Background

- Teachers and other school professionals who work with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) play an important role in students’ academic outcomes and goal achievement (Ruble & McGrew, 2013; Steinbrener & Watson, 2015), but evidence suggests that teachers of students with ASD may be at high risk for experiencing burnout (Coman et al., 2013), which is associated with negative outcomes for teachers and students (Brunsting, Srokovski, & Lane, 2014).

- Research has begun to focus on factors that may be protective against teacher burnout, including teacher self-efficacy, defined as “the beliefs teachers hold regarding their capability to bring about desired instructional outcomes” (Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011).

- Teacher self-efficacy has been associated with a variety of positive teacher behaviors, such as providing more support to students and creating a more positive classroom environment (Guo et al., 2012), as well as student outcomes including motivation, self-esteem, and prosocial attitudes (Ross, 1998).

- Little research thus far has focused specifically on the self-efficacy of teachers working with students with ASD. Ruble, Usher, and McGrew (2011) reported that self-efficacy is negatively related to burnout for teachers of students with ASD (Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov (2003) reported that a higher degree of commitment to a particular philosophy for working with students with ASD was associated with higher teacher self-efficacy.

- The present study investigated predictors of self-efficacy among school professionals working with students with ASD. Predictors of interest included knowledge about ASD, previous training regarding ASD and evidence-based practices, and years working with students with ASD.

Participants & Procedure

- Participants were 80 school personnel from 10 schools located in New York State. Schools were participating in a series of trainings designed to provide information about ASD and evidence-based practices for working with students with ASD, focusing on positive behavior supports (PBS) and the Prevent–Teach–Reinforce model (Strain, Wilson, & Dunlap, 2011) in particular.

- Participating school personnel included special education teachers, general education teachers, school psychologists, paraprofessionals, and school administrators, among others. The majority of participants were female (90%) and had graduate degrees (94%).

- School personnel were asked to complete online surveys prior to and following their participation in the training to assess their knowledge and self-efficacy regarding working with students with ASD. Data for the present study come from surveys completed prior to the training.

Measures

- Knowledge Questionnaire: Designed for the present study to assess knowledge about ASD and PBS.

- Autism Self-Efficacy Scale for Teachers (ASSET; Ruble, Toland, Birdshellstatt, McGrew, & Usher, 2013). The ASSET was designed to measure teacher self-efficacy for working with students with ASD.

Data Collection & Analysis

- Bivariate correlations were examined to assess the relations among variables of interest.

- Multiple linear regression was used to investigate the utility of various participant characteristics for predicting self-efficacy for working with students with ASD. Due to missing data, four participants were excluded from the regression analysis. Predictor variables were centered to aid interpretation.

Results

- Examination of the bivariate correlation matrix indicated significant correlations among many of the variables of interest (see below).

- Large correlations were observed among self-efficacy, training in ASD, and training in PBS, while small to moderate correlations were observed between self-efficacy and both knowledge about ASD and experience with students with ASD. However, no significant correlations were observed between knowledge about and experience with ASD.

- A four-predictor model (knowledge about ASD, years working with students with ASD, prior training in ASD, and prior training in PBS) accounted for 43% of the variance in self-efficacy ($F = 13.31, p < .001$).

- When all predictors were entered together, previous training in ASD was the best predictor of self-efficacy ($b = .471, t = 3.99, p < .001$).

Discussion

- Self-efficacy of school personnel for working with students with ASD is best predicted by the amount of previous training received on ASD. Years of experience working with students with ASD was not correlated with self-efficacy.

- Providing training on ASD and evidence-based practices may be an important strategy for increasing the self-efficacy of school personnel for working with this population. Future research within the present study will examine the ability of a training on ASD and PBS to increase ASD-related knowledge and self-efficacy of school professionals.