A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY ON THE EXPERIENCES OF

CHRISTIAN SCHOOL TEACHERS EDUCATING STUDENTS WITH

AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

by

Gale Dionne Hall

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

Phyllis Anne Booth, Ed.D., Committee Chair

Gail Collins, Ed.D., Methodologist

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of 13 Christian school teachers, who for at least six months, educated students with ASD in three Christian Schools in Hampton Roads Virginia. While information is available for the experiences of public school educators, the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD has yet to be examined. Thus, the central research question addressed how Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD and was guided by the theoretical framework of Milton Rokeach's theory of organization and change within value systems. I obtained data from on-site interviews, a focus group, and teacher event logs. The interview data was analyzed through personal introspection and Atlas.ti software where coding and theme naming were conducted. The significant themes derived from the analysis were teacher attitudes and experiences of acceptance, purpose, perseverance, and stewardship. This study speaks to the heart of Christian education as it revealed a direct relation between a Christian school teacher's belief system and worldview, in conjunction with their view of and interaction with students who have ASD; which was generally positive. The findings of this study show that strides are being made in Christian schools to embrace and celebrate ASD and its spectrum of challenges. Recommendations for future research include longitudinal and quantitative studies to track the experiences of students with ASD in Christian schools.

Keywords: autism spectrum disorders (ASD), Christian school teachers, attitudes, beliefs, values, practices

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Dedication

There are many people who collaborated with me so that I could obtain this degree. However, there is no way that I could have achieved this degree without the patience, love, help, and support of my dedicated husband, Horacio. In fact, I would not have even attempted this work without his encouragement and inspiration. My children, Avery and Brandon, have also been very patient and understanding to allow me time away from family to complete this degree. And to my mother, Dorothy Wright, I thank you for passing on the gift of tenacity, perseverance, and hard work to me.

Lastly, I dedicate this study to all the Christian school teachers who labor passionately day in and day out, many times without the tools and resources that their public-school counterparts receive to do the job effectively and efficiently. After interviewing and collaborating with my Christian school teachers for research, I finished this study with an even greater appreciation for Christian schools and Christian school teachers. Thank you for your dedication to our Lord, to Christian education, and to every student in our Christian schools who deserve an excellent education.

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I would to like to acknowledge and thank those individuals who provided encouragement in some manner, whether professionally or personally.   The completion of this dissertation certainly took a "village" and I am grateful for each person, some whom have no idea of their impact upon me on this journey.

First, I must give all praise, honor, glory, and thanks to my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. I look back on this journey and I am so incredibly grateful! I can truly say that "the desire accomplished is sweet to the soul" (Proverbs 13:19, *KJV*). I am a more dedicated, disciplined, and focused person because of the process of this study, and it has only been by God's grace that I have achieved this milestone. I acknowledge you dear Lord, and I thank You!

To my husband, Horacio: Thank you for encouragement and unwavering support. Thank you for all the long nights you stayed up with me, just to keep me awake, while I finished assignments. Thank you for driving me to Liberty for every Intensive I had to take. Thank you for being patient and understanding as you had to attend many functions without me. Thank you for cooking and cleaning and being the *gentle*man that you are.

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List of Abbreviations

American Psychiatric Association (APA)

Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA)

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)

Childhood Disintegrative Disorder (CDD)

Early Intensive Behavioral Intervention (EIBI)

Evidence Based Practices (EBP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Local Education Agency (LEA)

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES)

National Professional Development Center (NPDC)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The increasing presence of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) in general education classrooms is a growing conundrum among today's educators (Busby, Ingram, Bowron, Oliver, & Lyons, 2012; Finch, Watson, & MacGregor, 2013; Goodall, 2015; Lee et al., 2015; Locke et al., 2015; Majoko, 2016). The gradual increase in children diagnosed with ASD (Boswell, Zablotsky, & Smith, 2014; Finch, et al., 2013; Mehling & Tasse, 2016; Prykanowski, Gage, & Conroy, 2015; Russell, Rodgers, Ukoumunne, & Ford, 2017; Zablotsky, Black, Maenner, Schieve, & Blumberg, 2015) has also constrained researchers and educators to continue to create effective interventions for easy dissemination and generalization in the educational milieu (Brady & Dieterich, 2015; Iadarola et al., 2015; Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013; Schulze, 2016). While there has been research to address the trend of inclusion for students with ASD in public schools (Bond, Hebron, & Oldfield, 2017; Emam, 2014; Finch et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2015; Sugita, 2016), no studies have given voice to the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD (Lane, 2017; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Terry, 2014).

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD in Christian schools. While there are known research gaps addressing the issue of evidence-based practices in teaching students with ASD in public schools (Corkum et al., 2014; Iadarola et al., 2015; Peters, 2016; Riordan, 2013), there is also a gap in the literature addressing what Christian schools experience while educating students with ASD (Carlson, 2016; Contreras, 2013; Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) reported that Christian

schools are serving children with autism; however, valid, and peer-reviewed research is absent on this topic (Bacon & Erickson, 2010; Lane, 2017; Lane, 2017). The processes used in this phenomenological design will depict the very nature of ASD to reveal the *what* and the *how* of the teacher's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2015).

This chapter introduces and discusses important data relating to the study of the experiences that Christian school teachers have with navigating the core characteristics and defining hallmark traits of students with ASD. The subsections in this chapter include background, situation to self, problem statement, purpose statement, significance of the study, research questions, pertinent definitions, and a closing summary.

Background

ASD cannot be discussed without referencing the cognitive, social, and behavioral-emotional challenges which accompany the disorder. Advances to address the deficits evidenced by autism were first perceived by research founded on the early intensive behavioral intervention (EIBI) plan for younger children with ASD (Thompson, 2013). Leo Kanner (1949) launched the first scientific study of the symptoms of autism and termed the condition "infantile autism" (as cited in Thompson, 2013, p. 81). Kanner's preliminary research had concluded autism to be a language and cognitive disorder, dismissing the behavior and social deficits which were evidenced (Kanner, 1949; Prykanowski et al., 2015; Thompson, 2013; Verhoeff, 2013). Therefore, based on Kanner's (1949) research, autism was defined in a narrow more specific manner with no specifications for varying degrees of severity (Mehling & Tasse, 2016).

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV* (DSM-IV) included a broader spectrum of autism and merged five other developmental syndromes (autism, Asperger's disorder, pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), childhood

disintegrative disorder (CDD), and Rett syndrome to encompass one single diagnosis (Lohr &

Tanguay, 2013; Mehling & Tasse, 2016; Riordan, 2013; Soto-Chodiman, Pooley, Cohen, &

Taylor, 2012; Whalon, Conroy, Martinez, Werch, 2015). Consequently, in 2013 a new DSM-5

was instituted to incorporate all of the disorders under one umbrella term signified by differing

severity levels (Lee et al., 2015; Mehling & Tasse, 2016; Prykanowski et al., 2015). The

diagnostic process of researching autism has identified that cognitive, language, behavioral, and

adaptive functioning deficits encapsulate the essence of autism (Mehling & Tasse, 2016).

Hence, the essence of ASD often presents as parallel cognitive difficulties in executive function,

weak central coherence, and theory of mind (Kimhi, 2014). The assessment and diagnosis of

ASD is typically rendered by the collaborative efforts of a pediatrician, child psychologist,

occupational therapist, and language pathologist (Fraley, 2015).

For the purposes of understanding the nature of the disorder, ASD is defined as a

spectrum due to the wide variation of disabilities that accompany it and manifest differently in

each person (Autism Speaks, 2015; Fraley, 2015; Prykanowski et al., 2015). The term *executive*

functioning is defined as an umbrella term for the cognitive processes including working

memory, inhibition, planning, and shifting (Kimhi, 2014). Also, for the purposes of further

understanding the nature of ASD, *weak central coherence* is defined as a specific cognitive

method which limits one's ability to understand broader contexts within (Kimhi, 2014). The

challenge for a student with ASD is the ability to understand or characterize other people's

mental states referenced by goals, emotions, beliefs, etc. (Bauminger-Zviely, 2013; Kimhi,

2014). The evolution and mystery of ASD can better be examined through historical, social, and

theoretical contexts of the disorder.

Historical

The word *autism* was initially introduced and identified as a possible diagnostic entity by

psychiatrist, Leo Kanner, in 1943 (Lilley, 2015; Razali, Toran, Kamaralzaman, Salleh, & Yasin,

2013). *Autism* is a derivative of two Greek words: *aut* – defined as self or alone; and *ism* –

defined as orientation or state (Lamb et al., 2016; Razali et al., 2013). ASD is a complex

heterogeneous lifelong developmental disorder which affects a child's neurological pathways

early in life (Barnard-Brak, Ivey-Hatz, Ward & Wei, 2014; Cappe, Bolduc, Poirier, Popa-Roch,

& Boujut, 2017; Cervantes et al., 2013; Corkum et al., 2014; Holcombe & Plunkett, 2016; Lamb

et al., 2016; Mandy, 2016). Originally thought to be a rare condition (Lilley, 2015), the disorder

is characterized by a variety of neurodevelopmental deficits across several domains including,

but not limited to: impaired social interaction, poor communication skills, developmental delays,

restricted or repetitive behaviors or interests, executive function, adaptive deficits, emotional

understanding, and weak central coherence (Blacher et al., 2014; Cappe et al., 2017; Cervantes et

al., 2013; Emam, 2016; Kimhi, 2014; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012; Suhrheinrich, Dickson, Rieth,

& Stahmer, 2016). Autism is found to have a family of overlapping conditions; however, there

is no evidence of a lone homogeneous autism disorder (Thompson, 2013).

The categorization of mental medical phenomena is usually based on criteria as defined

in the American Psychiatric Association's (APA) *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental*

*Disorders (*DSM; Kite, Gullifer, & Tyson, 2013; Prykanowski et al., 2015). The DSM is a clear

guide on specific criteria and policy used by the medical profession for consistent referencing

when diagnosing mental health deficits (Tsai, 2013). Thus, the inclusion of autism as a

diagnostic entity into the DSM was recorded as DSM-III and was defined as such due to the

work of researcher and psychiatrist, Lorna Wing in the early 1980's (Mehling & Tasse, 2016;

Prykanowski et al., 2015; Waterhouse, 2008). The term "spectrum" was widely used by Kanner

who saw autism on a spectrum with an array of deficits varying in symptoms and impairments

(Prykanowski et al., 2015). In 1994, due to shifting impairments, the APA upgraded the

category to DSM-IV to allow for a broader definition addressing varying degrees of the severity

of autism to include Asperger syndrome among pervasive developmental disorder, childhood

disintegrative disorder (APA, 1993; DSM, 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Mehling & Tasse, 2016;

Prykanowski et al., 2015; Verhoeff, 2013). This change created fractions within the medical

community as the assertion is that the DSM-IV permits such a broad scope of severity of

symptoms that an accurate measure of the prevalence of autism would be skewed (Waterhouse,

2008).

In May 2013, the DSM made further modifications and provided new diagnostic criteria

for ASD (APA, 2013; DSM, 2013; Grant & Nozyce, 2013; Lee et al.; Prykanowski et al., 2015),

creating the DSM-5. The new DSM-5 eliminated the subcategories of Asperger syndrome and

pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (PDD-NOS) and created a new

category (APA, 2013; DSM, 2013; Lee et al., 2015; Onan, Ellefson, & Corrigan, 2015;

Prykanowski et al., 2015; Shrivastava, Krishnan, & Shrivastava, 2016). This new DSM-5

combined social interactions and communication and incorporated autism, Asperger syndrome,

PDD, and childhood disintegrative disorder under one general diagnosis or umbrella of *autism*

spectrum disorders with different severity levels (APA, 2013; DSM, 2013; Lee et al., 2015;

Prykanowski et al., 2015; Shrivastava et al., 2016).

Although studies suggested a link to a genetic malfunction as the cause, ASD cannot be

traced to any gene mutations or chromosome abnormalities (Arif, Niazy, Hassan, & Ahmed,

2013; Sodo-Chodiman et al., 2012). ASD has been found to be a neurologically based

developmental disability with impairments in core areas which manifest differently in individuals while moving across the lifespan (Kelly, Garnett, Attwood, & Petersen, 2008; Moore-Gumora,, 2013). The frequency of children with an ASD diagnosis has increased over the past couple of decades (Denning & Moody, 2013; Zablotsky et al.). However, within the last four years the numbers have gradually increased (Autism Speaks, 2018; CDC, 2014; Finch, et al., 2013; Zablotsky et al., 2015). Autism was listed as a separate category for disability beginning in 1991 due to the increased rate of diagnosis (Moore-Gumora, 2014). Researchers (Lee et al., 2015; Shrivastava et al., 2016) suggested that the rise in diagnoses can be attributed to the increased awareness level, expansion of the diagnostic criteria, and advances in the diagnosing tool improving the validity of prevalence. In 2008, children with autism accounted for 4.97% of all students with disabilities (U. S. Department of Education, 2008), however more recent numbers from a 2014-2015 survey reported that children with autism now account for 9% out of 14% for all students with disabilities in the U. S. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Thus, the number of students to be educated in schools, (whether public or private) is steadily increasing (Emam, 2014; Mandy et al., 2016).

Social

One of the defining hallmarks of ASD is its social deficit component (Cervantes et al., 2013; Goldstein, Lackey, & Schneider, 2014; Scuitto et al., 2012). This characteristic has posed both opportunities and challenges for the school environment (Humphry & Lewis, 2008). The deficits imposed upon children in social competence manifest a restricted range of social communication skills with limited ability to: (a) initiate maintain conversations, (b) articulate requests from teachers and peers, (c) listen to and respond appropriately to teachers and peers and (d) interact appropriately in games and activities (Amin & Oweini, 2013). It is described by

researchers and healthcare professionals as a social impairment with the most challenging and pervasive core deficit of children and autism (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Locke, 2015; Rodriguez, Saldana, & Moreno, 2012) and its causes remain unclear (Arif et al., 2013; Cervantes et al., 2013).

Children with average to above average cognitive skills are not immune to the challenges of ASD, as they often struggle academically because of social cognition issues (Majoko, 2016). Yager (2016) cautioned educators to remember that students who have ASD are prone to anxiety and depression and because they are not all alike, often demonstrate erratic patterns of social behavior isolating themselves further from the mainstream. However, the unpredictable and challenging behaviors associated with this disorder such as impulsivity, sporadic disruption, noncompliance, tantrums, and aggression (Iadarola et al., 2015) places significant stress on those who are tasked with providing their education, as well as a substantial amount of tension on the educational environment (Corkum et al., 2014; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Sciutto et al., 2012).

The social aspect of students with ASD is paramount, especially as legislation mandates require all students be educated in the least restrictive environment (Lauderdale-Littin, Howell, & Blacher, 2013; Marshall & Goodall, 2015; Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). However, some research has questioned whether inclusion versus a more segregated teaching environment are as beneficial as touted (Cassimos, Polychronopoulou, Tripsianis, & Syriopoulou-Delli, 2015; Lauderdale-Littin et al., 2013). The construct of peer support and relationship development is important for all children but does present an ongoing conundrum for students with ASD due to the gap in social cognition processing (Able, Sreckovic, Schultz, Garwood, & Sherman, 2015; Winner & Crooke, 2014). Thus, the need for the professional

community, particularly educators, to understand ASD and its many complexities and vacillating

dimensions is profoundly necessary (Leblanc, Richardson, & Burns, 2009).

Research suggested that students with ASD, across the grade levels, experience fewer

friendships, loneliness, lower social networking status than their peers without ASD, and

experience alarmingly high rates of bullying and victimization (Able et al., 2015; Sreckovic,

Brunsting, & Able, 2014). A study by Zeedyk, Cohen, Eisenhower, and Blacher (2016),

reported that 41% of 8-14 year-old students scored one or more standard deviations above the

normative rate for loneliness on the *Loneliness Rating Scale*. Additionally, adolescents with

ASD will also struggle with the added pressures of organization and self-initiation in a more

fluid environment which often lead to further struggles and difficulties (Hedges et al., 2014;

Rosenthal et al., 2013). These social challenges then lead to anxiety which in turn lead to further

isolation and social awkwardness (Goodall, 2015). Difficulties in social interactions often result

in decreased social and relational skills, displayed through feelings of anxiety and uncertainty,

and may even have some bearing upon an effective personal relationship with God (Schaap-

Jonker, Sizoo, Roekel, & Corveleyn, 2013).

Because the school and classroom milieu can be unpredictable and metamorphic at times,

Goodall (2015) strongly submitted that "expecting children to simply cope with social interaction

in an unpredictable sensory environment and manage unexpected changes in routine…is akin to

asking wheelchair-bound children to walk to school" (p. 321). Conversely, Majoko (2016)

conjectured that despite the benefits of an inclusive setting with increased academic

opportunities and peer interactions, the challenges faced by key individuals and stakeholders

who interact with these students can still also be overwhelming.

The teacher-student social relationship is an essential one as the teacher is a key factor in the successful inclusion of students with ASD (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). It has been reported that even if the teacher-student relationship does not yield a successful academic outcome, the social inclusion influence is relatively robust (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Fein and Jones (2015) reported that on a much larger scale, the lack of training and in-service development for teachers of students with ASD is a major contribution to the larger problem of social integration for these students.

However, while research has yielded information describing student-teacher relationships in general public education classrooms (Arif et al., 2013; Corkum et al.; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Iadarola et al., 2015), little to no research has given voice to student-teacher relationships for students with ASD (Brown & McIntosh, 2012) who are enrolled in Christian schools (Bacon & Erickson, 2010; Terry, 2014). With the lack of profitable information for Christian schools, the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) strongly encourages its Christian schools to "reach deeply into the minds and hearts of their students and seriously pursue the simultaneous development of the spirit and the intellect" (Keenan, 2002/2003). This targeted approach would certainly enable teachers to connect with their students in an authentic manner. It is important to understand how teachers experience the emotional quality of their relationships with disruptive students; however, McGrath and Bergen (2017) asserted that prior to May 2017, no study has yet examined that construct with disruptive students on a larger scale, much less in a private Christian school (Lane, 2017; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011) with students who have ASD.

Theoretical

There is a dearth of information available on the experiences that Christian school

teachers and educators encounter with students who have any learning disabilities (Anderson, 2011; Lane, 2017; Liu, Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2014), including ASD (Terry, 2014). Many studies that are completed focus on larger urban or inner-city school districts which service a large portion of children with ASD (Carlson, 2016; Contreras, 2013; Iadarola et al., 2015). While public schools experience issues with lack of training, available resources, and support issues (Iadarola et al., 2015; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012), Christian schools have the same experiences, except on a greater scale (Nelson, 2015/2016; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Given the greater challenges faced by Christian school teachers in their daily interaction with students with ASD, it is important that this research study propel their authentic voices (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012), individual experiences, emotions, and reactions (McGrath & Bergen, 2017) to an open platform.

It is vital to understand this issue on the basis of the underpinnings and framework of this study from a theoretical guise. The impetus associated with the experiences of Christian school teachers in this phenomenon has yet to be voiced (Lane, 2017; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011) thus, a theoretical perspective will give further insight into their mindset and world. The elements of attitude, values, and beliefs all give way to answering questions that might provide introspection into the experiences of Christian school teachers (Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). In previous studies of public school educators, research has attributed the classroom teacher's attitudes and beliefs toward a positive and successful experience of including students with disabilities in their classrooms (Cassimos et al., 2015; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015). One such empirical investigation researched by Cassimos et al. (2015) noted that teacher perception manifested by the willingness of teachers to interact with students with ASD in inclusive classroom settings, was considered to be a critical component of teacher and student success and

well-being in the integrated classroom. While the information retrieved from studies of public

school teachers is helpful, empirical studies for Christian school teachers are equally necessary.

What self-efficacy traits do Christian school teachers possess which help them to teach students

with ASD with very little resources and support? What inherent values or beliefs do Christian

school teachers hold which guide them in their daily difficult interactions with students with

ASD? These are questions which need to be answered through the voice of Christian school

teachers so that the essence of what they face each day in their environments can be shared with

the world.

Previous research studies on the attitudes and teacher perceptions and beliefs about

inclusive education have utilized a few theoretical frameworks. Some of those theories include:

1. Tolerance theory (Huber, Rosenfeld, & Fiorello, 2001) – lifestyles and traits are
   encompassed with the value people attach to them.

2. Practical theory and action theory (Nixon, Martin, McKeown, & Ranson, 1997) –
   processes concerned with human action in relation to motive, desire, purpose, intent, and
   free will.

3. Social cognitive theory (Slee, 2004) – behavior is learned by interactions and
   observations of one's environment.

4. Effective motivation theory or mastery motivation theory (Harter, 1978; White, 1959) – a
   connection between motivation to engage in a task and the confidence to perform the task
   which leads to an increased desire to continue the task.

5. Theory of reasoned action by Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975 (Vallerand, Deshaies, Cuerrier,
   Pelletier, & Mongeau, 1992) – behavior is determined by one's intention to engage in the
   behavior.

The theory of reasoned action is one which configures closely with this research study. The theory teaches that one's behavior is determined by his or her intention to engage in the behavior" (Tiwari et al., 2015, p. 129). The originators, Fishbein and Ajzen (1975) utilized three basic factors: (a) attitudes and beliefs about students with disabilities in one's classroom, (b) subjective norms – one's high regard of others' approval or disapproval of inclusivity weighted by one's motivation to comply with those beliefs, and (c) perceived behavioral control – one's perceived ability to perform.

This study centers on Christian school teachers and for that purpose, a theory which focuses on beliefs and attitudes within a person's worldview is more applicable to understanding this phenomenon. The theory of organization and change within value and attitude systems by Milton Rokeach (1968) suggested that there is a hierarchy in which beliefs are the basic building blocks of more complex systems being attitudes and values which lead to practices. Rokeach (1968) taught that one's belief system influences one's worldview and therefore prompts one to act or think in a particular way as one sees the world through the lens of those belief systems (Hartwick, 2015; Schultz, 2006; van Brummelen, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) discussed these worldviews or paradigms as systemic sets of beliefs which helps one make sense of one's world. The worldview and belief systems of Christian school teachers saturate the classroom and teaching content (Schultz, 2006; van Brummelen, 2009). This then predisposes them to approach difficult learning disability situations, such as ASD, from a biblical intervention basis (Kang, 2015) instead of a typical educational intervention response.

Therefore, the teacher's experiences and perceptions are derived from their beliefs, which are born out of these *basic building blocks* (Rokeach, 1968) of attitudes and values, which essentially are the foundation or root of their actions. The Bible refers to the root or foundation

of one's actions and beliefs as the *heart* – "For as he thinketh in his heart, so is he" (Proverbs 23:7, *KJV*) and "Keep thy heart with all diligence; for out of it are the issues of life" (Proverbs 4:23, *KJV*). This study seeks to describe the underpinnings of the yet unheard voices of Christian school teachers who teach students with ASD, and many times struggle with very little resources or expertise (Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). The research for this study is in pursuit of the essence of the belief system as shown through the attitudes and values that Christian school teachers experience as they teach and interact with students with ASD. The teacher's descriptions of their experiences will hopefully be used to instruct, inspire, and lead other Christian school teachers with the same experiences, as well as hopefully ignite a greater appreciation from others, for teachers who selflessly give themselves to this kind of work.

Situation to Self

Throughout this study, I endeavored to explore the phenomenon of the everyday lived experiences of Christian school teachers working with students who have ASD. My objective for conducting this study was to describe the Christian school teacher's deepest and innermost physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual experiences, or rather the essence of those experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018), with students with ASD in Christian schools. The focus was to provide "a grasp of the very nature" (van Manen, 1990, p. 177) of the experience a teacher has working with a student with ASD in the Christian school milieu.

The description of the essence of this experience is important since many Christian school teachers work with very little finances and resources; and therefore, encounter greater frustrations that most public school teachers may experience (Carlson, 2016; Nelson, 2015/2016; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). I attempted to develop an amalgamated picture of the dynamics which underlie their experiences as evoked through their perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and

awareness to ASD, accurately portraying the *what* and the *how* of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994) with ASD. The goal was to portray the *what* and the *how* of their experiences (Moustakas, 1994) in a fresh way as if they were experiencing it for the first time (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

This qualitative transcendental phenomenological study on the experiences Christian school teachers have educating students with ASD is important to the world of Christian education. However, there is a dearth in information about Christian schools and students with disabilities in general (Bacon & Erickson, 2010; Terry, 2014), but more specifically those students with autism. For the purposes of this study, a dearth in any qualitative research on the topic exists. Bolte (2014) expressed both his surprise and dissatisfaction that while many autism researchers are clinicians, there is still relatively little qualitative research in autism across the scientific community. Hence, the opportunity to enable these teachers to give voice to their experiences was liberating for them and educationally enlightening for their audience. I, too, have gained a better understanding of the mindset of the Christian educator who sees the student with ASD not only through an academic lens, but also through a biblical lens. I attempted to relate to the "heart" of what a Christian educator feels as they grapple with the spectrum of behaviors and nuances of these students as creations of God's hands, and yet different and distinct in their presence and participation in the classroom. It was my desire to find out if being a "Christian" educator affected the method and mode in which these students are educated. And lastly, I hoped to attain a sense of the attitude, mindset, and motivation of the Christian educator who chooses to teach a student with ASD with little or no resources, specialized faculty, or professional development opportunities.

This study was approached from an axiological viewpoint. The subject of ASD and Christian school philosophy cannot be addressed apart from the obvious attachment of values in

the Christian environment. The nature of this qualitative study lends itself to a value-laden

approach as values influence one's behaviors and actions (Creswell & Poth, 2018; van

Brummelen, 2009). I am a Christian school principal who has had some experience with

students with ASD in my school and understand the value that a Christian educator attaches to

the educational process. The simple value-laden traits such as unconditional love, respect, grace,

hope, patience, commitment, and servanthood are part of a Christian's DNA and therefore,

naturally accompany the Christian teacher's demeanor. In I Peter 1:5-7, Scripture outlines a

number of these values, and then ends with their importance by giving an exhortation, "if ye do

these things, ye shall never fall:" (I Peter 1:10b, KJV).

This study was grounded in a constructivist's paradigm as the actions of teachers were

assessed based upon how they constructed knowledge and meaning from their experiences

(Miller, 2010) with students who have ASD. The purpose of the research was to understand the

world (Creswell & Poth, 2018) of the Christian school teacher in educating students with ASD.

Creswell and Poth (2018) conveyed this search for understanding as a hunt for "complexity of

views rather than narrow the meanings…rely as much as possible on the participants' views of

the situation" (pp. 24-25).

Problem Statement

Statistics for the number of children identified with ASD increased from 1 in 100 in 2009

(Finch et al., 2013; Zablotsky et al., 2015), 1 in 80 in 2011, to 1 in 68 in 2012, to 1 in 45 in 2014

(CDC, 2014; Zablotsky et al., 2015). Additionally, more than 50 empirical studies from over 21

countries reported that the prevalence rates of autism have increased in many countries over a

period of time (Ozerk, 2016). This prevalence of children with ASD has increased the public

education system's awareness to provide therapeutic and class-based strategies (Ledford &

Wehby, 2015; Peters, 2016; Schulze, 2016) as well as increased programs and services (Iadarola et al., 2015; Sugita, 2016; Suhrheinrich et al., 2016) for the successful integration of these students into the general education classroom. Recent studies (Hodges et al., 2014) have also reported that an increased prevalence of ASD in 14-17 year old youth have matched that of younger children (Hedges et al., 2014) whom the IDEA noted as the fastest growing neurodevelopmental disorder in young children (Barton, 2016). Furthermore, research in a literature review revealed a frustration among public educators as there is still much work to be done in closing gaps for providing evidenced based strategies for effective interventions (Riordan, 2013). Additionally, there is a dearth of information surrounding the challenges faced by educators working with high school students in particular (Hedges et al., 2014). The search for effective special education intervention methods for any kinds of disabilities in Christian schools yielded disappointment, as programs, preparation, and experience are severely lacking in that milieu (Anderson, 2011; Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011; Terry, 2014). The addition of evidenced based strategies for the inclusion of students with ASD in the classroom is paramount as academic and social interactions between the student and the teacher can be pivotal to the behavioral and social advancement of the students (Blacher et al., 2014).

Research (Barnard-Brak, 2014; Finch et al., 2013; Locke et al.; McFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Razali et al., 2013; Tiwari et al., 2015) has shown that there have been provisions made for public school educators to adequately address the needs of students with ASD. Nevertheless, educators still experience difficulties with addressing tensions related to the unpredictable ASD social and emotional impairments (Emam, 2014). The problem is that while provisions and resources have been made available for the public education sector to properly address the needs of students with ASD, the Christian school milieu continues to struggle with lack of resources,

professional development, and finances to provide the same quality of education for its student population with ASD (Carlson, 2016; Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011; Terry, 2014). Although there has been research done to address the academic and social implications for students with ASD in public schools (Emam, 2014; Finch, et al., 2013; Locke, et al., 2015), no studies have given voice to address the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD in Christian schools (Bacon & Erickson, 2010; Terry, 2014), the literature field is silent. Boerema (2011) cited that while there is a world rich in educational research examining issues and providing evidence-based answers, one segment of the world that is absent from that research is private schools (Bachrach, 2015; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of 13 Christian school teachers, located in three Christian schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, who educate and interact with students who have an ASD diagnosis. The experiences of Christian school teachers with students with ASD will be generally defined by those teachers at Christian schools who interact with in any way or educate students who have been diagnosed with ASD. The theory guiding this study is the theory of organization and change within value and attitude systems by Milton Rokeach (1968). This theory suggests that there is a hierarchy in which beliefs are the basic building blocks of more complex systems (Rokeach, 1968). Rokeach (1968) taught that one's belief system influences one's worldview and therefore prompts one to act or think in a particular way as one sees the world through the lens of those belief systems (Hartwick, 2015; van Brummelen, 2009). The worldview (Finn, Swezey, & Warren, 2010; Schultz, 2006) and belief systems of Christian school teachers permeate pedagogical skills and classroom culture (Schultz, 2006; van Brummelen, 2009). This then predisposes them to

approach difficult learning disability situations, such as ASD, from a biblical intervention basis (Kang, 2015; Shotsberger, 2017) instead of a typical educational intervention response.

The 13 Christian school teachers were purposefully selected from among Christian schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. The method of criterion sampling was used as the individuals in this study represent people who have all experienced the same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The criteria for the teachers was that they have or have had teaching responsibilities to one or more students with ASD in a Christian school environment for at least six months.

<div align="center">**Significance of the Study**</div>

The deep data obtained through the purposeful and methodical tools of qualitative research is a valuable contribution to evidence-based research and practice (Watkins, 2012). Through the exploratory process of qualitative research, this study hopes to reveal critical information in educating students with ASD which have not been noted to date. As the findings of this study augment qualitative research in autism in the scientific community, hopefully Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD in their schools will be empowered with further strategies and resources for successful learning communities.

