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## Towards a Theory of Autism Spectrum Disorder Program Implementation

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TOWARDS A THEORY OF AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER (ASD)  
PROGRAM IMPLEMENTATION

by

IAN CESAR GESUNDHEIT  
B.A. University of California at Santa Cruz, 1992  
M.B.A. Nova Southeastern University, 1996

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Education  
in the College of Education and Human Performance  
at the University of Central Florida  
Orlando, Florida

Summer Term  
2016

Major Professor: Suzanne Martin

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## ABSTRACT

With the increased prevalence of students qualifying for services within Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) programs (Odom, Cox and Brock, 2013), it is imperative that the field comes to better understand how successful programs can be replicated at scale. The implementation of effective instructional programs for students with ASD across school systems on a large scale is a difficult task. School systems have tried to replicate successful programs for diverse learners but have been largely unable to do so. For students with disabilities, who perform poorly compared to their peers without disabilities (Odom et al., 2013), the need to replicate successful programs is even more pressing. This need is most pressing for students in programs for ASD whose educational outcomes lag behind those of students in programs designed for all other exceptionality categories (Cook & Cook, 2013).

The quality with which a program is designed matters little if the fidelity with which that program is implemented is lacking. For students with disabilities who perform poorly compared to their peers without disabilities (Odom et al., 2013), the need to replicate successful programs is even more pressing. The school leader plays an important role in the development, implementation, and maintenance of effective programs for students with ASD.

The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who have developed and/or managed successful programs for students with ASD within their school sites. It is clear that leadership matters in school and, therefore, influences program quality (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Reeves, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). School and system change is difficult work, prone to being unsuccessful—but improvement is possible and sustainable (Fullan, 2007).

The research questions for this study were:

1. What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with ASD?
2. What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with ASD across their school setting?
3. What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with ASD?

In sum, these principal participants showed an intense interest in improving support services for students with ASD. They emphasized their vision that, if given the proper support and environment, all students can succeed. The principals were diligent in supporting that vision themselves and in making connections that could help reinforce that vision. A tremendous part of supporting that vision was ensuring that staff has the appropriate skills to work effectively with students with ASD. Once success was realized in these programs, it was reinforced by the success of the students and the emotional compensation received from parents. However, leading such programs is not without its challenges. Overall, though, all of these principals were clear about setting forth a path where the schools they were leading would do what is necessary to help their students with ASD be successful.

This work is dedicated to the most important women in my life.

To my mother, Stella, who instilled in me to be persistent and dedicated in what I do. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't be here.

To my two wonderful daughters, Liana and Marina, you mean the world to me, and I hope I have been a good role model for you. Thank you to my dear friend Lisa Overton.

This list would not be complete without dedicating this to my sister, Joyce, my never-ending source of encouragement.

I love you all!!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My never-ending gratitude to Dr. Suzanne Martin for giving me this opportunity. Thank you for believing in me and for supporting me through this journey. I will make good with this gift. I will continue to make a difference!

I would like to also thank my dissertation committee for their support and guidance: Dr. David Boote, Dr. John Edwards, Dr. Mary Little, Dr. Suzanne Martin and Dr. Eleazar Vazquez. I am humbled by such a dedicated group of professionals.

I would like to acknowledge a special group of friends that provided me the emotional support and continuous encouragement throughout my journey of life and completing my doctorate. Sylvia Schaffer, words aren't enough to tell you thank you for always being there for me and making sure I made it through. Couldn't have made it without your input. Donna Wysong, thank you for always encouraging me through my path. To the crew, Claudia Cortes, Migdalia Garcia, Brandi Kesterson, and Peg Hyatt for always cheering me on.

A big acknowledgement to my NUSELI family. Through thick and thin, through Stats and CEC, I will always cherish those great moments together and hope that we all continue to stay in touch. Betsy, Hannah, Julie, Chris, Jonathan and Eric, love you guys and remember never "taco gawk".

Last and most importantly, my family. My mother for her never ending support and encouragement. To Liana, my beautiful daughter, thank you for always being my Johnny on the Spot, and always with a smile. You made this path easier for me. Remember that you can do anything, go as far as you can. My little Marina, I apologize for the hours I had to spend time studying and sacrificing that valuable time with you. I hope this sacrifice serves as an inspiration

for you to reach for the stars. To my “adorada” Joyce, thank you for your inspiration, I hope I make you as proud as you have made me proud. Love you, Enrique and my “Lani” bear, you guys always kept me strong.

To my brother Cesar, I have always looked up to you and wanted to be like you. Know that through all our life turbulences I thank you for being my brother.

I have to add a special acknowledgement to Eric Wells. These past two years we have developed a great friendship. Our conversations and discussions of how the world “should be” served to fuel my drive. I truly hope that some of those dreams of improving education together come true. You’re welcome, for not making you the last one to finish!



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## CHAPTER 1 THE PROBLEM AND ITS CLARIFYING COMPONENTS

### Introduction

The implementation of effective instructional programs across school systems on a large scale is a difficult task (Mehta, 2013). For years, therefore, school systems have tried to replicate successful programs for diverse learners but have been largely unable to do so (Cummings, 1998). Accordingly, school systems have gone through numerous restructures in an attempt to develop school programs that better serve students as a whole; unfortunately, few have been successful in improving core instructional practice at scale (Elmore, 2007). For students with disabilities, who perform poorly compared to their peers without disabilities (Odom, Cox, & Brock, 2013), the need to replicate successful programs has become even more pressing. This need is most pressing for students in programs for autism spectrum disorders (ASD) whose educational outcomes lag behind those of students in programs designed for all other exceptionality categories (Cook & Cook, 2013).

### Statement of the Problem

With the increased prevalence of students qualifying for services within autism spectrum disorder programs (Odom et al., 2013), it is imperative that the field comes to better understand how successful programs can be replicated at scale. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), there were first students identified as eligible for services under the ASD program in 2001. In that year, 93,000 students with ASD were being served under the Individuals Disability Education Act (IDEA) Part B. By 2013, there were 498,000 students with ASD requiring services in public schools. Clearly the need for

public schools to serve and support students with ASD will only continue to grow. Support for students with ASD is not limited to academics. Schools need to be prepared to properly serve those students with the disability who also have significant behavioral challenges. Treatment for these behaviors varies but has been recognized as necessary (National Autism Center, 2009). Identifying effective educational programs for students with ASD has been a challenge (Cook & Cook, 2013) for school systems. Educators have been trained to teach academics but have not been adequately instructed on how to work with ameliorating problem behaviors (Scott, Alter, & McQuillan, 2010). In 2009 and 2015, the NAC published a National Standards Project report that was intended to review different practices to reduce inappropriate behavior and evaluate its effectiveness. The project helped general society provide support for individuals with ASD so as to improve their daily living situations. The report delineated effective versus ineffective evidence-based practices that would: (a) provide the strength of evidence supporting educational and behavioral treatments that target the core characteristics of these neurological disorders; (b) describe the age, diagnosis, and skills/behaviors targeted for improvement associated with treatment options; (c) identify the limitations of the current body of research on autism treatment; and (d) offer recommendations for engaging in evidence-based practice for ASD.

Amendments made to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 formally inserted ABA procedures into required policies for all school districts concerning the best practice to be implemented with students on the spectrum (Bloh & Axelrod, 2008). The purpose of the amendments was to improve support and services for students with disabilities. Specifically, it required schools to conduct functional behavior assessments (FBA) and implement positive behavior support (PBS) in order to provide appropriate educational supports

to students with disabilities who exhibit behaviors that impede learning (Yell, Shriner, & Katsiyannis, 2006). Developing a fluency in applied behavior analysis requires specific technical training that teachers often lack (Scott et al., 2010).

Many school districts have a difficult time replicating effective educational programs between schools. This results in school district leaders to continually seek initiatives to improve educational programming and, ultimately, student performance (Mehta, 2013). The issue of replication is the result of the lack of an effective model to scale up and sustain effective educational programs by school districts (Klingner, Boardman, & McMaster, 2013). The scarcity of effective programs for students with ASD brings about other pressing and exacerbating issues. Montes, Halterman, and Magyar (2009) noted that parents of students with ASD were not satisfied with the services provided to them by the public school system. Given the increased identification of students with autism under the IDEA, and the amount of litigation within autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in regard to alleged violations of the IDEA (Odom et al., 2013; Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2013), school districts facing budget restraints and limited resources would be wise to give priority to improving programming within their self-contained ASD units (White 2014).

### The Challenge of Replicating Quality

School and system change is difficult work and prone to being unsuccessful, but improvement is possible and sustainable (Fullan, 2004). One of the major roadblocks to schools making meaningful, sustainable improvement has been found in poor implementation of educational programs (Payne, 2008). The quality with which a program is designed matters little if the fidelity with which that program is implemented is lacking. Although students directly

involved with a poorly implemented program face the possibility of educational harm, poor implementation has additional potentially negative ramifications.

. . . there is a recurring tendency to underestimate the rigors--toxicity, if you will--of the urban environment, and thus the modes of implementation typically employed fail to be robust enough to have a chance. . . . When such programs fail, observers, knowing little about the inadequacies of the implementation, may question the principles underlying the program. Maybe some kids can't learn, after all. Maybe resources really don't matter. Poor implementation is harmful not just to the particular teachers and students who are immediately involved; it also undermines the very idea that change is possible. (Payne, 2008, p. 154)

Payne's comments support the importance and need for school improvement. Given that many students with ASD are being served in special education programs, improvement of these specific programs is imperative. When assessing the needs of special education programs, the greatest priority must lie with the students who exhibit the most involved behavior. The category of ASD has increased identification. Higher prevalence rates and a plurality of litigation indicate a very strong need for improvement. Quality of program implementation is one of the major reasons why educators have not been more successful in improving schools. Poor implementation threatens school change as a whole.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who have developed and/or manage successful programs for students with ASD within their school sites. It is clear that leadership matters in school and, therefore, influences program quality

(Darling-Hammond, 2010; Reeves, 2006; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). As there are some quality programs, logic dictates that the field knows how to build quality programs. However, quality programs have not been implemented on a wide-scale as evidenced by lagging outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with ASD. Therefore, despite the field having the necessary knowledge to develop quality programs, practitioners have either not been able to replicate those quality programs or simply lack the knowledge of strong model programs to replicate them. Given the importance of leadership in the implementation of these programs, it is critical to study the lived experience of those leaders who have implemented quality programs for students with ASD across their school settings. If the essence of leadership can be explicated to allow for large-scale implementation of these quality programs, educators can build upon the foundation of knowledge needed to improve outcomes for students with ASD within school settings.

### Research Questions

In order to achieve this purpose, this research study was conducted to answer the following research questions and sub-questions:

What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with ASD?

What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with ASD across their school setting?

What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with ASD?



### Significance of Study

In the age of accountability for public schools, leaders have been scrambling to find effective ways of successfully instructing students. Core curriculum in each area should meet the needs of 80% of the students in class (Florida Department of Education [FDOE], n. d). Along those lines, the success of students in exceptional education has been far worse than general education populations when it comes to the percentage of students performing at grade level (Chudowski, Chudowski, & Kober, 2009). The failure in the majority of these initiatives cries for a major overhaul in how to generalize the implementation of successful programs (Payne, 2008). Questions arise as to how successful programs exist at some schools but other schools seem unable to develop similar successful programs as to why effective programs are not being replicated. If a system for replicating successful programs was found, it would have a great impact on student achievement and success.

### Research Design

Developing high quality programs that serve and support students with ASD is a challenge for public school systems in the U. S. Few supportive, high quality programs exist in school systems for ASD students. When such programs are found, therefore, educators and responsible government officials should take note. The experience of developing and leading such programs is limited. Therefore, it was particularly appropriate, in this study, to use phenomenological approaches to determine the lived experience of administrators with these successful ASD programs.

As a phenomenology, the methods used to conduct this study were heavily influenced by the German mathematician, Edmund Husserl (Creswell, 2007). A phenomenological study gives

insight to the meaning of a phenomenon within a group of several individuals and their lived experience (Creswell, 2007). This qualitative research method reviews a human experience and seeks to find the general essence of the experience (Moutsakas, 1994). Moutsakas described general steps in methods for conducting a phenomenological study:

1. The researcher determines if a phenomenological study is best to use in describing the phenomenon;
2. The researcher identifies the problem to be studied;
3. Information is collected from individuals who have experienced the phenomenon to be studied;
4. Those who have experienced the phenomenon will be asked two general questions pertaining to their experience with the phenomenon and what has influenced or affected their experience;
5. The researcher extrapolates significant sentiments from the data;
6. From these statements the researcher writes a description of the experienced phenomenon; and
7. The researcher summarizes the experiences of the phenomenon.

#### Definition of Terms

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD). ASD is a range of complex neurodevelopment disorders, characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and restricted, repetitive, and stereotyped patterns of behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Highly Qualified. To be considered highly qualified, a special educator in general must meet the following requirements: (a) have a bachelor's degree, and (b) pass a state test in his/her subject area (Bell & Meinelt, 2011).

Individual Education Plan (IEP). “The individual educational plan provides a clear and accurate description of the special education services and supports that address the educational needs of a student with a disability” (Beech, 2012, p. 9)

Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA). IDEIA is a law that seeks to provide educational services to children with disabilities by mandating how states and public agencies provide special education and related services. A revision of IDEA (Flaks, 2009).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001, Public Law (P.L.) 107-110. NCLB, the nation's general education law, was passed by Congress and signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002. Although it is referred to as NCLB, it actually amends longstanding legislation, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). NCLB has brought sweeping changes to the U.S. educational systems (Bell & Meinelt, 2011).

### Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study that had to be overcome was the researcher's potential for bias. Creswell (2007) noted that the researcher also has the obligation to choose participants who have truly experienced the phenomenon. In addition to this, the ability to replicate any potential practice was a challenge as well.

### Assumptions

The researcher assumed that: (a) study participants would provide honest answers when they were interviewed, (b) classroom environments observed were true depictions of what occurs in class on a daily basis, and (c) data collection of data would provide a valid theory in regard to phenomenon being observed.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction

This chapter contains a review of literature and research relevant to the focus of this study which was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who oversee successful programs for students with ASD within their school sites. The chapter has been organized into four major sections: (a) gaining equal access, (b) the role of leadership in school success, (c) the role of parents and the community in school success, and (d) the role of standards in school success.

