her class, which allowed all her students to communicate with her. Emily also found that visuals benefitted all students, not just those with ASD:

Emily: It's not just about R (student) having visuals for the quiet zone, everybody has the visual...a lot of our students have that visual...having a gesture as well so that students if they're not able to verbally communicate, they can communicate with the gesture

Emily also used visuals when there were few opportunities for a student to anticipate changes in their routine, such as when visiting their local intermediate school to participate in technology lessons, attending sports days or school camps. Photos were utilised to remind the students what would be happening during each lesson and gave the students the opportunity to see what success looked like for a task prior to them attending. The school provided the ability for students to practice what would be expected of them with the use of items such as a food trolley and sewing machines.

Emily: ...our students know what **is** going to happen. At tech they're making tacos so this is what it **will** look like... so that when they get there they're going to experience that success because the moment they start um struggling, then what we find is they don't want to go...it's not just our ASD kids, its ah any child...at the moment they experience that failure that they don't want to attempt anymore...and that's not what we want, we want confident well rounded students.

All of the teachers discussed the importance of having strict routines. To ensure a strict routine was set, Brian and Emily used a visual timetable, which was extended to all their students in their classroom/whanau hub. These were used for day to day activities in the classroom for everyone. One strategy noted was ensuring an up to date weekly calendar was on display at all times:

Emily: ...our kids will use the same and there's a consistency and routine, structure, if anything's going to change for, and it's not just for our ASD kids, for a lot of our kids with trauma, anything that's different or going to change there's

a lot of anxiety around that...keeping things tight, when you say that it's going to be reading, its reading...because it's that security in the knowledge of what's going to happen

Other visual strategies that produced good results were social stories, visual emotional scales so children can communicate how they are feeling and colour coded items in the classrooms. All of these visual strategies helped reinforce routine which suited all of the students in the classroom.

**Transitions.** Transitions were seen as an opportunity for teachers to learn about the child, and for the child to learn about the teacher and the other students in their classrooms. All of the participants discussed the importance of making transition time from ECE into primary school possible as it was crucial for getting to know the child. Transition from ECE included preschool visits where assessments could be made on the length of time to transition, the types of teaching approaches to put into place, and a general assessment of how children cope socially and in a classroom setting. April described this as an opportunity for teachers to learn the student's "quirks", and students get to gradually "settle into routines". She felt that it was vital that transitions were well supported.

**Digital Technology.** Digital technology was mentioned by two of the participants as a strategy to learn what a student's interest may be and also to encourage learning when physical difficulties such as holding a pencil occurred. Brian noted that use of the iPad came in handy with engaging one of his students. Dianne also noted that after determining a student's interests, they noticed that digital technology was the perfect aide to tapping into the students' ability to learn. She also discussed how technology allowed all children who needed stimulation, via music for example, could listen to their devices with one ear phone in so their learning was not impacted and they were not distracting the class.

**Other Strategies.** Many of the teachers discussed the importance of forewarning their students of change and prompting them throughout the day to remember when it was time to do things. For example, remembering to place their homework book in their bag. Cathy and Emily taught their students with ASD that they had a "safe area" where they could go to calm themselves down. Emily's school made use of a soundproof room where for the sake of the child's safety, the camera in the room was monitored by the office reception staff. Brian discussed the importance of breaking down instructions so that the child is able to have the time to process the information.

Brian also spoke of the importance of learning opportunities outside the classroom. He spent his release days doing extra activities with his student with ASD, two other students as buddies and the teachers' aide. These included activities such as cooking or visiting the museum. This worked to help him get to know the child and was to ensure that the student had "plenty of experiences" within a small group so that the child would have things to write about in class that he was familiar with. No doubt this small group also benefitted from social interactions as well.

**High Expectations.** High expectations of students were expected regardless of their disability. Participants felt that it was very important that all children participate in out of school activities. Dianne discussed some of the positive moments that she, her students, and their families had experienced through maintaining high expectations and inclusion in school activities:

Dianne: ...our school is one um, it's an expectation, you just get on and do it... we run a production every year...they are in that production which they do really well in...their parents sit there in the front row or wherever and they are just crying...because they just didn't expect to see their child dancing...he was just amazing...I was sitting there crying because you know even though it was an expectation, we didn't know if he was going to freak out...but it's you know that expectation...you know every one of those kids actually loves music, they love the participation side of it with their peers, and that's the most important thing.

Emily also said that while adaptations sometimes have to be made, this does not mean that expectations had to be low for the child's inclusion:

Emily: Parents have chosen to mainstream their child...and the adaptations will be made, but high expectations are going to be maintained...so we're gonna make those adaptations, but we still expect that your child will go to camp, that your child will go on trips, your child will have those experiences because that is the experience of the mainstream classroom...consistency, same expectations, participation, I think those are the biggies

**Adaptations.** Adaptations to the environment and the curriculum were generally discussed as being '*always possible*'. They were also viewed as a way of helping to ensure that a child has the right to education and inclusion. These adaptations not only benefitted children with ASD, but also all other students in the classroom. While the NZ Curriculum is inclusive, teachers still felt it was necessary to make adaptations from their regular teaching routines so that students with ASD could be included in all aspects of learning.

Emily's school had modified their environment by implementing whanau hubs. These hubs involved students being taught within an open plan area, which was zoned by accepted noise levels. They recognised that allowing students to work where the noise level suited them was helpful for all students' learning. They also rotated their teachers one at a time through each whanau hub, for example a junior teacher will swap with a senior teacher so that each hub gets to know all of the teachers in the school. This not only helped the students learn who they would be taught by, but also supported the teachers to learn who the children were and the conditions that support them to participate and learn well. When teachers were away on leave, the teacher who was on release would step in as a relief teacher for the day. This benefitted students by encouraging them to cope with small changes, they got to know other teachers' expectations, and this approach also ensured that unknown relievers would not upset the routine in the hub.

When Brian was aware that a student was not participating he ensured that they were still included:

Brian: ...sometimes you can put this particular student in a group and it doesn't work out very well, you know he...he doesn't participate...generally speaking try to set up the environment so, so he's included as much as possible

Cathy's experiences on both personal and professional fronts highlighted the need to include and allow access to all parts of the curriculum:

Cathy: ...incorporating them into games...we've always done that with "R" (family member) ...being able to access all parts of the curriculum to give them that whole holistic view of things.