Empirical

The mandate for evidence-based practices (EBPs) has been seen in virtually all therapeutic and educational professions (Goldstein et al., 2014). This professional assessment is seen as necessary as the use of scientific evidence to guide practices and interventions is seen as more reliable than mere theories (Goldstein et al., 2014). There have been empirical studies performed which have identified EBPs and teacher strategies for use with students with ASD (Goldstein et al., 2014; Suhrheinrich et al., 2016; Whalon et al., 2015; Wood, McLeod,

Klebanoff, & Brookman-Frazee, 2015). However, many of these studies have yielded mixed reviews on the progress of these EBP's.

The search in literature surprisingly revealed that many social skills interventions are conducted in clinical settings (Kretzmann, Shih, & Kasari, 2015) yet, they fail to generalize the results to real world school environments (Kasari & Smith, 2013; Kretzmann et al., 2015). However, there are studies (Iadarola et al., 2015; Majoko, 2016) which show that when researched based collaborative practices are instituted in schools, some teachers fail to implement the programs. One such study of 118 special education and mainstream teachers revealed that while 92% were in agreement that collaborative practices were available, only 57% admitted using the practices (Majoko, 2016).

In a study of one literature review on empirical research for validated interventions for ASD related deficits, the author found few relevant studies indicating that much work is still needed in research on autism (Riordan, 2013). However, there are currently no research studies in literature that address the ASD population in Christian schools (Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Terry, 2014) and the experiences that Christian school teachers encounter (Boerema, 2011). This study will hopefully add to the body of literature on educating students with ASD in Christian schools (Boerema, 2011; Finn et al., 2010; Osborne et al., 2011). It is important that the Christian school who desires to educate the ASD population in their churches and communities will have more tools and resources to be able to do so. The voices of other Christian school teachers will hopefully serve as encouragement, professional development, and strength to those teachers in Christian schools who feel overwhelmed and struggle with the challenges of educating students with ASD.

Theoretical

The needs of students with ASD can be challenging and burdensome for the teachers who educate them (Cassimos et al., 2015; Iadarola et al., 2015; McGrath & Bergen, 2017; Rodriguez et al., 2012; Tiwari et al., 2015). The intervention needed to meet the varying needs of students with ASD is so particular that it must be almost specialized to each student because each case of autism is so unique (Cappe et al., 2017). In a study on the sense of calling and commitment to teaching, Serow (1994) believed that those teachers who view teaching as a calling are less concerned about the sacrifices and issues and are more mindful of their potential impact on their students. While this sense of calling and commitment is evident in Christian school teachers, they also teach from a biblical worldview (Schultz, 2006; Van Brummelen, 2009) and therefore, inherently address every part of their job from a biblical perspective ((Finn et al., 2010; Hartwick, 2015; van Brummelen, 2009).

A Christian school teacher's attitudes, values, and practices are all subject to their belief in God and they operate from that perspective (Hartwick, 2015; van Brummelen, 2009). Nelson (2015/2016) contended that Christian educators have a God-given obligation to cultivate an environment of growth and development for all of its stakeholders and anything less would be in conflict with their desire to fulfill their school's mission and vision. Edie (2012) sees the task of Christian educators as a theologically intelligible form of ministry which calls out gifts of wonder from the disabled to the marginalized person to be awakened, nurtured, and empowered for vocational life in Christ. This phenomenological study will hopefully add credence to the underlying tenets of the beliefs, attitudes, and values of Christian school teachers in large and small Christian schools across the world who feel compelled to take on the task of educating students with ASD.

Practical

One aspect of students who have ASD being acclimated into the Christian school milieu is the matter of faith (Liu et al., 2014). A study conducted by the National Organization on Disability (2000) reported that 84% - 87% of families with disabilities considered faith to be an important part of their disability. While national statistics convey that the long-term outcome for students with ASD is among the worst of any disability category (Shattuck et al., 2012), faith is an important element to battle that pronouncement. Hence, parents of students with ASD want their children to be a part of a Christian school environment (Liu et al., 2014), and often value the faith-based factor above the academic preparedness factor. This study will hopefully add to the resources for parents of students with ASD who find themselves in those types of situations.

Also, many Christian schools operate with very low to non-existent budgets and few resources (Nelson, 2015/2016; Ramirez, 2011; Russo et al., 2011). Christian schools who have a desire to be inclusive often enroll students who have disabilities such as ASD, but pair them with teachers or in an environment which is not conducive to their deficits (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Carlson, 2016; Lane, 2017). This happens often due to the low budget restrictions of Christian schools and the lack of professional development available (Bachrach, 2015; Burke & Griffin, 2016; Nelson, 2015/2016; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011) for Christian school teachers (which again, is often caused by budget restrictions). This study on the experiences of Christian school educators with students who have ASD will hopefully provide avenues and new possibilities of professional development for Christian school teachers. This research also hopes to provide help to Christian schools from professional and financial resources to assist them in providing a relevant education to Christian students with ASD related learning needs.

Research Questions

For the purpose of this study, a central question is presented which is undergirded by three additional sub-questions. The questions are intentionally designed to be open-ended evoking well thought out opinions, thoughts, and conversations desired for the in-depth, colorful, and rich data needed for the qualitative phenomenological method (Eddles-Hirsch, 2015).

Central Question

How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students who have ASD in Christian schools in Hampton Roads Virginia? While there are Christian schools which do enroll students who have ASD, there is no research which describes their experiences with these students (Boerema, 2011).

Sub-Questions

1. How do Christian school teachers describe their attitudes toward students in their Christian school who have ASD? Christian schools have no legal requirements to enroll children with disabilities, yet their moral and religious imperatives guide their desire to help these students (Anderson, 2011; Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011).

2. How do Christian school teachers describe the values, based on their belief system, they have towards students with ASD? A teacher's values undergird and permeate their entire belief system affecting their relationships with students, the nature of truth, and the use of classroom resources (Brown, 2016; Hartwick, 2015; Rokeach, 1968).

3. How do Christian school teachers describe the practices that they found were successful in their experiences with students with ASD? Much research is needed on providing the appropriate professional development and instructional tools needed for Christian

schools to successfully educate students with disabilities (Brown, 2016; Finn et al.,

2010; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011).

Definitions

1. *Attitude* – "Attitude is an organization of several beliefs focused on a specific object or situation, predisposing one to respond in some preferential manner" (Rokeach, 1968, p. 16).

2. *Autism* - a derivative of two Greek words: *aut* – defined as self or alone; and *ism* – defined as orientation or state (Lamb et al., 2016; Razali et al., 2013). A neurological based developmental disability which is characterized by qualitative impairments in reciprocal interaction, and/or nonverbal communication, and restricted, repetitive, or stereotyped patterns of activities and interests (Moore-Gumora, 2014).

3. *Autism Spectrum Disorder* – A lifelong neurodevelopmental condition causing restricted or stereotyped patterns of behavior and impairments in social communication (Suhrheinrich et al., 2016); includes Rett disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder (CDD), autistic disorder, pervasive developmental disorder no otherwise specified (PDD-NOS), and Asperger syndrome (Amin & Oweini, 2013).

4. *Axiology* – A philosophical assumption which is correlated with the values a researcher brings into a phenomenological study (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

5. *Belief system* - The organized composite of all the person's beliefs, attitudes, values, and ideologies" (Hartwick, 2015, p. 125).

6. *Bracketing* – The process by which researchers set aside their personal experiences to take on a fresh perspective of a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

7. *Cognitive representations* – Pictures that are drawn to represent the heartfelt essence of a moment, concept, or experience of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

8. *Horizonilization* – the process of reviewing data such as interview transcriptions to highlight important information such as statements, quotes, or phrases that expresses how a person feels about a certain phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

9. *Phenomenology* – the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

10. *Values* – "A single belief which transcendentally guides actions and judgments across specific objects and situations; a standard or yardstick to guide actions, attitudes, comparisons, evaluations and justifications of self and others" (Rokeach, 1968, p. 16).

11. *Transcendental Phenomenology* – A philosophical approach to qualitative research methodology, developed by Husserl, that is a scientific study of the appearance of the phenomenon just as we see it and as it appears to us in consciousness (Moustakas, 1994).

Summary

The rising number of children with ASD presents problematic inclusion for both public schools and Christian schools. While there is empirical research to address ASD in the public school milieu (Goldstein et al., 2014; Suhrheinrich et al., 2016; Whalon et al., 2015), no studies have given voice to the Christian school teacher (Anderson, 2011; Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014). This chapter presented the proposed research study of describing the experiences of 13 Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD in three Christian schools, as no studies have given voice to this phenomenon.

The theory of organization and change within value and attitude systems (Rokeach, 1968) served as a framework to undergird the beliefs, attitudes, and practices of Christian school

teachers in their experiences with students with ASD. Currently, there are no reported studies on the experiences Christian school teachers have with students with ASD. This study has sought to add to the empirical body of literature and provide practical professional development to Christian school teachers in providing a relevant education to Christian students with ASD related learning needs.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of Chapter Two of this research study on the experiences of Christian school teachers with students who have ASD is to provide a theoretical framework for the study and review of relevant literature pertaining to Christian school teachers' experiences with students with ASD. The study is grounded in the theory of organization and change within value and attitude systems by Milton Rokeach (1968). The theoretical framework applies to the theory that there is a hierarchy in which beliefs are the basic building blocks of more complex systems (Rokeach, 1968). Rokeach (1968) taught that one's belief system influences one's worldview and therefore prompts one to act or think in a particular way as one sees the world through the lens of those belief systems (Hartwick, 2015).

The relevant literature provides the historical context regarding the increased diagnosis of children with ASD and the tools and resources that public schools have put in place for a successful education. The salient features of ASD are described and expressed in its relation to the school climate. The chapter concludes with a focus on the attitudes and perspectives of teachers who teach students with ASD. What will be noticeably absent from the literature are the provisions Christian schools make for students with ASD and the teachers who educate them. An exhaustive search of the literature base was virtually absent on what Christian school teachers experience in educating students with ASD. Hence, the need for this phenomenological study exists to add to the literature base on ASD and education.

Theoretical Framework

The foundation of any study begins with the underpinnings or footing with that which holds it together – a theoretical framework. Theoretical framework is vital to the study because

it is the lens through which a researcher will use to guide the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A theory can be defined as "an explanation of particular phenomena in terms of a set of underlying constructs and principles that relate these constructs to each other" (Gall et al., p. 11). Theories are constructed for any number of reasons from explaining, predicting, or understanding phenomena to challenging or extending current knowledge within the parameters of looming critical assumptions (Abend, 2008 & Swanson, 2013). Theory can be used for more than observing, explaining, or extending; theories can also change the construct being studied (Mogashoa, 2014). In conjunction with the meaning of the term theory is the element of construct which is defined as structures or processes which are thought to be the basis of observed behavior and events (Gall, et al., 2015).

Theories often serve as a set of interconnected statements that are a mixture of definitions, hypotheses, axiom, variables, and so on which describe unseen structures or processes and relate them to each other or other observable events and constructs (Miller, 2011). Conversely, theories can be thought of as the conceptual basis for understanding, analyzing, and designing ways to investigate relationships within systems (James & Jacoby, 2010; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017), and for the purposes of this research, social systems. And, thus, theorists essentially take hypothetical constructs and formulate testable hypotheses, which morph into facts when it is supported by empirical research, which evolves into laws which are well-established observations concerning the relationship among a set of facts (Miller, 2011). The evolution of theories is built by the constant back and forth commutation between the data and theory as new facts change the theory and in return, the theory produces new research which promulgates new facts, and so forth (Miller, 2011).

Thus, theories guide the behavior and thought processes for the researcher through the collection and organization of empirical data, which often leads to new information to aid in formulating questions, focusing the study, and then giving life and meaning to the research (Miller, 2011). Ravitch and Riggan (2017) and James and Jacoby (2010) asserted that a theory can have several roles in guiding the development of the framework of a study:

- Provide life to issues that have no previously identified solution strategies,

- Aid in identifying, defining, interpreting, coding, and solving research problems for immediate and future use,

- Aid in distinguishing important facts from those which are not important,

- Instrumental in providing new meaning and interpretations to aging data,

- Provides a lens to recognize important new issues and formulate the necessary questions to attain a better understanding of the issue,

- Provides the research community with a common language and frame of reference for understanding certain issues

- A tool to guide and inform research and ultimately improve professional practices

Miller (2011) suggested that theories should be judged by three distinct criteria: (a) logically sound, (b) empirically sound, as scientific observations are clear, and (c) cover a large area of science and integrate previous research. Consequently, as the theoretical framework is rooted in a theory, it tests the validity of that theory in relation to specific events, issues, or phenomena (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). This study will be a transcendental phenomenological study and the research will be methodically guided by the elements within the theory. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) proposed that an effective theory in the social sciences is valuable for the primary purpose of explaining the meaning, nature, and challenges associated with a phenomenon which

is often experienced but not easily explained, so that the researchers are able to ascertain the data to act in more informed and effective ways. Accordingly, the theoretical framework must dictate an understanding of the theory or theories surrounding the research study and be able to apply to the broader areas of the proposed research (Asher, 1984; Jarvis, 1999; Ravitch & Riggan, 2017; Sutton, 1995). Mogashoa (2014) advises that the correct use of integrating theory into one's study should only lead to deepening the research process.

Theory of Organization and Change Within Value-Attitude Systems

This research study on the experiences of Christian school teachers with students who have autism is a study that is rooted in the social and behavioral sciences. Much focus has been placed upon the elements of social and cultural factors and the impact they have upon learning and development which has led to widespread interest in sociocultural theories (Mahn, 1999). Lewis Morgan (1970), a social theorist, proposed that the construct of a family provides insight into larger social dynamics in broader communities. Therefore, because learning takes place in the context of relationships among students in a community, when those with disabilities are absent from Christian school milieus, both groups are not afforded the opportunity to relate to and learn from each other (Contreras, 2013). Hence, the quest to provide more help and answers for exceptional children in the 21st century has led to increased focus on the theoretical foundations toward understanding the unique and yet complex world and needs of the special education community (Mahn, 1999) of which those with ASD belong.

Although the theoretical framework for this study is guided by an established theory, there is also another component which is extremely integral to the framework of this study, and that is the spiritual construct. The primary mission of Christian schools is student discipleship; hence the spiritual development of students is highlighted beyond academics (Finn, Swezey, &

Warren, 2010). Christian schools promote a life that is guided by Christian values which are grounded in the principles of the Word of God (Contreras, 2013). This study is researching Christian school teachers, in a Christian school, involved in teaching Christian children – who just happen to have an autism disability. The theories of man are not governed by God's laws, and thus a disability, theory of mind, or social theory would need to be examined in conjunction with the spiritual component of man as they relate to God's laws and His work in humankind.

The philosopher and theologian, Thomas Aquinas, proposed that divine revelation is the ultimate source of truth, and is the validity and efficacy of human reasoning (Gutek, 2011). Aquinas dedicated himself to both scholarship and teaching and resolved that: (a) philosophy can prove some truths of the Christian faith by constructs which are unaided by revelation, (b) philosophy can make clear some truths which cannot be proved, and (c) philosophy can defend principles of the Christian faith against naysayers (Gutek, 2011). In research on Christianity and its place in education, Burke and Segall (2011) were forthright in their proclamation that it must be acknowledged that "all" of education is theological in character. Therefore, theories and philosophies must ultimately submit to an authority higher than hypotheses and conjecture.

In relation to the scientific realm, this research study was guided by the theoretical framework found in the theory of organization and change within value-attitude systems by Milton Rokeach (1968). The theoretical framework applies to the theory that there is a hierarchy in which beliefs are the basic building blocks of more complex systems (Rokeach, 1968). Rokeach (1968) taught that one's belief system influences one's worldview and therefore prompts one to act or think in a particular way as one sees the world through the lens of those belief systems (Hartwick, 2015). In his earlier development of this theory, Rokeach (1968) challenged the supposition of the social psychology world of his day to revisit the premise that

attitude was the central construct in theory and research in the social psychology. This theory is similar to another theory in which Sandra Rokeach helped formulate, *belief system theory*, which explains how attitudes, values, and behaviors are organized and identifies the constructs under which they will remain stable or proceed to undergo change (Grube, Mayton, & Ball-Rokeach, 1994).

Rokeach (1968) formulated that while attitude and value are both determinants of behavior, value is more motivationally dynamic and is a determinant of attitude and behavior. The goal was to focus on values, which would employ an interdisciplinary collaboration across many disciplines, and would broaden the range of the psychologist's choices to include other areas of education, re-education, and persuasion (Rokeach, 1998). An attitude was defined as an organization of many beliefs composed of interconnected assertions about a specific object or situation, causing one to respond in a preferential manner (Rokeach, 1998). According to Rokeach (1998), values are a belief or mode of conduct for guiding action, justifying actions and attitudes, judging oneself in relation to others, and a standard used to make influences of values, actions, and attitudes of others.

The part of Rokeach's (1968) definition of value which closely relates to this study is, "a value is a single belief which transcendentally guides action and judgments across specific objects and situations and beyond immediate goals to more ultimate end-states existence" (p. 16). Hartwick (2015) postulated that the underlying spiritual values, spiritual beliefs, and spiritual worldview of teachers profoundly impact their professional life, teaching practices, and educational outcomes. The definition of value is consistent even in how it translates to action in the secular business world. Breuer and Freund (2015) discussed the value component in triggering innovation in business organizations. In the realm of the business world, values are

defined as "subjective notions of the desirable and criteria for decisions and evaluations which provide heuristic and integrative functions for normative, strategic, and operational innovation management" (p. 1). Values, in this respect, unite companies and drive innovation (Breuer & Freund, 2015).

Schwartz et al. (2012) compiled a comprehensive set of internationally recognized basic values, which can be used as guiding principles in life.

1. **Benevolence:** Preservation and enhancement of the people with whom one is in frequent personal contact [meaning especially family]. (helpful, honest, forgiving, responsible, and true friendship).

2. **Universalism:** Understanding, appreciation, tolerance, and protection for the welfare of all people. (broadminded, social justice, equality, world at peace, world of beauty, and wisdom).

3. **Self-Direction:** Independent thought and action—choosing, creating, exploring. (creativity, freedom, choosing own goals, curious, and independent)

4. **Security:** Safety, harmony, stability of relationships and of self. (social order, family security, reciprocation of favors, healthy, and sense of belonging)

5. **Conformity:** Restraint of actions, inclinations, and impulses likely to upset or harm others and violate expectations or norms. (obedient, self-discipline, politeness, honoring parents and elders)

6. **Hedonism:** Pleasure or sensuous gratification for oneself. (pleasure, enjoying life, and self-indulgent)

7. **Achievement:** Personal success through demonstrating competence according to social standards. (ambitious, successful, capable, and influential)

8. **Tradition:** Respect, commitment, and acceptance of the customs and ideas that one's culture or religion provides. (respect for tradition, humble, devout, and accepting my portion in life)

9. **Stimulation:** Excitement, novelty, and challenge in life. (a varied, exciting, and daring life)

10. **Power:** Social status and prestige, control or dominance over people and resources. (authority, wealth, social power, social recognition, preserving my public image)

Schwartz' (2012) list of values are rooted deeply in a motivational continuum. Rokeach (1998) noted that values are organized into hierarchal structures and substructures, as there are a number of different values, as well as attitudes, within a person's belief system. Rokeach (1998) proposed separate subsystems within his value attitude system:

- Several beliefs may be organized together to form a single attitude.

- Two or more attitudes form together to produce a larger attitudinal system.

- Two or more values form together to compose a terminal value system.

- The beliefs one may have about his own behavior.

- The beliefs one may have about attitudes, values, motives, and behaviors of others.

- The beliefs one has about the behavior of physical objects.

Thus, in relation to teacher values and beliefs, a pattern is created whereby the greater a teacher's beliefs are about God, the greater or more impactful will be a teacher's worldview and in return, the stronger will be a teacher's professional and educational outcomes (Hartwick, 2015). In conclusion, values are vital to this theory as they transcend objects and situations (Grube et al., 1994) and can easily be conceived as a type of attitude (Maio & Olson, 1995).

Belief System

Another aspect of the theoretical framework in the context of this study must focus on the belief system of Christian school teachers and how that relates to educational variables. The metaphysical beliefs of Christian school teachers are those beliefs such as a sense of a divine calling to teach, or devotion, or conception of God, and belief in God (Hartwick, 2015). Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012) observed that teacher calling, and commitment have garnered little research attention and very few empirical studies. A look at how personal belief systems interact with educational practices (Buehl & Beck, 2015; Devine, Fahie, & McGillicuddy, 2013; Hollingsworth & Winter, 2013) is of importance to this study. Grube et al. (1994) advocated a belief system theory whereby beliefs were thought to be framed along a dimension of interconnectedness or importance. The premise is that the greater a belief is functionally connected with other beliefs, the greater the chances it has for connecting with other beliefs, therefore leading to greater connectivity of the belief (Grube et al., 1994). Gholami, Sarkhosh, and Abdi (2016) investigated practices of public school, private institute, and public-private school teachers, and found that overwhelmingly a teacher's beliefs, practices, and attitudes were closely related to the teacher's strategies to cope with challenges in their profession.

A critical component to this study is a need to understand how the religious orientation of the teachers impact their belief system. Somewhere within a teacher's belief system is the critical and integral component of "calling." A secular definition of calling may be "responding to a summoning, the sources of which are variously experienced as internal or external" (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). In the sense of a spiritual meaning, O. S. Guinness (2010) defines calling as, "…the truth that God calls us to himself so decisively that everything we are, everything we do, and everything we have is invested with a special devotion, dynamism, and

direction lived out as a response to his summons and service." The construct of a sense of calling is key to the theoretical foundation of this study because of the challenges a Christian school teacher encounters in their profession in which public school educators are exempt; the two most noticeable are finances and resources. Nevertheless, Serow, Eaker, & Forrest (1994) reported a most distinctive and deep service ethic that evident among teachers who reported being called to the profession. Serow (1994) noted:

> those who view teaching as their calling in life display significantly greater enthusiasm and commitment to the idea of a teacher career, are more mindful of its potential impact on other people, are less concerned about the sacrifices that such a career might entail and are more willing to accept the extra duties that often accompany the teacher's role. (p. 70).

The sense of calling among teachers appears to be more common than what is generally recognized in research and studies (Bullough & Hall-Kenyon, 2012). However, research does purport that on a consistent basis, teachers find the most satisfaction in delving in things which are intrinsic to their work of teaching (Richardson & Watt, 2006). Additionally, there are conscious and unconscious ways in which teachers' religious identifications affect their belief and action (White, 2010). Kang (2015) researched the importance of personal religious beliefs in teachers and found that most teachers agree that religious beliefs play a critical role in their teaching and was evidenced by the manner in which people in their workplace were treated. Consequently, teachers with devote spiritual practices tended to display virtues of patience, compassion, understanding, and love while simultaneously paving more effective ways to reach their students (Hartwick & Kang, 2013). Hence, it is realistic to speculate that teachers with strong religious beliefs also feel highly motivated in assisting with various issues related to their

profession (Kang, 2015). In this study, the teachers shared their experiences about teaching

children who have ASD.

Related Literature

A review of related literature on ASD, as well as Christian school teachers and their

experiences is necessary to provide connections to support this research study. A reputable

research study is contingent upon a strong understanding of the existing literature on the research

problem (Gall et al., 2015). Rocco and Plakhotnik (2009) asserted that all empirical studies must

have strong ties to literature, which supports the need for the research study. A review of and

synthesis of the related literature is so important to a research study that Boote and Beile (2005)

adamantly asserted it is "a precondition for doing substantive, thorough, sophisticated research"

(p. 4). The goal is to focus on a particular problem of practice and to synthesize the findings in

research to be able to draw implications for relatedness in improving educational practice (Gall

et al., 2015).

In this research study, there is much literature written on the topic of ASD and teacher

experiences in public schools, however there is a dearth of information addressing Christian

school teachers' experiences with students with ASD. Furthermore, there is very little research

about the extent to which any children with disabilities are educated in K-12 Christian schools

(Bacon & Erickson, 2010; Terry, 2014). This gap in the literature study requires gathering as

much relevant information on what is already known with the expectation to add to the

knowledge base of Christian teachers and their experiences with students who have an ASD

diagnosis. Being able to show how a study advances knowledge utilizes the existing literature

base to build a case which clearly provides the gap in what is known that the research study will

address (Rocco & Plakhotnik, 2009). The related literature for this study will provide

information in six areas related to the research topic and will hopefully provide new knowledge on the topic to assist educators in theory and practice.

Defining Autism

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability (APA, 2013; Zablotsky et al., 2015) which has challenged the theoretical and research field for over 50 years (Thompson, 2013; Razali et al., 2013; Waterhouse, 2008). ASD affects tens of millions of people worldwide and over two million just here in the United States (Auism Speaks, 2018). ASD has become the fastest growing disability in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014; Kuo, 2016; National Center for Education Statistics, 2016; Sugita, 2016; Zablotsky et al., 2015). In fact, eleven monitoring sites across the U. S. reported that new estimates for the prevalence rates in 8 year old children with ASD have increased nationally by 15 per cent from 1 in 68 in 2014 to 1 in 59 in 2018 (Autism Speaks, 2018). An additional study on the prevalence of ASD in 6 to 17 year old school-aged children reported a surprising 1 in 50 diagnosis (Blumberg, Bramlett, Kogan, Schieve, Jones, & Lu, 2013). Additionally, other research reported that the prevalence rate in 14-17 year old youth have even matched that of younger children (Hedges et al., 2014). Although ASD diagnoses have shown a 10 fold increase in the past 40 years, researchers are unclear on whether ASD is increasing, detection modes are more sophisticated, or if environmental factors are the cause (Autism Speaks, 2018). However, global prevalence of ASD as reported by comprehensive surveys of epidemiological reports from 1966-2011 propose that ASD is still under recognized in most developing countries (Anagnostou et al., 2014). Research reports that approximately 80% of children show behavioral signs of ASD by the age of two, although the average age for diagnosis is about four years old (Anagnostou et al., 2014).

The word originated from the Greek word *autos* which means alone (Razali et al., 2013).

It is a disorder which manifests as a series of neurodevelopmental deficits in social interaction,

communication, flexible behavior and thinking, and often restricted and repetitive stereotyped

patterns of behavior, interests, and activities (Boswell, Zablotsky, & Smith, 2014; Lamb,

Firbank, & Aldous, 2016; Lauderdale-Littin, 2013; Ledford & Wehby, 2014; Lord & Jones,

2012; Manolov, Gast, Perdices, & Evans, 2014; Moore-Gumora, 2014; Pisula & Pisula, 2014).

Another deficit of autism is the issue that the brain interprets everything literally, which leaves

them with a narrow perception of a black and white world with no room for gray areas (Fein &

Jones, 2015; Rucklidge, 2009). The autistic brain displays problems with central coherence

across many tasks and also tends to focus on details rather than the overall meaning of an

informational set (Deeley, 2009; Frith & Happe, 2006). The aetiology of ASD is considered to

be multi-factorial: environmental factors as well as a combination of genetic and nongenetic

factors working in tandem through various paths (Anagnostou et al., 2014; Soto-Chodiman et al.,

2012). Another defining element of ASD is its prevalence in boys, one in every 42 – particularly

Caucasian, than in girls, one in every 189 (Autism Speaks, 2018).

ASD is an umbrella term used to identify the characteristics which encompass the

characteristics exhibited by the disorder. The Diagnostics and Statistical Manual V (DSM-V)

currently defines ASD as a disorder with four different domains – autism, Asperger syndrome,

pervasive development disorder, and childhood disintegrative disorder – with three levels of

severity, 1 to 3, mild, moderate, and severe illness (Lee et al., 2015; Ohan, Ellefson, & Corrigan,

2015; Prykanowski et al., 2015). The current definition of ASD is significant in that it no longer

uses separate terms for diagnosis such as Asperger syndrome, classic autism, or pervasive

developmental disorder, as it encapsulates all these terms under one umbrella – ASD (Lee et al.,

2015). The previous definition for ASD, listed in the DSM-IV, was categorized under the umbrella term of *pervasive developmental disorder* (PDD) which included five separate domains including autism, Aspberger syndrome, Rett's disorder, childhood disintegrative disorder, and pervasive developmental disorder-not otherwise specified (Prykanowski et al., 2015). The new DSM-V was created due to a lack of viable evidence showing the reliability and validity of subgroup populations and other issues and concerns related to the diagnosis (Prykanowski et al., 2015).

ASD can be a most complex disorder as it manifests in various ways. Hence, the term *spectrum* is used to describe its variability and uniqueness (APA,2013; Autism Speaks, 2015; Fraley, 2015; CDC, 2015; Prykanowski et al., 2015). Those diagnosed with ASD can have varying features and symptoms ranging from dissonance and disengagement with little or no eye contact or emotions, mental retardation or superior intellect, to difficulty encoding and interpreting social and emotional cues (Arif et al., 2013; Barnard-Brak, Ivey-Hatz, & Wei, 2014; Elsabbagh et al., 2012; Kim & Leventhal, 2015; McKown, Allen, Russo-Ponsaran, & Johnson, 2013; Norbury & Sparks, 2013; Razali et al., 2013; Russo-Ponsaran et al., 2015; Strifert, 2014). A list of physical, social, and emotional signs that could indicate a possible ASD diagnosis in a child include (Arif et al., 2013; Project Autism la Garriga, 2016):

- A lack of interest in other children.

- A lack of interest in sharing.

- A lack of imaginative or symbolic play.

- A lack of visual contact and observation of other people's facial expressions.

- A lack of participation in social laughter.

- A lack of understanding jokes, innuendos, or metaphors; everything is literal.

- A lack of sensitivity to pain and often, hypersensitivities to touch, smell, taste, and sound.

- A lack of responding to others indicating possible auditory issues.

- Interests that are repetitive and often not shared.

- Behavior that is strange, repetitive, and self-stimulating such as: rocking, flapping of hands, or walking on tiptoes.

- Those that show a higher level of intellect often know they are different and are often frustrated and have difficulty understanding how they fit into a social networking system.

Although billions of dollars have been spent on research for ASD (Razali et al., 2013), its cause is still not known, and some studies suggest a strong tie to genetic mutations or chromosome abnormalities (Abrahams & Geschwind, 2008; Arif et al., 2013; Newschaffer et al., 2007). Some research does speculate that biological or genetic dispositions in family members also add credence to these as being possible causes of the disorder (Ryan, Hughes, Katsiyannis, McDaniel, & Sprinkle, 2011).