### Gaining Equal Access

One of the first steps for equal access for individuals with disabilities took place in 1954-1955 in five law suits: (a) *Brown v. Board of Education Topeka*, (b) *Briggs v. Elliot*, (c) *Davis v. Board of Education of Prince Edward County (VA)*, (d) *Boiling v. Sharpe*, and (e) *Gebhart v. Ethel*. All dealt with segregation in public schools. Despite the suits' primary focus on racial segregation, they laid ground work for future litigation for individuals with disabilities having access to education. Having gone through district courts, who sided with the Boards of Education, the cases were taken to the U.S. Supreme Court where they were consolidated and placed under one suit, *Brown v. Board of Education*. In *Brown*, the plaintiffs claimed that segregated schools violated the "separate but equal" clause because black schools were of inferior quality to that of white schools (Skiba et. al 2008). The plaintiffs also argued that the segregated black schools made black children feel inferior to white children (Ferri & Connor 2005). The court failed to rule on the case before the end of its term, and there were some

changes in judges, but the case continued to be heard. On May 14, 1954, the U.S. Supreme Court delivered an opinion, stating that: “We conclude that in the field of public education the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’ has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal. . . .” (U.S. Courts, n.d.). The courts did not require an immediate desist to the practice but required states to submit plans for ending segregation.

After the U.S. Supreme Court ruling on *Brown v. Board of Education*, numerous public laws that dealt with discrimination were passed, including some that related to students with disabilities. In 1958, Public Law 85-926 passed. It provided training grants for teachers of mentally disabled children. In 1965, the Title 1 Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) was passed. This Act specifically targeted children of low income families by providing funding to schools to improve/increase support to these populations. An amendment to the act, Public Law 89-313, was passed in the same year. This amendment provided funding specifically for state operated schools, providing services to disabled students who did not receive funding under the original act.

A major principle of the American school system is free education for “all” children (Bazelon & Boggs, 1963). This statement made clear that no child should be excluded from receiving an appropriate free education in the U. S. public school system. It is, therefore, the school’s responsibility to meet the needs of all students. The report of the Task Force on Mental Retardation (Bazelon & Boggs, 1963) documented the need for schools to better support students with disabilities. Curricular adaptations or modifications would include providing them with valid and relevant skills that would make them purposeful. The call for change in the American school system to meet the needs of the disabled population in the U. S. by the Task Force set a

tone of urgency in order to respect and follow the vision of a nation committed to liberty for all.  
(Bazelon & Boggs 1963)

After litigation wins that provided access to education for individuals with disabilities, law suits for quality of education began. In 1972, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens v. Pennsylvania suit argued that students with mental retardation were not receiving proper support services because the state was ignoring its obligations. Four main points were made in the litigation: (a) all children of mental retardation are capable of performing well given the well supported classrooms, (b) education should not be focused only on the academic piece, (c) a Free and Appropriate Public Education obliges the state to provide such to students with mental retardation, and (d) students with mental retardation should start school at an earlier age to provide them with more time to learn.

In the Mills v. Board of Education of Washington suit of 1972, parents argued that students with disabilities were excluded from school without proper due process of the law (Zettel & Ballard, 1982). The courts ruled in favor of the parents and ordered the school board to provide due process safeguards. In addition, the courts delineated due process procedures for labeling, placement, and exclusion of students with disabilities (Yell 1998).

The signing of Public Law 94-142 in 1975 provided the federal government a direct role in the way special education was provided (Abidin & Seltzer 1981). The Education for All Handicapped Children Act provided procedural formats and funding for states that implemented policies guaranteeing a special education for students with disabilities (Yell 1998). The law mandated that students with disabilities had a right to the following: (a) testing, evaluation, and placement procedures that did not discriminate against them, (b) education in the least restrictive

environment, (c) a procedural due process system that included parent involvement, (d) a free education, and (e) an appropriate education (Yell, 1998).

In 1992, a new set of amendments were introduced under the new name the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that primarily dealt with issues regarding infants and toddlers with disabilities (Yell 1998). An introduction of new amendments under this name was made in 1997. This reauthorization gave IDEA teeth to better educate children with disabilities, improving access and thereby providing them with a better chance at getting a better education (Kavale & Forness, 2000). The adjustments included (a) giving parents a stronger role, (b) highlighting accountability in learning and teaching, (c) guaranteeing access to the general curriculum and reforms, and (d) helping educational institutions address the funding to improve special education and the related services. It also dealt with behavior and school safety concerns, prompting the use of mediation between parents and school staff to resolve differences, and took into account linguistic differences in an attempt to avoid misidentification (Yell 1998).

Once access was established for students with disabilities, litigation and political movement for students for disabilities focused on quality of education. President George W. Bush signed a new set of amendments under the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) in 2001. The Act funded federal programs that increased the standards of accountability for states, school districts, and schools with the intention of improvement. It also allowed parents to have more choice in selecting the schools their children attended. With its intentional focus on mathematics and reading, NCLB sought to ensure that all children were required to meet academic state standards so as to reach their full potential through better designed programs (Yell, 1998).



The most recent reauthorizations to Public Law 94-142 came in 2004 under the title, Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), and regulations for its implementation were released in 2006. The main focus of IDEIA has been to improve the performance of students with disabilities (Yell et al., 2006). The reauthorization of IDEIA was Congress' attempt to align IDEA with NCLB. The most significant amendments were: requirements for highly qualified teachers, accountability, adequate yearly progress of students, statewide assessments and their delivery, standards, student participation in statewide assessments, accommodations for assessments, use of peer-reviewed research, alteration of eligibility requirements, changes in the IEP process, specific procedures for IEP developments, simplification of the discipline process, alteration of the dispute resolution process, and school flexibility in funding (Yell et al., 2006).

Current legislation, seen in the most recent reauthorizations of both ESEA (2015) and IDEA (2004), clearly delineated quality of education as the main focus for all students and students with disabilities, respectively. Despite the legislation, however, students with disabilities have continued to be the lowest performing student population. Within the larger group of students with disabilities, students with ASD have shown the lowest average achievement (Center for Education Policy, 2009). Though the reasons for that occurrence can be debated, it is clear that solutions to the problem must be found. It is imperative that schools learn to effectively replicate successful initiatives (Mehta, 2013).

### The Role of Leadership in School Success

Smarick (2010) noted that for decades the United States has unsuccessfully tried to turn around failing schools using, as one example, California's attempt to turn around schools that

were in the lowest quintile of performance. Only 11% were successful. Another example was Ohio, a state required to reorganize its school in 2008 due to pervasive failure. Only one in three schools showed some success. Smarick (2010) was not optimistic about school systems trying to improve school success in failing schools by turning them around, believing it to be a waste of time. According to him, more hope rests in successful private school industries and private business that have shown great results by closing down unsuccessful units, opening new ones, and replicating them. Smarick (2010) implied, but did not provide specifics, that it is the established culture of a failing school that blocks its progress, and restarting fresh allows schools a better chance to become effective in educating their students.

In contrast, other researchers have been a bit more optimistic about the possibilities of school improvement. Bryk (2010) reviewed a study conducted by Chicago Public Schools using 15 years of data. The researcher looked at schools in need of improvement and filtered the schools that were successful in their transformation from poor to improved schools. The analysis of the information provided five areas of critical support systems in place at those schools that gave way to the schools improving: (a) school leadership, (b) parent involvement, (c) work orientation, (d) safety and order, and (e) curriculum alignment. Byrk (2010) found that the school leader influenced four of the five support systems directly. He viewed the school principal as the single most crucial influence in the success of the school and in the quest to improve student achievement.

In regards to organizational leadership, Bolman and Deal (2008) proposed four frames for leadership. They stipulate that either weakness or over-emphasis in one or more of the frames would affect how successful a leader would be in developing an effective and successful

organization. This reinforces that if leaders have not developed adequate knowledge and skills, the likelihood that they will produce and/or maintain a successful organization is diminished.

In a study by Bird and Wang (2013) that looked at leadership styles of district leaders, four main styles prevailed and were evenly distributed. They were:

democratic – the leader includes others in making decisions and formulating goals and objectives; situational – the leader applies different patterns of behavior in response to the circumstances at hand being more direct and unilateral in making decisions during emergencies yet being more inclusive of others when time permits; servant – the leader is intent mostly with serving the needs of others as opposed to seeking accomplishments for her or himself; and transformational – the leader focuses on improvement of organizational achievement through purposeful change rather than just maintaining the status quo. (p. 14)

Kelley, Thornton & Daugherty (2005) also asserted that leadership plays a critical role in developing effective schools:

Education leadership is possibly the most important single determinant of an effective learning environment. Change leaders must understand procedures and processes that create the conditions necessary for organizational improvement. Skilled leaders correctly envision future needs and empower others to share and implement that vision. (p. 17)

Waters et al. (2004) determined that leadership had a direct correlation to the increase of student achievement. Billingsby (2010) commented that principals who were supportive of their staffs could expect a more focused staff with better student outcomes.

In regards to organizational leadership, Bolman and Deal (2008) proposed four frames for leadership. They stipulate that weakness or over-emphasis in one or more of the frames would affect how successful a leader would be in developing an effective and successful organization. This reinforces that if leaders have not developed adequate knowledge and skills, the likelihood that they will produce and/or maintain a successful organization is diminished.

Bird and Wang (2013) suggested that for the coming years, the complexity of education will require leaders to be able to adapt to the needs of the school and be authentic leaders, authentic meaning that the leaders, regardless of their leadership style, would be true to their beliefs and transparent in their actions. In their 2015 study, Male and Palaiologou proposed that due to the complexity of the educational field, leadership styles need to disappear and leaders need to be able to develop and understand the connections between students, teachers, parents and community, referred to as “pedagogical leadership” (p. xx). It is clear that leaders will have to adapt to the increase in demands that they are about to face as leaders. In a study conducted by Rasmussen (2015) he proposes that a life experience in poverty influenced the leadership decision making of principals.

DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran & Walther-Thomas (2004) found, in their study, that the school principal was crucial in providing effective services to the school’s special education students. They cited five areas that call for the principal to ensure effective special education services: (a) promote an inclusive school culture, (b) provide instructional leadership, (c) model collaborative leadership, (d) manage and administer organizational processes, and (e) manage and maintain positive relations with teachers, families, and the community.

### The Role of Parents and the Community in School Success

DiPaola et al.'s (2004) first four areas relate directly to the principal as a leader for faculty and staff and are directly influenced by the leader's leadership style. DiPaola et al.'s (2004) fifth area concerned making connections with not only with staff but with parents and the community. Parents of children with ASD do not believe they are valued members of the educational decision makers (Murray, Askerman-Spain, Williams, & Ryley 2011). The success of students with ASD is a shared venture between staff and ASD families. Families are crucial to the success of students with ASD throughout the school system (Burton-Hoyle, 2011). Students with ASD may have very involved education plans that may cover interventions for behavior that should require the active involvement of parents as they are being developed (Burrell & Borrego, 2012). Parents also have to face making decisions for their children with ASD as they transition through every facet of their education (Lee, McCoy, Zucker, & Mathur, 2014). Parents of students with ASD are typically under much stress due to the demands of their child care needs (Burrell & Borrego, 2012; Lee et al., 2014; Singer et al., 2011). The more strain on the parent, the less likely it is that there will be a positive outcome and progress (Burrell & Borrego, 2012).

It is clear that a well-established partnership between parents and school professionals can have a positive effect on the students with ASD (Mereoiu, Bland, Dobbins, & Niemeyer, 2015; Murray et al., 2011). Murray et. al. (2011) noted that establishing a parent and school staff positive relationship does not come with ease. Parents of children with ASD often believe that they are not a part of the decision making taking place at schools (Burrell & Borrego, 2012; Lee et. al., 2014; Mereoiu et al., 2015). Burton-Hoyle (2011) proposed that schools need to support

parents in the overwhelming task of educating their children. Parents of children with ASD have quite a challenge in helping provide their children with support through their education, both academically and behaviorally. To get a glimpse of the emotional stressors that parents of students with ASD have, Mereoiu et al. (2011) cited five major themes derived from a survey they administered to parents of children with ASD. Parents were asked questions about child care providers' lack of knowledge about the characteristics of ASD and the impact on families' initial experiences.

1. Parents thought child care professionals needed to know more about the appropriate instructional strategies, services, and resources that are critical for serving children with ASD and their families.
2. After recognizing this lack of knowledge among child care professionals, parents advocated for their child by finding resources and information themselves.
3. Parents want teachers to love, respect, and acknowledge the unique needs of their child.
4. It was important to parents that their child with ASD has peer friendships. (p. 4)

Another aspect of the parental involvement is the evolution of increased parental rights within the law. Parents of students with disabilities have organized for decades and have advocated for their children. Singer (2011) wrote that in the *Winkelman v. Parma* (2007) Supreme Court decision, the U. S. Congress highlighted increased parental rights in decision making:

It is beyond dispute that the relationship between a parent and child is sufficient to support a legally cognizable interest in the education of one's child; and, what is more,

Congress has found that “the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by. . . strengthening the role and responsibility of parents and ensuring that families of such children have meaningful opportunities to participate in the education of their children at school and at home. (p. 637)

In 1990, an amendment to the Individuals with Disabilities Act, whose new name denoted “people first,” added autism as a category eligible under the act (Singer, 2011). This change required schools to have and listen to parental input.

One way of building a bridge between the school and parents/community is through the involvement of outside community organizations. Murray et al. (2011) discussed a university model funded by a grant focused on educating parents and professionals about ASD which, as an added bonus, helps build a relationship between the two. In one Midwestern state, parents, professionals, and universities saw the dire need to establish statewide training for educators about ASD and treatment for educators. These groups worked together to form a state network that would provide professional development statewide (Maddox & Marvin, 2012). This attempt did not provide particularly spectacular results, it showed that the groups, through positive relationships, developed a statewide initiative.