Cathy also explained how she was able to adapt her lessons so that they still met the curriculum by incorporating a child with ASD's interests:

Cathy: ...I go with their interest, like we did stuff on rockets and stuff...I did all my maths around rockets for a while there...counting backwards, blast off, you know, fun for them.

Brian discussed adaptation of the curriculum as simply being part of the role as a primary school teacher. Brian was aware of how students moving on to high school do not cope when the schools do not "diversify" the curriculum or "adapt it" for all students. Emily also described how the role of accessing the curriculum became a role for the class as a whole for one blind student:

Emily: ...it's about everyone else in the class recognising what else we can do, what adaptations are we going to have to happen in order for him to access learning, so what is it we need to do...

She explained her long term thoughts around adaptation and her concern for her student with ASD moving to high school in the following year:

Emily: Yes, we have adapted the curriculum, we've adapted the conditions for learning to happen, but there is no reason that the high school shouldn't adapt the conditions to allow the child to access learning in the same way

Cherie: Yeah, but what sort of thing happens when that stops? Why does it stop?

Emily: But that's what I don't understand is, is he going to the unit? Well why should he? ...Then you have this fight at the high school and you fight the battle. They go in for a term and then you find they have been transferred over to a...unit. Well hang on he is quite capable, so what you've done is you've actually devalued the learning that he's made...we should be with our peer group...He is more than capable of footing it at high school and being able to cope...there is no reason why he should not have access

**Supports.** There were a range of supports that each participant had access to depending in the needs of the child. These included Teachers' aides, Social workers, Resource Teacher: Learning and Behaviour teachers (RTLBs), Resource Teachers for the Deaf (RTDs), Speech Language Therapists (SLTs), support agencies, MoE services, the use of *Individual Education Plans (IEPs)* and as mentioned earlier the benefit of having collaboration with staff members and SENCOs. A few of these were chosen to discuss here:

**Teacher's aides.** All the participants mentioned teacher's aides as being a valued "extra pair of hands". Many of the participants made mention of the misconception that '**teacher** aides' were there for one student only, instead seeing them as '**teachers**' aides' who could help with the rest of the class and help with tasks such as photocopying. April discussed that it was essential that teacher's aides have a "strong personality". Brian mentioned that he was very lucky to have a teacher's aide that understood that the child required time to complete tasks alone at times to "encourage some independence", but also noted different behaviours when the teacher's aides were present:

Brian: ...playing up a little bit with the teacher aides around...and when I work with the students I see quite a different side to the student, generally a lot more compliant

***Individual Education Plans (IEPs).*** Overall IEPs were viewed as being very helpful. Brian discussed the fact that they were beneficial for problem solving, collaboration and for taking ownership and responsibility to ensure the child achieves:

Brian: IEPs are pretty good at helping to overcome different challenges...it involves the parents and...all other agencies and involved as well so you can target a particular action to the particular stakeholders...and everyone's got buy in.

He also mentioned that this was only something that was done if a student had funding attached to them, and indicated that they probably were not done as often as they should.

Emily mentioned that the learning goals set in IEPs were beneficial, however she struggled with the idea of them being called IEPs as such. She believed that they were better termed (and viewed) as Learning Pathways. She saw the idea of using the word 'plan' as indicating is there was something "horrendously" wrong that required fixing, rather than a pathway to the child's learning success. She felt that only completing IEPs for students with disabilities was "isolating the child" and saying "you are different". In contrast, Learning Pathways were something that every child in the school had and was able to view at all times. The only difference for children with ASD was that this Learning Pathway was also viewed in a meeting with their parents.

## **Summary**

The teachers' understandings of ASD and inclusion positively impacted on their pedagogy. Their pedagogy was also supported by the inclusive culture within their schools. Teachers were able to identify many strategies which also influenced their pedagogy, as they were able to demonstrate the many ways in which they adapted their environment to offer the best chance for participation and learning to transpire. While the NZ Curriculum is inclusive in nature, adaptations to the way teachers taught were felt to be necessary. Having a range of supports such as support staff and IEPs also ensured that the teachers' pedagogy best met the learning needs for all children in their classes.

### **Areas for Additional Support**

There were some areas for additional support identified that impact on the ability to teach students with ASD. These were generally situations that were outside the control of the teachers, and those that were within their control they took them on as a challenge and worked to resolve any difficulties. These included, the often complex nature of students' needs, concerns around assessments with academic assessment, and financial assistance surrounding support for the child with ASD.

**Complex needs.** One area for support identified was when teachers were required to understand multiple and complex disabilities. Some students for example had behavioural difficulties and vision or hearing difficulties.

Emily: ...we have some children who are more than one condition..., and you just have to manage that, and that can be tricky at times, but there is no reason why a child shouldn't be included to not be allowed to be included in any school, but I do think that there are times...particularly when there is physical, social and emotional, there's a whole host of..., a whole child that there are concerns around...I think that's when it's difficult...extremely complex, I think that's where you'll find it the most difficult.

She went on however to discuss that an early introduction to the regular classroom can impact on the amount of difficulty that is experienced in understanding the child's needs:

Emily: ...I do think if children start in a school early, like a lot of our ASD kids started at five and as they have worked through school um you grow this picture.

April gave an example of teaching child with Cerebral Palsy who communicated using assistive technologies and supports. She did not find it too difficult to include her into the regular classroom activities, however she did find it difficult to incorporate, what she saw as non-verbal difficulties, and the physical side of her disability into the regular routine:

April: ...that was hard work...because she was non-verbal as well, so it was just noise...was more difficult because it was physical...she couldn't come out and play netball on the court with us...but then the kids would take turns, they would bounce a ball to her in her chair. She had a walker as well, so every now and then she would put it on, she hated it...

April did mention a teacher aide who assisted her with moving the child around the school which was good for everyone. She also indicated the benefits that both herself and the other children in the school had by including this child:

April: ...the kids loved her, and um it taught them a lot and it taught me a lot about patience and that sort of thing, so it was **very** good for the children.

Unfortunately, while this child experienced some regular schooling, she moved on to a satellite unit for the remainder of her primary education.

Brian mentioned the more positive side of complex scenarios by taking it on as a kind of personal challenge:

Brian: I mean it definitely comes with its challenges, but...you know...if somethings a real challenge for me, if there's a problem and it's not being solved, then I'll try to think of solutions to try to...fix the problem...if something doesn't work then come up with something else...creative sort of solution to the problem

**Academic assessments.** There was discussion surrounding academic assessments in terms of students not being supportive to the needs of those with ASD. Standardised testing and national standards in schools were mentioned due to the fixed nature of these assessments and the concern that they may affect a student's right to education. April stated quite cautiously her concerns surrounding this issue:

April: ...with the introduction of national standards in New Zealand and probably standardised testing, ...schools are going to get pickier I think (about who is included in their school) and the only people who are going to miss out are those with special educational needs, or behavioural issues

Cherie: Do you think that principals may not be quite so lenient as they were with behaviour issues and non-academic achievement?