Fraley (2015) recalled an encounter with a Christian family struggling with belonging to the Christian community as they contemplated how to help their son navigate through all of the symptoms and nuances of ASD. The family described how living with ASD was difficult for their son as his disability included auditory sensitivity and difficulty processing environmental inputs, such as bright lighting, touch, smell, sudden movements, sounds, dysregulation with emotions ad body movements, and unintentional vocalizations (Fraley, 2015). Furthermore, the child demonstrated difficulty understanding nuances of conversation and social interactions, reading emotions of others, and understanding how his behavior affected others (Fraley, 2015). It was necessary for him to work with a social navigator, a kind of social and linguistics interpreter needed for someone who speaks a foreign language (Moore, 2002) due to his anxiety

which leads to disruptive behaviors and emotions because of confusion and difficulty associated with him understanding his environment and those who are a part of it (Fraley, 2015). Fraley (2015) strongly encouraged the Christian community to *see* God's special children as a part of his wonderful creation and to begin to provide welcoming environments in every area of the faith community and treat them with the "God-like" honor that they deserve.

Evidenced Based Practices

The term *evidence-based practice* (EBP) refers to valuable research that has been grounded in the scientific process and is defined as "a process of clinical decision making that involves clinical expertise, best available research, and client characteristics" (Lubas et al., 2016, p. 189). Research literature (Wong, Odom, Hume et al., 2015) identified two types of intervention practices: (a) comprehensive treatment models which focus on a set of practices which revolve around a conceptual framework to counteract the core learning and developmental challenges of ASD; (b) focused intervention practices are operationally defined and address a single skill for specific learning outcomes over a concise period of time. The historical basis for utilizing focused intervention practices supported by empirical evidence of efficacy is grounded in the evidence-based medical movement which emerged in England in the 1960's (Cochrane, 1972; Sackett et al., 1996).

As the number of diagnoses of ASD continue to increase (APA, 2015; Zablotzky et al., 2017) and researchers work to integrate students into a successful learning environment, the acquisition of evidenced based practices is paramount. However, Hall (2013) maintained that although the sustained use of evidence based professional development practices by educators of students on the spectrum is critical, the research field is lacking in information on this topic.

Even more surprising, the Institute of Medicine (2001) reported that some studies suggest evidence based intervention may take as much as 17 years to transfer from research to practice.

The National Professional Development Center (NPDC) on ASD established a partnership with states whereby an in-service professional development system was implemented to increase educator's use of EBPs with students on the spectrum (Cox et al., 2013). The NPDC (2014)) developed a rigorous criterion and discovered and classified 27 focused and scientifically effective interventions EBPs for children with autism. The 27 interventions are regular practices for Applied Behavior Analysis (ABA) therapy conducted in many educational settings to help students achieve their learning and behavior goals (Kuo, 2016; Stahmer et al., 2015). A selection of the practices that may be utilized in an educator's classroom includes: functional behavior assessment, peer-mediated instruction and intervention, picture exchange communication systems, social narratives, structured play groups, technology aided instruction and intervention, exercise, and video modeling (NPDC, 2014).

Assurance that a practice is efficacious is based upon replication by different groups of researchers (Wong, Odom, Hume et al., 2015). However, not all EBPs are accepted practice in schools (Hess, Morrier, Heflin, & Ivey, 2008; Lubas et al., 2016). Wood, McLeod, Klebanoff, and Brookman-Frazee (2015) warned that the implementation of EBPs is very closely related to the degree to which the interventions are congruent with the organization's goals to be integrated into different settings. This element is pivotal to the success of the implementation of special education programs and educational accommodations for those with ASD and other disabilities. The Christian school's mission and vision in relation to its available resources must be clearly articulated and defined (Nelson, 2015/2016).

Current thought in legislature deems research based practices so important that the NCLB

Act and IDEA legislations mandate the use of EBPs by all educators (Hess et al., 2008; Lubas et

al., 2016). And consequently, the U. S. government has required that only scientifically based

research be utilized for the funding of any educational interventions and programs (Mesibov &

Shea, 2011). Also, The National Standards Project, fueled by the National Autism Center,

recommends that any EBPs must culminate in an analysis of the data to determine the efficacy of

the intervention (Martin, 2016). However, many of the large-scale efforts to generalize autism

research have been found to be just single-subject case designs, which is problematic as many

children present with symptoms that are all over the spectrum to which generalization would not

be relevant (Lubas et al., 2016). The issue involved with EBPs seems to be the generalization of

interventions for ASD when the disability requires a much more individualistic approach (Lubas

et al., 2016).

The variability of autism has posed a great challenge for researchers and theorists

(National Autism Center, 2015; Waterhouse, 2008). As the diagnosis of ASD continues to

morph, research studies reveal that a number of students with ASD continue to struggle in the

areas of social communication, academics, emotions, and challenging behavior (Sugita, 2016;

Carter et al., 2014; Wong et al., 2015). However, the growth of autism discoveries and

advances have propelled over the past few decades due to expanded new findings and EBPs

(Thompson, 2013). The IDEA of 2004, along with the NCLB of 2001 are mandates from the

federal government that districts must provide placement of students with disabilities in the least

restrictive environment with the same age peers to the greatest extent possible (Camargo et al.,

2014; Klehm, 2014; Kuo, 2016). This process of integration is called *inclusion* or

mainstreaming. The process permits the student's full participation as part of a general

education classroom with a full array of educational opportunities (Camargo et al., 2014; McFarlane, 2012). However, the current application of much EBPs in classrooms are not part of integration and inclusion practices and are not reflective of its intended purpose through research (Hess et al., 2008; Lubas et al., 2016).

Conversely, the move toward inclusion has its share of naysayers as students with ASD often struggle with social interactions, meaningful communication, and behavioral difficulties (Camargo et al., 2014; Tiwari et al., 2015). The spectrum of behaviors and issues that accompany the ASD diagnosis does require effective training and teaching techniques to be able to make a meaningful difference in this field. Yet, being able to identify effective interventions to use with children who have ASD can be challenging and disappointing (Richman, 2015; Ryan et al., 2011). The call for individualized and intensive instruction using EBPs has become a non-negotiable for schools and educators (Ledford & Wehby, 2015; Lubas et al., 2016; Sugita, 2016; Wong et al., 2015). This requirement is problematic for most Christian schools as The National Center for Educational Statistics reported that professional development for Christian school teachers lags far behind their public school counterparts (Finn, Swezey, & Warren, 2010); yet, an ongoing culture of intentional and targeted professional development would permit them to stay current on the latest educational techniques and materials (Finn, Swezey, & Warren, 2010).

However, an area of great concern for educators is that many interventions are being developed without the input and reflection of school resources or the educators who will be utilizing the practices (Harn, Parisi, & Stoolmiller, 2015; Iadarola et al., 2015). This element is especially important for the Christian school milieu as resources and experienced educators are often lacking (Lane, 2017; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011). A case study conducted on an Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) school, revealed that some strategies

teachers used resembled scientifically-based strategies, but the teachers lacked solid training in

the implementation of EBPs for successful student outcomes (Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011).

Some Christian schools avoid EBPs due to unfamiliarity based on lack of professional

development or simply spiritual convictions against utilizing "secular" methods.

Furthermore, Corkum et al., (2014) conveyed the frustration among educators that despite

EBPs, teachers still feel significant tension in attempting to deliver such strategies in inclusive

classrooms. This revelation leads to other research data which revealed a dearth of empirical

research related to the specific needs of students with ASD in inclusive settings as evidenced by

their teachers (Able et al.,2015; Parsons et al., 2013). Able et al., (2015) also reported that there

is also little information available about teacher needs in the ASD setting, which would greatly

inform intervention methods and best practices for inclusive environments. Also, in defense of

EBPs, it has been noted that when support, intervention, and training are present in schools,

many educators do not avail themselves of the opportunities (Able et al., 2015). One major

obstacle to this issue also may rest in the fact that when EBPs are used, they are often in

controlled settings with little research indicating how they generalize to real-world scenarios

(Iadarola et al., 2018; Smith & Iadarola, 2015).

When there is quality research available that provides empirical evidence to inform

instruction and guide intervention implementation, then there is strong indication that EBPs are

occurring (Camargo et al., 2014). This element is vital since teachers are required to use

educational practices that are based on evidence gathered from quality and reputable research

(Camargo et al., 2014; Hess et al., 2008; Lubas et al., 2016). The state of quality research seems

disjointed currently as expert opinions are diverse and often contradictory, and even more

disenchanting is the sporadic and unreliable universal application of EBPs (Hall, 2015;

Holcombe & Plunkett, 2016).

ASD researchers affirm that the early childhood through 6th grade years in school are especially critical in preparing and utilizing evidenced based educational practices to ensure a solid foundation for their educational experiences (Martin, 2016). A study utilizing an urban school district's K-2nd grade autism support classroom teacher's implementation practices, indicated that teachers in public school special education settings use evidence based strategies when three elements are present: (a) extensive training; (b) coaching, and (c) time to reach and sustain moderate procedural implementation fidelity (Stahmer et al., 2015). Fortunately, private and Christian schools, if they choose to, are able to take part in substantive and empirical based professional development opportunities through Title I and Title II funding as mandated by the Improving America's Schools Act by the U. S. Department of Education (DOE, 2015; Islas, 2010). Under this Act, local education agencies (LEA's) are required to provide private schools teachers the same equitable services provided to its public school constituents (DOE, 2015; Islas, 2010). This topic and journey to quality research will likely be a part of professional conversation in this field for some time.

Inclusion Needs of Students with ASD

Due to the high prevalence of the rate of autism among children (APA, 2015; CDC, 2013), there are few, if any, schools who do not have students enrolled who have autism (Yager, 2016). Hence, the rising rate of the diagnosis of students places a greater burden on schools to better allocate services to meet the needs of these students (Boswell, Zablotsky, & Smith, 2014). According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2016), the number of students with autism increased from approximately 94,000 in 2000 to 417,000 in 2011. The

Christian school milieu is not exempt from that scenario also, as the enrollment of students with special needs has increased in those schools (Dronkers & Avram, 2014; Parker et al., 2012; Russo et al., 2011). Conceptually, the mission of the Christian school should be to include students of a diversified range of skills and behaviors. This is in keeping with the Lord's mandate to "…go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in…" (Luke 14:23, KJV). The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2012) also reported that the four most common disability deficits in schools are: autism, other health impairment (OHI), specific learning disability, and language disabilities; and Christian schools are serving students from each of those sectors (Lane, 2017).

Autism is seen as one of the most difficult of disabilities included within the special education milieu to understand and to instruct in academic settings (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008; Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Unfortunately, research indicates that the deficits associated with autism are a guarantee to be likely excluded from school than most other learners from other disability categories (Humphrey & Synes, 2013). These deficits make the issue of inclusion an interesting and challenging directive to maneuver for any school (Orsati & Causto-Theoharis, 2013).

The mandates of the IDEA (2004) categorically state:

> Each state must establish procedures to assure that, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities…are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special education, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.

This mandate basically ensured that the teaching of students with autism would no longer solely rest upon the special education teacher but would initiate a shift which would require all classroom educators to address the needs of all the children in their classrooms (Busby et al., 2012).

Humphrey and Symes (2013) emphasized that inclusion is more than merely honing particular pedagogical approaches, but it also clearly must take into consideration teacher attitudes, knowledge and experience. This is where inclusion becomes difficult as the severity of the spectrum for some students with ASD lead to complex inclusion situations. Marshall and Goodall (2015) questioned the efficacy of mainstream inclusion as a 'one size fits all' model which is not appropriate for all students with ASD. Byrne (2012) advocated that mainstream inclusion must have a significant amount of support and expertise to be legitimately inclusive or it becomes nothing more than a means of physical integration. Rodriguez et al. (2012) reported that even experienced teachers of recognized professional competence often consider themselves inadequate for the challenges of students with ASD than with any other form of special education. This challenge magnifies the difficulty that Christian school educators with no professional development or knowledge educating students with ASD must experience. Thus, inclusion is no small process as the elements to its success are multifaceted and complex (Chevallier, Kohls, Troiani, Brodkin, & Schultz, 2013; Lindsay & Edwards, 2013; Lindstrom, 2013; Nistor, & Chilin, 2013; Peters, Forlin, McInrney, & Maclean, 2013).

The core component for students with autism is the adaptation portion of inclusion. The student with ASD will have one or more deficits in cognitive, social, adaptive, self-regulatory, or communicative areas (Blacher et al., 2014). The process of inclusion is far more than placing a student with disabilities in a classroom for instruction. The process is many-sided and affects

several stakeholders; some in monumental ways. A qualitative study done in three large urban

school districts of Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Rochester, revealed layers of tension evident

between stakeholders as issues of power, privilege, knowledge, economics, and lived

experiences were debated in educational settings reeling from limited resources (Iadarola et al.,

2015). Another qualitative study researching exceptional children in Christian schools revealed

some Christian schools that do accommodate students with learning, physical, social, and

neurobehavioral disabilities; however, their high functioning cognitive ability permitted

inclusion due to minimal disruption to the general classroom (Contreras, 2013). However,

Christian schools such as these are rare as they are engaged in trying to remain focused on just

surviving merely as a school (Contreras, 2013).

One element of complexity in inclusion is the ability of teachers to meet the educational

needs of diverse learners and for them to have the tools to recognize, understand, and

accommodate unique individuals within a cohort of many diverse learners (Holcombe &

Plunkett, 2016). Unfortunately, many teachers disregard the aptitudes of some of the most gifted

students in their class, those with ASD, because they have not learned to differentiate instruction

according to these student's needs and capacities (Morgan, 2014). Cochrane (2015) advocates

an educational environment facilitating student creativity as well as a creative and differentiated

pedagogical practice. Students in inclusive environments need trained and well-prepared

educators to provide balanced instruction for all students in the classroom. A study performed

by Contreras (2013) on the inclusion of exceptional children in Christian schools found one area

in western Michigan where over 40 Christian schools practiced inclusion; nonetheless, all special

education services and resources were outsourced to obtain credibility and successful outcomes.

Consequently, research shows many teachers feel inadequately or even improperly trained, some are not trained on any level, and some do not implement professional development training with high fidelity (Able et al., 2015; Corkum et al., 2014; Stahmer, Reed, Lee, Reisinger, Connell, & Mandell, 2015; Sugita, 2016). Research (Stahmer et al., 2015) in one study of an urban school district's K-2nd grade ASD support classrooms, sought to examine three specific areas concerning special education teacher's procedural implementation fidelity:

- Did they master specific strategies that were foundational to applied behavior analysis protocol for students with ASD?

- Did they use the applied behavior analysis strategies in the classroom?

- Did they maintain the procedural fidelity of these strategies over a sustained period of time?

The results of that study showed that the special education teachers at that school were able to implement the structured strategies; however, the longevity of the practices required ongoing coaching, training, and time to be able to maintain high fidelity implementation (Stahmer et al., 2015). Other research (Suhrheinrich et al., 2013) indicated that teachers would regularly omit components of the training which would reduce the overall fidelity and effectiveness of the practices.

A dearth of highly qualified special education teachers translates to students with ASD being taught by teachers with inadequate training to teach any students with disabilities in general, and those students who have ASD in particular (Hall, 2015). Furthermore, Martin (2016) asserted that although strides have been made to increase the knowledge base concerning the diagnosis and educational interventions of ASD, what is woefully lacking is a collaboration by the design and education fields to provide a classroom design that would address the physical

classroom's influence on students with ASD. The elements that are needed to ensure a

classroom is effective, efficient, and engaging produce a personalized environment that can adapt

to the needs of the learner.

Most classrooms are designed with the daycare, preschool, elementary, or high school

student in mind to ensure that the environment is a suitable place for learning. This same

concept is true and must be implemented in planning for students with ASD in the academic

environment. Martin (2016) noted a critical gap between the heuristic classroom design

decisions by educators and architects without inclusion of information gained from systematic

empirical evidence-based research. Mostafa (2014) suggested that the key to designing a proper

classroom for students with ASD should revolve around the issue of the sensory environment

and its connection to autism as its challenges have been suspected as a malfunction in sensory

perception. Previous research has pointed to sensory design as a method to create a more

conducive environment for successful skill development (Mostafa, 2014). Some of the areas of

design change include (Mostafa, 2014):

- Acoustics – ranked as the most influential feature of sensory issues for autistic behavior.

- Spatial sequencing – seamless flow of one way space from one activity to another without disruption or distraction

- Escape space – a respite space from overstimulation in the environment.

- Compartmentalization – organizing the classroom into clearly defined spaces to promote minimal ambiguity.

- Transition zones – a shift permitting recalibration of senses from one stimulus to another.

- Sensory zoning – organizing spaces according to their sensory or stimuli level.

- Safety – planning to take in consideration students who may have an altered sense of their environment.

Other evidence based research on the importance of the physical classroom environment on children with ASD is emphasized in a planning tool known as the Ziggurat Model. This intervention planning tool is a hierarchical approach to assist teachers to balance the strengths and abilities against the challenges and deficits of students with ASD (The Autism Project, 2014). At the center of this tool is the sensory challenge (Aspy & Grossman, 2011). The elements included in this planning tool from the base to the top include:

1. Sensory and biological aspects;

2. Reinforcement;

3. Structure and visual tactile supports;

4. Task demands to remove obstacles'

5. Skills addressing skills deficits (Aspy & Grossman, 2011)

The inclusion of students with ASD in regular classroom settings provides the opportunity to provide many benefits and opportunities to students who might not have access otherwise. However, due to the deficits in social communication and interaction, the ability to navigate peer-teacher relationships, and other classroom social situations can be difficult (Rovira, 2014) and sometimes, even dangerous (Able et al., 2015). An individualized and intensive instruction regiment using EBPs are necessary for social deficits (Ledford & Wehby, 2015). Some research purports that although children in clinic-based social skills groups often improve in peer behavior, the results often rarely generalize to real world contexts (Kasari et al., 2016). Hence, the practice of inclusion for increased proximity to peers without disabilities, is often unproductive in creating increased social skills interaction (Hochman, Carter, Bottema-

Beutel, Harvey, & Gustafson, 2015). Even when students with ASD have exceptional academic and cognitive skills they often struggle with success in school because of their social challenges (Stichter et al., 2010). Perepa (2014) noted that an essential element of working with students who have ASD is teaching what he terms as the *hidden curriculum* of social skills.

In today's changing academic mode from less lecture to more active learning, students are often expected to participate in group work with collaborative opportunities, which are often unstructured, and student directed (Able et al., 2015). Even though the majority of daily activities of the classroom are carefully arranged by the teacher, the environment can still be highly interactive and unpredictable (Martin, 2016). In these types of learning situations, the student with ASD will struggle with being cooperative, assertive, aggressive, controlling, distant, hyperactive, and/or depressive (Able et al., 2015). Often students with ASD have been found to have fewer friendships than their typically developing classmates, and middle and high school presents greater challenges with social networking as bullying and victimization rates increase (Able et al., 2015; Iadarola et al., 2018).

An additional challenge for students with ASD in inclusive environments is that they present with challenging behavior such as disruption, noncompliance, tantrums, aggression, or even self-injury (Iadarola et al., 2018). The ability of these students to address transition related times during the school day is often a culprit and precursor to many of these behaviors (Iadarola, et al., 2018). The repetitive and restricted behaviors and actions of these students is a distinct feature which calls for caution in any social settings (Shrivastava et al., 2016), and even more so in integrative settings with others where the unknowns of the environment could trigger unwanted and uncontrollable behavior.

Holcombe and Plunkett (2016) warned that students with high-functioning ASD have been identified as the most susceptible group for being at risk in inclusive classrooms due to "rising prevalence rates, unique and extreme presentations of behavior, excessive difficulties in educational settings and disproportionate levels of anxiety" (p. 42) which lead to educators being challenged and ill-prepared to provide for their needs in these settings. A final thought on inclusion focuses on a question raised by a study which investigated concerned mothers of students with ASD in inclusion classrooms. In this phenomenological study, the parents shared that most inclusive environments shared the notion that their child must change to fit the educational system, when the real issue to be addressed was the extent to which schools needed to change to be able to achieve inclusive education (Lilley, 2015).

It has been suggested that authentic inclusion will take place when schools and classrooms change from their traditional methods rather than so much effort to change the students (Lilley, 2015). Snow (2017) adamantly challenged that if the teacher will show up – the student with ASD will surprise, and not disappoint. The pattern of deficits found in classroom and school professional development protocol on students with ASD is widespread and unfortunate, and has been termed, *Autism Inclusion Disorder* (Lilley, 2015). Waldron, McLeskey, and Pacchiano (1999) advocated for "responsible inclusion" as defined by Vaughn and Schumm's (1995) model which includes adequate resources, perfecting school-based inclusive models, and providing ongoing professional development.

The inclusion paradigm for Christian schools continues to be a conundrum. In comparison with Catholic schools, Christian schools seem to have similar disadvantages and barriers: (a) lack of financial resources to fund the needed services, (b) absence of a formalized office or program which oversees the uniformity, direction, and implementation of an inclusive

program, and (c) absence of successful models to promote successful strategies and practices.
The Christian school does an exceptional job with inclusion from the viewpoint of integrating
what God's Word says about everything from the student to the academics (Banke, Maldonado,
& Lacey, 2012; van Brummelen, 2009). However, professional development and resources are
limited in preparing Christian school teachers for this challenge (Carlson, 2016; Contreras, 2013;
Lane, 2017; Finn et al., 2010; Terry, 2014). In fact, most Christian schools do not have policies
and procedures for serving children with disabilities (Contreras, 2013; Terry, 2014), and rely
mostly on teachers who were trained for public school service to provide the needed expertise
(Lane, 2017).

The importance of Christian schools embracing inclusion can be gleaned from the
admonishment in Scripture for us to provide teaching and learning communities that are
inclusive as the ones Jesus developed while here on the earth (Pudlas, 2004). Kunc (in APA,
2016) highlighted a very important element in referencing how Christian schools should view
inclusion:

> When inclusive education is fully embraced, we abandon the idea that children will have
> to become "normal" in order to contribute to the world. Instead, we search for and
> nourish the gifts that are inherent in all people. We begin to look beyond typical ways of
> becoming valued members of the community, and in doing so, begin to realize the
> achievable goal on providing all children with an authentic sense of belonging. (pp. 38-
> 39)

Interestingly, Russo et al. (2011) noted that when lawmakers adopted Section 504 of the
Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the IDEA of 2004, they did not have Gospel values in mind and
had no idea how closely those mandates would relate to Jesus' call to care for those with special

needs. While the possibility of inclusion for Christian schools is not impossible, it does present challenges which must be addressed professionally and financially, and from a research-based perspective. Nevertheless, inclusion in public and private milieus are found to be "fragile, contingent, and disappointing" (Lilley, 2015, p. 394).

Teacher Professional Development Needs

The process of inclusion into general education classrooms with students who have ASD not only puts a strain on the general classroom students, but it also brings with it a separate set of issues for teachers. The growth of autism diagnosis has triggered the influx of students with autism into both public and private schools (Zablotsky et al., 2015). As a result, the mandates of NCLB (1994) and IDEA (2004) have demanded mandatory inclusion of students into the general education classroom. While the concept of inclusion is noble, the lack of inclusion training is evident in many schools as teachers struggle to maintain their classrooms (Finch et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2015). The lack of training preparation for general education teachers seems to be a consensus among many frustrated educators in schools who practice inclusion (Able et al., 2015; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Dillenburger, McKerr, Jordan, & Keenan, 2016; Majoko, 2016).

Often, many educators of students with ASD pointed to limited resources and the lack of space for proper program implementation as a significant barrier to optimizing the education of students with ASD (Corkum et al., 2014). Conversely, mandating school-wide and whole staff training is almost a non-negotiable in developing a shared commitment to the support of inclusion for students with ASD (Bond et al., 2017). One of the main tenets of IDEA (2004) was to provide equitable learning situations for all students within the general classroom settings. However, Holcombe and Plunkett (2016) warned that the importance of understanding students

at an individual level and then matching EBPs to their deficits is the only effective way to ensure proper learning strategies and successful integration experiences for students with ASD.

The dimensions of experience, training and available resources and support are relevant elements in teacher professional development needs (Feldman & Matos, 2012; Rodriguez et al., 2012) for teaching students with ASD. Sugita (2016) reported that there is a rise in pre-service training in higher level learning institutions for more targeted instruction on ASD. The role of the educator can be complex as the skillset requires a range of specialized knowledge and ability (Bond et al., 2017). Consequently, there is a breakdown when these educators arrive in the field as schools have not had the proper training and support to implement the EBPs colleges are teaching (Lubas et al., 2016; Sugita, 2016). This gap in professional development has called for school districts to do a better job of transferring professional development to their schools (Sugita, 2016).

A research study performed by Finch et al. (2013) among a rural Southwest Missouri school district was done specifically to gather data on the experiences of general education teachers and their inclusion experiences with students who have ASD. Their study noted little inclusion training between general education and special education teachers in preservice and professional development programs, limited practical and background knowledge of ASD, limited teaching strategies and experiences, and extremely low levels of teacher efficacy and confidence were reported (Finch, et al., 2013). The quality and quantity of teacher development is an important factor to those in inclusive classrooms (Austin & Pena, 2017; Coman et al., 2013; Constable, Garrie, Moniz, & Ryan, 2013; Feng, & Sass, 2013; Pancsofar & Petroff, 2013; Segall & Campbell, 2012). A study done by Estrada and Deris (2014) reported that parents were frustrated with educators and let that teachers needed additional training to work more

competently with students who have ASD. While the quality of teacher training is paramount, the quantity of training must also be addressed as one or two-day workshops on ASD is not sufficient enough for teachers to have a relevant grasp on the disability (Brown & McIntosh, 2012).

The process of professional development is more than mere memorization of facts and data to be applied in a classroom situation. Opfer and Pedder (2011) defined professional development as "a complex interaction of a range of factors including training content, individual educator characteristics, and organizational elements" (p. 342). This definition of professional development also encompasses training that supports the development of skills, knowledge, and efficacy, supplemented by an atmosphere which enables the training to be applied and embedded (Bond et al., 2017). Due to the salient nature of ASD, professional development of educators is not an option and must be something that is continuous. A positive development for private and Christian school educators is equal access to professional development opportunities as public school educators through the use of Title II funding. The U. S. Department of education is on a mission to ensure that preparing, training, and recruiting highly qualified teachers and principals is a reality through Title II part A funding (U. S. Department of Education, n. d.).

Lilley (2017) warned that as educators try to fulfill the requirements of IDEA (2004) there is often slippage between *integration* and *inclusion.* There is a fine line between the two and educators of students with ASD need to be aware of the difference as they provide for fair and equitable learning environments for them. There is a consensus among some researchers that although IDEA (2004) is a necessary piece of legislation, there is a misguided focus on *where* to educate these students instead of *how* to educate them (Busby et al., 2012).

Teacher Emotions and Psyche

The role of a teacher can be a multifaceted one as teachers, must at times, be all things to all people. The nature of ASD, in its uniqueness and wide spectrum of characteristics, requires intervention that is targeted and also individualized (Cappe, et al., 2017; Humphrey & Symes, 2013; Kelly, & Barnes-Holmes, 2013; Shoji et al., 2015). The task of teaching students with ASD is more challenging than educating students of any other disability, in that high levels of stress and burnout, a low sense of self-efficacy, and decreasing teacher attrition rates are prevalent among teachers (Cappe et al., 2017; Ruble, Usher, & McGrew, 2011). Some of the overt challenges that teachers face when interacting with students with ASD can include poor and or lack of social and communication skills, developmental delays, restrictive language use, and rigid and stereotypic patterns of behavior (Autism Speaks, 2018; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012).

Given the documented and reported challenges of teaching students with ASD (Cappe et al., 2017), oddly there are few studies examining the relationships between teachers and disruptive students (Humphrey & Symes, 2013; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017) and no studies had yet examined the emotional qualities of elementary teacher's relationships with these students (Cappe et al., 2017; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2017). These studies were in reference to public school; therefore, putting more emphasis on the gap in any kinds of study on this issue in Christian schools with Christian school teachers. Some researchers maintained that if inclusion is to be successful, then the authentic voices of those in the trenches must be heard, as they may hold the key to producing more answers for practice (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012; Slee, 2004; Taxer & Frenzel, 2015). The same consensus holds true for the Christian school teacher's authentic voice to be heard as well in relation to their school environments.

There are several elements to be isolated and examined in the teacher's role of educating students with ASD. Whether the interaction and educating are in an inclusion situation or not, the level of support and training must be targeted and multifaceted to be successful (Feldman & Matos, 2012; Kelly & Barnes-Holmes, 2013; Rodriguez et al., 2012). Thus, the onus is placed upon the classroom teacher to ensure that all areas of transition, teaching, and other professional expectations are in order. Furthermore, Humphrey and Symes (2013) noted that whether or not the teacher-student relationship is productive towards the academic benefits of inclusion, the relationship does yield high probability for the social well-being of the student. Emam and Farrell (2009) noted that the relationship between teachers and students with ASD hinge on relationship as it is the bridge to effective interaction between the parties and the environment, which lead to a successful inclusion situation.

The mandate that children with ASD be mainstreamed (IDEA, 2004) into the regular classroom created a whole new realm of demands and workload challenges for educators (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). The increase of workload related stress among teachers of inclusion situations with unique and challenging educational needs can be related to inadequate preparation and the lack of resources, materials, and facilities that would assist in coping with some of the challenges experienced by ASD ((Busby et al., 2012; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012; Yan & Sin, 2014). These challenges are often accompanied by teachers experiencing increased tension and anxiety while attempting to balance the needs of all the students in the classroom, leading to healthy teacher and student interactions (Humphrey & Symes, 2013). Busby, Ingram, Bowron et al. (2012) reported teacher feelings of powerlessness, confusion, frustration, disappointment, defeat, and professional inadequacy. Teachers of students with ASD are consistently reported to have higher rates of burnout especially in the area of emotional

exhaustion (Corkum et al., 2014; Zarafshan, Mohammadi, Ahmadi, & Arsalani, 2013). These feelings tend to be heightened as teachers appraise their teaching experience with unsuccessful achievement, coupled with the frustration of their perceived or very real, lack of social support and feeling of isolation from their professional community (Cappe et al., 2017). However, teachers did report a decreased level of anxiety and stress when they received support from their colleagues, especially those experiencing similar situations (Cappe et al., 2017).

A study conducted in the United Kingdom employing eight mainstream teachers revealed a common workplace frustration among students with ASD and their inability to process the nonliteral usages of language which impeded and stifled the progress of academic instruction (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). Another study on teacher emotions and relationships revealed common negative emotional outbursts among teachers of students with ASD due to the unknown, and yet sometimes harsh behavioral disruptions of the students (Chang, 2013; Emam & Farrell, 2009; Hagenauer, Hascher, & Violet, 2015; Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012). One of the most disturbing outcomes discovered from one study was the source of resentment that many teachers felt toward the students mainstreamed into their classrooms, causing them greater preparation time, disruption from the regular pace of instruction, and constant jockeying between regular students and those with ASD to ensure stable relationships (Soto-Chodiman et al., 2012).

