

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING  
PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE ENROLLMENT  
OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES IN AN  
NILD PROGRAM IN A K-12 CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who has been enrolled in a National Institute for Learning Development (NILD) program in a K-12 Christian school. The central phenomenon is, “What are the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school?” Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) guide this study. Ten co-researchers, who have children with learning differences who have attended at least one K-12 Christian school and were enrolled in a NILD program in the United States for a minimum of one full school year, participated in an on-line survey, an individual interview, and wrote a letter of advice. Data were analyzed using phenomenological reduction as outlined by Moustakas (1994). All statements were listed and then irrelevant statements were eliminated. Significant statements were organized into themes, forming the basis of a composite textural description, composite structural description and finally the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Findings indicated that co-researcher perceptions of NILD were generally positive. Co-researchers experienced challenges prior to their children’s NILD enrollment and then resulting successes. Co-researchers shared spiritual reasons for enrolling their children in a Christian school. Co-researchers felt that any challenges they faced while their children were enrolled in NILD far outweighed the benefits they received.

*Keywords:* Christian schools, learning differences, inclusion, parental perceptions, NILD

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### **Dedication**

For my precious daughters, Shaelyn and Anya, the inspiration for this study.

I am so thankful that God has given me the privilege of being your mom.

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## Acknowledgements

I would first like to give thanks to God for allowing me to pursue this degree and to explore this topic of research. Without Him, this would not have been possible.

It is with profound gratitude that I acknowledge the work and support of my committee chair, Dr. Gail Collins. Dr. Collins provided me with extensive support in recruiting co-researchers, and believed in this study when I could not see any path to continuing or completing the research. Dr. Collins' commitment to the success of her students is inspirational.

I wish to thank my committee members Dr. Kathy Keafer and Dr. Nancy Shields. Dr. Keafer posed questions that pushed me to pursue a deeper understanding of numerous concepts throughout the dissertation process. Dr. Shields was my cheerleader, was quick to ask, "So how's it going?" and patiently listened while I gave her verbose, emotional updates. I am very grateful for their input in this research.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs)

Christian Learning Center (CLC)

Individualized Education Program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

National Institute for Learning Development (NILD)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### Overview

With the current focus on inclusive education in the United States, Christian education is moving towards providing inclusive special education services within traditional K-12 Christian classrooms (Anderson, 2011; Stegink, 2010). Families, who sometimes assume that faith-based schools will offer inclusive services because it is so prevalent in the public education system, are actively pursuing private school placements for their children with special needs such as learning differences (Taylor, 2005). While still relatively unavailable, there are Christian schools in the United States that have embraced a full inclusion model, and others that seek to provide education to students with special education needs only (Contreras, 2013). Establishing and providing special education services can be challenging for traditional Christian schools (Anderson, 2011; Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). One approach to assisting students with learning differences within K-12 Christian schools is the National Institute for Learning Development's (NILD) Educational Therapy™ program (Collins, 2001; Keafer, 2008). NILD Educational Therapy™ programs are currently offered by 600 trained therapists in 35 states and 16 countries (NILD, 2014).

Parents of students with special needs may have to choose between a public-school education and a Christian education (Contreras, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Consequently, the study of Christian special education has become necessary both to understand its challenges and to provide possible solutions to those challenges (Chang-Ho, Boyatt, & Boyatt, 2007; Pudlas, 2004; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). This chapter will include the background, situation to self, problem and purpose statements, research questions, and an overview of the research.