April: ...yep stand downs are starting to go up, so exclusions will go up especially if standardised testing comes in.

Brian also discussed his frustration with the lack of flexibility in terms of assessment and national standards. He identified that some students with ASD, when only looking at the set standards, show low levels of academic achievement. He discusses a student that with a lot of resources and practice, he was not capable of achieving the levels set by the standards he had to meet and that there was no flexibility within that, but stated:

Brian: ...that's the strategy I had to keep because national standards doesn't have any variation for special needs.

Brian also used the writing assessment e-asTTle as another example of the frustration of inflexibility. He explained how a student was quite capable of writing under slightly different conditions, however those conditions were not allowed:

Brian: ...this autistic student in my class, he can write, he can't write it down with a pen and paper...he can write sentences as long as it's on a, you know, a reasonable topic, a topic that he's interested in, I mean if he's not interested... you've lost him

**Financial support for inclusion.** Financial support, perhaps unsurprisingly, was mentioned by some of the participants who were SENCOs who felt that there was still not support in terms of financial resourcing. April and Dianne mention the difficulties of ensuring there is enough financial support:

April: ...lack of money of course because we've only got the SEd (Special Education) grant, which is only a percentage of the number of kids at your school, and if your percentage is...25% and they only pay for 5%, you know... TA support is...very limited...funding is extremely small...until the funding model is changed, it's going to be an ongoing struggle.

Dianne discussed the benefits of applying for ORS funding prior to starting school as she found once they were in the school system it was more difficult to get and too late for the supports that need to be in place to be set up. She also discussed a preferred funding schedule:

Dianne: ...funding, definitely there needs to be more funding when they start and as they become more proficient in their education or...more able to cope with the changes...it needs to be more at the beginning and then reviewed... rather than the other way around

Cherie: And having it drip fed to you?

Dianne: That's my feeling anyway

Others felt it was not something that changed the level of support for them, finding other means to ensure the student's needs were met such as topping up the limited hours through school funding.

## **Summary**

While there were areas where further support was required in complex situations, teachers were able to overcome these difficulties, taking them on as challenges. The standardised testing and national standards worries were considered relevant as they could have a major impact on inclusion. Finally, financial assistance - this was seen as a difficult aspect to juggle for some and not the most important thing by others.

## **Conclusion**

The analysis revealed an important and interesting account of how their perceptions about ASD were formed, and how these perceptions influenced their teaching practice. It was clear that these teachers had a deep understanding of ASD and inclusion, and how through a combination of previous knowledge (personal and educational) and new knowledge (experience teaching and educational), their pedagogy was able to reflect these understandings. While there were some areas identified for extra support, many of the teachers had managed to remedy these difficulties.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

*“It takes a village to raise a child. It takes a child with autism to raise the consciousness of the village,” - Elaine Hall*

This research, through the assistance of AI, allowed me to understand the perceptions and preparedness of five primary school teachers to be pedagogically responsive to children with ASD in the regular classroom. This methodology, centred on exploring the positive aspects of the discourse, revealed the positive and constructive values, attitudes and practices that they used to develop a pedagogy appropriate for teaching all students in their classrooms. The knowledge that these teachers had gained, both about ASD and about inclusion emphasised the principles of social constructivism whereby knowledge was actively developed - contextually, through collaboration, through language and through introspection (Carrington et al., 2012; Lyons et al., 2016).

This chapter is framed around the research questions for this project. It discusses teachers' perspectives on the knowledge they possess; how they have developed their knowledge of ASD and inclusion; and the influences of personal and professional factors on their understandings. The supports that they have been influenced and aided by will also be discussed.

### **What Knowledge do Teachers have of ASD and Inclusion?**

The research revealed that teachers appreciated the importance of having an awareness and an understanding of both ASD and inclusion. These teachers had developed a mind-set that viewed ASD as a different way of thinking and experiencing the world. They were able to understand the kinds of challenges children with ASD might have in the classroom environment and to take these into consideration as part of their teaching approach. As the responsibility of class teachers is one of the most crucial factors in terms of achieving successful and meaningful learning outcomes for students with ASD, their knowledge and perceptions of ASD and inclusiveness is important (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; McGregor & Campbell, 2001).

There was a noted emphasis placed on getting to know the children with ASD (and indeed all children), a point that is recognised as a crucial aspect in terms of acknowledging the uniqueness and diversity of children with disabilities (Ainscow, 2014; Ministries of Health and Education, 2016; Slee, 2011). Teachers were able to learn from the children and concentrate on working with the children's abilities, rather

than focusing on their deficits or difficulties, also considered key to successful inclusion (Lindsay et al., 2014).

**Equity.** Teachers displayed an understanding of what equity was for their students. As the Salamanca statement first declared, and much research has since indicated, all children should have a right to attend regular schools, and a right to a quality education equivalent to their peers (Slee, 2011). High quality education for students with ASD is achieved through sound teacher training, and ensuring that they implement the necessary strategies and adaptations required to include the child in the regular classroom (Walker, 2015).

### **How have Personal Factors/Prior Knowledge Impacted on Their Understanding?**

The main personal factors and prior knowledge that these teachers discussed were around their initial teacher training, personal experiences with ASD and prior experiences with people on the autism spectrum.

**Initial Teacher education.** These teachers had, with the exception of Cathy, completed their teacher training between 16 and 24 years ago and acknowledged the shortfalls in their own initial teacher training in terms of preparing them to teach students with ASD. While it is likely that the time period in which these teachers had studied inclusive practices were not deemed a necessary part of their initial teacher training, it is more recently noted that it is still not uncommon for teacher training to omit content on knowledge about ASD (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). All the teachers proposed that there ought to be more training directed towards understanding ASD and inclusion at the teacher training level.

More experience in the classroom setting as part of initial teacher training was seen as highly desirable by one of the teachers. Research suggests that this kind of contextual experience may increase knowledge and awareness of ASD, build teacher confidence, and also has the benefit of leading to more positive attitudes and outcomes in terms of inclusion of students with ASD (Ahmed, Sharma, & Deppeler, 2012; McGregor & Campbell, 2001; Rose, 2001).