In a large qualitative study of three urban school districts in Los Angeles, Philadelphia, and Rochester, the findings indicated severe tensions among the stakeholders attributed to many issues from power, privilege, and knowledge, to economics and the lived experiences indicative of the urban milieu where limited resources is a fact of everyday life (Iadarola et al., 2015). The tension between teachers, often the classroom teacher and special education teacher, was unfortunate and especially concerning because the tension had a direct effect on effective student

instruction and sometimes even contributed to escalating student behavior (Emam & Farrell, 2009; Iadarola et al., 2015). The climate among the classroom and school milieu is an important component not only for stability for students with ASD, but also for the teachers who interact with them (Bettini, Crockett, Brownell, & Merrill, 2016; Chang, Shih, & Kasari, 2016; Kasari & Smith, 2013).

Teachers in any settings who teach students with ASD have a great responsibility placed upon them that will probably increase as the educational challenges and needs of students increase (Brunsting, Srckovic, & Lane, 2014; Cappe et al., 2017). Although, most Christian school teachers are committed to the task of serving their students, Coles (1993) warned that service can even be exhausting, especially for those who are most centered on a service ethic. Even without the results of research and study, the impact of teacher interaction with students who have ASD is evident. The reports of teacher burnout, high anxiety, and stress is becoming commonplace in classrooms where teachers serve a multi-faceted cohort of students. There is a gap in the literature expressing these same feelings and experiences among the Christian school milieu (Lane, 2017). Brown and McIntosh (2012) observed that while much research has been explored examining teacher-student relationships and experiences for general education students, little research has explored that same construct for students with ASD. The opportunity for Christian school teachers of students with ASD to express their experiences with this real world issue would add to the literature base in this field as this study anticipates providing a voice to this very real phenomenon.

Summary

The outline of the literature review in Chapter Two provides details on the nature of ASD and the various impairments which accompany the disability. The chapter also provided

information related to the growing prevalence of ASD and the factors which may contribute to the growth of the rising numbers of children being diagnosed with the disability. The literature addressed the matter of inclusion and the needs and culture of the school as increasingly more students with ASD are immersed in the general classroom. The research in the literature has addressed the lack of EBPs for students with ASD and the ominous need for continuing professional development for teachers. Due to the lack of professional development, and in some cases, a lack of resources, there is evidence in the literature of the very real phenomenon of teacher stress, tension, and burnout in educating students with ASD.

The research also yielded a dearth of information on the experiences and descriptions of Christian school educators with students who have ASD, which revealed an obvious gap in the literature concerning Christian schools and students with disabilities. This study has provided an opportunity to offer evidence based research to Christian education, while affording Christian teachers a platform to describe their experiences among students with ASD. Additionally, this research study will contribute to the field of knowledge and narrow the gap in literature referencing students with ASD enrollment in Christian schools and the experiences Christian school educators have providing education to them.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of Christian school teachers with students with ASD in Christian Schools located in the Tidewater area of Virginia. A dearth in research studies exists in addressing the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students with ASD (Contreras, 2013; Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014). This research study will provide Christian school teachers an opportunity to express what is "texturally meaningful and essential in the phenomenal and experiential components" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93) of their experiences as they educate students with ASD. This chapter discussed the design of the proposed research study followed by the research questions, the projected setting, and the prospective participants. The chapter then proceeds with an examination of the procedures, the role of the researcher, the methods of data collection, and data analysis. In conclusion, this chapter reports the trustworthiness of the research study and outlines the ethical considerations that need to be addressed.

Design

When conducting a research study, the guiding blueprint for the study is the research design which focuses on the entire process of the research study from its inception, beginning with the problem, to writing a comprehensive narrative (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975).

Overall Design - Qualitative

This research study is qualitative in nature and design and utilizes a transcendental phenomenological methodology. However, it is important to note that there are no agreed upon rules or protocol for how to design a qualitative study as Creswell and Poth (2018) maintained that the qualitative process is much so driven by the selected approach utilized by the researcher.

Creswell (2013) compared the design choice to fabric which is woven on a loom and composed of intricate and minute threads of colors, textures, and blends of materials. The qualitative method uses interpretive and theoretical frameworks to study problems addressing complex, detailed social or human problems (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, as researchers review the nature and purpose of the study's research questions, the ability to identify the most appropriate research methodology should become more distinct (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014).

Creswell (2013) commented on the difficulty to define qualitive research due to the ever-changing landscape of its nature from social construction, to interpretivism, to social justice. Nevertheless, Creswell (2013) formulated a comprehensive working definition of the term in its truest sense, giving a nod and great emphasis to the design aspect of research and approaches to inquiry:

Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of the research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. To study this problem, qualitative researchers use an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes. The final written report or presentation includes the voices of participants, the reflexivity of the researcher, a complex description and interpretation of the problem, and its contribution to the literature or a call for change. (p. 44)

In relation to its definition, there are three components which are essential to designing a successful qualitative study. The first is preliminary considerations of design principles relative to the nature of the study, and for qualitative research, that is the scientific method (Creswell &

Poth, 2018). This process is affirmed by a methodological congruence touted by Richards and

Morse (2012) in which the elements of the study are so interconnected that it is presented as a

cohesive whole instead of a disjointed sum of parts. An interactive approach was also an integral

part of this research design (Maxwell, 2013). The second component is to engage in the phases

of the research process while conducting the study. And lastly, is the intent to be sensitive to all

the elements in all the phases of the research study, to include ethical considerations (Creswell

2013). Since the most defining characteristic of qualitative research is the exploratory

component, the design fits the proposed research study of Christian school teachers and their

experiences with students who have ASD, as little research has broached this area of study

(Contreras, 2013; Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014).

General Design - Phenomenology

This study was written from a phenomenological point of view. Phenomenology has its

roots in philosophy and is characterized by two distinct qualities of induction and description

(Moustakas, 1994). The everyday lived experiences of the varying phenomena of individuals are

analyzed and described to perceive how the individual makes sense of or interprets their world

(Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). Husserl (1970), the father of phenomenology, coined the term *lifeworld*

to describe one's everyday self-experience in one's world around them. The description consists

of the *what* and the *how* of their experience (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of phenomenology

is to "reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal

essence" (Creswell, 2013, p. 76); basically, a commonly shared human experience such as grief

(Creswell, 2013), insomnia, isolation, or even anger (Moustakas, 1994) is something that is

experienced universally by many people.

Over the years, there have been several philosophical arguments raised for the use of phenomenology. Consequently, Creswell (2013) advised that phenomenology not be studied apart from its philosophical roots. Kock (1995) maintained that phenomenological research must be contextualized to the philosophical tradition that informs its methods. Hence, the main philosophical thought is that of Edmund Husserl (as cited in Flood, 2010), who believed that a departure from the scientific approach was needed to bring out the essential components of lived experiences. As a result, Husserl's (as cited in Eddles-Hirsch, 2015) thoughts led to the descriptive phenomenological approach incorporating universal essences or eidetic structures and radical autonomy.

Other major thoughts of philosophy come from Merleau-Ponty (1962), who maintained that one can only really understand phenomenology by doing it, and van Manen (1984) who believed that there is a vast difference between intellectually comprehending phenomenology and understanding it from the inside. Moustakas (1994) reiterated "the challenge facing the human science researcher is to describe things in themselves, to permit what is before one to enter consciousness and be understood in its meanings and essences in the light of intuition and self-reflection" (p. 27). This research study gave Christian school teachers the opportunity to not only describe the student who has ASD, but describe the environment, and the experience of what it is like to teach students with ASD when most Christian schools do not have the financial, educational, or emotional resources to support the classroom experience (Lane, 2017). However, the teachers were able to converse about the elements of a warm, loving, Christ-centered, and biblically integrated environment that Christian schools are known for (Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014).

Specific Design - Transcendental

The transcendental design was utilized because it so articulately "adheres to what can be discovered through reflection on subjective acts and their objective correlates" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 45). Husserl advocated a departure from the way of the scientific approach and a return to 'the things themselves' of lived experiences where human consciousness and the world were united as one (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental science evolved out of dissatisfaction with the philosophy of science which was based exclusively on things and allowed no room to examine the experiences of people and often the objects that they interacted with in the real world (Moustakas, 1994).

The transcendental design examines the phenomenon as if freshly perceived for the very first time (Creswell, 2013). The elements of transcendental phenomenology include *epoche*, whereby everything is set aside or bracketed to gain a new perspective of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Then the process of reduction takes place, whereby describing the phenomenon in rich textural language occurs, "the rhythm and relationship between phenomenon and self" (p. 90). The reduction is observed as leading one back to an experience of the way things are (Schmitt, 1968). The next steps include imaginative variation and synthesis of the meanings and essences. This process allows for structural and textural themes to be developed which will then conclude with a process to derive the synthesis of the meanings and the essences of the experience (Moustakas, 1994) so others can have a better understanding of the phenomenon.

The transcendental phenomenological approach to this study opens up many avenues to see inside the world of Christian educators and their experiences with students who have ASD. ASD is so complex that the challenge for educators is that what it does is different for each

individual and behavior can vary daily (Holcombe & Plunkett, 2016). The unique issues that

Christian school teachers encounter in educating students with ASD, can lead to physical and

emotional pressures, unlike many other professions (Atiyat, 2017). The ability to explore the

breadth of understanding the challenges of educating students with ASD aligns it with a

qualitative approach which is appropriate when the data is not directly measurable, and

interpretation of the data is necessary to answer the research questions (Holcombe & Plunkett,

2016). This study seeks to describe and elucidate the reality of what Christian school teachers

experience, and this construct cannot be realized through instruments such as controlled

experiments, but through identifying with the observer (Moustakas, 1994). Thus, the construct

of reality and realism is a major focus of transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

Using rigorous data procedures, the complex and holistic lived experiences of people

(such as Christian school teachers) can be conveyed through the rich, deep, thick, textured,

insightful, and illuminative language of qualitative meaning (Bolte, 2014; Creswell & Poth,

2018). The experiences of Christian school teachers educating students who have ASD is a

phenomenon that can best be described through the phenomenological process. Because of the

mystery of ASD, the great variations in the way its symptoms are presented, and the functioning

of different children on the spectrum (Rotheram-Fuller et al., 2013), the processes used in the

phenomenological design will depict the very nature of this disability to reveal the *what* and the

how of the teacher's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The transcendental approach

permitted me to look from the outside in to reveal a fresh perspective of the Christian school

teacher's experience with students who have ASD (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Questions

Central Question

How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD in their classrooms?

Sub-Questions

1. How do Christian school teachers describe their attitudes toward students in their Christian school who have ASD?

2. How do Christian school teachers describe the values, based on their belief system, they have towards students with ASD?

3. How do Christian school teachers describe the practices that they found were successful in their experiences with students with ASD?

Site

The sites for this research study were three Christian schools chosen from Virginia. The Christian schools were located in Chesapeake and Virginia Beach on the Southside of the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. Hampton Roads is located in the middle of the Eastern seaboard where the James River, Nansemond River, and Elizabeth River pours into the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay (Hampton Roads Chamber, n.d.). It is known as the eighth largest metro area in the Southeastern United States and the second largest area between Atlanta and Washington, DC (Hampton Roads Chamber, n.d.). There are 61 private schools located in Virginia Beach and 32 private schools in Chesapeake (Private School Review, n d.) Most of the private schools are Christian or Baptist in establishment, and account for 51% of the private school milieu (Private School Review, n. d.).

Although participants may be located at one site, Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that the hallmark of a good qualitative research study is a report of multiple perspectives over a range of the spectrum of those perspectives. Therefore, three very distinct Christian schools were chosen to highlight the experiences those teachers have when interacting with students who have ASD. There are numerous Christian schools in Virginia; however, the sites purposefully selected were Christian schools with a criteria of general education classrooms that provide instruction for students with ASD and Christian schools that provide a dedicated special education program. Only one of the Christian schools in this research has a dedicated special education program for students with ASD. The schools were all within a reasonable driving distance for me which ensured suitable time for conducting the interviews and the focus group.

The Ridge Christian Academy (RCA) (pseudonym) is located in Chesapeake on the southside of Virginia, in the Tidewater area near the North Carolina and Virginia border. RCA is a smaller Christian K5-9th grade school of less than one hundred students. The school was founded by a pastor and his wife who have a child with ASD and tired of looking for Christian schools who had no resources to teach their child. The administrator of the school is the pastor's wife. She has a M.Ed. degree and also touts the experience that she has had with her son, who has ASD, to be an asset to the success of the school. The staff of approximately 25 teachers are varied in their skill set; however a large percentage are special education certified.

The school currently has just one class in each grade level and uses a team-teaching approach that utilizes a multi-modality teaching style. RCA is a unique Christian school with a dedicated purpose of creating a learning atmosphere which caters to students with different learning modalities instructing them on how they learn instead of a one size fit all approach. The school has a dedicated special education program, which is an integral part of the school as they

seek to educate those who struggle academically and have learning deficits and disabilities. The learning environment is a comprehensive one in which students with various learning challenges such as ASD, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), depression, and anxiety are included in the general education classroom setting. The school has several teachers who are special education certified, and the administrator provides ongoing professional development to keep the teachers abreast of current practice and protocol in special education. The rationale in choosing this particular school is because RCA is a Christian school which specializes in meeting the academic needs of students who have ASD and make provisions to provide for the unique and individual learning styles of its students.

The "Middletown Christian School" (MCS) (pseudonym) is located in the city of Portsmouth, Virginia which is on the western side of the Elizabeth River directly across from the city of Norfolk. MCS is a pre-K2 through sixth grade school. MCS currently has a student body of approximately 75 students, of which a small population of students with ASD has been identified. The school operates under a dual administrator/principal leadership model.

The school currently has one class in each grade with approximately fifteen teachers. Although none of the teachers are special education certified, the school partners with the National Institute for Learning Development (NILD) to provide for their student body learning deficit challenges, including ASD. An individual education therapy plan is offered for those with needs outside of the scope of the general education classroom as MCS is able to employ a full-time educational therapist utilizing the NILD methods of teaching for learning differences. The staff also benefits from this partnership as the NILD offers the school training opportunities at deeply discounted rates. It is through this program and the opportunities for professional development that the school is able to provide tools to help students with ASD. The rationale

for choosing this school is because MCS is a Christian school with limited resources to service students with learning differences, of which a small population of students with ASD have been identified.

The third school is the "Ambassador Christian School" (ACS) (pseudonym) located in Norfolk, Virginia. The school is a pre-K3-12th grade school with an approximate enrollment of about 175 students with two classes in each grade level. The elementary school is the only department that offers a resource program for its students. The number of certified special education teachers is sparse however they do have a resource and gifted education program that seeks to meet the needs of the student population who have special needs. There are children with autism who have been identified as part of the RCS student population. The rationale for choosing this school lies in the fact that it is a larger Christian school with some type of effort to accommodate its student population who has been identified with ASD.

The schools were within a reasonable driving distance for me so that I was afforded suitable time for conducting the interviews and the focus group. The schools selected consisted of grade levels K3-12th grade.

Participants

The participants for this research study were purposefully selected through criterion sampling to ensure an information-rich data collection procedure from participants who might best be able to inform the researcher about the study under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In their study of purposeful sampling, Schatzman and Strauss (1973) suggested that this method of sampling is simply a practical necessity of all the elements of the research study from the framework to the object of study. In other words, the participants are selected based on the needs of the study (Morse, 1991). Patton (1990) promoted the idea that the logic and power of

purposeful sampling is in the researcher's ability to select studies that are information rich for in-depth analysis. Purposeful sampling is driven by the desire to include a range of variations of the phenomenon in the study (Coyne, 1997).

The participants who were part of this study all experienced this same phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2015) in a Christian school. One of the hallmarks of the transcendental qualitative study is to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of participants who have experienced the same event or issue (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). This study followed that design and all participant-teachers had some kind of contact with instructing a student who has ASD in a Christian school environment for at least a six month period. The other general criteria or consideration for the participants included elements such as age, race, religion, gender, economic, or cultural factors (Moustakas, 1994).

For the purpose of avoiding generalization but elucidating the particular and specifics of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018), 13 Christian school educators were chosen. It was important that each participant was aware of the nature and purpose of the study so that their participation was optimal. Moustakas (1994) gives an example of a researcher, Fraelich (1989), who invited his participants to be co-researchers with him, with equal footing, to join with him on the search for truth, knowledge, and understanding of the phenomenon he was studying. Fraelich (1989) encouraged his co-researchers to immerse themselves in the incidents of the phenomenon that they could remember so that he could accurately achieve descriptive meanings and rich interview experiences. I believe that I was able to elicit such a partnership with the teacher-participants who were chosen, as I attempted to provide an accurate and data rich picture of this phenomenon. This seemed to be a most effective way to elicit participants who provided rich experiences for this study.

The participants were comprised of four to five general or special education teachers from each school. According to Fusch and Ness (2015), the number of participants needed in a qualitative study is contingent upon the sample size which would have the greatest opportunity to reach data saturation. Research (Burmeister & Aitken, 2012) has shown that neither a small nor a large sample size will guarantee data saturation, but rather it is "what constitutes the sample size" (p. 1,409). This is where the element of data rich information is vital, as data saturation is obtained when enough information to reproduce the study and the ability to acquire additional new information has been achieved, as well as when further coding is no longer possible (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Each participant was involved in teaching at least one student with ASD, for at least six months, at their Christian school or have taught students with ASD within the same time frame at another Christian school. The participants selected for the study were identified by their principal through a criterion-based search (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, Gall, & Borg et al., 2015).

Procedures

Prior to IRB submission, an expert review of the study was completed with two doctoral educators to determine face and content validity and also to confirm the quality of the interview and focus group questions. However, before IRB approval was granted, the first step of the of this research study was to obtain written permission (Appendix A) from the head of schools of the three locations where the research will be conducted. The permission was provided on school letter head. Once the IRB approved the study, the initial letters were replaced with the IRB approval letter. Conversely, upon approval from the principal, a recruitment letter (Appendix B) was sent to the schools to purposefully identify the teachers who fit the criteria for the study among their faculty (Gall et al., 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). As the participants

responded, I then selected 13 of them for the study. Upon their agreement to participate in the study, the teachers were issued a Consent Form (Appendix C) which detailed the conditions of confidentiality to protect their identity (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall et al., 2015; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014). The teachers were also informed concerning the details of the purpose of the study, the procedures, risks, benefits, and rights of the participant in a which is format clear and easily understandable (Creswell, 2013; Rockinson-Szapkiw et al., 2014), including their right to withdraw from the study at any point should they desire to discontinue their participation (Moustakas, 1994). The participants were also informed concerned the long range possibilities of the study such as possible media inclusion or publication in a dissertation or other pertinent educational focus (Moustakas, 1994). The focus group consisted of eight teachers collectively from the three schools that were chosen. The signed consent form was sufficient to meet the requirements to satisfy the IRB for this type of interview as well (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews and the focus group were scheduled during a convenient time for the teachers. Upon completion of the focus group, each participant was entered into a raffle drawing to receive one of three $50 Amazon gift cards as a token of thanks for their time given and participation.

Immediately after IRB approval, and prior to any research or interviews, a pilot study was held at my school, Beach Christian School (pseudonym), to ensure relevant lines of questioning and proper data collection means (Creswell & Poth, 2018) would be employed. Upon completion of the pilot study, I commenced the research with open-ended interviews of the participants. The participants were all personally interviewed at their school site within a two-week period, where they were all presented with instructions and the time restrictions for creating a teacher event log (Appendix G) of their experiences with the students. When the interview sessions from all three schools had been completed, I then arranged to have a focus

group meeting with a combination of teachers from each school. The focus group was held at

my school. The meeting was held within a three-week time period after the last school's

interview session. The interviews and focus group will be electronically recorded in two

different ways, iPad and digital voice recorder, to ensure a safe and accurate recording of the

information was obtained (Gall et al., 2015).

The event logs were collected at the end of the focus group interview session. The event

logs were also analyzed and assessed for reoccurring themes to add to the transcribed interview

analyses. The transcribed interviews were outsourced to be professionally transcribed through

the use of appropriate qualitative data analysis software (Creswell & Poth, 2018) from an online

company - Rev.com. After the transcription process, the data was manually and also

electronically (Atlas.ti) coded and assessed for themes used in portraying the essence of the

voices of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994).

The Researcher's Role

As the human instrument of this research study, it was vital that I remained nonbiased,

objective, and ethical (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, et al., 2015; Moustakas, 1994). Although I

have a working professional relationship with most of the administrators of the Christian schools

in the Hampton Roads area, I do not know them on a personal level. I also had no personal

relationship with any of the teacher participants who were identified.

Fields and Kafari (2009) cautioned that a researcher's bias and worldview is present in all

social research. Therefore, the better a researcher is able to recognize the personal lens, the

better will be the process to be able to hear and interpret the behavior and reflections of others

(Fusch & Ness, 2015). Dalal and Priya (2015) warned that the researcher is pivotal and central

to the process of not just obtaining the data, but in also correctly interpreting its meaning. The

researcher jockeys between multiple worlds to be able to obtain rich, thick, and hopefully, unbiased information.   In an attempt to gain unbiased information, a reflective journal (Appendix E) was kept recording specific incidences and occurrences of my possible biases as this research is conducted. Moustakas (1994) defines this process as *epoche* and specifies that the process "orients us toward looking before judging and clearing a space within ourselves so that we can actually see what is before us and in us" (p. 60). It is imperative to remember that the researcher's job is to glean information from the sources and not to judge (Holloway et al., 2010). Hence, it was important that the information obtained between these worlds were that of the phenomenon and not that of myself (Holloway et al., 2010). The use of the reflective journal (Appendix E) permitted me to remain focused on the purpose of the study.

I am a Christian educator who has worked with students who have ASD. I have been a part of large and small Christian schools who have had students with ASD; however, I experienced constant frustration as resources were not available for my use in helping to provide the students with a balanced and relevant education. I often felt the burden of being helpless to supply academic, emotional, and behavioral support. And to be honest, there were times that I felt pity for those parents who so desperately wanted their student with ASD to just have a good Christian education like all of the other "normal" students, and so they made the hard choice to keep their students enrolled for the sake of the spiritual component of Christian education, forfeiting the academic, behavioral, and emotional needs. As a classroom teacher, I did do what I could to try to meet all of the needs, but without the resources for professional development, my situation was as if I was on a sinking ship and using a cup to drain the water when what I really needed was a huge bucket or a hose. My sense of Christian ethics and academic prowess would not let me not do my best to meet the needs of all the students in my class, even the ones

with ASD. The Scripture commands in James 4:17 (*KJV*), "Therefore to him that knoweth to do good, and doeth it not, to him it is sin." Nelson (2015/2016) asserted, "Christian school leaders have a God-given obligation to cultivate an environment where the development of staff and students is prioritized" (p. 13).). I participated solely as the researcher in this study and worked to engage ethically and honestly with the participants from the three schools of this research study. I depended on the current literature and research information collected to guide the study (Gall et al., 2015).

An additional component of the role of the researcher involves the importance of self-care of the researcher – especially in light of examining emotionally laden and often overlooked topics (Cridland & Jones, 2014; Rager, 2005a, 2005b; Stamm, 1999). Therefore, it was vital that I maintained optimal physical, mental, emotional, and psychological stability to ensure the presentation of a focused and viable research study. Some recommended strategies to maintain emotional cognizance included maintaining a personal reflective journal (Appendix E), as I noted above, spacing out interviews to avoid too many interview commitments, and to allow ample time between interviews for substantive reflection between interviews (Cridland & Jones, 2014).

Data Collection

Gall et al., (2015) maintained that the primary instrument in the data collection process in phenomenology is the interview. The importance here is that all data collected is reflected through the interpretation of the researcher (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, the steps to data collection are paramount to the research process. Since qualitative research is grounded in interpretive conceptual frameworks, it can navigate a range of information gathering methods which touch the initial stages of how participants are chosen to when to cease the data collection

process (Cleary et al., 2014). Prior to the data collection process, the participants were informed

that all data will be confidential, names were to be put in pseudonym form to maintain

confidentiality of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, et al. 2015), and that the data

was to be stored in a locked container in my office. The majority of the large quantity of data

collected from the hours of interviews and the focus group were sent out to be transcribed by a

professional company (Rev.com) utilizing sophisticated qualitative data analysis software (Gall

et al., 2015). I was also active in this process by transcribing a portion of the interviews so that

personal immersion in the data and thoughts of the interviewees provided more clarity and

reflection in the data analysis process.

The research study was collected from individual interviews comprised of open-ended

questions, teacher event logs (Appendix G), and one combined focus group interview for all

three schools. The teacher event log (Appendix G) was explained at the initial individual

interviews, and then collected following the focus group interviews. The corroboration of data,

as well as internal and external validity, reliability, and objectivity was easily achieved by this

method of triangulation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, et al., 2015). An alternate term for

triangulation is *crystallization* which refers to multiple methods of data collection for the same

phenomenon to confirm research findings or to resolve any discrepancies in findings. This also

provides for the ethical reporting of data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Gall, et al., 2015). Since

researchers have many variances of thought on the term *validation*, Creswell and Poth (2018)

proposed that researchers employ accepted strategies to document the accuracy of their studies.

Interviews

The first method of data collection was to conduct interviews with the teachers, which are

considered a means of social interaction to elicit meaning and understanding from a person

(Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasized that in-depth interviews are the most effective means of gathering data for a phenomenological study as the questions are open-ended, general, and focused. A long interview is considered as the typical method to gain information in a phenomenological study (Moustakas, 1994). The questions that are asked should meet the criteria of description (Giorgi, 2009). There were 13 participant-teacher interviews for this research study. There are no specified number of participants required in a qualitative interview as research cites that the prevailing concept for the sample size is saturation or information power in which the more information the participant holds, the lower the amount of participation is needed (Malterud et al., 2015).

I conducted on-site individual interviews with all of the teachers. The interviews began with a social conversation which was designed to minimize anxiety and then crescendo into a relaxed climate for an open, honest, descriptive, and comprehensive view of the experience through the eyes of the interviewee (Moustakas, 1994). The questions (Appendix D) were composed of a few icebreakers and then five to seven other standardized open-ended questions which sought to minimize the possibility of bias (Gall et al., 2007). The broad questions lended to obtaining the rich, vital, and substantive descriptions (Moustakas, 1994) desired for a complete understanding of the essence of ASD. Also, the flow of the language and timeliness of how the questions were posed were done so in such a manner to impact the conversation and responses of the participants (Moustakas, 1994). I was also careful to take field notes, notating any nuances, voice inflections, or facial or body gestures during the interviews, as those elements often add to the substance of the interview (Gall et al., 2015). The individual interviews lasted approximately 25-45 minutes and were recorded using two reliable recording devices (Creswell & Poth, 2018); my iPad and a Sony IC recorder. To ensure a clear recording, I tested both

devices to gauge the sensitivity of the acoustics of the room and to ensure the instruments were operating properly (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The interviews were sent to a professional transcription company. Upon completion of the professionally transcribed interviews, the process of *member checking* was completed (Creswell & Poth, 2018), whereby I sent the teacher participants a copy of their interview to verify the accurateness of the interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018) and gave them an opportunity to correct any errors. The following are the interview questions:

Standardized Open-Ended Interview Questions

1. What is your name and professional educational background?

2. What is your specific job title?

   a. What do you do and who do you work with?

   b. How long have you been teaching at this school?

3. Why did you decide to become a Christian school teacher?

   a. What are some of the inherent values and beliefs of Christian school teachers?

   b. What makes your teaching distinctively Christian?

4. How would you describe the general atmosphere or culture of your school?

   a. Describe the attitude of the teachers concerning students with ASD?

   b. How are students with ASD changing your school?

   c. Describe how your values and beliefs affect your interaction with these students.

5. How would you describe the ages and grade levels of students with ASD you've worked with?

   a. What was your specific involvement with these students?

   b. Describe any stages or phrases that you can identify regarding your involvement?

6. Describe a successful experience with a student with ASD?

    a. Use adjectives to describe what made it successful.

    b. Describe how you and other staff and students felt during this time.

    c. Describe how you and other staff and students felt after this time.

7. How might you describe a challenging experience with a student with ASD?

    a. Use adjectives to describe what made it challenging.

    b. Describe how you and other staff and students felt during this challenging event.

    c. Describe how you and other staff and students felt after this time.

8. How would you describe any professional development you have had in educating students with ASD?

9. How would you describe any practical discoveries you have learned about new practices you could pass on to others based on your experiences with students with ASD?

10. Can you describe if and how your experiences have changed you personally as a Christian professionally as a teacher?

Questions one through three were designed to "break the ice" and make the teacher participants feel comfortable as I tried to establish rapport and a relaxing and comfortable atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 1990). The questions were basic and straightforward questions, not yet requiring any real thought. However, the sub-questions under question three and four required some thought and lead into a data rich conversation that which added to the theoretical framework for this study.

Questions five, six and seven were designed to get at the heart of the study and elicit vital and substantive descriptions of the teacher participant's experiences. Moustakas (1994) stressed

that broad questions aimed at eliciting rich data might yield fruitful results if the language and

sequence of the questions were framed or posed in a timely manner. Moustakas (1994) also

suggested that following the basic rapport questions, the following questions should be used to

get the participant to think deeply about the experience, any moments of significant impact or

awareness, and then to proceed to fully describe the experience. These two questions were

especially significant given the "spectrum" of behaviors that can result from a student who has

ASD, and the answers varied from each participant. Agee (2009) contended that asking the right

questions is an iterative process that can lead not just to descriptive information, but also to a

wider field of study.

Question eight invited the teacher participants to reveal any frustrations and/or

hopelessness experienced by those who have had no access to professional development for any

number of reasons. However, the financial challenges of all the schools seemed to be the

deterrent. It was interesting to hear the perspectives of these 13 teachers from three distinct

schools and how they conveyed what their school does or does not provide for professional

development in areas related to this phenomenon of ASD.

Question nine prompted the participants to reflect on the tools and resources they have

used to be successful in meeting the challenges of this phenomenon. The issue of the use of

evidence-based practices by teachers in public schools is in question as protocol is not always

followed even when the resources and tools are available (Hess et al., 2008; Lubas et al., 2016).

Hence, it was worth noting if Christian school teachers embraced evidence based practices, as

the values and belief systems of some Christian schools resulted in teacher distrust and

speculation of such practices (Boerema, 2011). This issue would enable me to probe into how

the teacher's views on evidence based practices relate to the teacher's theoretical viewpoints and

beliefs concerning children with ASD. This research was most beneficial as some researchers (Agee, 2011; Maxwell, 2005) believe that theory is intimately related to the research questions; as a pivotal interview question may point toward one or more of the theoretical constructs that frame the study.

Qualitative research questioning has evolved recently into an interactive inquiry type of process (Agee, 2009). Stringer (2011) pronounced that all who are involved in the phenomenon should be involved in the process of investigation. Thus, Agee (2009) maintained that productive qualitative questions should revel in the reflexive as well as interactive thought. Subsequently, question ten, the final question, prompted the participants to engage in deep reflexive and interactive thought as they pondered their philosophical, theological, and professional viewpoints.