In the literature reviewed, it was clear that there is need for appropriate training for teachers and parents. One question that arises is if colleges, universities and districts provide educators with adequate training, they will be able to better support and serve students with ASD. According to numerous researchers, it appears that colleges, universities, and school districts have been remiss in providing coursework, professional development, and sustained support (Byrk, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2015;

Mehta, 2012). A recurring topic concerning teachers of students with ASD is that the students' needs are so complex and variable that they require specialized education and training from educators (Mereoiu et.al, 2015; Murray et al., 2011).

Along the lines of training and/or professional development, disability awareness on behalf of all stakeholders would seem to be a critical piece in the success of students with ASD as well. Mereoiu et al. (2015) and Murray et al. (2011) wrote about the importance for family members of children with ASD to become familiar with best practices and processes of their respective school systems. In addition, these authors also discussed the fact that teachers and staff members who serve students with disabilities also lack knowledge to properly support these students. Tindall (2013) found that human negative perceptions of disabled individuals begins at a young age. The perception of negativity toward disabled individuals is also reinforced by the fact that the disability, when viewed from a medical perspective, is considered to be a disorder (Tindall, 2013). Mousouli et al. (2009), who conducted a study of how students with disabilities are perceived by university level physical education students, found that misinformation and education had influence on their views. Mousouli et al. (2009) concluded that “. . . better and wide ranging information about persons with disabilities and their needs can lead to the increase of the acceptance of children with special needs in regular schools” (p. 88). A better educated community would have a positive impact on all stakeholders (Tindall, 2013).

### The Role of Standards in School Success

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) deemed that teachers and school leaders have a direct effect on school success, and because of this, the organization developed standards that were specific in aiding leaders in developing schools where students learn and are



ready to contribute positively to society. The organization acknowledged that the task of school leaders to meet student needs despite changing budgets, demographics, and teachers called for a framework of standards that would best prepare leaders for the task. The standards were developed in conjunction with the help of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and the American Association of School Administrators. CCSSO affirmed that the standards were based on sound research that connects leadership with student learning. The standards manifested procedures that, if implemented, would have a direct effect on student achievement. CCSSO considers that these standards do not stand alone. Rather, they serve as a network, interdependent of each other. It is CCSSO's understanding that leaders are not the only ones working on developing a school that produces high achieving students. Teachers and the community play an important role in this success as well. The leader of the school is the key to managing and providing opportunities for the development and implementation of the standards. Principals serve as the guides and supporters of said task. The standards not only support school leaders in guiding their staffs but also serve as a guide for institutions that prepare new leaders for their roles. The CCSSO also wrote that there is a nationwide trend of educational leaders leaving the field. The standards serve to ensure that new leaders are better prepared for ever-changing roles and responsibilities. Table 1 contains a listing of the 10 CCSSO Professional Standards for Educational Leaders and a brief definition of each.

Table 1

*Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) Professional Standards for Educational Leaders*

Standard	Description
1. Mission, Vision, and Core Values	Effective educational leaders develop, advocate, and enact a shared mission, vision, and core values of high-quality education and academic success and well-being of each student.
2. Ethics and professional norms	Effective educational leaders act ethically and according to professional norms to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
3. Equity and cultural responsiveness	Effective educational leaders strive for equity of educational opportunity and culturally responsive practices to promote each students’ academic success and well-being.
4. Curriculum, instruction, and assessment	Effective educational leaders develop and support intellectually rigorous and coherent systems of curriculum, instruction, and assessment to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
5. Community of care and support for students	Effective educational leaders cultivate an inclusive, caring, and supportive school community that promotes the academic success and well-being of each student.
6. Professional capacity of school personnel	Effective educational leaders develop the professional capacity and practice of school personnel to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
7. Professional community for teachers and staff	Effective educational leaders foster a professional community of teachers and other professional staff to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
8. Meaningful engagement of families and community	Effective educational leaders engage families and the community in meaningful, reciprocal, and mutually beneficial ways to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
9. Operations and management	Effective educational leaders manage school operations and resources to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.
10. School improvement	Effective educational leaders act as agents of continuous improvement to promote each student’s academic success and well-being.

The Florida Department of Education (FDOE) also published a detailed list of leadership standards which were set forth in rule as Florida's core expectations for effective school

administrators. The Standards are based on contemporary research on multi-dimensional school leadership, and represent skill sets and knowledge bases needed in effective schools. They form the foundation for school leader personnel evaluations and professional development systems, school leadership preparation programs, and educator certification requirements. (FDOE, n. d.) The 10 standards, their respective domains, and descriptions are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2

*Florida Principal Leadership Standards*

Domain	Title	Description of Standard
Student achievement	Student learning results	Effective school leaders achieve results on the school's student learning goals.
Student achievement	Student learning as a priority	Effective school leaders demonstrate that student learning is their top priority through leadership actions that build and support a learning organization focused on student success.
Instructional leadership	Instructional plan implementation	Effective school leaders work collaboratively to develop and implement an instructional framework that aligns curriculum with state standards, effective instructional practices, student learning needs and assessments.
Instructional leadership	Faculty development	Effective school leaders recruit, retain and develop an effective and diverse faculty and staff.
Instructional leadership	Learning environment	Effective school leaders structure and monitor a school learning environment that improves learning for all of Florida's diverse student population.
Organizational leadership	Decision making	Effective school leaders employ and monitor a decision-making process that is based on vision, mission and improvement priorities using facts and data.
Organizational leadership	Leadership development	Effective school leaders actively cultivate, support, and develop other leaders within the organization.
Organizational Leadership:	School management	Effective school leaders manage the organization, operations, and facilities in ways that maximize the use of resources to promote a safe, efficient, legal, and effective learning environment.
Organizational leadership	Communication	Effective school leaders practice two-way communications and use appropriate oral, written, and electronic communication and collaboration skills to accomplish school and system goals by building and maintaining relationships with students, faculty, parents, and community.
Professional and ethical behaviors	Professional and ethical behaviors	Effective school leaders demonstrate personal and professional behaviors consistent with quality practices in education and as a community leader.

*Source.* Rulemaking Authority 1001.02, 1012.34, 1012.55, 1012.986 FS. Law Implemented 1012.55, 1012.986, 1012.34 FS. History-New 5-24-05, Formerly 6B-5.0012, Amended 11-15-11.

The Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), in conjunction with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), identified the knowledge and skills that characterize competent leaders of special education (Boscardin, McCarthy, and Delgado 2009). CASE developed standards for administrators, stating the following:

In recognition of the importance of ethics and standards and the need to guarantee quality special education services, the Council of Administrators of Special Education has formulated a set of ethical statements to guide the practice of our profession. (CASE, n. d.)

Though Voltz and Collins (2011) believed that the standards developed by CEC were a step in the right direction, they also thought further refinement was needed. The CASE professional standards are displayed in Table 3.

Table 3

*Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) Professional Standards*

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Professional Standards
Makes serving and supporting exceptional children and their parents the primary responsibility
Strives to be proficient in current professional practice
Supports study and research guided by the conventions of scholarly inquiry
Respects the privacy of students and parents and holds as confidential information in accordance with State/Provincial and Federal laws
Regards colleagues, parents and students with respect, courtesy, fairness, and good faith
Upholds and advances the values, ethics knowledge and mission of the profession
Fosters and supports maximum self-determination and independence on the part of exceptional children
Accepts the responsibility to provide meaningful training experiences to colleagues, general educators, and the public
Promotes the general welfare of exceptional children

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It is evident that the need for professional standards for school administrators has moved forward nationally. These standards are based on the need and movement to improve school performance (Provost, Boscardin, & Wells 2010). Boscardin, McCarthy, and Delgado (2009) wrote that “standards were developed to provide a framework for the knowledge and skills, and in some instances dispositions. . . [and] not meant to prescribe leadership practice” (p. 68). Although professional organizations in the field have developed standards for administrators, they do not appear to have filled the void of staffing qualified leaders. Different reasons why this has occurred have been offered. One such suggestion is the lack of qualified applicants who

wish to become administrators. To exacerbate the situation even further for special education programs, the number of candidates who have a special education background is even less. The majority of school administrators have emerged from the teaching pool. Current teaching pools are dense with candidates who are not well prepared to teach (Mehta, 2012; Payne, 2008 and Boscardin et al., 2009). There is a paucity of well-prepared, highly qualified teachers in exceptional student education to meet the high levels of demand in the nation's schools (Billingsley, 2011), and high skill levels are required to implement the difficult work of school change (Darling-Hammond 2010; Boscardin et al. 2009, Fullan 2007). In keeping with this theme, Donovan, McCoy, Denune, Barnett, Graden, and Carr (2015) described a frequent challenge faced by those who would implement large-scale change:

Implementation of systems-based initiatives requires changes in skills and behaviors and is often accompanied by concerns from implementers (e.g., teachers), which too often is interpreted as "resistance." These indications of resistance need to be reframed and analyzed within a behavior change and systems context. (p. 270)

Unfortunately, leaders often seek to address the perceived resistance to program implementation, rather than the actual skill gap, and this can hinder their implementation success.

We have seen that, in the right supportive circumstances, achieving high expectations is possible. Therefore, if the evidence indicates that high achievement is a possibility, but the data shows it to be a rare occurrence, the field has a moral obligation to find ways to replicate existing successful programs for all students with disabilities. The discussion must not focus on whether it is necessary to do this, but on how to support success for students with disabilities (Wells, 2016, p. 104).

The National Autism Center's (NAC) 2009 and 2015 National Standards Project report addressed evidence-based practices for individuals with ASD. The reports sifted through interventions and standardized them by effectiveness. In these reports, the NAC had a panel of experts review numerous interventions used to support and ameliorate issues that students with ASD. The National Standards Project report sought to:

provide the strength of evidence supporting educational and behavioral treatments that target the core characteristics of these neurological disorders; describe the age, diagnosis, and skills/behaviors targeted for improvement associated with treatment options; identify the limitations of the current body of research on autism treatment and offer recommendations for engaging in evidence-based practice for ASD. (NAC, 2009, p. 1)

The National Standards Project also served three purposes:

1. To identify the level of research support currently available for educational and behavioral interventions used with individuals (below 22 years of age) with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD). These interventions address the core characteristics of these neurological disorders. Knowing levels of research support is an important component in selecting treatments that are appropriate for individuals on the autism spectrum.
2. To help parents, caregivers, educators, and service providers understand how to integrate critical information in making treatment decisions. Specifically, evidence based practice involves the integration of research findings with (a) professional judgment and data-based clinical decision-making, (b) values and preferences of families, and (c) assessing and improving the capacity of the system to implement the



intervention with a high degree of accuracy. Parents thought child care professionals needed to know more about the appropriate instructional strategies, services, and resources that are critical for serving children with ASD and their families.

3. To identify limitations of the existing treatment research involving individuals with ASD. (NAC, 2009, p. 3)

In its most recent publication, the National Standards Project (NAC, 2015) updated interventions for individuals with ASD that were reviewed and tiered by effectiveness. The publication tiered the interventions into three categories: (a) established (effective), (b) emerging (may have effective outcomes), and (c) unestablished (little or no evidence that they were effective).

## CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

This chapter provides an introduction to the methods and procedures used to conduct this research study. Included in the chapter are a restatement of the study's purpose, the population and selection of the sample, specific research questions, and the researcher's approach to data collection and analysis. A phenomenological approach was used in conducting the research.

### Purpose of the Study

School leadership plays a central role in program quality (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Reeves, 2006; Waters et al., 2003). One of the main challenges in urban public schools at the time of the present study was to create effective programs that serve and support students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in public school systems. Researchers have identified the characteristics that make for effective programs for students with ASD (Magyar, 2011). High quality programs have been identified by Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) and Partnership for Effective Programs for Students with Autism (PEPSA). However, quality programs have not been implemented on a wide scale. This lack of wide-scale implementation is evidenced by lagging outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with autism (Magyar, 2011).

In an effort to disseminate effective instructional practices for students with autism throughout the state, the Florida Department of Education has sponsored PEPSA which partners with the Statewide CARD. Drawing on this partnership with PEPSA, CARD has "joined together with hundreds of Florida educators, providing training and technical assistance to

develop and implement innovative and effective practices within educational programs for students with ASD” (PEPSA, n.d., para. 1). Yet, outcomes for students with ASD have lagged (Magyar, 2011). Therefore, when effective programs for students with ASD are developed, school systems need to understand what makes them effective.

Given the importance of leadership in the development and implementation of these programs, it is important to learn how leaders have implemented high quality programs for students with ASD in their school settings. The purpose of this study is to document the lived experiences of school leaders who oversee successful programs for students with ASD within their school sites. This research will provide valuable information on the leadership behaviors of principals who oversee effective educational programs for students with ASD. As such, it will contribute insight to the creation of highly effective programs for students with ASD.

### Research Design

In this study, the researcher sought to explicate the essence of the leadership experience related to effective programs for students with ASD, using the methods and procedures associated with qualitative, phenomenological approaches. A phenomenological study gives insight to the meaning of a phenomenon within a group of several individuals and their lived experience (Creswell, 2007). This qualitative research method reviews a human experience and seeks to find the general core of the experience (Moutsakas, 1994). Moutsakas provided three main steps in extricating the core of the experience: (a) epoche, (b) transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and (c) imaginative variation.

In epoche, prior to investigating the phenomena, researchers must be aware and void themselves of all biases and contaminations that may taint the point of view. After this filtering,

they must observe the phenomena in a clean unaltered manner and with open eyes. The key element of the epoch phase is to allow the phenomena to be itself and present itself for what it is without preconceived biases polluting the description of what it is (Moutsakas, 1994). In order to be aware of biases prior to the interviews being conducted, the researcher completed a bracketing exercise. However, it is important to note that the researcher has been an administrator for 18 years. During many of those years, he was responsible for overseeing programs for students with behavioral disorders. At the time of the present study, the researcher was serving as an administrator over ASD programs within the district being studied. Accordingly, it is likely impossible to approach the research entirely from an objective viewpoint. However, in this study, the researcher's emic perspective provided benefit, as it provided him with the ability to (a) parse data collected that would likely be a sentiment similar to that of any other administrator within the district; and (b) probe for deeper meaning specific to the interviewed principals' lived experiences separate from that which would be expected of all administrators within this district.