While these teachers had developed a belief in their ability and a confidence to teach students with ASD, they were concerned that new teachers may not have prior experience, and therefore would be left to come to an understanding of what it is like to teach inclusively only when they begin teaching. This lack of belief in their ability and confidence in teaching can lead to higher levels of anxiety for teachers (Sinz, 2004). It is reported that those who do feel better prepared to teach students with ASD and with disability in general, are likely to have greater feelings of self-efficacy and confidence

and in turn are more likely to take responsibility for the learning of all students in their classrooms (Darling-Hammond, Chung, & Frelow, 2002).

**Personal experience.** Having prior knowledge through personal experiences with ASD had impacted on some of the teachers' perceptions. While it is unreasonable to expect every teacher to have had personal experiences with people who have ASD prior to starting out in their teaching careers, this was perceived to be a marked advantage. Research, while not specific to ASD, indicates that those who have a personal experience or spend a large amount of time with someone with a disability or mental illness for example, are more likely to maintain their supportive attitudes towards the illness for a longer period of time than that of those who gain knowledge elsewhere (Jacoby, 2015; Morin, Rivard, Crocker, Boursier, & Caron, 2013).

**Prior experience.** Cathy had gained an insight into ASD in a different working context prior to becoming a teacher, and this added to her knowledge and her overall understandings of ASD. Previous contact and successful interactions with students with disability has also been linked to the inclusion of students and with forming positive perceptions of ability to teach students with a disability (Ahmed et al., 2012).

### **How have these Teachers' Experiences Shaped their Knowledge?**

These teachers had a vast amount of experience between them and they all mentioned opportunities that arose for them to adapt their initial way of teaching to fall in line with the NZ Curriculum's flexibility to allow teacher to determine the best way for their class to learn the required curriculum.

**Teaching Experience.** While the teachers were concerned about the lack of education around inclusive practices and ASD, an effective way for teachers to develop an understanding of what inclusive teaching looks like, is to actually experience such practices first hand through observation and practice (Ainscow, 2014; Avramidis & Norwich, 2002). Most of these teachers felt that they had gained a lot of their knowledge around teaching students with ASD whilst on the job, suggesting that it is important for teachers to have support and opportunities to work interprofessionally to co-construct knowledge about teaching and ASD as they work with the child.

Teaching in an inclusive environment can also result in positive attitudes towards students with ASD, another key element as schools develop towards inclusion (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; McGregor & Campbell, 2001). These teachers had developed what I interpreted as a positive attitude towards students with ASD, regardless of the absence of initial training about ASD. Brian, for example, did not have

any personal experience with people with ASD, nor any knowledge about it as a result of his teacher training. Nonetheless, like the other teachers in this study he understood and appreciated the experiences of students with ASD, indicating that it was likely that his teaching experience was a key factor in gaining knowledge and forming perceptions about teaching a child with ASD. Like the other teachers in the study, the overall inclusive school culture was also highly influential in shaping Brian's inclusive practices. This is discussed later in the chapter.

These teachers had been able to be reflective in terms of their experiences. They described how when things did not go to plan they were able to sit back and determine where they could have improved or avoided a situation, being aware that this is something that an adult is able to step back and do, rather than a child. This reflection or intrapersonal collaboration requires a deep exploration of ones' personal perceptions and attitudes taking a holistic approach to learning and understanding (McGuinness, 2015). Through this reflection they were able to evaluate their experiences, practices, and values, which has the ability of leading to "change, commitment to quality and respect for difference" (Finlay, 2008, p. 8). Challenging their beliefs can allow them to deviate from doing what they have always done and learn to expand their knowledge (Pareja Roblin & Margalef, 2013). This introspection and reflection is also important for a teacher to perform, as what they conclude as being important to them, is often reflected in their teaching (Collinson, 1996).

**Implementation of the curriculum.** There was evidence that that these teachers had followed the NZ Curriculum guidelines on ensuring students were included in their schools (Ministry of Education, 2015b). As indicated earlier in the literature review, one of the main principles in the New Zealand curriculum is inclusion (Ministry of Education, 2016). Teachers in this study understood that all children can learn within the curriculum, a point that perhaps needs to be reiterated through processes of teacher education in order to enhance inclusion.

Slee (2011) has described how inclusivity can be achieved through a curriculum and pedagogy that has been significantly and thoughtfully adapted to acknowledge diversity. As the NZ Curriculum has been designed to be inclusive, it promotes inclusive practices and would have an obvious influence on teachers' perceptions and pedagogy. The NZ Curriculum guides teachers to respect the uniqueness of all students and to ensure that they participate, engage with their learning and achieve. (Ministry of Education, 2015b). The framework of the NZ Curriculum also promotes collaboration with the teacher, the family/whanau, and the student to gain knowledge of

the child (Ministry of Education, 2015a). Teachers ensured that students were not only present, but were participating and engaging with their peers, their environment and the curriculum. Teachers described holding high expectations for all students. They acknowledged that children with ASD think differently and are likely to experience high levels of anxiety or fear that they may not often be able to communicate. The teachers were very well aware that when a child with ASD exhibited disruptive/aggressive behaviours, they understood that such behaviours were due to the fact that the child was unable to cope with a given situation.

**School Culture.** These teachers were in schools that promoted inclusive values and practices. The inclusion of students with ASD or any disability cannot be achieved through the work of a single teacher alone - it requires a combination of the principal's leadership, teachers' strong commitment to inclusive principles, and strong collaboration with families and the local community for an inclusive culture to develop (Ainscow, 2014; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). With an overlap of previous knowledge and teaching experience, these teachers had not only gained a deep understanding of ASD and inclusive practices, but they were also able to influence the students and the wider community, further developing a culture of tolerance and understanding. The teachers noted that peers were very accepting of students with ASD, as they were honest with the class and school as a whole when explaining the unique characteristics of ASD. For real change to occur, this project supports the idea that school culture, and in turn the community, can adopt a change of attitude towards inclusion. The values that were reflected as part of their own school culture were likely to have been a major contributor to the perceptions that these teachers held, as: "teacher attitudes, beliefs and values that play a key role in creating inclusive classrooms and schools" (Carrington et al., 2012, p. 11)

It is suggested that teachers' knowledge impacts on the community as a whole, so actively sharing their knowledge with the community was bound to have a positive impact (Engelhardt, 2014). Some of the teachers felt that their school communities had gained an understanding and an acceptance of diversity, something that is crucial to achieving inclusion (Ainscow, Dyson, Goldrick, & West, 2012). More than simply expressing the importance of inclusion and understanding of ASD to the children in their classrooms, these teachers were able to make attempts to educate other parents in the surrounding community. Some of the teachers had highlighted the achievements that they had made in terms of educating and influencing their local communities to value diversity. The value of tolerance or acceptance of diversity was something that was evident in the schools of the participants. Moving towards this change of attitude

within the school and the wider community is a step in the direction that Ainscow believes is important: “development of schools that are effective for all children will only happen when what happens *outside* as well as *inside* the school changes” (Ainscow, 2014, p. 54).