Teacher Event Log

As a second means of data collection, a teacher event log (Appendix G) was given to all the teacher participants. As each teacher participant was interviewed, instructions for the teacher event log was explained. The teacher participants were instructed to record daily over a two-week period any interaction and experiences or observations they had with students who have ASD. The interaction could have been as simple as exchanges while passing in the hallway to in-depth interaction through teaching, disciplining, or any other social or academic contact during the school day. The teacher event log (Appendix G) were to describe any encounters in detail with as much descriptive information as possible:

- Describe the student in detail (gender, age, personality, etc.); a pseudonym for a name should be used.

- Describe where and how long the interaction occurred.

- Describe in detail, with as many adjectives and descriptive detail as possible, your interaction with the student and how you felt from start to finish.

Due to possible handwriting issues (Creswell, & Poth, 2018), I requested that the teacher event log entries be completed electronically. Research has shown that it is crucial for people to represent the self, as well as other people in social interaction (Guzman et al., 2015). Van Dijk (2009) asserted that social situations, social interactions, and social structures can only be influenced through people's perceptions of those constructs through mental models, attitudes, knowledge, and ideologies. Therefore, the socio-cognitive elements of visual, auditory, evaluative, and emotional experiences may provide interaction and communication through this crucial feature of human cognition (van Djerk, 2009).

Thus, a teacher event log (Appendix G) for the participants is a meaningful outlet to be able to express all the emotions, thoughts, and feelings that are associated with this phenomenon of ASD. The hope was to procure more unsolicited and raw data from which to extract even more description and rich data (Creswell, 2013). The teacher event logs (Appendix G) were collected from each school site after the focus interview session and was transcribed, examined, and coded for pertinent themes which emerged in relation to the teachers' experiences with the students.

Focus Groups

As a third, and final step to gathering data, I conducted one focus group composed of the previously interviewed teacher participants who were invited from each of the three schools. A total of eight teachers attended the focus group which was held one evening at my school. Focus groups are useful as participants are more likely to talk openly and express their opinions as they hear others in the group (Gall et al., 2015). The focus group is a type of group interview,

typically ranging from 4-6 or 6-8 participants for a 60 to120-minute interview where a moderator asks a set of open-ended targeted questions (Appendix F) about a specific topic (Bloor, 2001; Fontana & Frey, 2005; Krueger & Casey, 2009). Research over the years continues to confirm that the focus group is the most common method of collecting qualitative data in the academic arena (Krueger & Casey, 2000; Morgan, 1996; Weng, 2014). The questionnaire content is crucial to the design of the focus group and is pivotal in its success toward adding valuable information to the research study (Weng, 2014).

For transcription purposes, the meetings were recorded using two different devices, an i-pad with a voice recorder feature and a Sony mono digital voice recorder (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To ensure a clear recording, the microphone and recording equipment was tested to gauge the sensitivity of the acoustics of the room (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The meeting was also video recorded through the use of an iPad. Each participant stated their name before they answered a question to provide accuracy during the transcription process of the interview. It was important for me to guide the questions and conversations to ensure an accurate representation of the entire group (Eddles & Hirsch, 2014). There were no teachers who dominated the floor of discussion and I was able to direct the conversations to ensure that everyone was involved (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The use of the video was helpful in notating nuances, and facial or body gestures during the interviews, that are often useful elements during an (Gall et al., 2015). Conversely, in order to establish further credibility of this study, the transcripts from the focus group were returned to the participants for their perusal and review to ensure accuracy of the discussion. This research utilized thirteen questions:

Open-ended Focus Interview Questions

1. Please state your name, which school you are associated with, and describe your job title.

2. How would you describe how you have been involved with students who have ASD in your present Christian school or another one?

3. Describe in detail what you know about the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics of ASD.

4. Describe the feelings and emotions you experienced when you found out that you would be teaching a student who has ASD.

5. How do you describe your feelings and emotions those first few days or weeks in your interaction with students who have ASD?

6. Think back over the times you have been involved with a student with ASD, and describe your most memorable experience, and explain why it was so memorable.

7. In your past experiences with teaching a student who has ASD, describe a time that was disappointing (it could be related to the school atmosphere, protocol, curriculum, etc.).

8. How would you explain in detail what you feel is most productive about incorporating students with ASD into the Christian school milieu?

9. How would you explain and describe in detail what you feel is the responsibility of Christian schools toward Christian families who desire a Christian education for all of their students, including those who have ASD?

10. What, if anything, can you describe about what you have discovered about your Christian values and beliefs in relation to students who have ASD and the Christian school learning environment?

11. If you had the capability to wave a magic wand to implement one overarching change in relation to integration and instruction of students with ASD at your school, describe in detail, what would it be and what it would look like?

12. In lieu of updated federal laws concerning students with disabilities, how would you describe any problems you detect may be on the horizon for Christian schools and inclusion of students with ASD?

13. In lieu of this discussion and the information you have received, how would you describe in detail what you would say to other Christian schools who do not enroll students with ASD or to your own school to encourage further accommodations?

Questions one and two permitted rapport to be established among myself and the entire group of teachers. Then, in an attempt to provide a well-rounded view of who knew what in the group of participants, question three was framed to establish the teacher's knowledge base of the phenomenon and to provide the other teacher participants with an understanding of the expertise that was available at other Christian schools in their area. One of the purposes of a focus group and interview questions is to explore a range of experiences within a phenomenon, so this question relates to that area (Agee, 2009).

Questions four, five, six, and seven provided an opportunity for the teachers to provide some real and varied descriptive accounts of their experiences at their Christian schools with this phenomenon. Geertz (1973) asserted that inquiry from participants on this level should focus on the "particularities of the local and on the thick description of human interactions in that context" (p. 6). This was an opportunity for the teachers to even bond a bit as they realized that they were not alone and experienced many of the same issues. Geertz (1973) described this process of qualitative inquiry as getting at the microscopic details that yield information about the social and cultural aspects of the individuals.

Questions eight, nine, and ten required dialogue concerning the theological framework of this study. The teachers were given the opportunity to speak freely about their internal beliefs

and worldview about God's creation of children who have challenges and are not all deemed

"normal." They were challenged to think about their values and beliefs about all Christian

children having a right to a Christian education, regardless of their deficits (Brown, 2016; Burke

& Segall, 2011). These questions probed at the very core of their belief system and opened up

rich conversation and led to introspection. Agee (2009) warned that many researchers often

ignore the ethical aspect of question development, especially in marginalized populations.

However, the right frame of questioning will permit the researcher to glean valuable information.

Question eleven permitted the teacher just to be creative and relax and even be

vulnerable. This line of commenting gave the teacher an opportunity to express what may have

been hopes and aspirations that have been pent inside of them for some time. The opportunity to

be expressive should be freeing and liberating for the teacher. Question twelve was thought

provoking and forced the teachers once again to think about the scope of their knowledge base of

ASD and what current federal legislation mandates require of educators and schools concerning

children with disabilities (Terry, 2014) and what their school's philosophy is on this matter.

Although Christian schools are not obligated to the same standards of public schools (Lane,

2017; Russo et al., 2011), this issue, again, is one of ethical consideration, and worth

investigating. The responses to this question gave the teachers something of substance to think

about and hopefully encouraged them to continue the conversation among their own

administrations in regard to Christian education and meeting the needs of students with ASD

among Christian families.

Data Analysis

The organization and analysis of the research data commenced as I gathered all the

transcribed interviews and analyzed the information through the procedures of phenomenal

analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The approach Moustakas (1994) recommended included: (a)

bracketing, (b) horizonalization, (c) clustering into themes, (d) textural and structural

descriptions, and (e) textural and structural synthesis of the experience. This process of data

analysis was performed using the transcriptions from the individual teacher and focus group

interviews, as well as the teacher event logs.

Bracketing and Phenomenological Reduction

The process of bracketing and phenomenological reduction work together to permit

prejudgments to be set aside for the purpose of launching the study as far as possible into an

open, receptive, and free perception of the phenomenon being investigated (Moustakas, 1994).

Hence, giving way to pure subjectivity by viewing the phenomenon in its own meaning

(Moustakas, 1994). As a first step, I bracketed myself from the experience since I have worked

with students who have ASD and have my own perceptions and biases concerning the

phenomenon. The use of the reflective journal (Appendix E) included my own thoughts on this

topic. The process of phenomenological reduction as referenced by Moustakas (1994) refers to

this as "…seeing things as they appear free of prejudgments and preconceptions" (p. 90). This

first step is vital in grasping the essence and meaning of the phenomenon solely through the

information that is gathered.

Horizonalization

Next, the concept of horizonalization was utilized to comb through and thoroughly

exhaust all of the data to elucidate how the participants experienced the phenomenon. As part of

the iterative interpretive process, I sought to engage in making sense of the data by studying the

transcripts and listening repeatedly to the recordings so that each word and statement of

significance to this phenomenon could be extracted and examined more thoroughly (Creswell &

Poth, 2018; Eddles-Hirsch, 2015). The statements that are retrieved are known as the "horizons" (Moustakas, 1994). Through this process statements that were repetitive and had no meaning were deleted to obtain a focused look at the phenomenon. It is through this process where Moustakas (1994) advised to give each statement and comment equal value, whereby a deeper understanding of the phenomenon could be attained. Moustakas (1994) recommended that the researcher ask the following questions when recording these statements, (a) "Does it contain a moment of the experience that is a necessary and sufficient constituent for understanding it?", (b) "Is it possible to abstract and label it?" (Moustakas, 1994, p.121).

Clustering into Themes

The process of beginning to code and analyze data is so complex that it is often referred to as the "black hole" of qualitative research (Lather, 1991). Jackson and Mazzei (2012) refer to the analysis as thinking with theory because it can be quite difficult to master correctly. Thus, a researcher uses phenomenological reflection and imaginative variation to construct themes which properly depict the experience (Moustakas, 1994). The horizons that I extracted from the reduction process were clustered into the core related themes of the phenomenon.

The type of rich thick data that St. Pierre and Jackson (2014) cited that is necessary for this type of evaluation is "analysis that treats words (e.g., participants' words in interview transcripts) as brute data waiting to be coded, labeled with other brute words (and even counted), perhaps entered into statistical programs to be manipulated by computers, and so on…" p. 715). This process of coding is a common procedure in qualitative analysis (Gall et al., 2015), simply equated to a method of constant comparison of codes across segments to discover commonalities in the data reflecting meanings and relationships that will be utilized (Gall et al., 2015). Nevertheless, Goldstein (2011) cautioned that often there is a fallacy for researchers to look for

themes when there really are none, advocating for a careful return to more theoretical analysis to interpret that all important data component. Hence, following the steps of phenomenological reduction from complete statements, to invariant themes, to essential textures, and then imaginative or eidetic reflections, one comes to discover the meanings, essences, and experiences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Upon following this process, I was able to extract three reoccurring themes, as well as one unexpected theme. This information was extremely valuable in preparing this study.

Textural and Structural Description

The next procedure in this analysis process was to write textural and composite descriptions for each of the teacher participants. In this analysis, Moustakas (1994) recommended that the researcher use the specific words of the participants to convey their own unique perceptions of the phenomenon. Utilizing the total group of individual textural descriptions obtained, I was able to form a collective composite textural description from the themes and meanings obtained from every teacher participant. This composite structural description depicted a way of understanding how the teacher participants as a whole group experienced what they experienced (Moustakas, 1994) concerning students with ASD.

Textural-Structural Synthesis

The final step to this phenomenological analysis process was to combine the composite textural and structural descriptions to write a composite description which conveys a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994) that was researched – Christian school teacher's experiences educating students who have ASD. The desire here was to develop the composite description in such a way that others would have a better understanding of what it is like for Christian school teachers to educate students who have ASD.   As a final

phase to this analysis, I displayed the data in an enumeration table (Appendix I) to complement the information that was gathered (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The large quantity of data collected from the hours of interviews and focus groups was processed through the Atlas.ti qualitative data analysis software (Gall et al., 2015) used by professionals. Although, a professional company (Rev.com) was used to transcribe the interviews, I personally combed through all of the interviews as much as possible to obtain a greater awareness of the participant's perceptions and experiences hoping to lead toward a more educated synthesizing process (Eddles & Hirsch, 2014). I performed this analysis with the use of the Atlas.ti qualitative software analysis.

Trustworthiness

To add further credence to the trustworthiness of this study, member checking, the process whereby the participants have the opportunity to view the transcriptions and interview summaries, was used (Barr, 2014). To obtain a high level of trustworthiness, this study utilized triangulation, member checking, and participant feedback. These are all valid ways to add trustworthiness to a research study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, triangulation is of great importance to a research study. Fuchs and Ness (2014) stressed that methodological triangulation goes a long way toward ensuring the trustworthiness and validity of a research study. Trustworthiness adds credence to the research study and must be a part of the checks and balances system of the research process (Gall et al., 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lincoln and Guba (2007) defined the essence of trustworthiness in credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. Researchers consider the elements of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability as criteria which ensures the rigor of qualitative work (Anney, 2015; Guba, 1981; Schwandt, Lincoln, & Guba, 2007). As data is collected, it is also important

that information for the proposed research study is not manipulated to serve the researcher's

vested interests in any way (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Credibility

The term credibility is used in lieu of validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose is

to establish "structural corroboration and consensual validation" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.

246). The process of grounding the analysis in accurate and solid interpretation of the data is key

(Gibbs, 2002). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggested that member checking or seeking participant

feedback to be "the most critical technique for establishing credibility" (p. 261). I was able to

work well in obtaining rich feedback from the teacher participants in both interview processes.

Moustakas (1994) gave examples of several research studies in which the participants

were referred to as and vigorously invited to be co-researchers in the study. In this process, at

the end of the study, the co-researchers performed a kind of debriefing in which self-reports of

the data collection were done to review, confirm, or even alter the data to accurately portray the

co-researcher's perception of the phenomenon. Thus, the forms of substantive credibility I used

for this study was member checking of the data, and also an independent research check of the

data through the use of a peer review. This was accomplished through a partnership with other

educators.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is used rather than reliability (Creswell & Poth, 2018) as that the results will be

subject to change and instability. Dependability refers to the stability of data over time and

under different conditions. The process of protecting the identity of the participant by using

pseudonyms is one way that dependability is established. Also, confirmation that all data is

stored in a locked facility is further useful in establishing dependability. Confirmability refers to

the potential for congruence between two or more independent people about the data's accuracy, relevance, and meaning (Elo et al., 2014).

Confirmability also ensures that the data accurately represents the information and interpretations that the participants provided, and that the data is not fabricated by the researcher (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). The findings of the study must reflect the participant's voices, and not the researcher's biases or perspectives (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Polit & Beck, 2012). This is one reason authors often use exact quotations from transcribed text (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). I have done my best to provide a substantial amount of participation quotes to ensure their voice is heard. Confirmability of this study is established through an audit of the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I took care to provide an accurate audit (Appendix H) account of the dates of significant events which occurred during this study.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the potential for extrapolation (Elo et al., 2014). It relies on the reasoning that findings can be generalized or transferred to other settings, groups, locations, populations, etc. ((Elo et al., 2014; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher's job is to provide such rich and thick descriptions of the phenomenon so that the transfer is evident (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Lincoln & Guba (1985) sums up the essence of transferability as, "It is, in summary, not the naturalist's task to provide an index of transferability, it is his or her responsibility to provide the data base that makes transferability judgements possible on the part of potential appliers" (p. 316). Thus, the thick description of the data permits the readers to make the necessary transfer judgments for their purposes as they elicit shared characteristics from the manuscript (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, I have used all the pertinent research steps and criteria to select the teacher participants so that the transferability of the results to other

contexts can be addressed, if necessary (Elo et al., 2014; Moretti et al., 2011). It is important to to replicate this study Christian teacher's experiences with students who have ASD for future opportunities and further study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

The duty of a good researcher is to consider and address the anticipated, as well as emergent issues which may be involved in a study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Moustakas' (1994) provided strong reminders that human science researches are guided by ethical principles when working with human participants. Therefore, this research study on Christian teachers educating students with ASD, was performed in good faith by following the appropriate ethical practices necessary for a good quality transcendental phenomenological study as set forth by the American Educational Research Association (Gall et al., 2015).

This research study was conducted under the auspices of Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and research began upon formal approval by the IRB. After IRB approval, informed consent was obtained from the administrators of the three schools. The participants were then informed of the nature of the research study and informed consent for the interviews, focus group, and reflective journal (Appendix F) was obtained. The participants were informed that as a method of confidentiality, pseudonyms were used to protect their identity. The participants were also informed that all data would be securely stored in a locked container in a locked office and destroyed within five years of completion of the study. As per ethical considerations, the participants were advised that they were under no obligation to finish the study and could elect to discontinue at any time (Gall et al., 2015). Lastly, there was an opportunity for the results of the study to be shared with the participants to ensure an accurate reporting of all the experiences.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of Christian school teachers with students with ASD in Christian Schools located in the Tidewater area of Virginia. The chapter begins with a professional description of the 13 participants who were interviewed. A textural and composite description for each of the participants then follows using the specific words of the participants to convey their own unique perceptions of their experiences with students who have autism. This chapter concludes with a composite description which conveys a synthesis of the meanings and essences of Christian school teacher's experiences educating students who have ASD in such a way that others will have a better understanding of what it is like for Christian school teachers to educate students who have ASD. The chapter concludes with a summary of the findings.

Participants

Once IRB approval was obtained, the interview process commenced. The administrators of the three participating schools assisted in selecting the teacher participants who met the qualifications for the study. The recruitment letter and consent form were emailed to the administrators and they forwarded the forms to the teacher participants. The signed consent forms were collected before the commencement of each interview.

The interviews at each school were all conducted either in a private office or empty classroom. A total of 13 teacher participants were individually interviewed. The teacher participants included one preschool teacher, four elementary teachers, four middle and high school teachers, one school counselor, one cognitive therapist/curriculum instructor, and two administrators who also teach classes at their schools. The professional educational background

of the teacher participants varied and only two participants had degrees in special education.

One participant did not have a degree in education but in management. Another teacher who had

been teaching for almost 20 years only had an associate degree. Lastly, two of the participants

held doctorate degrees.

Table 1

Participant Information

Participant	School	Degree	Years' Experience	Grade Level	Gender
Debbie	Middletown	MA Administration	25	Administrator Substitute Teacher	F
Pam	Middletown	BA Early Childhood	28	Cognitive Therapist and Curriculum & Instruction	F
Kolleen -	Middletown	MA Early Childhood	10	1st grade	F
Tia	Middletown	Associate – Early Childhood	20	K4	F
Samantha	Middletown	MA Elementary Education	5	3rd/4th	F
Frank	Ridge Academy	BA Communications MA Administration Ed D Ed. Leadership	21	4th/5th	M
Linda	Ridge Academy	Management	5	4th-10th Social Studies/Science	F
Jillian	Ridge Academy	BA Special Education	24	Reading/Math Resource	F
Sharon	Ridge Academy	MA Special Education	18	Administrator 8th-9th World Geography	F
Hope	Ridge Academy	BA Elementary Education	22	K5/1st	F
Matthew	Ambassador	Ed D Biochemistry	18	Biology Earth Science	M
Crystal	Ambassador	MA Education MA Counseling	17	Counselor	F

| Kate | Ambassador | BA Elementary Education | 10 | 6th-8th Special Education | F |

A description of each of the participants is provided below. In order to preserve anonymity, pseudonyms were used for all the teacher participants and the location and name of the schools.

Samantha

As Samantha sat down to interview, she presented herself as a quiet, yet confident professional educator. She has a master's degree in education and has been teaching for five years; however, this is her fourth year teaching at Middletown Christian School (MCS). Samantha teaches a combined third and fourth grade classroom but is more active in fourth grade because she acts as more of an "overseer" for third grade. She was attracted to Christian education because her first year as a public school teacher was "absolutely horrible" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018) and she just wanted any kind of job other than the one she had with the school. Through a friend, she was introduced to MCS and was attracted to "how hands on it is, and how interactive, and I guess the overall mission" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018). Even though she had no aspirations to be a private school teacher, she expressed that she felt God specifically say, "Nope, I want you here. And so, it was just very clear to me that this is where I needed to be" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018). Sam described the general atmosphere and culture of MCS as community oriented and so small that everyone at the school is like family. When asked about the attitude the teachers at her school convey about students with ASD in their school, she replied, "I think we just view them as another child to teach…yeah, I think our attitude is basically they're here in our class, God put them here, and how can we serve them" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018)? Sam explains that her personal

values and beliefs guide her in teaching students with ASD as she is reminded that since God put those children in her class, her goal is to find how to best love and teach them the way God would want them to be loved and taught. Sam explains that the difficulty of having students at MCS is not really the students but many sources of frustration come from the student's parents who often are in denial about their children's behaviors and difficulties. However, she does describe a major frustration with the students who has ASD is their inability to retain information – "yesterday they were getting it, and today they're not, and they're just like, 'I knew it yesterday', can be rather frustrating" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018). When asked if she had any professional development in teaching students with ASD, Sam replied that she had only read a few blog posts and a children's book with a character who has ASD but other than that she had not really delved into the issue. Sam shared that her experiences in educating students with ASD has helped her discover the deep thinking and creativity of these students which is often overlooked.

Pam

Pam has been the cognitive therapist and curriculum and instruction director for MCS since 2013. She has a bachelor's degree I early childhood education and a double major in African history. After teaching for over 12 years and taking a hiatus to be home with her children, Pam took a course to become a cognitive therapist which led to her working for National Institute for Learning Development (NILD) and then ultimately obtaining her master's degree in curriculum and instruction. She initially began working at MCS as a drop-in therapist until the case load became so heavy, that she was hired full time. Pam works with all of the teachers to identify students who are struggling to design an individual educational therapy plan (IEP) or oversee those who already enroll with an IEP. When asked why she became a Christian

school teacher, Pam replied, "I didn't…God chose it for me" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

She believes that some of the inherent values of Christian school teachers are the fact that every

child is special and has the ability to learn because they're made in the image of God. She

further declared, "they may not all have the ability, but given the right circumstances and the

right encouragement, everybody can learn" (Interview, December 5, 2018). She affirmed that

prayer with - and prayer for her students is the one element that makes her teaching distinctively

Christian. When asked to describe the general atmosphere of MCS, Pam immediately spoke of

the fruit-bearer theme of the school, which she attributes to the academic, spiritual, and social

well-being of the school. "…the social really is for the students that I work with, the hardest

part…for me, that was what marked the difference here" (Interview, December 5, 2018). She

described the teacher's attitudes concerning students with ASD in their school as "accepting."

Their thoughts of a new student who has an ABA therapist this year were, "…we know it's going

to be a challenge, but Lord, you've called them to this school so therefore, you're going to

prepare us and you're going to provide what we need – it's December, and He has more than

abundantly" (Pam, Interview, 2018). Pam attributed her successful experiences with students

with ASD to a growth mindset, persistence, perseverance, and flexibility. She described her

challenging and not so successful experiences mostly as frustrating, especially in knowing how

to provide the proper assistance these students need for them to be able appropriately respond to

their environment. She declared that what helps her manage the challenges is, "knowing that

God has a plan for our lives, and we need to find out what that plan is and then walk in it…that's

how I pray for them and that's how we talk about things" (Pam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Since MCS is educating more and more students with ASD, Pam is getting professional

development through webinars, ABA classes, and area workshops. When asked how her

experiences in working with students have changed her as a professional Christian educator, Pam proclaimed, "…it took me 50 years to figure out what I wanted to do with my life, and now that I have, I know that this is what God created me for" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

Debbie

Debbie has approximately 25 years of experience in education. Her entrance into Christian education began through work with a publishing company in developing Christian literature and traveling nationwide to Christian schools and training teachers how to teach creatively. She has been the administrator at MCS for ten years. In addition to being the administrator, she is often in the classrooms or other locations when a substitute teacher is needed. When asked about the decision to become a Christian educator, she replied, "I don't know that I fully decided before God decided, like I was thrust into the role…was just a response to God's call on my life, and my life belongs to him, so I'm serving Him" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). She believes the defining intrinsic and inherent values of Christian school teachers is commitment – "…not here obviously for the pay…the job…just a true desire to make an impact on children's lives not just academically…the whole child" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Debbie described the overall atmosphere and culture at MCS as more than character education but an environment enriched with the fruit of the Spirit. She described the teacher's attitudes toward students with ASD in their school as welcoming with an outpouring of love to them. However, she discussed the struggle to meet the needs of students with ASD earlier in their existence – "I loved kids with autism, but I didn't want to pretend we had resources that we didn't and a small class size in a Christian environment wasn't enough" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Since then, the addition of an educational therapist has helped. She further detailed, "the numbers have increased…we began really just following

God's call doing what we could, case by case…" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Debbie described her worst feelings and emotions as a sense of frustration at times; frustration

that "…we are not making any headway" (Interview, December 5, 2018). She attributed this

feeling to the fact that ASD training requires so much from so many people. She described her

own personal feelings vividly in this way, "internally, you're just ready to collapse…just the

exhaustion of it…physically and emotionally exhausted…" (Debbie, Interview, December 5,

2018). Debbie expressed that having students with ASD at MCS had indeed changed her as a

professional Christian educator. She stated that her thought process and perception about all

people have changed from years ago and that she has become more humble. When asked what

advice she would give to other Christian school teachers educating students with ASD, she

admonished them to have faith and trust in God to provide resources, but to also use wisdom in

knowing which students to accept. She firmly believes, "just because it's Christian doesn't make

it better in the world's eyes" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Kolleen

Kolleen has taught for ten years in both public and private schools. She has a master's

degree in Early Childhood Education. She has been on staff at MCS as a first grade teacher for

six years; however, this year she is serving as a substitute teacher. She decided to become a

Christian school educator because she wanted the opportunity to be able to integrate her faith

into everything that she taught and offer a biblical worldview. Kolleen believes that one of the

most important intrinsic values and beliefs of a Christian school educator is to ensure that every

student is reached with the gospel of Jesus Christ. She believes there must be a balance between

a super strong Christian and a super strong teacher. When asked to describe the general

atmosphere and culture of MCS, she retorted, "Oh, gosh, wonderful…we're so simultaneously

Christ focused but also child focused…this is a family…and there's just an interconnectedness"

(Interview, December 5, 2018)! She further described the attitude of teachers towards the

presence of students with ASD in the school as welcoming – "the belief really is that everybody

benefits. When you have a diverse population, including students with special needs, everybody

benefits from that" (Kolleen, Interview, December 5, 2018). Kolleen described the student

population as more aware and tolerant to the fact that everyone is not alike and that there are

various ways to reach students who are different than they are. She relays that she has never

heard any negative feedback from other parents in the school. When asked to describe a

successful or non-successful experience with a student, she spoke of a boy who was strong

academically but weak socially. This student's behaviors required much patience from the

teachers and the students but was well integrated into the classroom by the end of the year. She

also had another young boy who was high functioning but had severe impulse control

difficulties. She expressed that having a students with ASD in the regular classroom led the

typically developing students to exhibit both patience and empathy which "helped us to solidify

our community as a safe place where people could be who they are" (Kolleen, Interview,

December 5, 2018). When asked to describe a worst day scenario in her with students with

ASD, she described times of behavioral meltdowns and frustrations trying to juggle between

typically developing students and those with ASD. She spoke of the need for more support for

the students and the teachers in those moments so that everyone could stay focused and on task.

Kolleen gained any professional development through ACSI webinars and anything that she

could research online on her own. She encouraged other educators to invest time into the

families of these students so that "they're on your side for the rest of the year…you want to make

them feel like we are all really on this team together…" ((Kolleen, Interview, December 5,

2018). Kolleen expressed that her experiences in working with students with ASD had definitely changed her as a Christian educator and it all really revolves around the worldview of the teacher (Interview, December 5, 2018):

> I think it's just helped me develop and expand the pedagogy that I already had as a foundation…every child has a right to learn, and every child can learn…every child is valuable…making sure that you're treating every single child as a unique and amazing individual that they are…

Tia

Tia is the K-4 preschool lead teacher at MCS. She has been teaching at MCS for approximately 16 years. She came to MCS as a parent looking for a secure and nurturing place for her child and ended up being led by the Lord to join the staff. She has an early education childhood certificate and is just a few courses away from her Associates degree in education. Tia believes some of the inherent values and beliefs of Christian school teachers are humility, grace, and forgiveness – curbing the tendency to tally behavior issues. She believes that the element which makes her teaching distinctively Christian is biblical integration. She considers the fruit of the Spirit to be a leading influence among the atmosphere and culture of the school – "it's a build upon, instead of just teaching…it integrates from one grade to the next grade to the…" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018). When asked to describe the attitude of teachers concerning students with ASD at MCS, Tia spoke of the challenge, "…sometimes we would like to have more resources in the classroom…so you have to go seeking and asking…more personal training would be helpful…basic knowledge is just not enough" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018). When asked how students with ASD are changing MCS, she became tearful as she expressed her thoughts, "changing the way we view children, I think is changing our heart…you

cannot penalize a child for what they don't know and what they don't understand, so it's made us more compassionate, more understanding…" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018). Her values and beliefs affect her interaction with these students greatly because she chooses to love unconditionally. She asserts, "you just have to love them as they are, see them as they are…despite whatever differences that comes in, I just want them to see God's love because you're not going to get anybody to Christ if you're judgmental" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018). She spoke of the challenges of one student in her class this year who is high functioning but has social issues and communication barriers. She also described a successful experience with another student in her class this year who has made strides in behavior and social cues. Tina expressed that "sometimes I don't know I'm being successful…I might not be able to identify I'm doing it right because I'm just doing what I think is best and still treating him like everybody else" (Interview, December 5, 2018). Tia has had some general professional development courses through Tidewater Community College. One class focused on retraining thinking and visually catching things. She encourages other educators to use any practices that utilize the student's critical thinking skills. When asked how working with students who have ASD had changed her personally as a Christian educator, Tia responded, "how it's changed me the most is my prayer life…they tug at your heart…you just can't let them go because there are many families that come, they're not in church, so you need someone to stand in the gap" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

Jillian

Jillian was an experienced teacher of approximately 24 years. Her degree is in special education with an endorsement in severe and profound disabilities and learning disabilities. Her position at Ridge Christian Academy (RCA) over the past two years has been special education

teacher where she teaches a pull out reading and math Resource class. She has "never not wanted to work at a Christian school" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018) and expressed joy over being able to practice her faith because "it's just not any differentiation between my background and my belief and my faith and my school…" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018). She believes teachers should stay true to their basic beliefs in order to influence their students and parents. Jillian described the general atmosphere of RCA toward students with autism as loving. In her words, "they walk on eggshells if they have to, they will go across fire for these kids…they do everything, they walk across glass to help a special child" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018). Conversely, the presence of students with autism has changed the school by making them more tolerant and aware of the needs of students with autism and other disabilities. She believes in giving students with autism an opportunity to flourish by permitting them to experience independence, even if it's for a short time. Jillian described a successful experience with one of her students this year whom she has assisted in reading and writing. This is surprising because last year, no one knew he could do either. She attributed this to raising the bar –"don't keep them down, raise the bar…a year ago they thought he'd never hold a pencil, they had no idea he could read…" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018). Jillian described feelings of personal frustration in working with students with autism. Most of the frustration is attributed to parents who do not want individualized education plans or accommodations for their children with autism; meanwhile, these students thrown themselves on the floor and cause chaos and the parents deny that anything is wrong. When asked how her experiences in working with students with autism had changed her professionally as a Christian educator, Jillian replied,

He has taught me how not to be that person that gives up…He's showed me this is the least of what I have to offer and I'm giving it to you. What an honor to be asked…you learn about what it is to serve and watch these kids fight and no one really understands their struggle or their determination… (Interview, December 12, 2018).