The second step in finding the core of the experience is transcendental-phenomenological reduction where the researcher looks at each individual experience as its own entity. The first step in this process is bracketing. In bracketing, a specific focus is chosen, and all other topics are separated. This progression allows for the research to center on selected specifics and to move to the next process in the reduction is the development of different unique descriptions, called horizontalization. In horizontalization, each description is viewed as having its own individual perceptions and differences, and a unique textural description is developed. Each portrayal is considered a distinct horizon.

Imaginative variation is the final step in isolating the core of the experience. Moutsakas (1994) wrote that in the imaginative variation step the world disappears, existence no longer is central, and anything whatever becomes possible. This step allows the researcher to develop structural themes from the textural descriptions. By sifting through the information, the researcher can attempt to explain the development of the phenomenon.

The final step in the phenomenological research process is the synthesis of statements that explain the core cause of why the phenomenon occurs. The researcher does this by incorporating the heart of what textural descriptions and structural themes consider and capturing and explaining the phenomenon. This research was initiated only after it received the approval of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Central Florida (Appendix A).

### Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with ASD?
2. What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with ASD across their school setting?
3. What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with ASD?

### Population

The population for this study was all principals from a central Florida public school district who had been in place in their current schools for a minimum of two years and who oversaw a self-contained program for students with ASD.

### Sample

Principals for the study sample were selected via a dual nomination process. Representatives of the host school district and experts in the field of autism had opportunity to provide input into the study sample.

The researcher made telephone contact with (a) the Executive Director for the Exceptional Student Education department of a large urban school and by email contact with (b) the administrator of the University of Central Florida's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD). Each of the administrators was asked to obtain a list of 10 schools in the school district which housed self-contained ASD units and were considered the most effective according to quality indicators developed by CARD (Appendix B). The administrators were asked to rank the list of programs, using the criteria provided by the researcher, with the most effective program earning a ranking of 1, the second most effective program earning a ranking of 2, and so forth. The two separate ranked lists were then transmitted to the researcher.

The researcher compared both lists, assigning each program its rank value from each list as a score (i.e., 1-10). If the program appears on only one list, it was ranked at the bottom of the other list and received a rank score of 11 for the list on which it did not appear. Earned scores from each nominating body were added, and a single, ranked list resulted. In this list, the schools with the lowest summed scores reflected the highest ranked programs. The top three

programs were selected as the sample. In the event that multiple schools earn the same ranked score, up to six programs could have been selected to ensure that programs of comparable quality were not excluded from the study.

Purposive sampling methodology was used to locate highly effective programs for students with ASD. Criteria for inclusion in this study required highly performing programs as designated by two different professionals with expertise in the area of ASD. The importance of this study hinged, in part, on the existence of a relatively low number of highly effective ASD programs. Therefore, by its design, the researcher assumed that there would be a relatively small number of participants, and there was no intention for its findings to be generalized to all principals. Doing this led to an important, albeit narrow, description of the experiences of leaders in high performing programs.

Principals from the top three programs were sent an introductory email (Appendix C) from the researcher. The email addressed the purpose of the study and requested the principal's participation in an interview. Once the administrators agreed to be interviewed, the researcher contacted them via phone to select a date and time to meet at a location convenient to them. Prior to the meeting, the questionnaire protocol was sent to the participating administrator via email (Appendix D). The protocol requested demographic information and included general information regarding the focus of the interview.

### Instrumentation

The instruments used in this research study include a Pulse Livescribe Smartpen, a redundant recorder, NVivo 10 for Windows (A Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS)) and an Interview Protocol. The Livescribe Smartpen records

and matches notes to what is recorded. It was used in the process of recording interviews and taking notes.

The CAQDAS software provides tools that help with the qualitative research. The software aids in transcription analysis, coding and text interpretation, and content analysis. For this study, the researcher used NVivo 10 for Windows software. The interview protocol served as a guide for the interviewer as he interviewed the sample principals.

### Data Collection

Participants of this study needed to have firsthand knowledge and involvement in the area being reviewed (Creswell, 2012). In this study, those responsible for the planning and implementation of self-contained elementary ASD units were the active participants.

The researcher secured interview appointments with principals of selected schools via phone. Principals were informed that interviews would last between 60 and 90 minutes, and they were asked to select a day, time, and location convenient for them. All interviews were guided using an interview protocol. Moustakas (1994) suggested that all individuals be asked at least two general questions: (a) What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? and (b) What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon? These general questions elicit better comprehension of the common experiences shared by the individuals selected for interview. Even though there was a set of preliminary interview questions, the researcher approached the interview from an informal, conversational perspective to allow participants to share information that they deemed important. Such an approach respects the importance of the participant's viewpoint which is critical to the interview process in this approach (Creswell, 2012).



The researcher requested permission from the participating principals to record the interview using a Livescribe Smart Pen and an additional, redundant recording device. The redundant device was used to ensure availability of recordings for the purposes of analysis. The researcher also took notes during the interview. All interview recordings were downloaded to the researcher's computer and transcribed.

### Data Analysis

Once interviews were completed and data were transcribed, the researcher moved to what Tracy (2012) calls data immersion. In essence, the researcher immersed himself in the reading and re-reading of the interview transcriptions so as to become well versed in the responses. As I became immersed, I took field notes of thoughts and beliefs so as to collect the development of insight. The information was then summarized based on the most significant and repeated information provided by the interviewees that specify how they experienced the phenomenon. This step is referred to as horizontalization (Moutsakas, 1994). The researcher then developed "clusters of meaning" (p. 67) from these summarizing statements. The researcher used a computer assisted/aided qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) to help analyze the collected data.

A description of the stated experiences, referred to by Creswell (2007) as a textural description, was developed from the summarizing statements. From the textural descriptions, the researcher developed an identifiable thematic description of the phenomenon in question that elaborated on the themes found in the research.

### Limitations

One major limitation to this study was the reliability of the individuals interviewed to provide accurate and detailed recounts of their experience. Along those lines, it was assumed that the interviewees would share true information and will be forthright in relating their experiences. In order to maintain internal validity, the interviewees were provided with transcripts and details of their interviews which they reviewed for accuracy.

There also exists the limitation in this study of researcher bias. In order to minimize this limitation, the researcher completed a bracketing exercise. The process allowed the researcher to be aware of any areas with bias potential.

### Assumptions

It was assumed that participants in the research would be truthful and provide detailed information regarding the phenomenon. It was also assumed that the experts called upon to assist in identifying the sample for the study would submit individuals with adequate experience related to the phenomenon and that the researcher would be allowed to conduct the study in the selected schools.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of principals who oversee successful programs for students with autism spectrum disorder within their school sites. This chapter presents the results of the research. It has been organized around the three research questions that guided the study.

### Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with autism spectrum disorder?
2. What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with autism spectrum disorder?
3. What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with autism spectrum disorder?

### Epoche

Epoche is the process by which the researcher identifies the primary biases and preconceptions about the topic at hand. Once those biases are identified, researchers are able to look at elements of a study with fresh eyes, open minded and free of preconceived perceptions (Moustakas 1994). It is critical for researchers to be well aware of these prejudgments throughout their studies so as to avoid tainting the true picture of the research.

The researcher began his career in education as a bilingual education teacher. A year later he entered the field of special education with the understanding that students with

disabilities were students with physical and intellectual disabilities. His first job with students with disabilities was with students with severe behavior disorders. Unbeknownst to him, it was his most difficult and most life-changing year in his career as an educator. The researcher's passion in the area of human behavior began. He continued as a classroom teacher for four years as a varying exceptionalities teacher, behavior resource dean and as a behavior analyst. He worked primarily with students with severe behavior disorders who were not identified as having autism spectrum disorder. After these experiences he entered school administration. Of the 18 years as an administrator, 13 have involved the development and/or maintenance of programs for students with behavior disorders. At the time of the study, the researcher was certified to teach exceptional student education, grades kindergarten through 12 and had been a certified associate behavior analyst for eight years.

Special education is close to the researcher's heart. Why program effectiveness across schools and programs in regular education and special education has been such a conundrum have always intrigued him. He has been able to replicate effective special education programs across schools that he has led and finds it exciting to be able to delve deeper.

### Participating Principals

#### Principal A

Principal A is a Caucasian female who is certified in the areas of elementary education, Grades 1-6; specific learning disabilities, Grades K – 12 and school principal, all grades. This participant has been a principal for 10 years. She is currently a principal at an elementary school that is designated a center school for students with autism spectrum disorder. The school currently has three self-contained classrooms for students with autism spectrum disorder.

Principal A previously led a school that had what was considered a model program by district exceptional student education administrators for students with autism spectrum disorder.

#### Principal B

Principal B is a Caucasian male who is certified in the areas of elementary education, Grades K -6, English for speakers of other languages endorsed, gifted endorsed, educational leadership and school principal, all grades. He was in his third year as principal at the time of the study. The participant is currently a principal at an elementary school that is designated a center for students with autism spectrum disorder. The program houses self-contained classrooms for students with autism spectrum disorder.

#### Principal C

Principal C is a Caucasian Male who is certified in the areas of elementary education grades 1-6 and school principal all grades. He has been a principal for 7 years. The participant is currently a principal at an elementary school that is designated a center for students with autism spectrum disorder. The program houses three self-contained classrooms.

### Research Question Results

#### Research Question 1

What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with autism spectrum disorder?

Analysis of the interviews of these principals revealed common characteristics that were shared by these leaders. These commonalities are then posed as themes.

### Theme 1: Personal and Professional Experiences in Education Prior to Leadership Role

In one-way or another, all principals had life experiences in education either personally or professionally. Principal A had been exposed to education all of her life. Her mother was an educator, opened up her own school, and also worked in the public school system's Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Department. Principal A shared that education has "always been ingrained and part of our growing up or what not."

Principal B came from a family and extended family of educators. He acknowledged that though there were many educators in his life, there was a calling in him to become an educator which began at a very young age.

Principal C, similarly, had a family member who was an educator. His mother was a teacher and reading specialist. He indicated, however, his mother's involvement in education did not provide him with his main drive to become an educator.

Although two of the three participants did not believe that their family link to education was the main force that led them to their profession, all three did have a strong personal life experience in education. The two principals who did not believe that their family involvement in education had anything to do with their going into education did participate in their youth in some job/program related to teaching. Principal C shared two important experiences in his youth that he believed influenced him in choosing a career as an educator. He reported that in high school, he learned of a program that would give him school credit if he would go to a local elementary school and teach physical education. He participated in it and truly enjoyed it. Principal C also credited being a counselor at a YMCA summer camp as another motivator. He was a lead counselor who reviewed lesson plans for all the groups in this large camp. His

success in this experience reinforced his career choice. Participant B also credited job experiences that had to do with education as a motivating force, responding:

I've always wanted to be a teacher. So even my first job as a camp counselor, a lot of my jobs growing up were working at the Y or the JCC (Jewish Community Center) or working anything that had to do with kids. A lot of the jobs I've done revolved around that.

The participants all had professional experiences in leadership, and all of them sought leadership roles on their own. Participant A was a lead staffing specialist for the exceptional education program for over five years and followed by becoming an assistant principal. Principal B came to the conclusion early on in his teaching career that he wished to become a school leader and formally sat with his principal at the time to discuss a leadership pathway for himself. After teaching for a few years, he became a curriculum resource teacher, which in Florida is often considered part of the administrative team. He eventually was promoted to an assistant principal position. Principal C's leadership pathway included positions as lead teacher, faculty advisory committee member, and curriculum resource teacher. He then became an assistant principal at an elementary school.

Only one of the participants had a background in exceptional education, but all of them worked with exceptional education programs that supported students with behavior disorders at one time when they were assistant principals. All of them believed these experiences played a critical role in their success as leaders of successful programs for students with autism spectrum disorder. Principal A worked at three different schools as an assistant principal. Two of those sites were designated centers for students with autism spectrum disorder. She believed that the

experience in those sites gave her a strong base in exceptional student education, stating: “I’ve had lots of experiences with those types of units and having former ESE experience, it seemed to lend itself well to impacting the issues. . . .”. Principal B worked at an elementary school that was designated a center for students with autism spectrum disorder. The program at the school was well advanced in inclusionary practices. As he stated, “In the previous school where I was assistant principal at, . . . we were really big into inclusion and getting the kids back into the general education setting. . . .” He stated that his experience at the site built his belief system of how a good program is developed, and he brought that knowledge with him to his current site. Principal C had experience working with students with emotional behavioral disorders as an assistant principal, and he believed that his expertise and knowledge of working with students with disabilities grew from that.

## Theme 2: Principals See Themselves as Change Agents

Another theme that emerged from the responses of these principals was that regardless of where they were with their programs for students with autism spectrum disorder, they all had room for change. All the principals had clear pathways as to what progress they needed to make, and they were the change agents for their goals. All the school sites were considered to have successful programs for students with autism spectrum disorder by the University of Central Florida Center for Autism and Related Disabilities and a lead administrator of the Exceptional Student Education Department of the school district that employs these principals. All the programs had strong, self-contained classrooms for students with autism spectrum disorder and were in the process of expanding their inclusionary practices.



Principal A discussed her goals:

It will come down to creating more opportunities for kids. I mean it's already a three to one ratio and they're already going out to certain areas of the day. . . . I think if we had unlimited resources, unlimited monetary means, then we'd be able to have them all go out and have exposure. I think that is just so critical for our kids, because I mean not that everybody within the group doesn't like have gifts and what not that they can learn from, but age appropriate peers and being able to see what that looks like and have that as a model to them that's going to be essential for them, whatever they decide to do lifelong, whether it's a job or what not. You got to have those models that are available. So I would create even more opportunities. . . .

Her drive was to maximize the opportunities for students. As this principal develops her vision for change, she asks herself what she has to do so these students have access to more chances.

When Principal B came to his current school and assessed the program for students with autism spectrum disorder, he developed a vision of the direction he believed he needed to take the program. He relied on his experience in his previous work site as an assistant principal. That school had an extensive well-developed program for students with autism spectrum disorder that utilized inclusionary practices, "We were really big on inclusion. . . so I came here with that mentality." His whole vision was on how he could change the current practices and insert a detailed system of inclusionary practices. He said, "This is a far fetched vision, but the ultimate goal is to have every one of those kids back in the general ed setting."