The benefits of having an inclusive school culture are invaluable to the child with ASD as well as to other children in the classroom. It promotes not only an acceptance of diversity, but also facilitates communication, leadership and academic skills among all children (Katz, 2013). These teachers described how children in their classrooms were able to respect diversity. This respect had also become a strong part of their school values. This respect for diversity or tolerance on the part of the teachers and the other students is extremely important as “attitudes of teachers - and of fellow students - can either promote or inhibit a fair, welcoming and inclusive working climate” (Ainscow et al., 2012, p. 122).

### **How have Professional Supports Shaped Teachers’ Knowledge?**

These teachers were able to use professional supports such as interprofessional collaboration, PD, teacher’s aide support and IEPs to both support and shape their knowledge of ASD and inclusive practices. They all spoke highly of the effectiveness and importance of utilising these supports.

**Interprofessional Collaboration.** These teachers had spoken of the benefits of interprofessional collaboration. Importantly, the teachers had the sense that they would be supported within the school by their colleagues. Many had been able to approach their colleagues for advice and to brainstorm when they were faced with challenging situations in their classrooms. The extent of collegiality and peer support helped build these teachers’ positive attitudes and outlook towards being inclusive (Ahmed et al., 2012; Musset, 2010).

The teachers also utilised professional support services such as RTLBs for their students. They attended workshops and courses with their colleagues and other members of the team involved with the children with ASD in their classrooms. These teachers sought out the support of other professionals to collaborate with. This kind of collaboration is thought to be a beneficial way of gaining knowledge and awareness (Mentis et al., 2012). The positive benefits of working with and learning from and about others, gives each person involved with the process responsibility for the child’s learning.

Collaboration with families is highlighted as a crucial to the learning of a student with ASD, as it provides the opportunity to learn the unique characteristics of the child with ASD, which can then be integrated into their IEP to assist their learning (Ministries of Health and Education, 2016). These teachers emphasised the importance of having the families involved in the collaboration process in order to be best prepared to teach student/s with ASD. The teachers referred to this collaboration as a partnership which encouraged families to be an equal contributor to their child's learning, which in turn also helped the teachers learn about the child with ASD.

Through interprofessional collaboration these teachers were able to gain a better understanding of the individual child with ASD they were teaching. Apart from the child's family, this included talking to past teachers in ECE and within their current schools. This allowed them to get to know the children and determine what works best for their learning. In having a shared knowledge, these teachers were able to make the necessary adaptations to ease the transition of children with ASD into their new environment (Schneider & Stern, 2010).

**Professional development.** These teachers were not hindered by the fact that their initial teacher training did not give them the ASD-specific knowledge that they felt was necessary. They instead took opportunities to educate themselves and learn from professional development courses and workshops to better their understanding and expand their knowledge and practices. It is thought that those who undertake extra training, whether through professional development or university training, may be seen to embrace inclusion with a more positive attitude and confidence (Symeonidou & Phtiaka, 2009). Professional development has a follow-on positive influence on students' learning as well, as continuing teacher education is deemed to be a major contributor to student achievement (Musset, 2010).

The teachers were positive about the types of workshops and courses available to them for learning ASD strategies, highlighting the importance of engaging in context specific teacher education (Musset, 2010). The willingness of a teacher to implement inclusive strategies is vital in the effectiveness and success of inclusive education (Fraser et al., 2005). They were then able to utilise these strategies and incorporate them into their daily routines and practices in their classrooms. Programmes such as '*TIPs for Autism*' were mentioned as a useful and collaborative approach to training. Support staff such as teacher's aides were invited to learn alongside the rest of the staff, which is regarded as an effective method of building more solid and positive

relationships between staff and ensuring students are positively assisted in their learning (Alborz, Pearson, Farrell, & Andy, 2009 ; Humphrey & Symes, 2013).

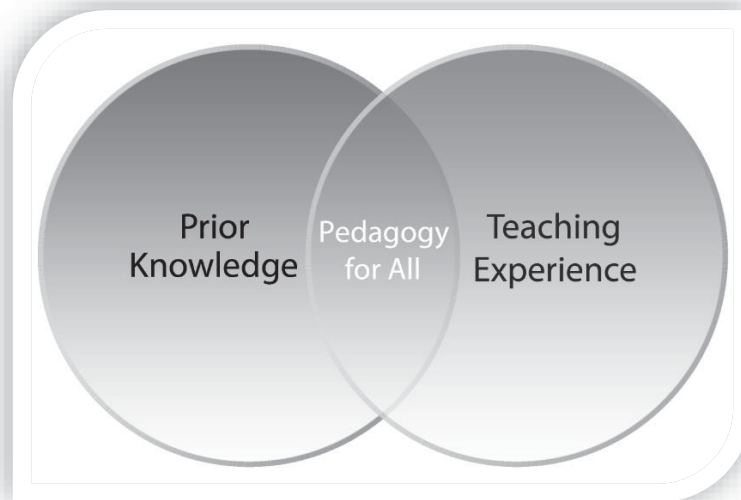
**Teacher's aide support.** The use of teacher's aides as supports for themselves was noted by most of these teachers, addressing the often misconceived idea that the teacher's aide is to be tagged on to an individual child. They described collaborating with teacher's aides in ways that promoted independence in children with ASD. Teachers appreciated that children's opportunities for social and academic inclusion could be limited by practices that led to children being too reliant on teacher's aides for assistance, and ultimately being segregated and stigmatised (Rutherford, 2012).

**IEPs.** IEPs were considered helpful in terms of setting goals for students. As Emily noted, they are beneficial for all children, not just those who are on the spectrum or have additional learning needs. The suggestion that they be referred to and treated as 'Learning Pathways' instead of 'Individual Education Plans' takes away some of the stigma associated with them, and works to ensure that they remain focused on the child's learning, rather than the IEP being seen as paper to note down problems, or to file away until the next IEP. IEP meetings were also attended by the students with ASD in some cases. This was a way of upholding students' participation rights, and of including them actively in decisions about their learning (Mason, Field, & Sawilowsky, 2004). It allowed teachers to gain a richer understanding of the child within the school environment.

