Impact of a Student’s Diagnosis of Autism Spectrum Disorder on General Education Teachers’ Attitudes
Laura Hiruma, Kristin V. Christodoulu, & Melissa Rinaldi
UNIVERSITY AT ALBANY, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, DEPARTMENT OF PSYCHOLOGY

BACKGROUND
Past research of teacher attitudes toward students with disabilities has largely focused on teachers’ attitudes regarding students with general learning disabilities (Foster et al., 1976; Clark, 1997; Cook et al., 2000; Brady & Woolfolk, 2008); however, little research exists examining general education teachers’ attitudes toward students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) and whether there is specific stigma associated with this diagnostic label in educational settings. Studying attitudes toward specific diagnostic labels is crucial since past research has shown that teachers’ attitudes toward integrating students with disabilities is largely influenced by the nature of the disability and its presenting challenges (Center & Ward, 1994). Since an increasing number of students with ASD are being placed in inclusive and mainstreamed classroom settings, it is particularly important to study the attitudes of general education teachers regarding students diagnosed with ASD (Robertson, Chamberlain, & Kasari, 2003). Previous research examining teachers’ attitudes toward teaching students with developmental disabilities has indicated that teachers who exhibit higher levels of teacher efficacy tend to have more positive attitudes about teaching a student with challenging behaviors (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003). Furthermore, research examining teachers’ attitudes toward students with general disabilities indicates that teachers may exhibit positive biases in terms of providing more positive supports to students with disabilities, whereas other research indicates that general education teachers may show more negative attitudes about teaching students with disabilities (DeBettencourt, 1999). Additional research is needed to examine specific attitudes that teachers in general education settings may harbor toward students with ASD as well as how teachers are likely to respond to students with ASD in different classroom situations.

PURPOSE
The purpose of this study was to examine the extent to which disclosure of a hypothetical student’s diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder impacts: (1) the way in which general education teachers respond to hypothetical student behaviors; (2) teachers’ attitudes about students who are portrayed student in their classroom; and (3) teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy. This study also aimed to examine the relationship between teachers’ feelings of self-efficacy and their attitudes toward teaching the hypothetical student in the vignette as well as the ways in which they would respond to student behaviors. The primary hypothesis was that general education teachers would indicate that they would respond to challenging behaviors of the student labeled with a diagnosis of ASD with more reinforcement-based approaches and less punishment-based approaches than teachers responding to challenging behaviors of the student portrayed without a diagnostic label. Although teachers were hypothesized to respond to the student labeled with ASD in a more positive manner, it was also hypothesized that teacher would express more negative attitudes teaching the student with a diagnosis of ASD in their classroom. Additionally, it was hypothesized that high sense of self-efficacy among teachers would be linked to more positive attitudes about teaching the portrayed student in the ASD label condition as well as use of more reinforcement-based approaches, and less use of punishment-based approaches to address student difficulties across groups.

METHOD
Participants: Participants included 56 general education teachers of fourth and fifth grade classrooms in New York, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Washington, D.C. The majority of participants were teachers in New York State (91%) as the majority of recruitment efforts took place in this location. Because the attitudes of general education teachers who may have mainstreamed or included students with autism in their classrooms were of particular interest, teachers in special education settings were excluded from the study. Fourth and fifth grade classrooms were selected since inclusion into general education classrooms typically begins during elementary education (State Department of New York State) and to control for age-appropriate challenging behaviors presented in the vignette.

Measures: A brief vignette was developed in collaboration with a team of education specialists from the Center for Autism and Related Disabilities to realistically portray the behaviors that a child with high-functioning autism might exhibit in a classroom setting. This vignette was followed by an investigator-derived Response to Student Behavior Scale, which used a four-point Likert scale to assess how likely teachers would respond to specific scenarios of student behavior with either reinforcement or punishment-based approaches. Teachers’ attitudes toward teaching the student portrayed in the vignette were measured through participants’ agreement to statements regarding the student’s probable academic and social success in their classroom on a five-point Likert scale adapted from questions included in the First Impressions Rating Scale and the Predictions Rating Scale (Cornett-Ruiz & Hendricks, 1993). Lastly, the Teachers’ Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk, 2001) was used to assess participant’s feelings of self-efficacy as teachers.