Principal C feels like an agent of change as well. He sets high expectations of where he feels the school needs to go and clearly disseminates that information to his staff. He is direct in

letting them know where the school is going. If that vision does not fit their pathway, he encourages them to find a work site that is a better fit for them. He stated, “My vision is to do what’s best for the kids. . . I mean really just getting them ready for life, having high expectations. I think that’s important, even for the ones that aren’t verbal.”

All three principals demonstrated their passion in attaining these changes at their sites. To them, change was a serious business. Though they realized there were obstacles beyond their control (e.g., funding), they had faith that they could surmount whatever barriers they encountered that could be changed. They were determined to make change happen.

## Research Question 2

What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with autism spectrum disorder?

### Theme 1: Strong Support of Teachers

One common theme that was shared among the principals was a strong support of their teachers in charge of their programs for students with autism spectrum disorder. They all believed that in order for their programs to be successful, they needed to make sure their team members had all the tools necessary. Principal A took a global view of her teachers with respect to training. She believed that by training her entire staff, not just those in exceptional student education, she better prepares the school for the future. In her view, school systems will be moving to a more inclusionary model and regular education teachers need to be well prepared to support and meet the needs of all students. She explained how she has worked towards that end:

“We've done UDL [universal design for learning] this year. Because, again, all those tools and all those different strategies are not going to just apply to ESE. We have ELL kids. We have all sorts of kids. So, the more things I have in my toolbox, the more I'm going to be able to create scenarios that are going to be successful for kids.”

Principal B had a similar view in supporting his teachers and training. As he saw his general education instructors struggle with the inclusion of students with autism spectrum disorder in their classrooms, he provided the necessary support. He discussed the training he provided his general education teachers because of their apprehension to take students who were ready for inclusion,

I think it was resistance because they were uneducated on the topic, on what it meant.

There were some like, “No. I can't do this. I don't know how to handle a student that has ASD. I don't know what to do with--how to use my classroom skills to approach them, or lead them, or guide them.” That's where staff training came in. Is that, it's not that we're asking you to teach differently. Make some tweaks that will benefit--I mean, it really benefits all students.

He sensed that training for his staff helped overcome faculty resistance and helped move the school forward in its quest to increase inclusion practices. Principal C was in agreement with the other two administrators with regard to properly supporting his staff with training. He indicated that he meets with his leadership team to review the needs of his staff. Based on that review, the team determines what the staff training needs to look like in order to properly support the staff. Principal C feels that one annual training does not provide adequate support. Trainings are followed up with further trainings that review the professional development provided. He argued

that the trainings have provided the necessary training for teachers to move the school forward, stating, “I’m not even sure our training’s the best in the world, but it seems to have worked. I think that along with the expectations, that along with the vibe, has gone a long way.”

All the participants felt strongly about the necessity of having the right supportive resources in place to properly assist staff in achieving their vision. Each one assessed the needs of their faculty and put in place resource personnel to help. Principal C indicated that he scrutinizes classrooms as he builds them and develops a system of support for the teacher and the students:

Within the units, we sit down over the summer--the classroom teachers know their roles just because that's their assignment. But then what we look at is the group of students that is going to be in those classrooms the following year and take a look at who our ESE paras are, and kind of match them based on where certain needs are, and develop their groupings for the teacher that way. So that way there's some equity among the classrooms, and that way each room is getting the support that it needs for the students that are in there.

By tailoring his support staff to student and teacher needs, he believes the likelihood of success increases. He elaborated, indicating that his staff has indicated their gratitude for his showing of support, “We appreciate, we know you're always there for us.” Principal A took similar actions. She shared that as she builds general education classrooms and/or places students with autism spectrum disorder who are ready for inclusion, she asks herself “What levels of support will that teacher need?” She related the following:

You don't have students that are all just fitting a mold or what not, you have these kids are all coming in, so I need to find that same level of support for them, because as I include kids it's not like, "Alright, here's a new one for you, and good luck with that." It's like, "What is going to help you and this child be successful in this room?"

Based on teacher input and observation, Principal A develops a detailed plan of support. She goes as far as using a picture model of the physical classroom to determine the support needed:

So, even when I know a student's got to go into a new room, I'm like, "Alright. Well, where's he going to sit? What do we need to provide as far as the interactions? The name of who he's going to sit by."

Principal B indicated that he focused on having the right people in place as well. He credited having a strong behavior specialist and staffing specialist for part of his success and providing strong support to his teachers in and out of the classroom. According to him, the behavior specialist provides critical support, "She's the behavior support for those classrooms, helps with classroom management, setting up point systems, schedules, all that kind of stuff." He credited the support provided to his teachers for their new and improved outlook on inclusion. When approached about having a student with autism spectrum disorder mainstreamed into their classrooms, teachers have responded with, "Yeah, I'll try it out and see how it goes." Now, it's almost like an open door policy. A teacher is just like, "Yeah let's bring them in. Let's try it out. Let's see how it goes."

The three administrators also showed commonality in their practice of being hands on when they are providing support. Two different examples were provided, each relaying a

commitment to being hands on. Principals B and C both were proud of being on the floor, ready to support in any area. Principal B stated,

There are many times there's a call on the radio, and we're all there. All hands are on deck, and it comes from the mentality and the exposure that they see me involved with that, that, "Okay, everyone can do this. He's not just talking about it. He's doing it."

Principal B believes that by being visible in every aspect of the school, he is providing critical support.

Interestingly, Principal C relayed a similar experience in supporting his staff and stated that if he is going to support his staff, he will do whatever it takes. He stated, "I think absolutely showing the teachers and the general staff that you recognize them for what they do but also that you're in there. . . ." Principal A revealed that she was highly involved in collaborating with teams as they met to discuss student matters. She indicated that she participated in every meeting held by staff members that have to do with student achievement and success. She is there to collaborate, listen, and help make decisions and to contribute to the success of the teacher and the students. As she called it, she likes to be "preventive."

## Theme 2: Strong Connection to External Stakeholders

All three principals held the belief that to be successful they needed a strong connection to parents and outside agencies. They viewed these relationships as critical to the success of their programs for students with autism spectrum disorder. Principal C stated that his close positive ties with parents has spread like wild flowers within the community of parents with children with autism spectrum disorder. He shared that he continuously fields calls from parents inquiring about how to register at the school, "Hi, heard about your school through this or that

and want to come there. What do I need to do to make sure I'm in the autism program in your zone?" Principal B stated that he works hard to build a strong connection and relationship with his parents. He does so by earning their trust that school personnel are doing what is best for their children. He discussed parent's feelings about the school's offerings for students with autism spectrum disorder:

And they only want the best for their child, and I think they're very appreciative that we're offering that to them, that we're not just putting them in a classroom when they start here and then when they finish fifth grade we're just sending them off. We're really developing the student with the social skills and as much academic skills as possible. So that way when they go to middle school they can have some success.

Principal B saw this bond as helping his staff and parents work together to do what is best for children. Principal A discussed the importance, in building strong relationships, that the conversations held with parents be honest and provide a positive path for the future. She stated, "So, as long as you work together, and they see progress, if you're working together to get to a better place, then they're more than open." Principal B share similar thoughts:

We don't sugar coat things for the families. So we tell them, "This is where we are, these are the facts." We collect binders of data on students to share with them. So when we have the evidence, and the support, and the knowledge to share that with parents and they feel part of the team that really builds the relationship. So it's not really a battle here, it's really like, "How do we work together as a team to do what's best for your child?" So, they don't see it as a school versus parent. They see it as a school with the parent to do what's best.

The principals stated that having strong connections with community members was critical as well. All three principals worked with a variety of agencies, but all of them had an established relationship with the University of Central Florida's Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD) chapter. Principal C stated that CARD has been very active in providing support in his school. Recent budget cuts have forced CARD to scale back in its involvement, but nevertheless agency and school still work together. He sensed that CARD has a lot to do with the reputation the school has developed in the autism spectrum disorder community. Principal B stated, "We do have CARD that comes and they do some observations. They do work for some students." The agency has been involved at the school for a number of years now. CARD has provided Principal A's school with training in different areas. One of the teachers of the self-contained unit for students with autism spectrum disorder participated in an extensive partnership with CARD and is now considered a model classroom. She relayed,

So, you have those model schools. I would say one of our units is a model school for UCF. They send interns over to see what it looks like, so that they get like training in before they come into the school system. I think it's just constant looking at what it's supposed to look like, and then adapt that to whatever needs of the students that you have.

Having this strong connection with the outside agency has provided the school with support as to produce an exceptional example of a self-contained classroom.

### Theme 3: Disability Awareness Education

Making stakeholders aware of disabilities before inclusion took place was a key step taken by these administrators. They all affirmed that awareness was important to their success.



Principal C responded that he finds it necessary to conduct training for disability awareness for his staff throughout the year, not just at the end of the year,

We do training for all staff. We do a specific training that we've refined over the years - every pre-planning emphasizing the particulars of ASD. It's so wide, but there's some key things. So every single year we do that, and then review it again around November to December. And I don't mean it's a three-hour training. I mean, it's sort of a half hour. But we do it, again, twice a year at least, and sometimes more, along with our normal in-service, that's more in-depth. So, for the most part, and I've told people this is--What it is. These are the kids we have.

Principal B noted that the professional development provided to school staff that prepares them for inclusion has been important in getting buy-in from teachers who will be impacted by inclusionary practices,

We did some professional development on what inclusion was about. About that all students can learn. It's really just getting some buy-in from the teachers and just showing them that it can work and that these kids can be successful in the general ed setting.

Along the same lines, Principal A observed, "So you have to put that in like, some PD, and help them understand the kind of details and just the different styles of students coming into their classrooms." She emphasized that the method of preparing teachers for students with autism spectrum disorder coming into their classroom was to properly educate them about the disorder.

Principal A also indicated that professional development that prepared general education teachers for incoming inclusion students not only helped the teacher support students with disabilities but also provided the teacher with strategies that can benefit all students, "We've

done UDL this year. Because, again, all those tools and all those different strategies are not going to just apply to ESE. We have kids ELL. We have all sorts of kids.” It was evident that all participants believed that educating their staff and making them aware of student disabilities gave the staff ownership of the students and allowed for a successful transition of their inclusionary practice.

All three principals were clear in stating that they not only made their teachers aware but also invested in educating their student body about disabilities. Principal B’s leadership team works during the summer building classrooms for the following year. They highlight those classrooms that will be including students with autism spectrum disorder and target them for disability awareness in the form of a lesson.

The behavior specialist will go in and do that lesson at the beginning of the year. Then if we do that throughout the year, like, "Okay, student A is ready to go in," and it's like January, the behavior specialist will go in and give that lesson to that class beforehand. Kind of give them a heads up, “You're going to have a new student come in,” administer the background, they kind of go through it. They go through the Powerpoint, and they go through the lesson.

Principal B shared the details of timing of these lessons (i.e., dependent on student’s pending arrival). He also touched on the value of the lesson for the class:

That way if an ASD student comes into the classroom, all of the students that are in that classroom have a heads-up about-- well, to me they look like a normal student, they may act differently. But just because they act differently, doesn't mean that they're different. So they talk about how do you build connections with a student with ASD and work from

there. So that way those relationships are building. And in fact, we have what I've seen is a lot of strong relations to building amongst peers from different backgrounds.

Principal A emphasized that student disability awareness is absolutely necessary for a program to succeed. She stated that if the general student body is accepting of students with disabilities, in this case, specifically students with autism spectrum disorder, it tremendously aids in the success of their program. Principal C talked about the value of making a direct connection with students in a respectful manner, to better ensure their buy-in and support for students with disabilities that come into the classroom,

Talking to the children, but not talking down to them. We have many trainings, we do general social skills, we do general needs for teachers. I think setting the tone, we talk about treating people fairly. Doesn't always mean equal, but it's fair.

Principal B noted that as a result of the trainings provided to his staff and his students, a club has been formed that has helped build healthy relationships with students with disabilities and those with no disabilities.

And it's really teaching all students that are part of that club how to be aware and how to work hand-in-hand with a student with disabilities. So we have a lot of our ASD students that are part of that club and many GenED. I mean, the first week alone there were over 60 kids that signed up for it. And now this past week, I think, there was 85 or 90 kids that were just involved in this one-and-a-half-hour club.

The principal was very proud that his disability awareness training had sprouted such a relevant club that clearly shouted that the school community was one, regardless of any differences they may have as individuals.

### Research Question 3

What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with autism spectrum disorder?

#### Theme 1: Rewards Associated With Student Growth and Positive Experiences With Families

When the principals were asked about rewards associated with being an administrator of an effective exceptional program for students with autism spectrum disorder, they all indicated that the single biggest reward was the growth and positive experience students with autism spectrum disorder and their families had in the schools they lead. Principal C shared that he had one family at his school that had enrolled their child with autism spectrum disorder in kindergarten. Parents had been concerned as to how the child was going to be served and supported at the school. They remained at the school for years but eventually had to move to New York City. The mother wrote a letter to the superintendent of schools regarding the great experience their family and child had at the school. He related, “That one letter from that one mom with the two boys, I couldn't have written a letter that well. It was stunning the way she wrote [about] the progression when he got here in kindergarten.” Principal B remarked similarly,

I think the most positive event is the push for the more inclusion. I think that parents are very appreciative of that - the parents of ASD students are appreciative of that - because they understand the challenges that we have in education with that.

Although he noted the push for inclusion as the most positive event, it was clear that the reinforcing experience was the fact that both parents and students with autism spectrum disorder were thankful for such a positive experience at the school. The families and students believed

they were being heard and supported on their journey. They sensed they were part of the family and were not ostracized. Principal A concurred, sharing one of her most memorable experiences,

Yes. So, I remember actually back at Bonneville, we had a student who was full time ASD. We started to move him out more and more, include those supports, include every opportunity for them, and now they were getting ready to go into high school and there are still supports in place, but heading on a Gen Ed track, and so you take these kiddos that are coming into these very intensive units, and then it's like, "Well, let's get him out. Let's see what he can do." And then, now, all of a sudden, you have a student who can potentially graduate from school or high school, and then find a job, and we've helped them to figure out how they can function in society."