**Areas for additional support.** These teachers did not list many areas for desired additional support. The main areas identified were around complex needs, assessment, and funding. Due to the often complex needs that a student with ASD might have, the training mentioned earlier in this chapter is important in assisting teachers with getting the best strategies and supports in place to ensure quality learning takes place. The difficulties with assessments could indicate the need for a slightly different approach, such as having more flexible assessments. Lack of funding is often listed as an area of concern by schools and parents (Kearney, 2009). Assistance from external and internal supports enabled teachers to continue working with their students in an inclusive manner. While often deemed a barrier, with the right kinds of other supports in place, the funding difficulties may be perceived as less of a barrier

### Overlap of Knowledge and Experience = Pedagogy for All

Overall, the teachers' perspectives revealed that their understanding and practice was developed through a combination of prior knowledge and their teaching experience. These two general areas of knowledge appear to overlap to inform teachers' understanding of both ASD and inclusion. The contribution of each of these factors is discussed followed by a discussion on the overlapping of these two themes, as the intertwining of prior and current knowledge is often inevitable, especially when forming perceptions (Fejes & Andersson, 2009; Fuster, 2003).



*Figure 4. Venn Diagram demonstrating how a pedagogy for all is developed through the overlapping of previous knowledge and teaching experience*

These teachers' prior knowledge included personal experiences, initial teacher training and experiences outside the teaching environment. There are many studies that have reviewed teachers' prior knowledge, effects of this preparedness, and how this impacts their teaching - and much like any other beliefs or perceptions that a person has, they are difficult to change once embedded (Darling-Hammond et al., 2002; Fuster, 2003; Jacoby, 2015; Morin et al., 2013).

The teachers had developed a '*Pedagogy for All*', whereby children were included as a right, and their lessons ensured that all learners' needs were met (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). The teachers also ensured that their students with ASD were not simply present in the classroom, but that they were also participating alongside their peers. It was evident that the broader school contexts in which these teachers were working were conducive to achieving an inclusive environment in their own classrooms.

Teachers described approaches to teaching and learning that may be consistent with inclusive pedagogy, where teachers have set out to achieve inclusion for all their students (Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011). They all had a positive attitude towards eliminating barriers and marginalisation. A teacher's pedagogy is thought to be developed through a combination of content, beliefs about learners, knowledge of the curriculum, knowledge of supports, resources and context, their aims and their pedagogical knowledge (Hashweh, 2013; Whiteside).

The duty or responsibility to achieve inclusion rests with teachers (Carrington et al., 2012). The teachers in this project had come to this understanding, and described taking full ownership, ensuring that all adaptations, both ecological and curricular, ensured the best possible outcome for all learners. It was also evident that these teachers did not view inclusion as something they were doing to fit a '*disabled*' child into a classroom, but instead saw inclusion as fairness and as a process that needed to occur to benefit not only the child with ASD, but the school environment as a whole – child, class, school and community - (Carrington et al., 2012). The desire to make adaptations for both inclusion and quality education seemed to imply that their students with ASD and other disabled students not only were receiving an equal education, but that these teachers were striving towards *equity* in education.

### **Limitations of this research**

The biggest limitation in this project was the time restraints which resulted in obtaining fewer participants than initially hoped for. I was actively seeking participants willing to discuss preparedness to teach and include students with ASD employing an appreciative inquiry methodology. This meant that those who may have had different perspective on including students with ASD may have not indicated an interest in participating in this research. This does however leave the door open to pursue further research, perhaps into the initial teaching programmes and the benefits from the individual workshops mentioned by the teachers.

Due to the small sample size these findings are not necessarily generalisable, but the study lends itself for replication. This study has also highlighted the need for more research into the initial training of teachers to build a capacity in teachers to be responsive to children with ASD in their classrooms.

### **Conclusion**

This study has revealed that while a lot of rethinking, support and learning is needed to ensure all children are included, it is not impossible for a child with ASD to

be included, nor is it unrealistic to expect that children with ASD receive an equitable and high quality education.

These teachers described inclusion as being possible through a supportive school environment, one that encouraged teaching practices that were responsive to diversity. While it is suggested that the best way to teach inclusively is to experience diversity in the classroom this first-hand, these teachers also felt that they could have been better prepared to teach all of their students in their teacher training. Recent teacher training offers extra papers in ASD and other specialist type teacher programmes, however the teachers agreed that compulsory papers and more practical exposure within an inclusive school environment was a necessity during training.

Through the combination of prior knowledge and teaching experience, the teachers in this project described becoming inclusive practitioners who were able to accommodate the learning needs of all students, immaterial of their differences such as having ASD. As a result, their teaching practices included building collaborative learning and problem solving, adapting their environment to reflect everyday needs, and utilising their prior knowledge and knowledge about the child in their practice to provide meaningful learning opportunities for all learners (Bonk & Cunningham, 1998). Their belief that all children can learn, combined with their specific knowledge around ASD and other difficulties meant that their pedagogical practices included **all** children – in short, they subscribed to the notion of ‘pedagogy for all’. This embedded everyday inclusive practice was further supported by the wider school culture.

This research has also been a journey for myself in terms of learning, challenging, changing and confirming some of my own perceptions. I have discovered teachers’ preferences for person/identity first language, and I have aligned my own thinking with equity rather than equality as a key goal in education. I have confirmed in my own mind that it is possible for teachers to use their knowledge of fairness, equity, teaching and learning within a wider inclusive school culture to successfully include students with ASD. This research has also given me hope that there is the chance for children with ASD to be included, valued and learn well within a regular classroom. As a parent this has been a reassuring journey.

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## Appendix One: Letter of Request for Assistance (MoE)



Educational Psychology Programme  
Institute of Education  
Massey University  
Private Bag 102904  
North Shore, Auckland 0745  
New Zealand

Cherie Apers  
[Street Address],  
[Town, Auckland, Code]  
[Date]

[Name]  
Franklin Service Manager  
Ministry of Education  
Unit I/16 Bishop Dunn Place,  
Botany South,  
Manukau,  
Auckland

Dear [Name],

My name is Cherie Apers. I am a postgraduate student at Massey University who is currently finishing a Masters in Educational Psychology. To complete this, I am writing a thesis, for which my chosen topic is '*Teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom*'. This research requires me interviewing teachers who have taught or are currently teaching a child on the autism spectrum.