Linda

Linda was an enthusiastic and spunky young lady. She showed an enthusiasm and zest for her work at RCA. She has a master's degree in management, and has been in Christian education for five years; but at RCA for two years. Her teaching duties involved fourth through tenth grade science and social studies where she interacted with two students who have ASD. Linda decided to become a Christian educator because of her passion to work with children and to spread the gospel. She joyfully exclaimed, "…to bring those two passions together, I mean, what more could you ask for" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018)? When asked about her thoughts on the intrinsic values and beliefs of Christian school teachers, she unequivocally stated that it was sharing the love of Christ without restraints to parents and other family as well as the children – "…that's what makes it really, really important for you" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018). She shared that what makes her teaching distinctively Christian is the fact that everything always reverts back to God. Linda described the attitude of teachers concerning students with ASD at RCA as loving and understanding, treating them as normal and ensuring "…they are a part of the entire school population" (Interview, December 12, 2018). She felt that students with ASD "play a big part in their school, and were changing RCA into a better place. She also felt that her own values and personal beliefs were being stretched and her frustration level was tempered by her love for the children. She expressed that there is some difficulty in teaching an inclusion class with students who have ASD due to their social complexities. She

described how she has watched one of her students evolved in science class as they worked

through the process of photosynthesis. She also described an unpleasant experience where one

student became fixated on something and just could not let it go – he annoyed the other students-

"…there was no moving forward…" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018). When asked how

resources and professional development affected her ability to teach these students effectively,

she replied, "…it hurts financially, because I teach science, you depend on either what's coming

out of my pocket or the little budget that we have…the students miss out on a lot…that's

constantly a complaint" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018). Linda took a couple of

professional development classes on ASD last year, but mostly relies on the interaction that she

has with a cousin who has ASD. She admitted that working with students who has ASD has

changed her personally and professionally as a Christian educator: "It makes me pray more…I

understand the struggle that the child is having…" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Frank

Frank was a seasoned teacher who had worked 21 years in higher education before being

led to RCA. His professional education included a bachelor's degree in communications,

master's in college administration, and a doctorate in education and leadership studies. His

duties at RCA include teaching Bible classes for fourth through tenth grade; as well as chapel

There are four students that he teaches who have ASD but are high functioning. His entrance

into Christian education came as the door in higher education closed – "The opportunity

presented itself and I just felt the Lord pushing me in this direction" (Frank, Interview,

December 12, 2018). Frank considered having a biblical worldview and biblical integration as

some of the inherent values and beliefs of Christian school educators and it was also the element

which made his teaching distinctively Christian. Frank emphasized that the introspection into

the scriptures helped "…the students make more sense" (Frank, Interview, December 12, 2018).

He described the attitude of teachers concerning students with ASD at RCA as "caring, wanting

the best for them, loving environment, accountability in life" (Frank, Interview, December 12,

2018). He also touted a successful 'you can do this' attitude with their neurotypical students.

When asked how students with ASD are changing the school, he replied that is was helping the

neurotypical students understand other student differences and that the educators were learning

how to tailor learning techniques and experiences. Frank gave a vivid example of how the often

erratic behaviors of students with ASD "that we think might not be productive or conducive are

actually helping the student make the connections with the materials, helping provide some

scaffolding for them" (Interview, December 12, 2018). Frank described his interactions with

students with ASD as actually pleasant; he reiterated several times "it's not the ASD folks"

(Interview, December 12, 2018) who provide challenges in the classroom. He spoke of one high

school student with ASD whom he described as "one of the better students in the class" (Frank,

Interview, December 12, 2018), as disengaged yet knowledgeable about everything taught in

class. He expressed that while one on one connection is great now because they are a small

school; the future will definitely call for more resources and special education staff. Frank had

professional development training on students with ASD years ago when he taught at the

university level, but has not had any opportunity for professional development on ASD at RCA.

When asked if his experiences with students with ASD had changed him personally and

professionally as a Christian educator, Frank conveyed that differentiation and tailoring

instruction were things of importance to him.

Sharon

Sharon was the administrator of RCA, but also performed double duties by teaching half

a day in classes in the middle and high school. She has been teaching at RCA since 2010, when

actually she and her husband started the school. She has a master's degree in special education

and also touts that she has a "PhD in autism" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018) because

she has raised a son who has autism. Sharon became a Christian school teacher because she

wanted to be able to share the Christian world-view with children and to be able to teach students

that would have difficulty in other Christian schools in an environment suitable for their

educational and behavior needs, along with a Christian atmosphere. She believed that the

overarching inherent or intrinsic value of Christian school teachers was the motivation to follow

the will of God. She proceeded with the thought that "…all of us are highly employable in other

places with less stress and better compensation" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018). When

asked to describe the atmosphere of the school faculty towards those students who have ASD

(approximately 25% of their school population), she used the words "…love…highly

flexible…open minded…" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018). She believed that the

presence of students with ASD was changing their school and described the neurotypical

students as patient and nurturing. Sharon contributed her interaction with these students to the

fact that she has a son with autism which causes her to have a unique perspective. When asked

to describe a worst day or worst case scenario, Sharon revealed "…it is usually with the parents,

I get the students with ASD" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018). She described a situation

with a student who had several meltdowns, then became violent, and then hit another student

just because his aide had been switched that day. She also described a couple of student success

stories at RCA. One such student was barely speaking upon enrollment at RCA, now a few

years later, he is speaking, reading, and writing; his only trigger is the fire alarm, which he still cannot handle. Sharon also described the shortage of resources, personnel, and time as obstacles to professional development and meeting student challenges. She lamented, "If I could take the money that public schools have, and bring it here, the money would follow the child. Imagine the difference that we could make" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018)! When asked what advice she could pass on to other Christian schools, she shared some heartfelt, yet honest words of admonition:

> You have to find people with a heart for this, if they have no patience and they have no heart then they're better off with the neurotypical student…you have to have the patience of Job and you have to be called to do it. If you're not, stay away from it, you'll cause more damage than help… (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Sharon explained that her experiences had definitely changed her personally and professionally as a Christian educator, "…I don't know I just love it, but I've always loved it. I've always had a passion for it…this is probably the hardest job I've ever done, but I do love it (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018). She concluded very thoughtfully "…God has me here for this season…you know it's definitely met with some…it's difficult, I just don't know how to say it" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Hope

Hope was in her 22nd year of education at RCA. She had worked in public and private schools in both Louisiana and Virginia, but had now been at RCA for a total of eight years. She teaches a combination class of both kindergarten and first grades. She has a bachelor's degree in Education. As she sat down for the interview , she was gushing with excitement and could not wait to answer my questions and share her experiences. Her interaction with students who have

ASD at RCA include five students. Hope shared that she decided to become a Christian school teacher after becoming frustrated and disheartened with the public school system. She listed raising good citizens and good Christians as some of the intrinsic values and beliefs of Christian school teachers and noted teaching a biblical worldview as the thing that makes her teaching distinctively Christian. Hope had nothing but positive things to say about the general atmosphere and culture of RCA, "…a lot of us have a heart for children with special needs…we do what works with the kids, even if they're not quite finished the assessment process" (Interview, December 12, 2018). She believed that students with ASD were having a positive influence at RCA as she observed the other students learning patience and the value of other's differences. She described the accommodations for these students as mostly behavioral, but they try not to "jump to a discipline" (Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018) instead, accentuating the positive as an initial reaction. She did not feel that the presence of students with ASD in the classroom hindered the progress of the neurotypical students because of the flexibility of their curriculum schedule. Hope explained how she had watched several of these students evolve through different difficult stages and they've "gained maturity and learning coping mechanisms…" (Interview, December 12, 2018). When asked to describe a challenging experience or what a bad day might look like, she referenced a student who actually was not at the school anymore. This student had severe behavioral issues, to the degree where safety concerns were paramount. She described a lot of loud yelling which disturbed other classes. She described it as a very stressful time. Hope described the RCA as very supportive in the area of providing resources for their teachers. She said that her administrator was very good about determining whether or not they could properly service children with ASD. When asked if teaching students with ASD had impacted her personally or professionally, Hope answered

affirmatively, "…it's opened up my heart more and reminds me of the Bible verses about the least of these…if I don't tend to the ones with the most needs, like children on the spectrum, I am not doing the biblical mandate" (Interview, December 12, 2018).

Kate

Kate was a passionate middle school educator at Ambassador Christian School (ACS). As she began to engage in conversation, her South African accent flowed strongly as she shared her enthusiasm for what she did. Kate received her Bachelor of Education degree in her homeland of South Africa. She taught sixth grade in South Africa for a while, and subsequently spent three years working with education programs and building schools in central Africa in the active conflict zones of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She was in her third year of teaching at ACS where her duties included eighth grade learning and writing labs, as well as educational support for students in grades six through eight. Her decision to become a Christian school teacher was basically because of Jesus, "When he called me from the red zones of central Africa to the United States, it was Christian school" (Kate, Interview, December 18, 2018). She expressed that she believed that the overarching intrinsic value and belief of Christian school teachers must be "Jesus first…my relationship with Jesus…the way I live that out then becomes Christian education" (Kate, Interview, December 18, 2018). Her answer was the same when asked what she believed made her teaching distinctively Christian, that they see Jesus. Kate described the culture and attitude of the teachers at ACS concerning students who have autism as fluctuating, "For many teachers there's an embracing of differences…an embracing of learning challenges... for others, very honestly, that is hard work…a real challenge and almost an irritation" (Kate, Interview, December 18, 2018). Kate was very honest about her feelings of having students with autism at ACS. She stressed the need for teachers to be challenged and saw

these students as an avenue to provide those opportunities. In reference to how students with

autism were changing the school, Kate expressed some apprehension, in that she felt many times

these students were not given space and opportunities to grow and to shine, "…they're sort of

busy being protected…we tend to shelter because then it's easy…rather than expose it,

encourage and help walk through" (Interview, December 18, 2018). She believes that her own

personal values and beliefs of finding Jesus in everyone helps her in her job to prove that

everyone can be successful as she works at discovering and honing their treasure. When asked

how the inclusion of students with ASD affected the neurotypical students, Kate described how

the students were supportive and understanding of the accommodations which were made,

exclaiming "the kids knew" (Interview, December 18, 2018). She believed her work with her

ASD students has grown relationally and the skill of communication has increased. She asserted

that she has never had a bad day and her overall experience has been positive. However, she

does attribute the lack of funding and resources as an obstacle to meeting the challenges of

students with ASD at ACS. As a result, classrooms are staffed with untrained and ill equipped

teachers with no specific professional development in ASD training. Kate described an

atmosphere of complacency or indifference towards providing training for any kind of special

education expressing, "Do you need a special education program to be able to get the training

you need for the one" (Interview, December 18, 2018)? The final question was for Kate to

describe how her experiences with students with ASD had changed her personally or

professionally. She unequivocally stated that she had acquired an extra measure of patience –

with the students and herself. Additionally she emphasized, "sometimes I need to do more…it

has given me a hunger and a desire to possibly go back and do some special needs training"

(Kate, Interview, December 18, 2018).

Matthew

Matthew came to ACS approximately two years ago as a highly experienced educator touting a doctorate in biochemistry as well as experience from teaching at one of the local universities. His duties at ACS included teaching Biology and Earth Science where he has interaction with two students on a regular basis who have ASD. Matthew's decision to become a Christian school educator was two-fold: increase student's zeal for biology and earth science and help students navigate their roles as Christian regarding important issues of the day. He felt that emphasizing the growth of student's spiritual relationship with the Trinity was part of the intrinsic inherent values and beliefs of Christian school teachers. He saw the opportunity to integrate God into his teaching area as the element that made his teaching distinctively Christian. Matthew expressed that he felt the general culture and atmosphere of the teachers concerning students with autism in the school was welcoming, "parents are paying for the education…it would behoove the school to do everything to make the child's experiences as positive as possible" (Interview, December 18, 2018). When asked how he thought students with ASD were changing the school, he described attitudes of acceptance and integration as two pertinent goals realizing that change can be natural or difficult. He felt that his own personal values and beliefs were influential in his interaction with the students with ASD at the school – "…as Christians and decent people…we have to find ways…to reach all our students…" (Mathew, Interview, December 18, 2018). Matthew did not believe that the inclusion of students with ASD in his classes were an intrusion to the neurotypical students or to his instruction. He reasoned that due to the small size of the school, students were familiar with the background of other students which made everyone feel a little more comfortable. Matthew expressed that he had not had any bad case scenarios or experiences in his interaction with the students who have ASD. He also

could not say that he had any personal frustrations or challenges adding that would be more of a personal issue with teachers, claiming, "everybody's different" (Mathew, Interview, December 18, 2018). The only professional development on autism Matthew had received was a couple of workshops that he attended but noted that there was no real take home message. He did affirm that the administration was aware that faculty awareness training on autism would lead to better staff interaction. When asked about any practical discoveries that he could pass on to other Christian educators, Matthew expressed that all of his expertise thus far was "…not because of anything I've learned. It's just an extension of my nature, I supposed" (Interview, December 18, 2018). He also agreed that his experiences with students with autism had changed him personally and professionally by strengthening the importance of being slow to take offense and being observant before reacting.

Crystal

Crystal was the middle and high school guidance counselor who was in her second year at ACS. After teaching for a few years, she obtained her Master's in education, taught for another 15 years, and then went back to school to earn her degree in counseling. She decided to become a Christian school teacher because she believed in Christian education and wanted to be able to pray and share Jesus in the classroom. She believed that having a biblical worldview contributed to the intrinsic values and beliefs of Christian school teachers; adding that prayer with her students and conversations about having Christian value-laden actions are two elements that make her teaching distinctively Christian. She described the attitude of the teachers at ACS toward students with ASD as mixed – "…some are frustrated…but then other teachers especially in the middle school, are very willing to work with students with autism and adjust for their needs" (Crystal, Interview, December 18, 2018). She contributed the frustration to the fact that

ACS is a college preparatory school and the belief is that all students should rise to the

expectation that comes with that. Crystal did not believe that students with ASD were actually

changing her school, but that overall their presence was a positive one. She described how her

own personal values and beliefs affected her interaction with her students with autism as

supporting and encouraging. She did not believe the inclusion of students with ASD affected the

educational mandates for the typically developing students. She described just one instance with

a student who was a challenge due to the student evolving socially and wanting to be comical.

She also described another student who upon his initial enrollment was problematic. A few

years has passed and now "…he can deal with certain social situations…he's in the drama and

he's found his niche, so he's become very more open" (Crystal, Interview, December 18, 2018).

She contributed this to the school being patient and permitting him time to acclimate and grow.

When asked about the challenges of resources and finances for meeting the needs of students

with ASD, Crystal was encouraged that the administration was doing more. She explained that

the finances had increased and that they had even hired two teachers with expertise in executive

functioning in the past year. Crystal described the biggest frustration of doing her job properly

in meeting the needs of the ASD community at ACS was ensuring that all teachers followed the

accommodations set forth in the individual educational plan. She had not had any professional

development on ASD but felt quite confident that the administration would be willing to provide

the resources. When asked what practical discoveries she could pass on to other Christian

educators, Crystal asserted that flexibility was a huge virtue. She cautioned that if Christian

schools are going to permit students with special needs to enroll, then provisions should be made

for student resources and teacher education. The final question was what she saw on the horizon

with students with autism and Christian school enrollment. Her response was, "they should

provide funding…not only counselors that do the college and career, but they need mental health counselors…that's very important in a Christian school as well…" (Crystal, Interview, December 18, 2018).

Results

The following section addresses the three research questions posed at the beginning of the study. Furthermore, themes were developed and extracted through intense scrutiny of the data collection methods of personal teacher interviews, teacher event logs, and a focus group. The themes are presented as they relate to each of the research questions. The data coding system Atlas.ti was utilized to assist in developing themes; however; an intense manual scrutiny of the documents was the main avenue for achieving theme progression. This section will commence with a discussion of the themes, followed by answers to the research questions using the exact verbiage of participant quotes obtained during the data collection phase.

Themes

In each of the data collection methods: teacher participant interviews, teacher event logs, and the focus group, there were certain words and/or phrases that were repeated. I loaded each teacher interview, event log, and the entire focus interview into the Atlas.ti software program to obtain results for a word list. I then manually scoured each document to extrapolate words and phrases that were repetitive. Next, through the process of horizonalization (Moustakas,1994), I studied each word and phrase carefully to discover how each participant perceived their experiences with students with ASD.   I then used the horizons extracted from the reduction process (Moustakas, 1994) to begin to discover what themes were present among the list. I discovered three anticipated themes and one unexpected theme: a) purpose, b) acceptance, c) perseverance, and d) stewardship.
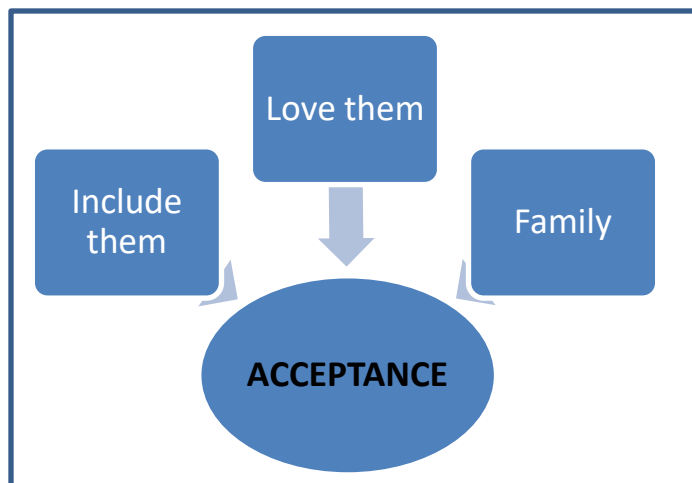
Figure 1. Theme: Acceptance

Love = 48
Love them = 47
Include them = 11
Family = 9

Acceptance. The first theme, acceptance (Figure 1), was discovered as I analyzed words such as: include them, we just love them, they are family, embracing, celebrate them, and a safe place for them. Again, the teacher participants did not flinch as they spoke of unconditional love and belonging for students with ASD at their schools. These words and phrases related directly to acceptance. Additionally, as I spoke to each of the teachers, their attitudes seemed to reflect a mindset or mentality of acceptance that where they were and what they were doing was just part of their "reasonable service" (Romans 12:2, *King James Version*).

Many of the participants commented that they wanted the students to feel like they were a part of the population of the school. Lisa spoke with sincerity, "We love them, and they all have a special place in our hearts…we treat them just as normal, as any other child…they do play a big part here in our school" (Lisa, Interview, December 12, 2018). Cathy spoke of respecting each student by notating that they "never say they have autism, but some of them may tell other people that they have autism" (Cathy, Interview, December 12, 2018).

One of the defining traits of ASD is the tendency for children to operate in a world of loneliness. As I interviewed Sam, she spoke of intentionally including them:

> …it's a community oriented school. It's small, so we kind of all know each other…like it is so small that they really become family…we just view them as another child to teach. I mean each child has their own needs…our attitude is basically they're here in our class, God put them here, and how can we serve them? (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Sam's comment about serving the students, leads to the attitude that a few of the teacher participants described about celebrating the students which makes them feel accepted:

> There certainly are moments where children on the spectrum are given time to shine and really celebrated…I do believe that in everybody there is something that we can celebrate…they're given the space to do so…they're provided the space to be included and to really shine always (Kate, Interview, December 17, 2018).

Jillian was certainly very enthusiastic about the inclusion of students with ASD at RCA. She beamed with pride and excitement as she shared how the students were loved and included at RCA. When asked about the inclusion of students and the atmosphere, it was evident that the students were well accepted as she acclaimed,

> they love them. I thank the Lord every day, they love them. They love them, they make exceptions for them…they love them, and they make it known…they just include them in everything. They do everything to help a special child" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Kate, also from RCA, echoed Jillian's sentiments and attitude, "they want them to be loved. Part of that is accepting and loving other kids…everyone just pitches in to support each other and to support that child" (Kate, Interview, December 12, 2018). Matthew from ACA described

"acceptance and integration as the two best goals that we are striving to do" (Matthew, Interview, December 17, 2018). Mark shared that these two traits actually come naturally to many of their staff at ACA. Kate, who is also on staff at ACA, described an environment where "they're provided the space to be included and to really shine always" (Interview, December 17, 2018). Tia described the commitment at MCA as a desire to love unconditionally – "when they come in, you just have to love them as they are, see them as they are…I try to hold back on any of those preconceived ideas and just love…come as you are and I'm just going to love you…" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018).
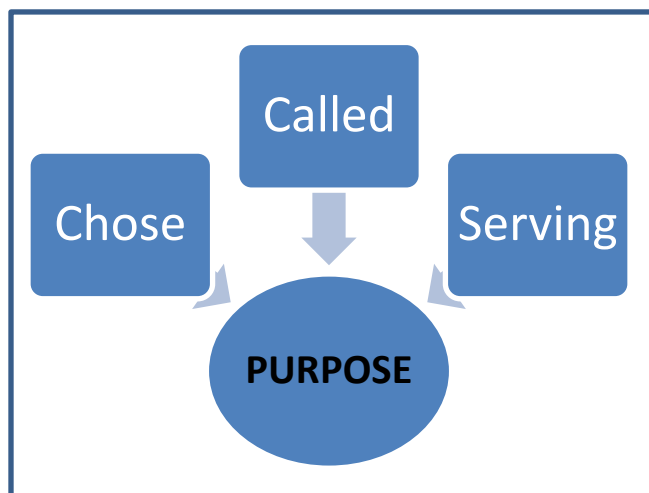

Figure 2. Theme: Purpose

Chose = 4
Called = 8
Serving =

Purpose. As each teacher participant spoke about their involvement with students with ASD in their Christian school, words and phrases such as: called, calling, passion, worldview, I was chosen, He chose me, I have a heart, and serving the Lord rolled off of their tongues with

ease. After extrapolating each form of data, I deducted that these words and phrases could be translated into purpose (Figure 2).

Since these were all Christian school teachers, they presented the essence of what they do as ministry more than a job. One teacher participant, Sharon, provided the impetus she believes which inspires Christian school teachers:

> Literally, I truly believe that our motivation comes from wanting to follow the will of God, honestly…what motivates us is that whatever the will of God is, because I know all of us are highly employable in other places with less stress and better compensation (Interview, December 12, 2018).

Kang (2015) referenced this sense of motivation as a strong trait found in teachers having strong religious beliefs. I found that worldview was also strongly related to purpose in some teacher's work ethos: "I enjoy being able to practice my faith because to me it's just not any differentiation between my background and my belief and my faith and my school and all that stuff" (Jillian, December 12, 2018).

Linda's (Interview, December 14, 2018) impetus for her involvement in what she does at RCA comes clearly from her love for the Lord. When asked why she decided to become a Christian school teachers, she clearly declared that her love for God overshadowed every other reason for being at RCA. She beamed with excitement as she presented her answer to me.

Another area which pointed to purpose was the use of the word *service* or *serving* as the answer to why they do what they do. Debbie replied, "I'm serving Him" (Interview, December 5, 018). She further reasoned, "You just go day by day serving the Lord, doing what He's asked you to do and in whatever capacity" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). She further indicated that she does not believe her entry into Christian education "…was ever a conscious

decision…for me was just a response to God's call on my life, and my life belongs to Him."

(Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Kate's commitment level to education spanned beyond

the academic requirement as she boldly stated, "I would hope that the intrinsic values of a

teacher are Jesus first" (Interview, December 17, 2018)!

Thus, Debbie's response to God's *call* on her life, is a segue way into the response that

most of the teacher participants articulated. Debbie stated, "I don't know that I fully decided

before God decided…the Holy Spirit made it clear to me that this is where He wanted me to be"

(Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Pam also stated, "It was kind of chosen for me…God

chose it for me" (Pam, Interview, December 5, 2015). The theologian O. S. Guinness (2010)

defined the importance of *calling* in acknowledging the truth that God presents His calling so

distinctively that everything one is, does, and has is paired with a special devotion, dynamism,

and direction evident as a response to his summons and service. As I spoke with several

participants, the same story seemed to resonate as they spoke of wanting to go down another path

but being drawn to the opposite direction by God. Sam articulated her calling in this way

> My first year I was in public school, and it was absolutely horrible…growing up I was
>
> always like, 'Nope, I will not be a private school teacher, I grew up in public school, I'm
>
> gonna be a public school teacher.' But God was like, 'Nope, I want you here.' And it was
>
> just very clear to me that this where I needed to be. (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Frank articulated his call as, "…just felt the Lord pushing me in this direction" (Interview,

December 5, 2018). The unanticipated call to Christian education was further echoed by Kate:

> Honestly, it was Jesus. I had never anticipated being in a Christian school. I see
>
> education as the most beautiful form of ministry and have always known that I was called
>
> to ministry…When the Lord called me to the United States…I never anticipated…when

he called me from the red zones of central Africa to the United States, it was Christian

school…I kicked and screamed and said 'I don't want to teach in a Christian

school'…God is clear as to why a Christian school and that's essentially why I am here

(Interview, December 17, 2018).

In direct reference to teaching students with ASD, Kate confidently declared, "We're called as

Christians to stop for the one" (Interview, December 17, 2018).
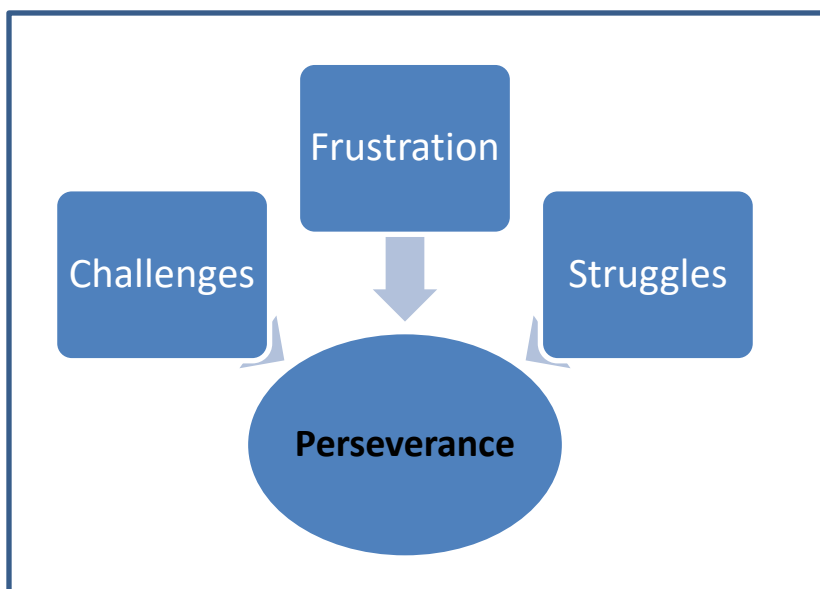
Figure 3. Themes: Perseverance

Challenges = 35
Frustration = 15
Struggles = 9

Perseverance. The third theme, perseverance (Figure 3), was developed as the repeated

words and phrases: challenging, challenges, struggles, struggling, flexible, and frustrated

appeared numerous times. Each teacher participant expressed most articulately the effort needed

to interact with students with ASD; thus the Christian virtue of perseverance was developed as a

theme. The participants all expressed some level of candidness as they expressed, described, and

portrayed as best as they could the difficulty, they experienced in working with children with ASD. Sharon provided everyone with a rousing laugh as she described dealing with the struggles and frustrations of ASD as "having your own PhD in craziness" (Sharon, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

Debbie, who serves her school in an administrative role as well as a teacher role, described a time where they enrolled a student with ASD who was low functioning. They did not know if he was verbal or what level he was on. She spoke of questioning her teachers as to the school's ability to meet his needs, "

> Okay guys, if you can't do this, if this is too much, then I'll make a change…and they both wholeheartedly said 'No we want to try…we love this family. We want to meet their needs…and so we brought them in. And so, he's loved, I mean…because it was set up really well, but again God because I don't always know what I'm doing" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Pam described a growth mindset as an element that helped her to manage in her environment:

> So it all has to do with not giving up. Persistence, perseverance, realizing there's more than one way to do something…frustrated at times wondering if anything we were doing was getting through…our biggest frustration is knowing how to get him the assistance that he needs in order to be able to appropriately interact with his classmates (Pam, Interview, December 5, 2018). Sam described her biggest disappoint and frustration as perseverance in the learning process, "…the kid with autism, maybe I'm working one on one with that child, and yesterday they were getting it, and today they're not, and they're just like, 'I knew it yesterday' (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

The teacher participants also shared their genuine heart about letting the students be themselves, but how that takes a lot of patience and perseverance and practice. They reiterated that results are not always quick and sometimes can be non-existent:

And there's a lot of times where you think someone's not listening. They're listening and soaking it up. So you keep and continue drilling them like you would any other student. You might have to adjust how you assess and different things, but to find the way that you can find out what information they know and what they don't and allow them to have other ways of participating in class (Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Crystal spoke highly of an 11th grader who was having great difficulty socially, emotionally, and academically a couple of years ago. However, she spoke of the school's persistence in helping him communicate and work through his issues. She commented that he "is doing great…he's in the drama and he's found his niche…we're being able to tailor his curriculum and just allowing him that time without just saying, 'okay, you're not a fit for this'…this school was patient and allowed that (Crystal, Interview, December 17, 2018). Jillian echoed Crystal's thoughts as well. Jillian spoke repeatedly about how it was important for her to not put boundaries around students with ASD. She felt very strongly that with help and guidance, the students with ASD could do what everyone else does and that is how she runs her program. She confidently echoed,

Raising the bar, that's what makes it successful across the board…write a book on it, put it in the newspaper, go to conferences, tell everybody – raise the bar – don't leave! I've been doing this for 20 something years, raise that bar! Don't keep them down…if they can't do it, well, move on to something else. But if they're not given a chance, if they can't…they're never going to experience independence if you don't give them a chance (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018).