In essence, the most rewarding memory for these principals who led schools with effective programs for students with autism spectrum disorder was the involvement and the ability to directly impact the lives of students with the disability. In addition, knowing that they were able to soften the challenging experience of the parents of children with autism spectrum disorder was also a reinforcing factor.

## Theme 2: Challenges Exist: Needed Education, Funding, Bureaucratic Issues

Although expressed in slightly different ways, the general consensus as to the challenges associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with autism spectrum disorder was that there is a vast amount of education needed to work with this population. The variability in characteristics associated with individuals with autism spectrum disorder calls for an extensive amount of knowledge in the area to understand it. Principal A believed that the lack of knowledge of some parents made it difficult at times to

move forward with the adequate education and support for students with autism spectrum disorder. She shared,

I think sometimes you have parents who don't necessarily want to accept that their child is not normal, in a sense. I mean, they're just unique. They're just-- they have different qualities about them. What is normal these days? I have no clue. So, it's a matter of helping them come to an idea that we're still going to push them. We're still going to create these opportunities. It may not be what you envisioned, but it doesn't mean that it can't be a different vision, and helping them to formulate that thought. And it's not over. It's not ended. It's just going to be different, and we work together to collaborate that. So, sometimes they have their own idea, and they want a student who's not able to even interact with students, to just sit in a room. So, I'll always try to say, "Well, what is the ultimate goal?" Because sitting in a room just to be around students, is that going to end up getting them to a point where they can end up with a job, they can end up with career skills? Or is it just being in a room near kids that, you know, you consider normal?

This pervasive feeling in some parents tended to create tension and inadequate support and expectations for some students with autism spectrum disorder. Principal C recalled that his challenging experiences were with parents who were ill informed and not willing to accept research based information. He elaborated, "We have one very recent one. A kindergartener, knew the mom, really just--she's sort of old school. I think she's read too many websites". He believed that she comes into situations at the school, demanding, and has the idea that, "Schools won't help you, you got to be the advocate, and she's taken that to the extent that. . . and she doesn't want to talk to other parents because her son's different." He feels that she doesn't

understand that he invests in all his students; that he makes sure that students with autism spectrum disorder have what they need.

Principal B found his challenge more in the education and awareness of his staff, particularly those in what are considered classified positions, (e.g., paraprofessionals). He described his situation as one where the majority of individuals holding these positions have been in the school system for quite a while and refuse to educate themselves in the area of autism spectrum disorder; or if they do, they are reluctant to accept the information. He shared,

I would say the biggest challenge is making sure that we have the trained staff to make it the program it needs to be. Either the teachers get on board and they're trained--the bigger struggle are the [paras?]. To be honest, they are the biggest struggle that we have just because they are not trained educators. You can offer PD, and you guide them through it, but at the end of the day they don't have the educational background and some of the knowledge to see the vision or see how to go about it, and many of them have been in the district a long time and are here because they have a job. And that's the reality of that [chuckles].”

### Summary

This chapter has presented the results of the study. The research questions were reviewed, the epoche discussed, and the participating principals were described. The remainder of the chapter was organized around the three research questions which guided the study. The results of the interviews conducted with three principals were shared, and emergent themes were identified. Chapter 5 contains a summary and discussion of the findings as well as recommendations for future research.

## CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### Introduction

This chapter contains a restatement of the problem, and the purpose and significance of the study. The research questions are presented, and a synopsis of the research is provided. The chapter is largely focused on a summary and discussion of the findings. Recommendations for future research conclude the chapter.

### Statement of the Problem

With the increased prevalence of students qualifying for services within autism spectrum disorder programs (Odom et al., 2013), it is imperative that the field comes to better understand how successful programs can be replicated at scale. According to the U.S. Department of Education's National Center for Education Statistics (n.d.), there were first students identified as eligible for services under the ASD program in 2001. In that year, 93,000 students with ASD were being served under the Individuals Disability Education Act (IDEA) Part B. By 2013, there were 498,000 students with ASD requiring services in public schools. Clearly the need for public schools to serve and support students with ASD will only continue to grow.

Support for students with ASD is not limited to academics. Schools need to be prepared to properly serve those students with autism who also have significant behavioral challenges. Treatment for these behaviors varies but has been recognized as necessary (National Autism Center, 2009). Identifying effective educational programs for students with ASD has been a challenge (Cook & Cook, 2013) for school systems. Educators have been trained to teach academics but have not been adequately instructed on how to work with ameliorating problem



behaviors (Scott, 2010). The NAC published National Standards Project reports in 2009 and again in 2015 that were intended to review different practices to reduce inappropriate behavior and evaluate their effectiveness. The project helped general society provide support for individuals with ASD so as to improve their daily living situations. The report delineated effective versus ineffective evidence-based practices that would: (a) provide the strength of evidence supporting educational and behavioral treatments that target the core characteristics of these neurological disorders, (b) describe the age, diagnosis, and skills/behaviors targeted for improvement associated with treatment options, (c) identify the limitations of the current body of research on autism treatment, and (d) offer recommendations for engaging in evidence-based practice for ASD.

Amendments made to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 formally inserted ABA procedures into required policies for all school districts concerning the best practice to be implemented with students on the spectrum (Bloh & Axelrod, 2008). The purpose of the amendments was to add applied behavioral analysis and behavioral support for students with disabilities. Specifically, it required schools to conduct functional behavior assessments (FBA) and implement positive behavior support (PBS) in order to provide appropriate educational supports to students with disabilities who exhibit behaviors that impede learning (Yell et al., 2006). Developing a fluency in applied behavior analysis requires specific technical training that teachers often lack (Scott et al., 2010).

Many school districts have a difficult time replicating effective educational programs between schools. The lack of ability to replicate effective programs results in school district leaders continually seeking initiatives to improve educational programming and, ultimately,

student performance (Mehta, 2013). The lack of an effective model to scale up and sustain effective educational programs is the result of school districts' inability to replicate them (Klingner et al., 2013). The scarcity of effective programs for students with ASD brings about other pressing and exacerbating issues. Montes et al. (2009) noted that parents of students with ASD were not satisfied with the services provided to their children by the public school system. Given the increased identification of students with autism under IDEA, the litigation in regard to alleged violations of the IDEA for students with ASD has also increased (Odom et al., 2013; Yell et al., 2013), school districts facing budget restraints and limited resources would be wise to give priority to improving programming within their self-contained ASD units (White 2014).

### The Challenge of Replicating Quality

School and system change is difficult work and prone to being unsuccessful, but improvement is possible and sustainable (Fullan, 2007). One of the major roadblocks to schools making meaningful, sustainable improvement has been found in poor implementation of educational programs (Payne, 2008). The quality with which a program is designed matters little if the fidelity with which that program is implemented is lacking. Although students directly involved with a poorly implemented program face the possibility of educational harm, poor implementation has additional potentially negative ramifications. Payne (2008) summarized the challenge well by stating:

. . . there is a recurring tendency to underestimate the rigors--toxicity, if you will--of the urban environment, and thus the modes of implementation typically employed fail to be robust enough to have a chance. . . . When such programs fail, observers, knowing little about the inadequacies of the implementation, may question the principles underlying the

program. Maybe some kids can't learn, after all. Maybe resources really don't matter. Poor implementation is harmful not just to the particular teachers and students who are immediately involved; it also undermines the very idea that change is possible. (p. 154)

Payne's comments support the importance and need for school improvement. Given that many students with ASD are being served in special education programs, improvement of these specific programs is imperative. When assessing the needs of special education programs, the greatest priority must lie with the students who exhibit the most involved behavior. The category of ASD has increased identification. Higher prevalence rates and a plurality of litigation indicate a very strong need for improvement. Quality of program implementation is one of the major reasons why educators have not been more successful in improving schools. Poor implementation of quality programs threatens school change as a whole.

#### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who have developed and/or manage successful programs for students with autism spectrum disorder within their school sites. It is clear that leadership matters in school and, therefore, influences program quality (Hammond, 2010; Reeves, 2006; Waters et al., 2003). As there are some quality programs, logic dictates that some practitioners know how to build quality programs. However, quality programs have not been implemented on a wide-scale as evidenced by lagging outcomes for students with disabilities, particularly those with autism. Therefore, despite their having the necessary knowledge to develop quality programs, practitioners have either not been able to replicate those quality programs or simply lack knowledge about strong model programs to replicate. Given the importance of leadership in the implementation of these programs, it is

critical to study the lived experience of those leaders who have implemented quality programs for students with ASD across their school settings. If the essence of leadership can be explicated to allow for large-scale implementation of these quality programs, educators can build upon the foundation of knowledge needed to improve outcomes for students with ASD within school settings.

### Significance of the Study

In the age of accountability for public schools, leaders have been scrambling to find successful ways to provide effective instruction for all students. Core curriculum in each area should meet the needs of 80% of the students in class (Problem Solving & Response to Intervention Project & Florida's Positive Behavior Support Project, n.d). Along those lines, the success of students in exceptional education has been far worse than general education populations when it comes to the percentage of students performing at grade level (Center for Educational Policy, 2009). The failure in the majority of these initiatives cries for some type of major overhaul in how to generalize the implementation of successful programs (Payne, 2008). Questions arise as to how successful programs exist at some schools, but other schools seem unable to develop similar successful programs. Why are effective programs not being replicated? If a system for replicating successful programs was found, it could have a great impact on student achievement and success.

### Research Questions

1. What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with ASD?
2. What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with ASD across their school setting?
3. What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with ASD?

### Methods and Procedures

At the beginning of this phenomenological study, the director of CARD at the University of Central Florida was asked to identify 10 school sites in a local district that the organization had acknowledged as having effective programs for students with autism spectrum disorders. Concurrently, a list identifying the top 10 school sites housing what the school district considered as effective programs for students with autism spectrum disorder was requested from the Executive Director of Exceptional Student Education of the target district in this study. The lists were then compared to identify programs that were determined as effective by both CARD and the school district. A total of three such schools were identified. The names of these schools were provided to the school district's director of research who sent each of the school's principals an email requesting their participation. All three principals responded positively to the email and agreed to participate in the study.

All three principals who agreed to participate in the study were leaders in elementary schools. None of the schools were identified as Title I (i.e., having 75% or more of their students

living at or below the poverty line). All the principals held certification for school principal, K-12, and elementary education. One of the principals was also certified in specific learning disabilities, K-12, and another principal is endorsed in gifted and English for speakers of other languages. Combined, the principals had 21 years of experience with an average of seven years of experience. Two of the principals have been administrators at only one school and the third administrator was currently at her third site.

Interview dates and times were determined cooperatively with all principals. The interviews were based on phenomenological principles. Moustakas (1994) emphasized the importance of conducting interviews in a manner that allows for both a verbatim description of the experience and a detailed historical, aesthetic portrait of the participant's perceptions of the experience. In his view, doing this requires that the researcher spend time with the participant before the actual interview to allow a level of comfort and trust to be built between the researcher and participant. Doing this reduces the guardedness with which the participant recalls their experiences, and can lead to a more thorough, authentic response. It is also important that the researcher probes the participant's initial responses for more historical and aesthetic information.

Thus, interviews were conducted face to face using a semi-structured format where the researcher tried to make the participants feel free to elaborate on their answers in a conversational manner. The goal of the interview process was to extract core information as to how these leaders forged a system where they produced effective programs for students with ASD. The interviews were structured to allow the researcher to gain insight on the beliefs, lived experiences, leadership practices, and management approaches that led to this success. It is

important to note that though the researcher's bias in the field served as a limitation to the study, it provided some advantage. Because of the researcher's emic perspective, he was able to build rapport with the interviewed principals and to extrapolate information from them that was authentic.

The first overarching question was: What have you experienced in terms of developing, implementing and sustaining a successful program for students with ASD? The researcher sought to elicit as much detail as possible from the interviewees by using prompts and questions such as the following: (a) Describe your leadership pathway (probing for childhood experiences, family experiences and role models), (b) What can you say about the staff in the ASD units? and (c) How do they know their roles and responsibilities?

The second overarching question in the interview was: What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences in developing, implementing and sustaining a successful program for students with ASD? Probing sub questions were: (a) Tell me about the most positive event related to your leadership over the ASD program and (b) Tell me the most negative event related to your leadership over the ASD program.

With participant permission, each of the interviews was recorded so they could be transcribed. An analysis of the interview was then conducted and horizontalization of the information took place. From this process, each significant statement was clustered to allow themes to emerge. Themes were reviewed in light of other significant statements and clusters to determine if themes would emerge from the data.

## Summary and Interpretation of Findings

### Research Question 1

What are the characteristics of a school administrator who oversees effective self-contained classroom(s) for students with ASD?

Analysis of the interviews of these principals revealed two major characteristics that were shared by them. The following two themes emerged based on the commonalities:

1. Principals had personal and professional experiences in education and special education prior to becoming a leader. This theme touched on how the participants' experiences in education/special education in their personal and professional lives seemed to build their character as leaders.
2. Principals saw themselves as change agents. This theme was characterized by the principal participants' observations that they, as leaders, were in the schools to ensure that what was best for students, including those with ASD, was taking place. Their vision of the future was to guide and take the school to a level where all students were successful.

These leaders had life exposure to many individuals who were in the education field, and this seemed to impact their approach to leadership. In a recent study that explored the effect of a low income childhood on the leadership practices of principals in high poverty schools, each of the principals felt that their childhood experiences impacted their approach to leadership (Rasmussen, 2015). In the current study, each of the principals related experiences with family members and/or work that had to do with serving others. These life experiences led the principals to practicing leadership from the perspective of servant leader (Bird & Wang, 2013).