Procedure: Teachers were randomly assigned to one of two web-based surveys, which asked participants to read a vignette about a hypothetical student who displays challenging behaviors. In one condition, teachers were told that the student portrayed in the vignette has an autism spectrum disorder. In the other condition, this information was not disclosed. Teachers were then asked to answer questions related to how likely they would respond to specific challenging behaviors with either reinforcement or punishment-based approaches, as well as their attitudes toward having this student in their classroom, and their feelings of self-efficacy as a teacher to see how knowledge of the student’s autism diagnosis might impact teachers’ ratings.

Data Collection and Analysis: A one-way between subjects ANOVA was conducted to examine the effect of vignette condition (ASD label versus no label) on teachers’ scores on the Response to Student Behavior Scale and the Teachers’ Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale. Additionally, a correlational analysis was used to examine the relationship between scores on the Teachers’ Sense of Self-Efficacy Scale, teachers’ attitudes toward teaching the student portrayed in the vignette within the ASD label group, and the likelihood of teachers across groups selecting reinforcement and punishment-based approaches in response to the student’s challenging behaviors.

RESULTS
Means and Standard Deviations of Participants’ Scores for the Two Vignette Conditions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>ASD Label Disclosed (n = 23)</th>
<th>Label Not Disclosed (n = 33)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Reinforcement Practices</td>
<td>23.65 (2.90)</td>
<td>22.18 (2.27)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of Punishment Practices</td>
<td>14.48 (3.03)</td>
<td>15.30 (2.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Expectations of Student</td>
<td>14.87 (1.79)</td>
<td>14.73 (1.68)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Self-Efficacy</td>
<td>87.00 (12.58)</td>
<td>92.33 (9.36)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results from the one-way ANOVA indicated that there was a significant effect of diagnostic label condition on teachers’ scores for likelihood of responding to student behaviors with reinforcement-based approaches (F(1, 59) = 4.52, p = 0.038); however, there were no significant effects of diagnostic label condition on teachers’ scores for likelihood of responding to student behaviors with punishment-based approaches (F(1, 59) = 1.02, p = 0.317), teachers’ attitudes related to expectations for the student in their classroom (F(1, 59) = .092, p = .763), or teachers’ sense of self-efficacy (F(1, 59) = 3.31, p = .074). The correlational analysis revealed that there was no significant correlation between teachers’ ratings of self-efficacy and attitudes toward teaching the student among participants in the ASD label group (r = .280, n = 23, p = .195). There were, however, significant correlations between teachers’ ratings of self-efficacy and use of reinforcement-based approaches (r = .287, n = 56, p = .032) and between teachers’ ratings of self-efficacy and use of punishment-based approaches (r = .299, n = 56, p = .025) across groups.

DISCUSSION
Findings from this study indicated that there was a significant difference in the extent to which teachers indicated that they would use reinforcement-based approaches in response to the hypothetical student’s challenging behaviors in the ASD label versus no diagnostic label condition. These findings support the hypothesis that a positive bias is likely to occur when teachers are aware that a student with challenging behaviors has a diagnosis of ASD. Previous research (Clark, 1997) has attributed teachers’ perceptions of student academic outcomes to attribution theory (Graham, 1991; Weiner, 1986); that is, teachers who attribute a student’s challenging behaviors as stemming from a specific diagnosis are likely to use more positive strategies rather than punitive strategies to address behaviors. Findings from this study also indicate that high ratings of self-efficacy as a teacher are positively correlated with use of reinforcement-based strategies to manage challenging behaviors, whereas high ratings of self-efficacy were negatively correlated with use of punishment-based strategies. One limitation of this research was the limited sample size as data collection is ongoing. Furthermore, more information is needed regarding the relationship between ratings of self-efficacy and actual teacher behaviors in educational settings. Future analyses will assess the relationship between teachers’ ratings of self-efficacy and the likelihood that they would access a resource for educating children with autism that is provided to them.