There was much discussion on trial and error as well due to the lack of resources available to them. However, most of the teachers were just so proud of their accomplishments with these students, "we're just so excited! We were like, 'Oh, did you hear what he said today?' Like it's just…'Did you see this? This is what he did!' I was jumping up and down with excitement just seeing that" (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018). A couple of comments probably give an accurate assessment of these teacher's desire to press on and make it work: "It's just a constant discussion of what's working, what's not working…so you just kind of keep it going…" (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019); "…you're always looking at the betterment of what's best for this child…" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).
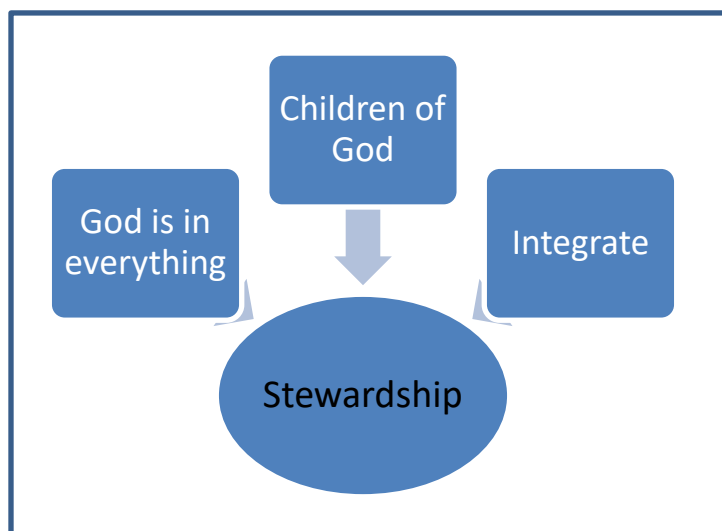

Figure 4. Themes: Stewardship

God is in everything = 25
Children of God = 20
Integrate/worldview = 15

Stewardship. A fourth theme was developed, which was an unexpected theme – stewardship (Figure 4). As I extrapolated the data, I kept hearing terms such as: they are a treasure, children of God, they are God's children too, our responsibility, I need to do more, and

practicing my faith. I understood these terms to mean the teacher participant's desire to be more than just teachers of students with ASD, but managers and overseers to ensure their success. Hence, they are acting as stewards of who God has given them to manage every day.

During the focus group discussion it was heartwarming to hear and see such a focused mantra or determination from all of the teacher participants. A couple of the sentiments expressed were: "…out of all education arenas, I think the Christian schools ought to be the most, as possible, accommodating. Because, I don't know, I think that would be the first one Jesus would take…" (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). Mark (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019) spoke of creating an environment whereby students with ASD realize that although they are different, they acknowledge, know, and feel that they are still children of God. Crystal (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019) and Kate (Interview, December 17, 2018) spoke of giving them a safe place to communicate and be who they are.

One specific feeling that I garnered from just about every participant was their desire to shepherd these children. The responsibility of a steward is to ensure the well-being of whatever has been entrusted to them. Kate expressed it in this way: "…I could teach children to quote scripture. I can teach children biblical lessons. I can do all of that but unless they see an example to follow, what is it really" (Interview, December 17, 2018)? The teachers at MCA spoke highly of the model at their school whereby the culture throughout the school is guided by the theme of the fruit of the Spirit to help shepherd the child's heart. Debbie described it in this way:

> …a true desire to make an impact on children's lives and not just academically…we talk about the whole child, but you don't have a whole child if you take the spiritual out of it…the emphasis on helping a child develop a spiritual sense goes beyond a social, and

emotional, and academic and physical…we place them in an environment where the fruit of the Spirit is cultivated and we give them the steps that they need to have a personal relationship with Jesus, they'll become a vessel that is an outpouring of the Spirit, the fruit…that's the culture we create all the time. Our classrooms are fruit stands (Interview, December 5, 2018).

As I talked with the teacher participants about resources and tools, comments were made which spoke to the heart of being able to have the tools to be proficient enough to meet the needs the population of students that the Lord sent their way. There was a sincere sense of dedication and service, mixed with humbleness to serve these students in the best possible manner. These statements were key to discovering the stewardship theme.

The teacher participants exhibited a keen awareness of their strengths and weaknesses:

I don't want to assume that I'm the best school for every child….one of my big concerns becomes with such small class sizes, if there's a higher percentage of children with special needs in the class, is it an inclusion class anymore, or is it a special needs class (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). Debbie continued the conversation by expressing a great point about knowing when to say no:

We have great services through Pam but how many kids can Pam reasonably service, and at what age and what need would they be better serviced somewhere else? I constantly look at that…I'm always looking at…I definitely want to know that each child is in the best environment…and not just assume that…because we're Christian we…you know, everybody should be here. It's not always the case (Pam, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

Sharon followed up in the same vein of concern as Pam,

Sometimes, we have to say no, because it's not the right fit; and that doesn't mean that

we're not being compassionate…that we're not being loving. It's just that we're

not…God to me is saying no because we're not equipped to handle that particular child

or case…I do look at a student, and I'm like 'can the public schools give them a better

education? Can they provide them services?' What is best for that child…kind of like

they do with an IEP…am I impeding the learning of that child or learning of others…can

I service this child (Sharon, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019)?

I heard great concern from two additional teacher participants about their ability to be successful

in teaching students with ASD based on the amount of resources they are provided or the attitude

of the administration about the real need for help. The teacher participants seemed to hunger for

more, to do more, but described the lack of tools and resources on many levels. Cathy was one

such teacher participant who was very articulate in voicing this concern:

I've just learned the importance of Christian schools should have the resources if they're

going to allow students with special needs to come in; that they need to provide the

resources and be willing to do that…I really feel like they should provide funding for

extra help and extra support for those students…(Interview, December 17, 2018).

Kate also reaffirmed this concern in her comments to me:

I think the lack of just funding and resources…it means we don't have an extra pair of

hands and sometimes those students just do need more support in the classroom

environment. I feel like there are many teachers who just feel ill-equipped…I think

sometimes it's looked at as, well, there's so few children…the question comes up, 'are

we going to be a school that is going to have a big special education program? Do you

need a special education program to be able to get the training you need for the one

(Interview, December 17, 2018)?

Kate's sentiments were very heartfelt. She was excited about her role and even went on to express a desire to do more because of what she sees in the students, "Sometimes, I think the frustration for me is I need more…I need to do more…it has given me a hunger and desire…for those students because I see such treasure in them. I feel like their treasure is being missed" (Interview, December 17, 2018).

Central Research Question

The central research question, "How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD in their classrooms?" described the phenomenon related to the teacher participants in this study. I interviewed 13 teacher participants who all were eager to share their experiences in the classroom related to students with ASD. Out of the 13 participants, Debbie probably summed up the overall feelings of everyone:

> …it takes so many people and it takes so much and so many different things…my
>
> frustration becomes we've had issues now everyday…and they are not getting
>
> better…just the exhaustion of it…this is like every day and I don't know where the line
>
> is, I don't know where the, you know… (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

One other mutual thought of Debbie is, "this job just keeps you humble, and I honestly…some of my perception has changed that I can do more than I thought I could…" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Sharon referenced this as she spoke of what happens when everyone in their school works together as a community, "…out of all education arenas, Christian schools ought to be the most accommodating…the data says that whenever inclusion takes place, we all learn…even the upper echelon learn…we're teaching them empathy, we're teaching them love,

we're teaching them different is celebrated, and it's okay" (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

Crystal referenced this attitude as she recorded in her event log about passing students in the

hallway, and although there may be no eye contact, there is often a simple smile (Event Log,

December 17, 2018).

Hope described an "internal struggle" (Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018) noting,

"you want everything to balance and work together and you don't want to affect other children"

(Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018). Jillian was a bit more forthright in her overall

assessment of her experiences with students with ASD. Several moments throughout the

interview she stated, "it's hard" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018) and spoke of a "personal

frustration" (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018). What came near the end of the interview

conveyed the brutal honesty of the heart of Jillian's personal feelings:

> …it's hard to be as [inaudible] on your feet when you want to smack them, but you can't
>
> do it…you swallow your pride and you learn about what it is to serve and really watch
>
> these kids fight and no one really understands their struggle or their determination…
>
> (Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Kate also voiced her brutal honesty in servicing students with ASD: You're challenged. For

some teachers having children with special needs is a real challenge and almost an irritation.

Can I say that? I wish I didn't have to but it's very true" (Kate, Interview, December 14, 2018).

And so, while there were frustrations that were voiced, there were also statements of affirmation

in working with these students. Sam described a student in her care who although has an ASD

diagnosis struggles at times, he also has long periods of insignificant behaviors (Event Log,

December 19, 2018). Overall, she described him as a boy who enjoys drawing and imagining

hilarious stories for his creations (Event Log, December 19, 2018).

In reference to some of the frustrations with professional development, Debbie spoke of the journey with autism education as a trial and error, "it's just a constant discussion of what's working, what's not working. We don't know what to do, so you just kind of keep it…it's always a challenge" (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). Sharon added to this conversation by sharing her own personal experience, as she is the parent of a child who has autism, but is in the low functioning range. She divulged, "we do our best…it just gets crazy…we almost have your own PhD in craziness…and so you figure out how that works…I just think that if we get proficient…you can teach any child well; if that makes sense" (Sharon, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). Sharon went on to convey that there are times when they have to say no to a family because the student is just not a good fit for their school as they are not efficiently equipped to service that particular child's needs.

Kolleen spoke of a *balance* of the hard task of ensuring that every child gets what they need. She expanded on her experiences by affirming "I always believed that every child has a right to learn, and every child can learn. But it's one thing to say that and believe that, it's another thing to make sure you're living it out every single day" (Kolleen, Interview, December 5, 2018). Tia was very humble, yet excited about her role as a preschool lead teacher also teaching and interacting with students who have ASD. However, she gave an example of one male student she teaches this year and the spectrum like behaviors are a challenge. In fact she depicted his interactions with them as varied across the spectrum (Tia, Event Log, December 19, 2018). She described him as "lacking the emotional ability to actually care for the feelings of others and to keep his hands to himself" (Tia, Event Log, December 19, 2018). Her perception of her experiences was also honest, "…I don't know I'm being successful…sometimes I might

not be able to identify I'm doing it right because I'm just doing what I think is best…" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018).

In regard to the central research question of this study, "How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD in their classrooms?" most of the teacher participants used the same terms to describe their experiences. Some of the key words and phrases used to describe a summary of the participant's experiences were: frustration or frustrated, concerned, challenging, struggle, hard, and patient. The interview sessions almost had the feel of a therapy session as most of these teachers exhibited a freedom and openness to express their feelings about this population of students in their community. I felt the urge in many of them to just want to tell their story.

Research Questions

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to answer the central research question, "How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD in their classrooms?" The three research questions were answered by obtaining rich data extracted from interviews and event logs with 13 teacher participants. An in-depth study of the data revealed four major themes which provide insight into what the teacher participant experiences were like.

Research question one. How do Christian school teachers describe their attitude toward students in their school who have ASD? The overall consensus among all of the teacher participants was positive. Even in the midst of the frustration, challenges, and difficulty – they all unequivocally welcomed students with ASD in their schools. This openness gives credence to the theme of acceptance (as shown in Figure 1) that was developed through the study. In fact, one teacher participant, described their attitude as "overjoyed, we were excited" (Hope, Focus

Group Interview, January 15, 2019). This excitement was further accentuated by one teacher participant's knowledge of relevant data about the positive results of inclusion, "the data says that whenever inclusion takes place, we all learn; even the upper echelon of the academic students learned…we're teaching them different is celebrated, and it's okay" (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2018). Jillian spoke of the importance of accepting students where they are and establishing boundaries for them in a loving environment. She spoke of one such student in her event log and shared that the student had shown "stark improvement" (Jillian, Event Log, December 18, 2018) since first beginning at the school.

One teacher participant felt that the attitude of teachers at her school was diverse:

> I believe some are frustrated by having to deal with autism and the things that come along with it because they are teaching at a higher level…it's hard for them to teach a different type of student that may just have some even social problems…it's just a little bit hard for them…other teachers, especially in the middle school are very willing to work with students with autism and adjust for their needs (Cathy, Interview, December 17, 2018).

Another teacher participant shared her thoughts on acceptance of students with autism in much the same way, but reflecting that perhaps attitude adjustments are contingent upon the type of year the school is having: "I think it fluctuates depending on the year, to be honest. For many teachers, there's an embracing of difference…an embracing of learning challenges regardless of what the learning challenge is…for others, very honestly, that is hard work" (Kate, Interview, December 17, 2018). Other thoughts were voiced as, "welcoming…has always been just an outpouring of love to them…no different than any other student, and I think partly being small…very loving" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

One teacher participant described concern as a primary attitude among their teachers, not because they do not love or accept the students, but the teacher's attitude was one of concern due to feeling adequate for the job. Tia described it this way:

Well, I know since we have [a specialist], she's a tremendous great resource…if we didn't have her, our concern would be greater…there's always concern when you're told what you're being given, because it's going to be a challenge as a classroom as a whole…ultimately, there's a concern that we're okay with it, as long as we knew we have it [the specialist]; sometimes we would like to have more resources in the classroom…I have my one and I was like, 'well, I do have [the specialist], but she's not here every day, all day long…so you have to go seeking and asking… (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Tia expressed these feelings of inadequacy in her event log as she recorded difficult days with one of her students who is quite a challenge emotionally and behaviorally. She expressed that she often feels "exhausted or defeated" (Tia, Event Log, January 11, 2019) because of not being successful at helping this student modify his behavior and properly integrate and be accepted among the other students. Other general statements about the teacher's attitudes were: "accepting, wanting to help" (Pat, Interview, December 5, 2018); "We love them…and we treat them just as normal, that they are a part of the entire school population" (Linda, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Research question two. In what ways do Christian school teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD in their schools affect their values, based on their belief system, about students with ASD in Christian schools? The answers to this question really revealed the essence of the heart of the Christian teacher participants in this study. Most of the teacher

participants answered in a manner that circled back to their relationship with Jesus Christ and the focus was on their purpose, then as Christians, to be true to their calling and service to God.

Cathy (Interview, December 12, 2018), who has a child with ASD, felt very qualified to respond to this question and shared that the Lord gives certain burdens, nuances, or visions to His people as their mission for Him. Of course, there was conversation about how personal values are shown in everything that one does; thus, infiltrating into the daily classroom atmosphere – "you're looking at a vessel that God made that has purpose just like our vision…so they are different than any other child and their needs" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018). Many of the teacher participants referenced *prayer* as something which guided them in every aspect of their interaction with students with ASD. Debbie shared it in this way: "…one thing we do a lot of is pray together, and we pray with these kids. We pray over these kids but we do that whether they are autistic or not" (Interview, December 5, 2018). They saw this matter of prayer as their service as Christian educators. In relation to her values, Tia saw her prayer life change the most as she serviced her students with ASD. She expressed that Christian families placed expectations upon their Christian school because they were Christians and they knew what values Christian schools are supposed to show (Tia, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

An additional avenue in which teacher participants described how their belief and value systems relate to students with ASD was the pathway of love. Tia declared, "my values is to love unconditionally…despite whatever differences, that comes in…I just want to see God's love because you're not going to get anybody to Christ if you're judgmental…just love" (Interview, December 5, 2018). She also reiterated, "…they're coming to us with the expectation that we are going to be able to reach their kid. We are going to be able to help them, and they are coming in with the expectation to see genuine love" (Tia, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

Pat, on the other hand, described her inherent values as being related to the fact that we're made in the image of God. She explained, "…therefore, every child is special…that they all have the propensity to learn…may not all have the ability, but given the right circumstances, and the right encouragement, everybody can learn" (Pat, Interview, December 5, 2018). In her event log, Tia shared her struggle to love a very difficult student who did not deserve grace but could show such a loving personality when met with the right correction (Event Log, December 19, 2018). Consequently, the proclivity for a student with ASD to learn is fostered in the belief that God has purpose for everyone, as they are made in His image. Sam added one other additional thought to the conversation. She shared that her values and beliefs affect her interaction with students with ASD by:

> being reminded that God loves them…just being reminded that God put all of the kids He wants in my class, and how can I best love them, and how can I best teach them how God would want them to be taught (Sam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

Kolleen (Interview, December 5, 2018) went a little further, and described the belief and value system element for the Christian school teacher as integrally related to a belief and trust in Jesus as personal Lord and Savior. Kolleen reasoned, "You have to balanced out if you want a really super-duper strong Christian, you also what a really super-duper strong teacher…sometimes that can be difficult because there's a whole other set of requirements there" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

One other main element that most of the teachers mentioned, which they agreed could not be separated from belief and values was worldview – which integrally tied in with their purpose as Christian educators. When asked what they saw as some of the intrinsic values and beliefs of Christian school teachers, 11 out of the 13 teacher participants specifically mentioned having a

biblical worldview or biblical integration as their first response. Crystal believed that giving students knowledge of a biblical worldview would perhaps help them be more accountable and smart at life: "…talk about how their actions should come from their values within and from their Christian values and how they act…" (Interview, December 17, 2018).

Matthew, the biology and earth science teacher at ACS, spoke of the importance of how worldview would help all students, not just those with ASD, to understand the role God has for them on earth: "…we really get an opportunity to convey the role that God has us play with regards to environment and our atmosphere and life on earth" (Interview, December 17, 2018). Jillian emphasized worldview as to the importance of not just raising good Christians, but also raising "good Christian citizens" (Interview, December 12, 2018). Frank spoke of using character quality education pieces that are tied right back to scriptures…it begins to help the students make more sense" (Interview, December 12, 2018).

Research question three. How do Christian school teachers describe the practices they found were or were not successful in their experiences with students with ASD? Due to the spectrum of behaviors ASD can exhibit, behavior in the classroom can be quite difficult to predict or to control. The teachers described times of challenges, frustrations, and struggles. The difficulty of this fact can be seen by behaviors that were recorded by one of the teacher participants in her teacher event log.

Tia recorded observations of one of her most difficult students who has an ASD diagnosis: "gets dramatic and loud emotionally to communicate; requires a delicate voice but stern and gentle instruction or he will be more defiant; quarrelsome; impatient; lacks empathy; non-compliant to directions…I feel exhausted or defeated…was not successful at changing his behavior" (Teacher Event Log, January 8, 2019). Hope also recorded an observation with one

of her students and noted a "strong dominant personality, clashing and arguing with students…reminded her of kindness and our behavior clip system…helped improve the situation…start improvement over when student first began" (Teacher Event Log, December 18, 2018).

Another frustration and challenge that was expressed in the focus group was not with the students who have ASD but with teachers and professional development. Many of the teacher participants expressed frustration in training staff only to see them leave shortly thereafter. Debbie shared one of her greatest frustrations in this area:

> …you spend time on that teacher training and that development, and then they leave you, and the teacher turnover for me is an issue, because it's just…you're constantly reteaching and retraining…I know other small Christian schools deal with that too…Go figure; people need to pay their bills. That's just so rude, isn't it (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019)?

The teacher participants also spoke of the frustration that inclusion often brings to their classrooms. Debbie described the conundrum of the basics of the whole issue:

> …when we talk about inclusion, one of my big concerns becomes with such small class sizes, if there's a higher percentage of children with special needs in the class, is it an inclusion class anymore, or is it a special needs class? I definitely want to know that each child is in the best environment…and not just assume that…because we're Christian we…you know, everybody should be here. It's not always the case (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

> Thus, based on a few examples of what the teacher participants experienced over the two week observation period in conjunction with their interviews, I found that the themes of

acceptance (Figure 1), purpose (Figure 2), perseverance (Figure 3), and stewardship (Figure 4) were utilized by all of the teachers as practices in producing successful experiences with their students. Kolleen (Interview, December 5, 2018) felt that investing time into the families of the students the very beginning of the school year was a successful practice in helping her maneuver through the difficulties and frustrations of ASD experienced by her students. She further shared, "…this was a win…keeping those lines of communication open is so important…and it's never an us as teachers versus them as parents" (Kolleen, Interview, December 5, 2018). Debbie echoed the thoughts of Kolleen, "I would definitely tell them to team with the parents, team with the therapists, team with everybody…so it's just joining together" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

The attitude of love, patience, and deep sense of responsibility seemed to resonate with all of the teachers. The practices these teachers found that were successful in educating their students with ASD, were not just academic tools and materials. Crystal shared from a place of love and concern as expressed by their entire school, "even the neuro-typical kids are giving those students with ASD a safe place to be who they are" (Focus Group, January 15, 2019). Through most of the interviews, I found that the deep sense of stewardship, as referenced in Figure 4, to the cause of educating all students for the glory of God to be a motivation. While the words "patience" and "flexibility" were used numerous times, Sharon spoke of *heart*:

> …you have to find people with the heart for this, if they have no patience and they have no heart, then they're better off with the neuro-typical students…so really you have to have the patience of Job and you have to be called…if you're not, stay away from it, you'll cause more damage than help (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018).

There were also comments that spoke to the reality of their purpose and what they could actually do with the resources they had. Sharon remarked that she has learned to use a simple criteria:

> I look at a student and I'm like 'Can the public schools give them a better education? Can they provide them services?' So to me, what is best for that child…am I impeding the learning of that child or the learning of others? Can I service this child?...what I can give them is better than they can get in a public school, even with all the funding that public school has…I have a peace that this student is supposed to be here…that is I think what makes us different and unique is, you pray about it, and we ask the Holy Spirit…My heartstrings, I want to help everyone, and I can't, so who do you want me to help (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019)?

 Although they seemed weary in many decisions which must be made daily, they also seemed to be powered through the day to day classroom expectations with the assurance of the Lord's guidance: "It's difficult but there's a peace to know that this is what I'm supposed to do" (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Summary

This phenomenological transcendental study addressed the experiences that Christian school teachers have educating students who are diagnosed with ASD. There were 13 teacher participants identified from three different Christian schools in the southeastern area of Virginia. The teacher participants included one preschool teacher, four elementary teachers, four middle and high school teachers, one school counselor, one therapist/curriculum instructor, and two administrators who also teach classes at their schools. After a thorough analyses of the data: teacher participant interviews, teacher event logs, and a focus group; four themes were identified. The three main themes were acceptance, purpose, and perseverance. An unexpected theme of

stewardship was also discovered and analyzed. I answered the central research question and the four sub research questions through the rich data provided by the themes. I provided a textural and a composite description of the participants as I discussed and described the experiences that Christian school teachers have while educating students with ASD in a Christian school environment.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of 13 Christian school teachers, located in three Christian schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia, who educate students who have an ASD diagnosis. The data obtained for this study was collected through personal teacher interviews, a focus group interview, and teacher event logs. The data analysis revealed several codes which led to four themes. This chapter will begin with a summary of the findings followed by a discussion of how the data analysis relates to the pertinent literature and the theoretical framework. I then provide methodological and practical implications for the study. The chapter concludes with the delimitations and limitations of the study as well as future recommendations.

Summary of Findings

The central research question guiding this study was, "How do Christian school teachers describe their experiences with students with ASD in their classrooms?" The data analysis utilized to obtain the pertinent information for this study was obtained through the use of individual teacher interviews, teacher event logs, and a focus group. A concise summary of the sub-research questions guiding this study is as follows:

Research Question One

How do Christian school teachers describe their attitude toward students in their school who have ASD? This study was completed at three different Christian schools and in three distinctly different areas. Although the mission of each school was clearly the same, to give students a "Christian" education, the teachers all had their own distinct ways of discussing what their attitudes and perception were in reference to educating students with ASD at their school.

I had the opportunity to interview 13 Christian school teachers. The general attitude of all 13 teachers in reference toward educating students with ASD at their school was positive and hopeful. In spite the obstacles of teaching students with ASD, all of the teachers voiced positivity, acceptance, and love. Although I heard the words *frustration, struggles, challenges,* and *concern* more than once and from more than one teacher participant; I did not discover any attitudes of regret of teaching where they were, of animosity at the administration for their teaching assignment, or of contempt for the children with ASD in their care. Instead, interview after interview, I heard descriptions of *love, empathy, celebration, patience, passion, embracing, serving,* and *purpose.*

What I seemed to hear as the prevailing impetus behind the teacher's attitudes, was respect for the fact that these students are made in the image of God. The teacher participants clearly expressed their belief that God has a plan for these students with ASD, as well as the typically developing students. It was strongly expressed that students with ASD should not be deprived of the opportunity to acquire a Christian education merely because of their disability. During the interview process, I discovered that two of the teacher participants have children with ASD, therefore their empathy level was much higher than some of the other participants. Sharon described her attitude very candidly, "…our youngest has autism, so I think that I come with a unique perspective. I think because my heart goes for them…" (Interview, December 12, 2018). Conversely, other teacher participants who were teachers at the same schools with these two teachers, also showed sympathy toward the goal of educating students with ASD because of their interaction with their colleague's child or the colleague herself.

Some of the comments in reference to teacher attitudes are as follows:

- "…it reminds me of the Bible verses about the "least of these"…if I don't tend to the ones with the most needs, like children on the spectrum, then I am not doing the biblical mandate" (Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018).

- "…you cannot penalize a child for what they don't know and what they don't understand…it's made us more compassionate, more understanding…" (Tia, Interview, December 5, 2018).

- "…you just go day by day serving the Lord, doing what He's asked you to do, and in whatever capacity…" (Debbie, Interview, December 5, 2018).

There seemed to be a peace and an overall resolution to being in God's will which was the lever or drive for each of these teacher participants to do what they do each day (again, in spite of obstacles). I believe that Sharon encapsulated the prevailing attitude of all the teacher participants in this sincere and heartfelt statement:

You have to find people with a heart for this…know what they're signing up for before they do that…you have to have the patience of Job, and you have to be called…yes, this is probably the hardest job I've ever done but I do love it… (Interview, December 12, 2018).

Research Question Two

In what ways do Christian school teachers describe how the presence of students with ASD in their schools affect their values, based on their belief system, about students with ASD in Christian schools? The teacher participants were all Christians and expressed a sincere love for the Lord, as well as an ongoing personal relationship with the Lord. Many of them felt that this relationship with God was a necessary part of their job of being a Christian school teacher. They saw no distinction between their faith and beliefs and their job. It all seemed to be encapsulated

in their *purpose* (Figure 2) and what they viewed as their *calling* and *service* to God. This belief was evident in Jillian's statement, "…it's just not any differentiation between my background, and my belief, and my school and all that stuff" (Interview, December 12, 2018).

It was also interesting to note that while all of the teachers expressed very generously their belief that all children of God should be serviced at their school (within their capabilities), there was discussion about the unknown and fears. However, it seemed that the presence of students with ASD in their schools appeared to bolster their personal beliefs and value systems. I personally compared their attitude to that of Jesus when he spoke to the Pharisees and questioned, "And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that" (Matthew 5:47, *NIV*). In comparison, these teacher participants spoke of a calling and a passion and a purpose to God's will. Their desire was to present a biblical worldview in keeping with their Christian values and beliefs. Hence, it was expressed that teaching the neurotypical student is easy; however, teaching the student with ASD requires more adherence to their Christian walk – in essence "doing more than others" (Matthew 5:47b, *NIV*). The participant's love, care, concern, as well as desire to impart instruction and belief that every student with ASD can learn was never in question. The seamless way that belief and value system was incorporated into the everyday school structure, was stated clearly by Pat:

> Knowing that God has a plan for this child, and that he's extremely smart, and that he in some ways has knowledge beyond his years…I guess it all comes from that we're made in the image of God. He has a plan for our lives, and we need to find out what that plan is and then walk in it. That's how I pray for them and that's how we talk about things (Interview, December 5, 2018).

Research Question Three

How do Christian school teachers describe the practices they found were successful in their experiences with students with ASD? The teacher participants from all three school had classroom experience ranging from five years to 28 years of experience. While two of them possessed doctorate degrees, at least seven of them possessed master's degrees. The longevity at their places of employment, as well as in Christian education was also admirable. Hence, I was anticipating a good bit of diverse information on successful practices, procedures, resources, etc. on their interaction with students with ASD in the Christian school milieu.

I was pleasantly surprised that I found no major "tools" or "tricks" of the trade that these teachers utilized in their everyday interaction with students with ASD. Instead, what I heard was conversation that focused on perseverance (Figure 3) and stewardship (Figure 4). One practice that was mentioned several times, was the practice of *prayer*. Pat asserted, "I pray with my students. They know first and foremost that I'm going to…pray with my students…I pray for my students" (Interview, December 5, 2018). Debbie also shared that practice in a very emotional, honest, and heartfelt statement,

> I don't know what else to say to you. I don't know how else to help. Let's just go sit in the therapist's room for a while. And I'll tell you [she] may need some therapy on this one too…every time you're meeting, you're talking with a child…you're looking at a vessel that God made that has purpose just like our vision. So, they are different than any other child and their needs…I may not always understand their needs, but God does, and God promises wisdom. So, one thing we do a lot of is pray together and we pray with these kids. We pray over these kids…" (Interview, December 5, 2018).

An additional practice that several of the teacher participants mentioned was serving the students and giving them an opportunity to be included – to be "celebrated" (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). While it sounded like something so simple, it evidently goes a long way in their environments. Kate (Interview, December 17, 2018) mentioned embracing their differences and their challenges and then giving them space to do what they do best. She spoke of an example of how every couple of weeks they have students do the morning announcements.   They have included one of her high school students who has ASD, and here is what she described, "…he reads the announcements…honestly, better than the administration. He does a phenomenal job…students have recognized that…and have asked for him…" (Kate, Interview, December 17, 2018).

I heard the teacher participants speak repeatedly about *love, accepting,* and *including*. One teacher spoke very seriously of "walking on eggshells…going across fire for these kids…they walk across glass to help a special child" (Jillian, December 12, 2018). The teacher participants spoke very sparingly of professional development in terms of classes, materials, and resources because funding was either non-existent or very sparse. A few of them spoke of access to Title II funding from the government to do some professional development on ASD; however, most of them had either completed an online course or two, or was in the process of looking for some professional development that was either free or inexpensive. Thus, the practices that seemed most utilized and most effective were not techniques or systems, but rather those that one can only acquire from a place within the heart of the heavenly Father – love, acceptance, patience; and the next minute, hour or day - more love, acceptance, and patience.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences that Christian school teachers have while educating students who have ASD. I chose this topic because of the rise of ASD diagnoses in children, and because of the dearth of information available on this topic in the Christian school milieu. I believed that this study would also speak to the "heart" of what Christian education is about – the "heart" of the teacher, which is directly tied to one's belief and value system. This study was guided by the theory of organization and change within value and attitude systems originated by Milton Rokeach (1968). The theory propagates that there is a hierarchy in which beliefs are the basic building blocks of more complex systems (Rokeach, 1968). This study revealed a direct relation between a Christian school teacher's belief system and worldview in conjunction with their view of and interaction with students who have ASD. This section will provide the theoretical and empirical significance of this study.