I am writing to you to request assistance in helping me locate schools that have students who have Autism Spectrum Disorder. Due to my location, I am seeking schools within the Waiuku area and surrounding places in the south west area of Franklin for example Pukehohe. I would like to interview teachers from primary schools with a range of decile ratings.

I would be extremely grateful for your assistance with this request. If you would be interested in assisting me locate schools, please contact me via one of the methods you prefer below. In the meantime, please let me know if you have any questions regarding this request, and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Cherie Apers

Hm: [REDACTED]  
Mob: [REDACTED]  
cherie@apers.net

## Appendix Two: Letter of Request for Assistance (Principal/BOT)



Educational Psychology Programme  
 Institute of Education  
 Massey University  
 Private Bag 102904  
 North Shore, Auckland 0745  
 New Zealand

Cherie Apers  
 [Street Address],  
 [Town, Auckland, Code]  
 [Date]

[Recipient Name]  
 Board of Trustees/Principal  
 [School]  
 [Street Address]  
 [Auckland, Code]

Dear [Recipient Name],

My name is Cherie Apers. I am a postgraduate student at Massey University who is currently finishing a Masters in Educational Psychology. To complete this, I am writing a thesis, for which my chosen topic is '*Teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom*'. For this research I would like to interview six teachers who have taught (for at least one year and within the last two years) or are currently teaching a child on the autism spectrum. I am interested in teachers' experiences, and particularly in the strengths and knowledge they bring to this task, as well as the information and support they feel they need to teach students with ASD in their classrooms.

I am writing to you to request assistance in helping me locate teachers who would be willing to participate in this research. I have enclosed an information sheet explaining the research in more depth.

I would be extremely grateful for your assistance with this request. If you would be interested in assisting me with finding a participant within your school, please feel free to contact me via one of the methods you prefer below. In the meantime, please let me know if you have any questions regarding this request, and thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Cherie Apers

Hm: [REDACTED]  
 Mob: [REDACTED]  
 cherie [REDACTED]

## Appendix Three: Principal Information Sheet



Educational Psychology Programme  
 Institute of Education  
 Massey University  
 Private Bag 102904  
 North Shore, Auckland 0745  
 New Zealand

### ***Teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom.***

#### PRINCIPAL INFORMATION SHEET

Hello, my name is Cherie Apers. I am currently completing my Masters in Educational Psychology at Massey University. As part of my course, I am required to complete a research study and submit a thesis.

#### **Study Topic**

For this study I have chosen to investigate what teachers' perceptions are regarding their knowledge, experience and preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom.

I aim to have the opportunity to get teachers insights into the challenges and highlights of teaching children with ASD. This study involves me interviewing a teacher who is working/has worked with a child who has ASD. My research aims to find out what is the best practice for teaching a child with ASD. This will hopefully lead to recommendations for training and support for other teachers in this area.

I wish to seek your assistance with locating potential participants to participate in this research which I feel will help work towards providing benefits for teachers surrounding their education and professional development. I am seeking teachers who have had experience teaching students with ASD, either currently or in the past.

#### **What does this study entail?**

I will conduct an interview with the participant where I will ask them a set of approximately 10 questions. Some questions may lead to further discussion and they will be free to add comments at any stage. The time expected to complete this interview will be approximately half an hour, but may take a few more minutes if clarification is required. I am asking if the participant is willing to do this interview after school time, however I understand that their time is precious so arrangements could be made to best suit their convenience.

I do not anticipate the participant experiencing any discomfort throughout the interviews, however they will be free to cease participation or decline to answer any or all questions at any stage throughout this project for any reason.

This research will be carried out with informed consent. The participants name and identity will be kept anonymous and confidential at all times and this information will be stored securely. Any data recorded and transcribed will be used only for this research paper and when this has been fully analysed they will be held for 2 years and then be destroyed. Information analysed will be used to complete my Masters thesis, which will be printed and sent for grading to Massey University.

### **Participant's Rights**

Participants are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If they decide to participate, they have the right to:

- decline to answer any particular question;
- withdraw from the study (until the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2016);
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- provide information on the understanding that their name will not be used unless they give permission to the researcher;
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.
- ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

### **Project Contacts**

Jude MacArthur – Supervisor

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [J.A.MacArthur@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.A.MacArthur@massey.ac.nz)

Vijaya Dharan - Supervisor

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz)

Please feel free to contact myself, the researcher, or my supervisors at any stage if you have any questions about this research.

Kind Regards

*Cherie Apers*

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [cherie@apers.net](mailto:cherie@apers.net)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 15/55. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Mr Jeremy Hubbard, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone 04 801 5799 x 63487, email [humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix Four: Teacher Information Sheet



Educational Psychology Programme  
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 Massey University  
 Private Bag 102904  
 North Shore, Auckland 0745  
 New Zealand

### ***Teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom.***

#### TEACHER INFORMATION SHEET

Hello, my name is Cherie Apers. I am currently completing my Masters in Educational Psychology at Massey University. As part of my course, I am completing a research study which will be written into a thesis.

#### **Study Topic**

For this study I have chosen to explore teachers' perceptions, knowledge, experience and preparedness to include and teach students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) in the regular classroom. I would like to interview six teachers who have experience teaching a child who has ASD either currently or within the last 2 years and for at least one year. I hope to learn about the knowledge and strengths that teachers bring to this task, and also to explore the areas where teachers may feel they need information and support to teach children with ASD well. I hope that the project will lead to some recommendations for enhancing teacher capability and support in this area.

I wish to invite you to participate in this research. I have approached the principal of your school and asked them to identify a teacher who has taught or who is currently teaching a child with ASD within the last 2 years for at least one year and they have given me your details.

#### **What does this study entail?**

If you wish to participate in the study, please contact me on via the details provided. I will then interview you at a time and place that is convenient for you. If you wish I can provide the interview questions beforehand. Although I have a set of questions that I will ask you, these are a guide and it is possible that other questions may arise as a result of our discussions. The time expected to complete this interview is approximately 45 minutes to one hour.

I do not anticipate you experiencing any discomfort throughout the interviews, however you will be free to cease participation or decline to answer any or all questions at any stage throughout this project for any unspecified reason.