The principals exuded altruistic motivation in helping others due to their experiences in life. It was apparent that each of these principals experienced a calling to serve as a support to others, (i.e., teachers, students, and families) that comprised their school communities. From their earliest experiences, which molded their core values, these leaders strived to serve others by supporting them to a point where their very best could emerge. Listening to the leaders' responses to the interview questions, the deep drive they felt towards ensuring effective programs for their students, and the satisfaction they took in leading such programs, was evident. Along those same lines, they all talked about "doing what was right" for students with ASD. Their passion shone as they discussed monitoring and managing classroom units and their schools to make sure that all students were successful. Payne (2008) stressed the importance of social support, stating that it plays a critical role in the development of effective schools that produce well-rounded, high achieving students. It was evident in the interviews that each of these principals prided themselves on being able to provide that social support to their staffs. The participants each conveyed high levels of supporting others in their lives and in their jobs. Among the many roles they fulfilled within their schools, these principals placed a primary importance upon providing support to their staff. However, there were indications that the principals did not always believe the support they provided their staff was reciprocated by the leaders above them. The level of support they received from the district occasionally seemed to present a challenge to their success. All three principals described instances in which navigating the bureaucracy of the district presented a significant barrier to being able to lead successful programs. Accordingly, they believed that, at times, they needed to be strong advocates for their schools to try to meet the demands of their program.

A defining characteristic of these principals was also that they saw themselves as, and acted as, change agents in their schools. All of the schools involved in this study were seen as traditionally strong schools. Their performance has not typically been questioned. They are the types of schools that cause parents to buy houses within their attendance zones so that their children may attend them. Therefore, as these schools have a legacy of effectiveness, it would seem counter-intuitive that principals would act as change agents. However, as the literature shows (Fleury, 2014), even in settings where other students do well, students with disabilities lag. Within the larger population of students with disabilities, outcomes for students with ASD lag (Center for Education Policy, 2009). These principals recognized the fundamental social justice cause at the heart of educating students with ASD effectively and made it a personal mission to ensure that this traditionally underserved population, at least in their schools, received the education to which they are entitled.

Being change agents in their schools aligns with two of Bolman and Deal's (2013) frames of organizational leadership, the symbolic and structural frames. In regard to the symbolic frame, all of the principals, as change agents, set a vision and mission of what their schools needed to do to improve supportive practices for students with ASD. At first, they promoted and reinforced that vision with their exceptional education team, then used their buy-in to facilitate adoption of that vision among the remainder of the school staff. The principals have built an environment where staff members themselves have become change agents and advocated as well to meet their task at hand. Within the structural frame, these leaders made all necessary changes to the structures of their schools to ensure that they supported the vision and mission. All the principals made it part of their common practice in their structures that teachers were to accept

and support any student with ASD that came into their classrooms for mainstreaming. The principals in this study felt that it was beneficial to have a structured system of how and when to include students with ASD into the regular classrooms. Doing this did not allow for any misunderstandings and helped their school teams be more focused on the task of including the students. Principals that lead schools that house programs for students with ASD would benefit from building these structures proactively. Though inclusion of students has been mandated by law, these leaders restructured their systems of inclusion to be very supportive of all stake holders. Principals would also consider building a vision and mission together with their staff so that all those involved have ownership of the task at hand.

#### Research Question 2

What are the lived experiences of principals who have led teachers to implement effective classrooms for students with ASD across their school setting?

This question was meant to illuminate the experiences, in depth, that the interviewed principals had. Three common themes were identified:

1. Principals provided strong support for their teachers. This theme was prevalent among all participants. They all believed that in order for their programs to successfully support students with ASD, it was their duty to make sure all staff had the necessary tools to be successful in the endeavor.
2. Principals believed they needed strong connections with external stakeholders. This theme was also common to all of the principal participants. These principals believed that they needed to make a strong connection with all the school community, all

students and parents, and community organizations with the expertise in the area of ASD.

3. Principals were advocates for disability awareness education. All the principals sensed that, in order for their vision to effectively and properly support students with ASD, they needed to make sure that all stakeholders were educated and were aware of ASD.

It was clear from the interview that these leaders had formulated plans to develop effective programs for students with ASD that would allow their vision of effective programming to come to life. All three principals conducted an assessment to provide baseline data in order to connect the level of effectiveness in their schools to their vision for the ASD programs. Additionally, the principals used the data from their baseline assessments to devise an effective action plan for moving their schools to the needed level of programming as described by their vision. Fullan, Rincon-Gallardo and Hargreaves (2015) discussed the importance of developing a vision that can lead to a successful program. However, they shared that a vision alone is not enough. An effective leader must intentionally plan the steps needed to be implemented in order to achieve a vision. Part of the planning process for achieving a goal must include progress monitoring (Darling-Hammond, 2004). The principals actively monitored their progress toward their goals and revised as needed to continue on a successful path in providing the best support for students with ASD to succeed. .

All three principals held strong beliefs in the need to support their staffs. All the principals surveyed their staff needs by being present in meetings and discussions about the program. Any needs or issues that were apparent were tackled immediately, allowing the

principals to steer their staff in the right direction. Support came in the form of hiring necessary resource staff, restructuring systems and processes if needed, developing guides and guidelines for staff, and being actively involved in the staff meetings, trainings and discussions. Darling-Hammond (2010) wrote that countries considered to have high ranking education systems invest heavily in their novice teachers and their training. It is this direct support that helps produce effective teachers. According to Darling-Hammond (2010), those who seek high performance do not place poorly trained novice teachers in the classroom and let them sink or swim. Instead, they provide intense support and practice as their novice teachers begin their careers, and they continue providing support long-term until effective skills have been developed. Donovan et al. (2015) discussed the unfortunate framing of the resultant skill gap during early implementation of programs as teacher resistance. These authors suggested that this would be better framed as an opportunity for developing requisite skills. In my view, based on the findings in the current study, principals are the key variable in providing that needed support. It is critical, and of the utmost importance, in ensuring well prepared and educated teachers for students with ASD and for all students, that universities, school districts, and local school administrators spend time training, educating, and supporting teachers to meet the challenge of the job (Byrk, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2015; Mehta, 2012). The National Standards Project report (NAC, 2015) contains ample information about interventions that are considered to have effective outcomes for students with ASD. School staffs would be well served if their leaders were well versed about best practices and would advocate for professional development in regard to those practices.

Unfortunately, teachers are currently under prepared in a field that is more complex than ever (Darling-Hammond, 2015). If, as Darling-Hammond suggested, ongoing support of teachers are the critical determinant of students' success in the classroom, it is no surprise that in this study high levels of support were being provided by the principals. Indeed, it seems that the support that these principals provided to their teachers was directly related to the success of their ASD programs. Each principal would likely agree. They all spoke of providing adequate training to their faculty as a critical piece of their programs' successes.

In a survey of teachers conducted by Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in the U.S., two-thirds of teachers felt unsupported and not valued by society. This has been regarded as an indicator directly linked to student achievement (Darling-Hammond 2015). The concept is aligned with Billingsby's (2011) thoughts about special education teachers who are supported by their administrators being more committed to the field and more satisfied with their jobs leading to increased student achievement. Sung and Leithwood (2015) noted in their research review that supporting faculty was a core component in successful leadership.

For these principals, a strong connection to external stakeholders was also a core component of their leadership. Each of the participants had robust systems in place to welcome parents and organizations that support individuals with ASD. Burrell and Borrego (2012) expressed the belief that in order to effectively treat students with ASD, parents must be involved in the intervention efforts. As well, Lee et al. (2014) concluded that an actively involved parent of a student with an ASD child who is transitioning through the school system was critical for the child's success. Burton-Hoyle (2011) suggested that parents of students with ASD wish for a

future for their children where they are independent members of society but face a difficult path to making that vision a reality. Schools can help in this process by providing support to parents that makes the planning for independence less daunting (Burton-Hoyle, 2011).

Parents of children with disabilities have worked ardently to ensure that their children are provided with a free and appropriate education. As Singer (2011) documented, parents of children with disabilities have diligently worked through the court system to continually advocate for amendments to the law that will specifically delineate services and supports for students with disabilities. Based on this advocacy, one can ascertain that many parents who have children with disabilities wish to be active participants in the process of educating their children and in the decision making process. Their tireless efforts have pushed the law to a point where it requires schools to involve parents in the process of educating their children and allow parents some weight in making decisions (Singer 2011). The fact that the law requires parent input in the educational process, coupled with the threat of litigation from parents for lack of involvement, should serve as a strong motivator for schools to seek out parent participation (Katsiyannis et al., 2012). All principals made it clear that they would prefer to work together with the parents to resolve any parent concerns. They spoke about how advocates and or lawyers that represented parents added a layer of tension to their conversations with parents. A great working relationship with parents was high on their list.

Additionally, all three principals in this study led schools that were populated with many middle class and/or upper middle class families. Families from these socio-economic levels are well known in the school system for being actively involved in their children's school lives and serving as strong advocates for their children. All three participating principals shared that the

parents of their students with ASD were likely to involve advocates or lawyers if they saw the need arise. Regardless of the parent's socio-economic status, a well-informed parent advocating for their child has much clout. Mereoiu et.al, (2015), Murray et al., (2011), and Borrego and Burrell (2012) all argued that the chances that a student with disabilities will be successful in school increases dramatically when their parents are actively involved in the decision making. If the academic gap for students with ASD is to close and the likelihood that they are to be successful is to increase, school leaders must make strong, positive connections with the parents involved.

One other strong bond that schools need to make is that with outside agencies. Many researchers have addressed the lack of specialized skills as to how educators and/or parents can best educate and support children's diverse needs (Byrk, 2010; Darling-Hammond, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004; Donovan et al., 2015; Mehta, 2012). This lack of appropriate professional development to provide those skills is detrimental to the success of students with ASD. In the National Standards Project 2015 report, the National Autism Center proposed different interventions that parents could use to support their children. In addition to helping their children, the interventions also promoted the building of a relationship with school staff to get better outcomes.

Mehta (2012) forcefully argues against the professional development systems currently in place in most school systems in the United States. In his view, these systems not only provide inadequate professional development to teachers, but those that are offered are of limited relevance. When combined with the fact that school systems often place the least experienced teachers in the most difficult settings, Mehta (2012) concluded that the lack of educational



success is not surprising. This conclusion shows how important it is for leaders to staff classrooms with well-prepared teachers and to provide adequate, ongoing professional development programs to those staff members.

One of the manners in which this task can be completed, Mehta (2012) argued, is by investing in schools in order to restructure their professional development systems to include experience from the job itself. Providing educators with the teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to work effectively with students who have ASD needs to be the primary goal of this updated professional development system. Mehta (2012) compared such a system to medical doctors who complete a year of residency working under an accomplished professional. Darling-Hammond (2010) noted that the same process of change within the medical model, where doctors spend years learning in residencies, should take place in education. Both have discussed the importance of an ongoing mentoring process that allows emerging teachers to continue to develop skills throughout their careers. Such a change, they have suggested, will bring about better prepared teachers who have the skills to successfully navigate the difficult tasks associated with being an effective teacher.

Connections with outside agencies represent another possible solution to the challenge of building capacity within the teaching ranks. These connections with experts in the field could ensure that teachers and parents are well prepared for the complex task of educating students with ASD. In partnerships with districts, outside agencies could provide much of the expertise needed for professional development systems restructured in the manner Darling-Hammond (2010) and Mehta (2012) have suggested.

Mereoiu et al, (2015) and Murray et al. (2011) provided examples of the powerful impact outside organizations who are experts in the area of educating students with ASD have on the success of the students they serve. The agencies in these researcher's studies were able to provide adequate support and training to parents and educators. It is of great value for school leaders to make strong connections with outside organizations, and all three of the interviewed principals had direct connections and bonds with outside agencies. It was through these relationships that they were able to provide adequate support for their students with ASD, teachers, parents, and other family members. In their view, this collaborative relationship and the support provided by outside agencies significantly improved their programs. If the research and the experience of these principals holds true, the connections to parents and outside organizations play a crucial role in the success of developing and sustaining effective programs for students with ASD. This point of view completely aligns with the finding in which principals interviewed stated that by working together with the students, parents, teachers and staff members the likelihood of the students success at school increased.

Florida's Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities are a powerful example of the positive impact that can be made by leveraging partnerships among parents, districts, and outside agencies. However, given the pressing need for skill development, those who would see replication of successful programs for students with ASD must effectively lobby for additional resources (a) to support existing agencies like CARD; (b) to ensure appropriate resources are provided at the university level for teacher preparation; (c) to fund adequate professional development efforts within school districts; and (d) to develop additional support structures that can assist in meeting this challenge.

### Research Question 3

What rewards and challenges are associated with being a school administrator with an effective exceptional education program for students with ASD?

This question was intended to identify intrinsic/extrinsic rewards as well as barriers that created challenges for the interviewed principals as they strived to reach their goals for their ASD programs. Two common themes were identified.

1. Principals identified rewards associated with student growth and positive experiences with families
2. Principals recognized challenges related to education of staff about ASD and staff support, funding of programs, and bureaucratic issues.

In regard to rewards, all three principals stated that they experienced great satisfaction in seeing individual students who had been taught in their program for years grow and become highly successful. This was particularly true for students who had come to the school with very few social or academic skills. After years of being educated at their sites, the students were well integrated into the regular class setting. The principals were each able to share instances where, through having provided an appropriate and supportive program over the course of several years, students who had previously required intensive support in a separate class setting were now able to continue being successful within the regular class setting. These examples are evidence of the power of a successful school to improve a child's life.

Principals also shared that they received emotional compensation from parent accolades. Though it was clear that these principals were not purposely seeking accolades, it was equally clear that what parents thought mattered to them. They greatly appreciated the respect they had

earned from parents over the course of years. In my view, because principals lead from a servant leadership perspective, and seem to be motivated by helping others be successful, the appreciation they receive from parents is strongly reinforcing for their work. I would argue that a positive reinforcement cycle results: (a) the principals, because of their nature, work diligently to support students; (b) the parents emotionally reinforce the principals for their actions; and (c) the principals continue to serve others, in part, because of this reinforcement. The net result of this cycle is that strong programs that effectively support students with ASD become exemplary programs for students with ASD.

With respect to challenges, all the principal participants identified a lack of financial resources, struggles with bureaucracy, and adequate supportive staff. However, the challenge that rang the loudest for all was the lack of skills that some of their teachers had in regards to effectively educating students with ASD. In light of the earlier discussion regarding how a lack of skills can be perceived as resistance, it is important that in this situation principals take care to address the actual challenge (whether it is a skill gap or actual resistance). However, each of the principals did identify the ignorance and/or resistance of some stakeholders regarding students with ASD as a primary challenge faced in leading successful programs.

