

Research Week Proposal

Title – A Phenomenological Study of the Experiences of Middle School Teachers Working with Girls with High Functioning Autism

Program of Study – Education

Presentation Type – PowerPoint (Remote)

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Category – Applied

Abstract: The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of middle school teachers who work with girls with high functioning autism in eastern North Carolina. This study was guided by disability theory, also known as critical disability theory (CDT). Participants included 10 middle school teachers who had experience teaching at least one female student with high functioning autism. Data was collected through demographic surveys, semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and personal artifacts. Data was analyzed using Moustakas's modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen process. Consistent with prior research, this study identified the need for better training and greater understanding of girls with high functioning autism. There are several practical implications for this research. In particular, the findings could be used to help in the development of teacher education courses or professional development programs related to autism. The information can also be used to help school administrators or parents when making placement decisions for girls on the high functioning end of the autism spectrum. Future research should consider a broader group of participants to include male and female teachers, individuals with both positive and negative experiences, and teachers in other geographic areas. Additional research should also include

quantitative methods, such as a causal-comparative study of what particular factors might contribute to a positive or negative experience.

Christian worldview integration: As a Christian, all aspects of my life are centered on the teachings of Jesus Christ. Jesus often encouraged his followers to love those people that others ignored or ridiculed. This is demonstrated in Luke 9:48 (English Standard Version), which says, "...Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." As a special education professional, I am called to work on a daily basis with those students who others might consider to be less. My research reflects this calling in several ways. First, the area of autism education focuses on students that are often difficult to reach and teach. As a result, these students are often pushed aside or ignored by traditional education. Additionally, my research focused on girls on the autism spectrum, who are a notoriously underserved population in autism research.

The findings of my research are also consistent with Christian worldview. As an educator, my primary goal in all aspects of my career is to make the educational experience positive for all students with whom I work. One of the key findings of my research was the importance of positive relationships for the educational success for girls on the autism spectrum. I hope that this information can be used to benefit both students and teachers in order create positive experiences in the classroom and beyond. I feel that one of the greatest influences I have as an educator and researcher is summed up by Proverbs 31:8 (ESV), which says, "Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute." I hope that is what I have done with my research. I hope that I have provided a voice for a population of students who have not previously been given that voice.