This research will be carried out with informed consent. Your name and identity will be kept anonymous and confidential at all times. The project is governed by anonymity and confidentiality which means that no real names of people, places or schools will be used in any presentations or written material from this project. All information will be stored securely. Any data recorded and transcribed will be used only for this research paper and when this has been fully analysed they will be held for 2 years and then be destroyed. Information analysed will be used to complete my Masters thesis, which will be printed and sent for grading to Massey University. Findings from the project may also be presented at education conferences and in published research articles.

### **Participant's Rights**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

decline to answer any particular question;

withdraw from the study (until the 1<sup>st</sup> of October 2016);

ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;

provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;

be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

ask for the recorder to be turned off at any time during the interview.

### **Project Contacts**

Jude MacArthur – Supervisor

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [J.A.MacArthur@massey.ac.nz](mailto:J.A.MacArthur@massey.ac.nz)

Vijaya Dharan - Supervisor

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz](mailto:v.m.dharan@massey.ac.nz)

Please contact myself, the researcher if you wish to participate in this research. Please also feel free to contact myself or my supervisors at any stage if you have any questions about this research.

Kind Regards

*Cherie Apers*

Ph: [REDACTED]

Email: [cherie@apers.net](mailto:cherie@apers.net)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, Application 15/55. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Mr Jeremy Hubbard, Acting Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A, telephone 04 801 5799 x 63487, email [humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsoutha@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix Five: Teacher Consent Form



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#### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – INDIVIDUAL/TEACHER**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the interview being sound recorded.

I wish/do not wish to have my recordings returned to me.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name -  
 printed**

.....

## **Appendix Six: Interview Schedule**

### Teacher Experience

1. When did you complete your teacher training?
2. Where did you complete your teacher training?
3. How many years have you taught?
4. What age groups have you taught?
5. What is the main age group you work with now?

### ASD Teaching Experience

6. Approximately how many students with ASD have you taught? Are you currently teaching a child with ASD?
7. What is your experience of disability generally? How have your experiences impacted on your thinking and approach as a teacher?
8. Tell me about the children you have taught who have had other disabilities. How have these experiences impacted on your teaching generally?

### Knowledge about ASD

9. Tell me what you know about ASD at the moment. How and when did you come to know about these things? What is your experience of disability generally? How have your experiences impacted on your thinking and approach as a teacher? Are there any areas where you still feel you would like to know more?

### Teacher Strategies

10. When you first taught a child with ASD, what strengths did you bring to that task?
11. What ideas/strategies/approaches do you see as beneficial when teaching children with ASD?
12. How did you come to learn about these ideas/approaches?

### Challenges and Barriers

13. What would you say are the challenges or barriers that you have faced when teaching a child with ASD? What would you say generally are the challenges for teachers working in this area?
14. What would help you the most when it comes to trying to overcome these challenges and barriers? What did you feel you needed at the time when you were facing these challenges?

### Supports

15. What supports for you as a teacher are most helpful when teaching a child with ASD? What supports have you had to date that really worked well? What support would you like to have (but don't have yet/at the moment)?
16. What approaches/strategies do you use to ensure children with ASD are included - i.e. to ensure they are fully participating and achieving?
17. Are there any areas where inclusion of children with ASD is difficult to achieve? Why do you think this might be? What do you think needs to happen/change in order for children in these situations to be included?
18. Do you have any other comments or advice about teaching a child with ASD that may help teachers who are teaching a child with ASD for the first time?

## Appendix Seven: Authority for the Release of Transcripts Form



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### AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

I agree that the edited transcript and extracts from this may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

.....

**Full Name -  
printed**

.....

### Appendix Eight: Example from Interview Analysis

Emily

3

D

who's supporting the family, what is it that I need to be doing at home to support my child, as well

C: Yeah

H

Ch: And yes mum you're going to need to learn this alongside us. So that's the approach we've taken with, with some of our children, particularly with vision. Hearing a lot of the time, it is you your self having to, um

SDH

when you've got the FM system on realizing, just how loud you do come through

C: Yep.

U K

Ch: With your um, hearing impaired kids, and yes it's only going directly to that child, but its recognising when you're asking, when you're laughing and that's on, it actually echoes through to the child

C: Right.

R

Ch: So, um I guess um we have a lot of it it's really hard to say, you just do the job that you're employed to do I guess.

C: Yep. And so we've probably already asked this already about how these teacher experiences have impacted your teaching generally, as you said

UP

it has made you more aware and making sure that you do get that access for them um so tell me what you know about ASD at the moment have you heard anything new sort of

S HD

U

RH

Ch: Well the way we share it with children because we are open with our kids because our students need to recognise that we are a whanau hub and that every child in our hub needs to have the same experiences and the same opportunities, so what we say to our year 7 and 8's is its

UKH

U K

U D

U K

around children who are not able to interpret the world in the same way that you interpret the world, um and that there are different things sometimes it's around language, sometimes it's around those social skills that is different from how we interpret something to be and don't necessarily see too, so our face, it's not recognising some of those facial expressions and um also around some of the behaviours some of the behaviours that might be considered unusual, stimming for example

C: Yep

R = Rights to education/Inclusion  
D = Different thinking  
H = Honesty/ Collaboration  
K = Knowing the child/teacher  
P = perceptions  
U = Understanding gained  
S = Strategies/ supports

\* Importance of talking with parents  
\* Knowing other needs/disabilities benefited.

\* see earlier comments.

\* Honesty of telling others

## Appendix Nine: Ethics Confirmation Form (MUHEC)



MASSEY UNIVERSITY  
TE KUNENGA KI PŪREHUROA

7 September 2015

Cherie Apers  
32 Mellsop Avenue  
Waiuku  
AUCKLAND 2123

Dear Cherie

**Re: HEC: Southern A Application – 15/55**  
**Teachers' perceptions about their preparedness to include and teach students with ASD in the regular classroom**

Thank you for your letter dated 6 September 2015.

On behalf of the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A I am pleased to advise you that the ethics of your application are now approved. Approval is for three years. If this project has not been completed within three years from the date of this letter, reapproval must be requested.

If the nature, content, location, procedures or personnel of your approved application change, please advise the Secretary of the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Mr Jeremy Hubbard, Chair  
**Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern A**

cc Dr Jude MacArthur  
Institute of Education  
PN500

Dr Vijaya Dharan  
Institute of Education  
PN500

Prof John O'Neill, Director  
Institute of Education  
PN500

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**Massey University Human Ethics Committee**  
**Accredited by the Health Research Council**

Research Ethics, Research and Enterprise

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