In sum, these principal participants showed an intense interest in improving support services for students with ASD. They emphasized their vision that, if given the proper support and environment, all students can succeed. The principals were diligent in supporting that vision themselves and in making connections that could help reinforce that vision. A tremendous part of supporting that vision was ensuring that staff had appropriate skills to work effectively with students with ASD. Once success was realized in these programs, it was reinforced by the

success of the students and the emotional compensation received from parents. However, leading such programs is not without its challenges. Overall, though, each of these principals were clear about establishing a path whereby the schools they were leading would be able to accomplish whatever necessary to help their students with ASD be successful.

### Implications

Since the enactment of Public Law 94-142, legislation has continually moved toward increasing the role parents have in partnership with educational systems. Research is saturated with studies showing the importance of parent involvement in the success of children with disabilities (e.g., Bryk, 2010; Burrell & Borrego, 2012; Burton-Hoyle, 2011; DiPaola et al., 2004; Kelley et al. 2005; Lee et al., 2014; Murray et al., 2011; and Singer et al., 2011). All three principals expressed the critical role parents and community members played in the success of their programs for students with ASD. Yet, despite the successes these principals have indicated in this area, very little success in strengthening these connections has occurred across the field as a whole. The field's weakness in doing so can be seen by the continued active advocacy from parents seeking increased involvement in the process of planning their child's schooling. It would be beneficial then to examine the existing successful schools that have attained these strong connections with families and community members. Thorough examination of the factors that have cultivated these strong connections within these school communities is critical if we are to replicate those successes within other communities.

Another important implication is found in the importance that these principals placed upon disability awareness within the school community in generating successful programs for

students with ASD. Having school communities that are knowledgeable about, familiar with, and comfortable around students with disabilities, particularly with regard to ASD, seemed to be critical to the success of the students with ASD within these schools. Principals seeking to enhance their ASD programs would be wise to seek ways to ensure that the internal stakeholders within their school communities are knowledgeable about and comfortable with all of the students in that community. Additionally, the field would benefit from researchers further exploring the effect of disability awareness on non-disabled peers and individuals. Will such an awareness make them more empathetic? What impact would such awareness have on the achievement of students with ASD?

All of the principals in the current study clearly expressed the need to provide ongoing professional development to their staff in order to assure that the stakeholders have the knowledge and skills required to adequately support students with ASD. The principals noted particularly the needs students with ASD have related to communication and behavior as an area where extensive professional development needed to occur. They discussed watching the success of students with ASD increase as stakeholders gained the needed knowledge. It is therefore clear that professional development related to communication and behavior needs of students with ASD must be provided to relevant stakeholders if effective programs are to be replicated. The skill set that teachers and parents need to successfully support students with ASD is very specialized. There should be extensive professional development in ABA and communication provided for school staff and parents. Curriculum that meets the vast variability of needs of children with ASD is another area where extensive and detailed professional development needs to be provided. Those charged with providing that professional

development, likely districts and professional organizations, need to carefully plan the needed professional development based on the needs of the local stakeholders.

There are also implications for organizations that prepare personnel for the complex task of leading schools. If leaders are going to ensure that their school communities have the knowledge and skills needed to effectively serve students with ASD, it stands to reason that those skills have been effectively developed within the leaders themselves. Professional organizations have developed leadership standards for principals because they see the need to set preparation parameters (CCSSO, n.d.; FDOE, n.d. and CASE, n.d.). Personnel preparation programs are the natural institution to fulfill this need. However, the lack of effective ASD programs would seem indicative of the need for improvement in this area. Effective school leadership is a difficult process, made more complex by the challenges posed by the incredible variation of learner needs within schools. Given this, the development of effective management and leadership skills is one of the most pressing needs facing the field. Those in charge of personnel preparation programs must continue finding ways to ensure leaders leave their programs with the skills needed to meet the challenges of their work.

#### Recommendations for Further Research

This study has been focused on the lived experiences of principals who lead schools that house effective programs for students with ASD. It was intended to provide insight into some of the practices the three interviewed principals believed they had taken in order to implement their effective programs. This study provides only an initial overview of the work of administrators related to ASD. Future research is recommended in the following areas:

- Further study of leaders of schools that house successful programs for students with ASD.
- A study the perceptions of teachers whose administrators have been identified as developing/managing effective programs for students with ASD.
- A study of the perceptions of parents of students with ASD who are served at schools with effective programs for their children.
- A study of the involvement or lack of involvement of agencies that provide expertise and support to schools that house programs for students with ASD.
- A study school district support for administrators/schools that house programs for students with ASD.

Throughout this research, the researcher has questioned why it is so difficult to replicate quality programs in existing schools. Smarick (2010) highlighted that numerous school districts in different states such as California, Maryland, Alabama, Ohio, and Illinois have attempted to improve schools by replicating effective practices but have had limited success. Mehta (2012) proposed five pathways to school reform. He delineated a paradigm shift in education that would bring about a consistent duplication of effective educational practices in schools. Future research might be conducted to look at causes of successful replication of effective programs for students with ASD and followed by a study of unsuccessful replication.

Another issue that was of concern to the researcher was how well prepared are principals for the task of not only leading a school that is successful for students in the mainstream but for students who may need some extra support. It seems that it is not lack of effort on the behalf of



administrators that leads to dismal results in developing effective programs. Rather, it is their ill preparedness that stifles it (Smarick, 2010; Payne, 2008).

It was Mehta's (2012) assertion that a school district's main staffing pipeline for teachers was individuals who performed at the lower quartiles in their schools. He stressed that in addition these teachers are provided with little or weak professional development that has little or no significance. Mehta proposed that educational systems should take on a system of building professionalism like that of the medical field, (i.e., new doctors gain training through residency). Residency for doctors in training can take years. This, Mehta believed, would produce a rigorous professional development for teachers who, in turn, would become proficient educators.

This is aligned with Crockett's (2011) observation that with the growing population of students and the increase in identification of students with disabilities, there is a greater the need to recruit administrators with a background in special education. The number of individuals in administrative pools with experience in exceptional student education is low; thus, districts staff these administrative positions with applicants with little or no experience in exceptional student education. The result is often that ill prepared leaders lead schools.

Poor preparation may also be evident in an administrator's organizational leadership.

Based on this, it is important that future research be conducted in the following areas:

- A study of the types of training or job experience districts provide administrators, comparing effective and less effective schools for students with ASD.
- A study of exceptional student education coursework required by universities for a degree in educational leadership
- A study of the rigor of school district Preparing New Principals Programs across the state, comparing percentages of success rates of schools with programs for students with ASD.
- A study of school district requirements for admission into administrative pools.
- A study of school district recruitment and employment practices for principals

### Summary

The dedicated administrators of schools that housed effective programs for students with autism spectrum disorder who were interviewed for this study had some common practices that they used to develop and maintain their programs. These commonalities may provide useful insights to school districts about leadership when attempting to replicate effective programs in other schools. Though there is some pessimism in regard to districts being able to turn schools and programs around, this information may illuminate potential changes that could help schools develop strong and effective programs for students with ASD.

APPENDIX A  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board  
Office of Research & Commercialization  
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501  
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246  
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276  
[www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html](http://www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html)

### Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1  
FWA00000351, IRB00001138**

To: **Ian C. Gesundheit**

Date: **November 23, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 11/23/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination  
Project Title: Towards a Theory of ASD Program Implementation  
Investigator: Ian C Gesundheit  
IRB Number: SBE-15-11750  
Funding Agency:  
Grant Title:  
Research ID: N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewski, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 11/23/2015 03:55:43 PM EST

IRB Manager

APPENDIX B  
CENTERS FOR AUTISM AND RELATED DISABILITIES (CARD) CRITERIA  
FOR ASD CLASSROOMS

**Observation Instrument for Autism Classrooms**

Classroom/Teacher: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Support Staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Administrator/Observer: \_\_\_\_\_

- Score: 2: Present and being actively used  
 1: Present, but not being used; or partially achieved  
 0: Absent  
 NA: no opportunity to evaluate

Quality Classroom Indicator:	Score	Comments
<b>ENVIRONMENTAL ARRANGEMENT</b>		
Room arrangement has clearly defined visual boundaries for specific activities, allows for supervision of all students at all times; and prevents or minimizes problem behaviors.		
Visual supports are at the correct level of symbolic functioning, and are used to enhance predictability, facilitate transitions, and help convey expectations.		
Materials and furniture are age appropriate.		
Individual workstations are arranged left-right or top-bottom, and tell how much work, what work, when finished, and what's next. Materials in workstations are varied from day to day and are educationally and functionally related to student IEPs.		
<b>SCHEDULING, ACTIVITIES, AND INTENSITY</b>		
A staff schedule showing staff and student assignments, locations, and activities, is prominently posted and being followed.		
A daily classroom schedule is posted at student level, is visible and appropriate for students' level of symbolic functioning, and is used throughout the day.		
Schedule and activities reflect appropriate distribution of curriculum for the age, level and individual needs of students in the classroom.		
Schedules reflect a variety of learning formats for each student, including 1:1 instruction, small group, large group, independent work, and social interaction/leisure options.		
Individual schedules are at child level and are being used correctly.		
Large group transitions are infrequent and supported by environmental arrangement and scheduling.		
Staff ratio of at least 1 adult for every 3 students is maintained during observation.		
Activities are language-based, and staff encourage commenting, asking and answering questions; staff create opportunities to promote communication between students.		
Students remain actively engaged in learning opportunities throughout observation, with no more than 2 minutes down time.		
During 5 minute observation, staff interact with each student at least once to teach or promote learning.		
<b>INSTRUCTION AND INTERACTION</b>		
Communication directed to students is clear and relevant, appropriate to language ability, grammatically correct and presents opportunities for dialogue (rather than being largely directive).		

Comments directed toward students follow a ratio of 7:1 instructive/positive comments to corrective comments.		
During instruction, staff deliver instructional cues clearly, prompt as needed, and reinforce correct responses or deliver error correction as needed.		
Inter-staff communication is respectful of students and limited in content to classroom issues and instruction. Confidentiality of students is preserved.		
All classroom staff are involved in delivering instruction, including during out-of-classroom activities (lunch, recess, CBI).		
All classroom staff can state IEP objectives being worked on for each student when asked.		
Instructional methods reflect the unique needs of students, and are grounded in research-based practices, including DTT, incidental teaching, and direct instruction.		
Instruction pace promotes high rates of correct responding, and uses appropriate schedules of reinforcement.		
Instruction is individualized, incorporates natural and individualized reinforcers, and encourages spontaneous use of skills in different settings		
“Hands-on” contact with students promotes independence and preserves dignity.		
Skills are taught in the context of naturally occurring activities and daily routines.		
Students with slow rates of learning are provided intensive levels of instruction, including daily one-on-one instruction sessions.		
Data are collected during instructional activities for each student; data are tracked, summarized and reported and brought to student study/IEP meetings.		
Daily communication with parents is informative, positive and non-judgmental.		
<b>CORE CURRICULUM AREAS</b>		
Staff create many opportunities for spontaneous use of communication skills, and foster communication through a variety of instructional approaches.		
Use of AAC devices or PECS or sign for students using these supports is encouraged in all situations, and students are not denied access to their communication systems.		
Behavior problems are minimized by using choices, clear expectations and positive reinforcement.		
Students displaying behavioral difficulties have an individualized behavior plan or have been referred for an FBA.		
Opportunities for meaningful interaction and friendships with non-disabled peers are provided. Social skills instruction is planned and supported by staff.		
Curriculum and schedule reflect an emphasis on the core deficits of autism; activities emphasize social interaction skills with adults and peers, functional communication for all students, age appropriate engagement, and maximizing independent functioning.		

Comments:

Developed by Florida’s Centers for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD)

APPENDIX C  
EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH





## **EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH**

Title of Project: Towards a Theory of ASD Program Implementation

Principal Investigator: Ian Gesundheit

Other Investigators: n/a

Faculty Supervisor: Suzanne Martin, Ph. D.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

- **Research Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to document the lived experiences of school leaders who oversee successful programs for students with autism spectrum disorder within their school sites. This research will provide valuable information on the leadership behaviors of principals who oversee effective educational programs for students with ASD. As such, it will contribute insight to the creation of highly effective programs for students with ASD
- **Procedures:**
  - The researcher will secure interview appointments with principals of selected schools via phone.
  - Principals will be informed that interviews should last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be asked to select a day, time, and location convenient for them.
  - During the interview, an interview protocol (Appendix B) will be used.
  - Even though there will be a set of preliminary interview questions, the researcher will approach the interview from an informal, conversational perspective to allow participants to share information that they deem important.
  - The researcher will then request permission from the participating principals to record the interview using a Livescribe Smart Pen and an additional, redundant recording device.
  - The redundant device will be used to ensure availability of recordings for the purposes of analysis.
  - The researcher will also take notes during the interview.
  - All interview recordings will be downloaded to the researcher's computer and transcribed .
- Principals will be informed that interviews should last between 60 and 90 minutes and will be asked to select a day, time, and location convenient for them.

**Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:** If you have questions, concerns, or complaints Ian Gesundheit, Doctoral Candidate, College of Education and Human Performance, (407) 492-0283 or by email at [gianucf@knights.ucf.edu](mailto:gianucf@knights.ucf.edu) or Dr. Suzanne Martin, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences, at (407) 823-4260 or by email at [suzanne.martin@ucf.edu](mailto:suzanne.martin@ucf.edu).

**IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint:** Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX D  
PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

## Interview Protocol

1. What have you experienced in terms of developing, implementing and sustaining a successful program for students with ASD?
  - a. Describe your leadership pathway. (Probe for childhood experiences, family experiences, role models)
  - b. What can you say about the staff in the ASD units?
  - c. How do they know their roles and responsibilities?
  
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences in developing, implementing and sustaining a successful program for students with ASD?
  - a. Tell me about the most positive event related to your leadership over the ASD program.
  - b. Tell me the most negative event related to your leadership over the ASD program.

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