Empirical

While there is a profusion of research information available to address the inclusion of students with ASD and their experiences with teachers in public schools (Bond, Hebron, & Oldfield, 2017; Emam, 2014; Finch et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2015; Sugita, 2016), there is a dearth of empirical information addressing Christian school teachers and their relationships with students with ASD (Lane, 2017; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Terry, 2014). Due to the malleable nature of ASD, there are known research gaps addressing evidence-based practices for teaching students with ASD in public schools (Corkum et al., 2014; Iadarola et al., 2015; Peters, 2016; Riordan, 2013), and Christian schools (Carlson, 2016; Contreras, 2013; Lane, 2017; Terry, 2014).

Although the literature pool was dense on this topic, I did discover that what was available corroborated the findings of my research. The NCES (2016) has reported that there are Christian schools who service students who have autism. In my research of the three Christian schools, I discovered that each of those schools service at least five to ten students who have been diagnosed with ASD, and there are more in their population who are undiagnosed. Previous research noted a rise in autism diagnoses based on increased awareness, expansion of criteria, and/or advancements in diagnostic tools (Lee et al., 2015; Shrivastava et al., 2016). The teacher participants in my study shared their observation of increased diagnoses of children with ASD, which in return spawned increased interest of the parents of those children desiring to enroll them in their Christian schools.

One of the defining hallmarks of ASD is the social deficit (Cervantes et al., 2013, Goldstein, Lackey, & Schneider, 2014; Scuitto et al., 2012) and Humphrey and Symes (2013) reported that teacher-student socialization is a key factor in the successful inclusion of students with ASD. The research I conducted unequivocally confirms this belief. The teacher-student relationship was discussed in a positive manner by several of the teacher participants. This positive relationship was attributed to action by the teacher to provide an environment that was loving, accepting, accommodating, and even celebratory (Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). Richman (2015) and Ryan et al., (2011) noted the difficulty the spectrum of behaviors and issues that accompany ASD; thus making effective interventions challenging and disappointing. The teacher participants in my study also described the challenges they often face as well due to just not knowing what to do to handle the spectrum of behaviors that are often presented during the school day.

The empirical studies reported the importance of teachers using evidence based practices as a means of legitimate scientific intervention for students with ASD needs. However, the difficulty of using EBP's in public schools due to generalization (Lubas et al., 2016) and intentional and targeted professional development issues (Finn, Swezey, & Warren, 2010) seem to be the same difficulties that Christian schools experience as well (Sharon, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019).

One area where my research clearly differed from previous studies was in the area of inclusion and exclusion. Humphrey and Symes (2013) recounted research that described the deficits of autism so great, that those with ASD would be more likely to be excluded from school than those with any other disability. In my research, I found all of the teacher participants to be warm and inclusive, as well as sharing that their schools all welcomed students with ASD, so much so that they were actually celebrated and included on a regular basis. This action refers back to the teacher participant's worldview and their belief that all students are children of God and should be valued and celebrated (Debbie, Interview, December 12, 2018; Kate, Interview, December 17, 2018).

The characteristics of attitude, values, and beliefs have been noted as possible reflectors into the world of the experiences of Christian school teachers (Hartwick, 2015; Kang, 2015; White, 2010). Thus, similarly, previous studies of public school teachers showed that a teacher's attitudes and beliefs contributed toward positive and successful experiences of the inclusion of students with disabilities in their classrooms (Cassimos et al., 2015; Tiwari, Das, & Sharma, 2015). Humphrey and Symes' (2013) research noted that successful inclusion of students with ASD hinges on positive social interaction to the degree that even if a successful academic outcome is fruitless, the social influence is relatively robust.

Theoretical

This study was guided by Milton Rokeach's (1968) theory of organization and change whereby one's belief system influences one's worldview and therefore prompts one to act or think in a particular way as one sees the world through the lens of those belief systems. Based on the very personal and rich data I collected from the teacher participants, I believe this study extends this theory. There are numerous references in my research noting where the teacher participants referred to their worldview, values, and beliefs as the impetus to their love and care for those with ASD in their schools. The teacher participants spoke regularly of the challenges and hardships of teaching students with ASD, yet shared heartfelt and sincere examples of what they do daily to be stewards to these students that God has given them to teach. Rokeach (1968) formulated that while attitude and value are both determinants of behavior, value is more motivationally dynamic and is a determinant of attitude and behavior. Rokeach (1968) formulated that while attitude and value are both determinants of behavior, value is more motivationally dynamic and is a determinant of attitude and behavior. As I interviewed the teacher participants and listened to and dissected their interviews, my analysis seemingly always reverted to the *heart* of their actions – their *values.* This study also could not be analyzed without discussing the spiritual element of belief and worldview.

Earlier in the study, I referenced Gholami, Sarkhosh, and Abdi (2016) who investigated practices of public school, private institute, and public-private school teachers, and found that overwhelmingly a teacher's beliefs, practices, and attitudes were closely related to the teacher's strategies to cope with challenges in their profession. This research corroborates the information I gleaned in reference to the teacher participant's deep rooted belief in God and His place and plan for them; which in effect guided their daily challenges and struggles and gave them what

they needed one situation at a time – one struggle at a time – one child at a time. I found the

teacher participants to be thankful and appreciative that they had been *chosen* for such work. It

was this overarching attitude and purpose which propelled them in their work. I retired from this

research with much respect and admiration for the work that Christian teachers do with students

who have ASD. They value their work as well as their students. I did not feel sympathy or any

kind of pity for these teachers in any way and they certainly did not want any. They are doing a

great work.

Implications

This study has important implications for Christian schools educating students with

disabilities, and more specifically, those students who have ASD. While there are theoretical,

empirical, and practical implications for this study on ASD, this topic is also pertinent to many

stakeholders within the educational environment. This study has implications for the parents of

students with ASD, teachers who educate or interact with these students on a regular basis, and

also administrators of Christian schools. This section will discuss the particulars of those

implications.

Theoretical

The results of this study, *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study on the Experiences

of Christian School Teachers Educating Students with ASD,* supported Milton Rokeach's theory

of organization and change. The study also supported and extended the research of Hartwick

(2015), Grube et al., (1994) and Bullough and Hall-Kenyon (2012) that the teacher belief system,

divine calling, practices, and attitudes are all somehow interconnected, furthering teacher ethos,

motivation, and productivity. I found this theory to be embodied in several thoughts of one of

the teacher participants,

Literally, I truly believe our motivation comes from wanting to follow the will of God,

honestly…God gives us each a different nuance and a different niche or vision that He

wants us to do…you have to be called to do it…God loves those children and that is why

we do what we do. And yes, this is the hardest job I've ever done, but I do love it, and I

think God has me here for this season… (Sharon, Interview, December 12, 2018).

Empirical

A review of the literature noted plenty of research to address public school teachers and

the presence of ASD in public schools (Goldstein et al., 2014; Suhrheinrich et al., 2016; Whalon

et al., 2015. However, there was a dearth of information on the experience of Christian school

teachers and students with ASD in the Christian school environment. Thus, studies revealed a

gap in the literature pool giving voice to what Christian school teachers experience while

educating students who have ASD. This study adds to current literature on ASD as it revealed

the value-laden ethos of 13 Christian school educators as they shared their experiences educating

students in their Christian schools who have ASD.

Practical

The practical implications for this study are far reaching in the Christian education

milieu. These findings have ramifications for teachers, parents, and administrators in Christian

schools. I spent a couple of weeks observing 13 exceptionally dedicated Christian school

teachers who worked with students who have ASD alongside of their neurotypical students.

Parents

The findings of this study have shown that Christian school teachers are competent,

educated, and resilient enough to be able to teach students who have ASD.   The fact that

research shows a 10 fold increase in autism diagnoses over the past 40 years (Autism Speaks,

2018), gives credence to the fact that more students are being diagnosed with ASD, and many of those students belong to Christian families who desire a Christian education for their students. Parents can be reassured that Christian schools are more than just places of spiritual instruction, but are now becoming legitimate educational institutions providing authentic educational instruction, as well as emotional and behavioral care for students with ASD. This study also lends credence to the nurture and love that can be found in Christian school classrooms. Christian parents can be encouraged to know that while their students who have ASD may never outgrow the characteristics embodied by the disorder; there are Christian teachers who are prepared to cultivate an environment of inclusion, acceptance, and celebration for every student, regardless of their challenges.

Teachers

This study indicated that when faced with educating students with ASD, Christian school teachers persevere through the many challenges, frustrations, and struggles that present with ASD diagnoses. The sense of stewardship in their profession propels them to do what they do each day with love and care. However, the honest dedication and commitment to teaching students with ASD does not replace authentic professional development.

Additionally, while many of these teachers had no professional development or even intermittent training, I believe that the Lord filled this gap with the love, nurture, and acceptance that they are able to give the students. While these things do not negate the need for professional development, they are certainly necessary if their schools are to be considered authentic institutions of learning. Therefore, the implications for teachers is for immediate certifications and additional endorsements in special education related courses. This study also confirmed that the spiritual direction of Christian school teachers allows for a greater and more successful

outcome for educational strides. Since the teacher's belief system was also paramount to their attitudes and educational practices, it would be incumbent upon them to ensure that they are hearing from the Lord and doing those things which keep them in tune with Him.

Administrators

In this study, two of the administrators also served as teachers at their schools. This multitasking was also an opportunity for the administrators of those schools to see and hear what the classroom teachers experience on a daily basis with students who have ASD. One of the administrators spoke of challenging other administrators on not being fearful of opening the door to students with ASD in their schools, "don't close your mind and your heart to what God may have…" (Debbie, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019). The implications for administrators are the opportunity to open their schools to another part of the body of Christ; as one teacher participant called them – "the least of these" (Hope, Interview, December 12, 2018). The parents of these students (and also the students) would feel validated and also supported in this often lonely and misunderstood world.

Also, the teachers spoke of how students with ASD had also enhanced their student population by the unique gifts and talents that God has given to them. Many students with ASD are high functioning and are very bright. A couple of the teacher participants addressed what role these students played in highlighting their skills in various parts of the school. Administrators have an opportunity to create experiences for students with ASD to meld with the rest of the school body and to be "celebrated" (Sharon, Focus Interview, January 15, 2019) by all stakeholders.

The inclusion of students with ASD in Christian school environments would also permit administrators to show that their Christian school is willing to do as other public and private

schools have done. They would be perceived as "legitimate" institutions of learning by attempting to comply with IDEA legislation which mandates the placement of students with disabilities in an environment that permits full participation to every educational opportunity available. Therefore, the onus is on administrators to begin to employ teachers with certifications in areas of special education to meet the needs of the new incoming population.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations refer to the decision to limit the focus of the study. This study was limited to Christian school teachers who teach students with an ASD diagnosis. There is already research available on the study of public and other private school teachers who educate students with ASD (Bond, Hebron, & Oldfield, 2017; Emam, 2014; Finch et al., 2013; Locke et al., 2015; Sugita, 2016), but there was a gap in the literature referencing Christian school teachers experiencing this phenomenon (Lane, 2017, Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Terry, 2014). The teacher participant pool was limited to only teachers who teach in Christian schools; and only those teachers who had been teaching students with an ASD diagnosis for at least six months. The focus of the study was only students with an ASD diagnosis.

The limitations defined in a study refers to weaknesses that cannot be controlled. The teacher participants were one area of limitation. I had to defer to the administrator and/or principal for a pool of participants. Also, out of the 13 participants, only two were male and 11 were female; that was an element I could not control. This study was conducted in the month of December while schools were concentrating on finishing instruction and leaving for the Christmas holidays. This limited the time I was able to visit the schools, teachers completing the event log, as well as limiting some of the teachers I was able to interview based on their schedule.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study yield opportunities for further research. First of all, from a phenomenological viewpoint, this study could be replicated examining ASD in Christian schools from the view of actual students with the diagnosis. There are many high functioning students in Christian schools whom I am sure would relish having their voice heard. Additionally, while this study did include two administrators who multitasked as teachers, a study on ASD in Christian schools merely from an administrator's view and personal experience would also be profitable.

While this was a phenomenological study on the experiences that Christian school teachers have educating students with ASD, this study could also be replicated as a case study. There was enough rich information yielded from the data, that the study of a couple of teachers, or a couple of students would be sufficient to support the basis for a case study. While interviewing the teacher participants for this study, I could almost feel the excitement some of the teachers had to be able to share their story.

Additionally, a longitudinal study could be replicated. This study would be able to replicate the experiences of students with ASD in a Christian school environment over the course of a specific number of years. This type of a study would yield extremely valuable information into the world of someone with ASD as they move from one grade level to another over several years or from primary, to middle, to high school. Additionally, quantitative studies could also be completed to assess the effectiveness of instruction for students with ASD using the same variables. I recommend future research to reveal what further strides Christian school communities make in providing education for students with an ASD diagnosis.

Summary

This study examined the experiences of Christian school teachers while educating students who have an ASD diagnosis. Since there is a rise in the diagnosis of ASD among children (Autism Speaks, 2018), this study fills a gap in the literature concerning the education of students with ASD in the Christian school milieu as there was a dearth of information addressing this subject (Lane, 2017, Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Terry, 2014). The theoretical framework guiding this research was Milton Rokeach's (1968) theory of organization and change within value systems whereby one's belief system influences one's worldview, hence, prompting one to respond through the lens of those belief systems. The teacher participants in this study were all from Christian schools, and therefore, this research could not be analyzed without including the component of the teacher's belief system and worldview.

There were 13 teacher participants who were purposefully selected from three private Christian schools in the Hampton Roads area of Virginia. The teachers all had at least six months experience teaching a student with an ASD diagnosis in a Christian school. The data collected from the teacher participants included a teacher interview, teacher event log, and a focus group interview. The data analysis revealed three distinct themes (see Appendix I): acceptance, perseverance, and purpose; and one unexpected theme – stewardship; which appeared throughout the documents.

All of the teachers displayed and communicated a strong attitude and sense of commitment, passion, compassion, and focus to their teaching responsibilities. A textural and a composite description of the participants was developed through the intense, yet honest discussion and description of the experiences that the teachers shared about their experiences

educating students with ASD in a Christian school environment. The rich data that was collected provided answers to the central research question as well as the three sub research questions.

The overarching goal of this research was to provide the teachers an outlet to genuinely express what was "texturally meaningful and essential in the phenomenal and experiential components" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 93) of their experiences as they educated students with ASD. I was overwhelmed by two statements that I believe were both meaningful and essential in trying to understand the world of the Christian school teacher in their experience and relationship with students who have ASD:

…He's showed me, this is the least of what I have to offer and I'm giving you; what an honor to be asked. I don't have a lot of accolades. I don't have a lot of trophies, or a lot of people knocking on my door…You swallow your pride and you learn about what it is to serve and really watch these kids fight and no one really understands their struggle or their determination…(Jillian, Interview, December 12, 2018).

…I really do believe that everybody can be successful. I do believe that in everybody there is something that we can celebrate. I do believe that you just need to have your eyes open to find Jesus in somebody; to find their treasure. I talk to my kids a lot about how everybody is born with treasure and we need to find each other's treasure…I really do work at discovering the treasure…(Kate, Interview, December 17, 2018).

…Well, I tell people, it took me 50 years to figure out what I wanted to do with my life. And now that I have, I know that this is what God created me for. So, being able to do and walk the road that He created for me is the biggest thing…" (Pam, Interview, December 5, 2018).

When I began this study, I knew that I was going to be impressed by other fellow Christian educators; however, I received more than what I expected from these teachers. The

magnitude of the love, faith, care, and service of each teacher was evident and extremely impressive. I believed that this study would speak to the heart of Christian education – the results of this study reveal just what that is – the "heart" of the teacher, which is directly tied to belief and value system and worldview. As Christian parents with students who have ASD seek acceptance in private Christian schools, the findings of this study show that strides are being made in Christian schools to embrace and celebrate ASD and its spectrum of challenges.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Approval Letters

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 14, 2018

Gale D. Hall
IRB Approval 3545.111418: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study on the Experiences of Christian School Teachers Educating Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Dear Gale D. Hall,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University IRB. This approval is extended to you for one year from the date provided above with your protocol number. If data collection proceeds past one year or if you make changes in the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit an appropriate update form to the IRB. The forms for these cases were attached to your approval email.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):
6. Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes.

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies. (NOTE: Some research in this category may be exempt from the HHS regulations for the protection of human subjects. 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2) and (b)(3). This listing refers only to research that is not exempt.)

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
The Graduate School

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UNIVERSITY.
Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971

8/29/18

Dear Mrs. Hall:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled ASD Education in Christian Schools, we have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at Norfolk Christian Schools

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

✔ [Data will be provided to the researcher stripped of any identifying information.]

✔ [I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,

Respectfully,

Tyler J. Ashworth, MA
Upper School Director

Norfolk Christian Schools
255 Thole Street
Norfolk, VA 23505
757-423-5770
www.norfolkchristian.org

"Equipping students spiritually, intellectually and physically to be Christ's Ambassadors in the world."

central ACADEMY

WHERE HOME, CHURCH, AND SCHOOL WORK TOGETHER

August 27, 2018

To Whom it May Concern,

I give permission for Mrs. Gale Hall to interview our teachers and conduct research on our experiences working with students diagnosed with ASD. We welcome the opportunity to be a part of her focus group and take part in Mrs. Gale Hall's research.

Sincerely,

Administrator
Central Christian Academy

1200 Hodges Ferry Road I Portsmouth, Virginia 23701 Phone:
757-488-4477 Fax: 757-488-4836

w w w . c e n t r a l c h r i s t i a n a c a d e m y . c o m

"Because children matter to Him"
www.hickoryridgeacademy.org

September 6, 2018

Dear Ms. Hall:

After careful review of your research proposal regarding ASD and Christian Schools, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at Hickory Ridge Academy.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

X Data will be provided to the researcher stripped of any identifying information.

X I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

August 24, 2018

Teaching Staff
████████████████
████████████

Dear Educator:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The title of my research project is *A Transcendental Phenomenological Study on the Experiences of Christian School Teachers Educating Students with ASD* and the purpose of my research is to better understand the experiences that Christian school teachers encounter in the Christian school milieu when educating students who have an autism spectrum disorder (ASD) diagnosis. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

If you are 18 years of age or older, have taught a student who has ASD in a Christian school general or special education setting for a minimum of six months, and you are willing to participate, you will be asked to be a part of one detailed interview concerning your experiences with students with ASD at a time that is convenient for you during or after your school day. This interview should last approximately 45-60 minutes. You will also be asked to participate in a focus group interview to be convened in the school auditorium about shared experiences in teaching students with ASD social skills related deficits. This interview would last approximately one hour. You will also be asked to complete a teacher event log over a two week period to record any observations and interaction at all with students who have ASD. Upon completion of the interviews, you will have the opportunity to review the transcription to ensure accuracy of the interviews. Your participation will be completely confidential. Any personal information gathered will be protected through the use of pseudonyms.

To participate, please email me (███████████████) to confirm your interest in the study and to schedule your interview. Your head of school or principal will provide a consent document to you for your signature and permission to proceed with the study. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If it is your intent to participate, please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of our scheduled interview.

If you choose to participate, you will be entered in a raffle drawing with the other participants from your school to receive a $50 Amazon gift card.

Sincerely,

Gale Hall
Doctoral Candidate

Liberty University

Appendix C: Teacher Consent Form

CONSENT FORM
A Transcendental Phenomenological Study of the Experiences Christian School Teachers Who
Educate Students with ASD
Gale Hall
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on the experiences of teachers who educate students who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD) in Christian schools. You were selected as a participant because your head of schools or administrator identified you as a teacher who has taught a student who has ASD in a Christian school general or special education setting for a minimum of six months. I ask that you read this form and contact me with any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Gale Hall, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to describe the experiences of Christian school teachers who educate students who have autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Procedures: If you agree to this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
    1. Participate in one **individual interview** concerning your experiences with students with ASD. This interview will be recorded and should last approximately 45-60 minutes.
    2. Complete a **teacher event log** to include any interaction and observations with students with ASD daily over a period of two weeks. This will be collected at the end of the focus group interview.
    3. Participate in a **focus group interview** with other educators from three area Christian schools who have shared experiences in teaching students with ASD. This focus group will be recorded and will last approximately one hour.
    4. Review the transcription of the interviews to ensure accuracy of the interpretation of the interview.

Risk and Benefits of being in the Study: The **risks for participants** are minimal, which means they are no more than the participants would encounter in everyday life. Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from participation in this study.

Compensation: You may be compensated for participating in this study. You will be entered in a raffle drawing to receive one of three $50 Amazon gift cards that will be delivered to your

school after the focus group interviews have been completed. One gift card will be raffled for each participating school. Each school's participants who complete the study will be entered into the drawing for their own school.

Confidentiality: The records of this study will be kept private. Any future publications of this study will be prepared in a manner to preserve and protect the identity of all participants. Research records will be stored properly and safely so that only the researcher will have access

<div align="right">

The Liberty University Institutional
Review Board has approved
this document for use from
11/14/2018 to 11/13/2019
Protocol # 3545.111418

</div>

to the information. To protect the privacy of all participants and the school, any electronic data will be stored in password protected filed, hard copy data will be stored in locked filing cabinets, and pseudonyms and code names will be used for all names and titles. All data will be destroyed three years after the study is completed. Interviews and focus groups will be recorded. All recordings and electronic files will be maintained in password protected files for the purposes of transcription and analyzing. These recordings will be erased three years after completion of the study. I cannot assure participants that other members of the focus group will not share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

Voluntary Nature of the Study: Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision on whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with your school or Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you reserve the right to refrain from answering any of the questions and you may withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

How to Withdraw from the Study: If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

Contacts and Questions: The researcher conducting this study is Gale Hall. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ██████████████   or ████████████ . Additionally, you may contact her advisor Dr. Phyllis Booth at ████████████ .

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Suite 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24502 or email at irb@liberty.edu. ***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

Statement of Consent: I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

☐By checking this box, I give my consent to be audio and video recorded while participating in the research study.

Signature: _____   Date: _____

Signature of Investigator: _____   Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Questions

1.   What is your name and professional educational background?

2.   What is your specific job title?

   a.   What is your job description and which specific grade level(s) do you work with?

   b.   How long have you been teaching at this school?

3.   Why did you decide to become a Christian school teacher?

   a.   What are some of the inherent values and beliefs of Christian school teachers?

   b.   What makes your teaching distinctively Christian?

4.   How would you describe the general atmosphere or culture of your school?

   a.   Describe the attitude of the teachers concerning students with ASD.

   b.   How are students with ASD changing your school?

   c.   Describe how your values and beliefs affect your interaction with these students.

5.   How would you describe the ages and grade levels of students with ASD you've worked with?

   a.   What was your specific involvement with these students?

   b.   Describe any stages or ~~phrases~~ phases that you can identify regarding your involvement.

6.   Describe a successful experience with a student with ASD.

   a.   Use adjectives to describe what made it successful.

   b.   Describe how you and other staff and students felt during this time.

   c.   Describe how you and other staff and students felt after this time.

7.   How might you describe a challenging experience with a student with ASD?

   a.   Use adjectives to describe what made it challenging.

   b.   Describe how you and other staff and students felt during this challenging event.

      c.   Describe how you and other staff and students felt after this time.

8.   How would you describe any professional development you have had in educating students with ASD?

9.   How would you describe any practical discoveries you have learned about new practices you could pass on to others based on your experiences with students with ASD?

10.   Can you describe if and how your experiences have changed you personally as a Christian professionally as a teacher?

Appendix E: Researcher Reflective Journal

Date	Reflective Thoughts, Prejudices, Bias
8/20/18	A new school year has started, and the number of students with ASD diagnoses in our Christian school has doubled.
8/20-24	The Resource teacher is bombarded this week by teacher requests to observe their classrooms for students exhibiting signs of ASD.
8/20-24	One kindergarten teacher has come to me several times this week with a student who is diagnosed ASD – he is very bright academically; however he has no sense of personal space, cannot stay in his seat, cannot keep his hands to himself, and questions every single thing the teacher asks him to do.
8/21	A new 1st grade student is exhibiting many signs of ASD. He is having a difficult time with transitions. As the teacher is trying to acclimate them to centers, this student does not understand that when the time is up, everyone must move to the next station.
10/25	At a 6th grade retreat, one female student who exhibits signs of ASD was uncomfortable in different surroundings. She flailed her arms and ran around for some time. The other students were uncomfortable with her actions, and the teachers were not quite sure how to get her calmed down.
11/6	The school has been struggling with a K5 student recently formally diagnosed with ASD (although teachers had long suspected it). His K5 experience has been difficult due to his lack of social skills and incessant invasion of personal space of his peers. However, he is very bright and complains of knowing everything already. After much observation and dialogue, the administration decided to transition him to first grade hoping that the busyness and challenge of the grade level would help with some of the behaviors.
11/13	After a three day weekend, one K4 student who is on the spectrum had a very hard time with cooperating. He did not like that it was time for him to move centers and began to scream and yell at the teacher because he could not stay at his station. He had to be removed from the classroom and taken to the office where his father was called. He settled down and went back to the classroom; however, shortly thereafter he had to return to the office because he could not control his behavior. He had to be sent home for the remainder of the day.
11/13	The K5 student who was transferred to first grade last week is having a pleasant experience so far in his new classroom and grade level. The challenge of higher level work seems to counterbalance the behavioral issues he was previously experiencing. Today he also receives the psychological evaluation that was done by an outside behavioral center. This evaluation will help the Resource department implement an appropriate 504 plan for his needs.
11/20	During the Thanksgiving parties, one first grade class had several issues with two students who have an ASD diagnosis. It began in a chapel when the special speaker asked all the students to yell as loud as they could. This was a "trigger" and led to less than desirable behavior. The entire day was somewhat

	unstructured due to the Thanksgiving parties, and so the schedule was not as usual. This caused both students to not know what to expect and to continue with behavioral issues. During game time they became upset because they did not win and had to be removed from the classroom. They were taken to the Resource room where they were given an opportunity to calm down.
11/26	The first grade teacher with six diagnosed students met with me and the school administrator today. She has become overwhelmed at the neediness of her class and does not know how much longer she can teach in that environment (and it is only November). She feels that the six diagnosed students are taking up so much of her time that the other students are being ignored and their academic needs are suffering due to the countless interruptions and accommodations for the other six students.
12/5	There was a combined chapel. Those students with ASD sensory related issues were removed from the area or given headphones due to the level of noise.
12/12	In preparation for the Christmas program, our Resource met with several of the teachers and the program Director to determine how to manage the population of our ASD students on the stage.
12/17	Today, there was a fire dill. One 1st grade student who has ASD could not recover from the noise, and had to be walked around the building and sent to the Resource room.
1/14-1/25	We built a new school and moved in over the Christmas holiday. The first day in this new building was 1/14. The students with ASD have had to acclimate to much transition from the previous semester. The Resource Director has been working directly with teachers to give them tools to help teachers with this transition.
2/4	Enrolled a new K4 female student today with an ASD diagnosis. She high functioning; however, is very volatile and we discovered today that she is a "runner." Our preschool Staff and Specialty teachers were made aware of what her triggers were and what to do.
2/22	A K4 student with ASD diagnosis had a meltdown in the computer lab. I was called to help contain the situation. The classroom was cleared as she thrashed around, and three staff member did what we could to ensure she did not hurt herself. Security was called and it took three staff members to get her to the principal's office.

Appendix F:Focus Group Interview Questions

1. Please state your name, which school you are associated with, and describe your job title.

2. How would you describe how you have been involved with students who have ASD in your present Christian school or another one?

3. Can you describe in detail what you know about the physical, mental, and emotional characteristics of ASD?

4. Can you please describe the feelings and emotions you experienced in when you found out that you would be teaching a student who has ASD?

5. How do you describe your feelings and emotions those first few days or weeks in your interaction with students who have ASD?

6. Think back over the times you have been involved with a student with ASD, and are you able to describe your most memorable experience, and explain why it was so memorable?

7. In your past experiences with teaching a student who has ASD, can you describe a time that was disappointing (it could be related to the school atmosphere, protocol, curriculum, etc.)?

8. Could you explain with detail what you feel is most productive about incorporating students with ASD into the Christian school milieu?

9. Are you able to explain and describe in detail what you feel is the responsibility of Christian schools toward Christian families who desire a Christian education for all of their students, including those who have ASD?

10. Can you describe what, if anything, you have discovered about your Christian values and beliefs in relation to students who have ASD and the Christian school learning environment?

11. If you had the capability to wave a magic wand to implement one overarching change in relation to integration and instruction of students with ASD at your school, describe in detail, what would it be and what it would look like?

12. In lieu of updated federal laws concerning students with disabilities, can you describe any problems you detect may be on the horizon for Christian schools and inclusion of students with ASD?

13. In lieu of this discussion and the information you have received, what would you say to other Christian schools who do not enroll students with ASD or to your own school to encourage further accommodations?

Appendix G: Teacher Event Journal Log

Teacher Name_____

School_____

Over a period of two-weeks, please record in descriptive detail as much information as possible:
- Describe the student in detail (gender, age, personality, etc.); a pseudonym for a name should be used.
- Describe where and how long the interaction occurred.
- Describe in detail, with as many adjectives and descriptive detail as possible, your interaction with the student and how you felt from start to finish.

This form will be collected at our Focus Group meeting in two weeks (place and time will be provided).

Date	Experience, Incident, Interaction, Observation of Student(s)

Appendix H: Audit Trail

Date	All Events Related to this Study
11/14/18	Received IRB approval
11/19/18	Emailed recruitment and teacher invitation letters to schools
11/19-12/4	Communicated back and forth with the principals and teachers to answer questions about the interviews.
12/4/18	Spoke to MCA to confirm interview time
12/5/18	Interview at MCA – 5 teachers
12/6/18	Contacted ACA about setting up interviews
12/7/18	Communicated with 2 teachers from ACA about interviews
12/10/18	Confirmed time for interviews at ACA
12/11/18	Confirmed time for interviews at RCA
12/12/18	Interviews at RCA – 5 teachers
12/17/18	Interviews at ACA – 3 teachers
1/2/19	Sent interviews to be professionally transcribed
1/3/19	Transcribed interviews returned
1/4/19	Communicated with all 3 schools about setting up Focus Interview
1/4/19	Sent teacher interviews to be reviewed by teachers (member check)
1/15/19	Focus Interview – 8 teachers
1/21/19	Focus interviews sent to be transcribed
1/22-2/24	Review transcriptions, synthesize, code data
2/24-3/12	Finish Chapters 4 and 5
3/12	Requested formal review from the chair

Appendix I: Enumeration Table

Codes	Code Appearance Across Data Sets	Theme
Include them	11	Acceptance
Love/Love them	47	
Family	9	
Chose	4	Purpose
Called	8	
Serving		
Challenges	35	Perseverance
Frustration	15	
Struggles	9	
God is in everything	25	Stewardship
Children of God	20	
Integrate/Worldview	15	