## **Background**

Parents of children with special needs in the United States have the right to choose a private school placement for their child, even though that child is entitled to a free and appropriate public education (Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). If a parent desires for their child with learning differences to receive Christian education, those schools are not legally obligated to provide special education services (Contrera, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Ramirez & Symeist, 2011; Russo et al., 2011). Currently, some traditional Christian schools do offer some level of special education services (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Contreras, 2013). NILD Educational Therapy™ services are one such way that K-12 Christian schools can assist students with learning disabilities or who are struggling with learning without a formal diagnosis of a learning disability (Keafer, 2008). To serve students with special needs, there are many Christian schools in the United States that offer full inclusion, and a few others that are devoted exclusively to servicing students with special needs (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011). Parents who desire for their children to have a Christian education, but have one child in the family with a special need may need to send their children to different schools, which can present challenges for the family (Contreras, 2013). For example, if there is only one Christian school in the area, and that school cannot meet the needs of the family's child requiring services, the family may need to send that one child to another school, often a public school, and their other children to the Christian school (Contreras, 2013).

There are challenges facing traditional K-12 Christian schools when accepting students with special needs (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011). Administrators may face opposition from parents of typically developing students, adding special education services may pose financial difficulties, and teachers may not feel ready to include students with special needs

into their general education classrooms (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011). Once students with special needs have been included into traditional Christian schools, they may not always receive research-based, high quality teaching methods (Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Symeist, 2011).

There is conflicting literature concerning parental perceptions of exclusive and inclusive learning environments for students with special needs (Alisauskas, Kaffemaniene, Meliene, & Milteniene, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Earey, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Scorgie, 2015; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Some parents feel that their child will be best served in an inclusive environment, and will benefit both socially and academically from being included with typically developing peers (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010, Tobin et al., 2012). Some parents may make the choice that a special school may best serve their child's academic needs and more importantly their social and emotional needs (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; de Boer, Pijl, & Minnaert, 2010; Frederickson, Jones, & Lang, 2010; Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). To serve families who desire a Christian education for their child with special needs, as well as an exclusive setting, some K-12 Christian education schools have been established (Contreras, 2013). This research will seek to discover how parents perceive the experience of having their children with learning differences participate in NILD programs in Christian K-12 schools.

### **Situation to Self**

I am the parent of two children with special needs, including both math and language-based learning differences, who were not able to be serviced in traditional Christian schools. Although not without challenges, my children spent four years in a Christian special education secondary school, and thrived in this environment. As an educator, I understand the value of

inclusion. However, in my personal experience, an inclusive environment at a Christian school was not possible for my children during the middle school years. Having been an early childhood Montessori educator in private schools for fifteen years, I have supported numerous families with students going through the evaluation process for suspected disabilities. I have also supervised teachers and developed classroom behavior management strategies for students with behavioral challenges. Additionally, I have served many students in private school settings with visual and hearing impairments (including one student with total blindness), Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASDs), Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), learning disabilities, and mental illnesses. Most of these students were not receiving additional support outside of the general education classroom. As both a parent and educator, I have found that there are both positive aspects of inclusion as well as challenges.

Both my professional and personal experiences with children with special needs have powerfully impacted my beliefs and assumptions surrounding special education, and more specifically Christian special education. I hold the ontological assumption that people experience reality in different ways. Additionally, I hold a social constructivist paradigm as theorized by Vygotsky (1978). Finally, I hold a biblical worldview, and believe that all children are created in the image of God, each deserving the chance for a Christian education in whatever form is best for each child.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is that parents who have children with learning differences are not always able to have those needs met adequately, if at all in many traditional K-12 Christian schools (Contreras, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Many proponents of inclusive education in Christian schools promote the idea that Christian educators have a biblical mandate to educate all



children (Anderson, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Stegink, 2010). If K-12 Christian schools are established to serve the entire body of Christ, not just a select group of typically developing students, how can those schools best serve students with learning differences? The body of literature available surrounding Christian special education is sparse (Wolf, Witte, & Fleming, 2012). Literature focusing on the perceptions of parents whose children have special needs and have been enrolled in Christian school is nearly absent (Buursma, 2010). This study seeks to begin to fill the large gap in the literature by examining the perceptions of parents who have had the experience of having a child with learning differences enrolled in an NILD program in Christian K-12 schools.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who is or has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school for at least one school year. The central phenomenon is, “What are the experiences of parents who have a child with a learning difference who has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school?” Learning differences are generally defined as any diagnosed learning difference that would qualify for an IEP or 504 plan in a public-school setting, and a K-12 Christian school is generally defined as any Protestant, K-12 Christian school in which the children of the co-researchers has been enrolled. Of the five K-12 Christian schools who are participating in this study, all offer one-on-one educational therapy to students with learning differences that is provided by educational therapists trained through the NILD. The participating schools all provide these services in addition to inclusive general education classes for students with learning differences. The theories guiding this study are socio-culturalism (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory

(Bandura, 1986). Socio-culturalism can be foundational in the discussion of inclusion (Freytag, 2008; Gindis, 1999), and supports the notion that students learn in collaborative environments and with more capable peers that enable them to move through their zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). Additionally, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory posited that children learn through modeling the behavior that is observed in their environment. This directly impacts the discussion of inclusion as it supports the idea that students with special needs benefit from observing the behavior of typically developing peers (Naraian, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013).

### **Significance of the Study**

Although the body of literature concerning Christian special education is certainly limited in quantity (Wolf et al., 2012), there have been studies that examined the practices of traditional Christian schools in meeting the needs of students with low achievement or learning differences (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Three of these studies were specifically related to the implementation of NILD Educational Therapy™ within Christian schools (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). Studies have also examined how schools implemented special education programs within the context of a Christian school, whether the school was fully inclusive, partially inclusive, or a school designed specifically for students with special needs (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). These studies have examined the phenomena through the voices of administrators or administrators and teachers (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). There are no empirical studies published in the last five years that have

examined the perceptions of parents who enrolled their children with learning differences in a K-12 Christian school.

Parents who have children with learning differences, and desire for their children to have a Christian education, often need to choose between enrolling their child in a Christian school that may not be able to meet their needs adequately, and a public school that provides special education services (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011, Russo et al, 2011). For some families, their child's needs may have been met well in an inclusive setting during the elementary school years, but not as well during the secondary school years (Byrne, 2013; Tobin et al., 2012). If parents can find a Christian special education secondary school, the school may not offer any after school clubs, athletics, or other activities that most students and parents in the United States have come to associate with secondary school. "One Canadian mother spoke of the loss of valued school experiences and memories that can occur when children receive education in special schools" (Scorgie, 2015, p. 42). Researchers that examined parents' perceptions of inclusion have noted that some parents felt that their children have had more opportunities for socialization with a decrease in bullying activity in a non-inclusive setting (Alisauskaus et al., 2011; Frederickson et al., 2010; Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). Clearly there are advantages and disadvantages to fully inclusive settings, yet this study sought to give a voice to parents who experienced having their child with learning differences enrolled in a K-12 Christian school in both inclusive and exclusive environments. No student should be denied a Christian education if it is the desire of that student or their parents to be educated in a Christian setting. It is important for school administrators and teachers to understand the perceptions of parents of children with learning differences to best serve these students within a Christian setting.

## Research Questions

As more K-12 Christian schools are granting admittance to students with special needs by establishing programs for students with learning differences or creating separate Christian special education schools (Anderson, 2011; Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011), it is important to understand the experiences of the parents whose children with learning differences are enrolled in these schools. Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) would support the notion of inclusion within traditional Christian schools by promoting the notion of the zone of proximal development. Vygotsky (1978) asserted that optimal learning conditions exist when children are learning within their zone of proximal development with the help of more capable peers or adults (Vygotsky, 1978). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) would support inclusion as well with the concept of modeling. Social cognitive theory has maintained that children learn to model their own behavior from the behavior of others within their environment (Bandura, 1986). These theories support the research questions by framing the inquiry with the understanding that inclusive educational environments can have positive impacts on student social and academic development.

The central research question for this study is as follows:

What are the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who has been enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school?

Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) would suggest that an inclusive environment would provide an educational environment that would include more capable peers, making an inclusive environment a positive experience from an academic perspective. Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) would also support a positive experience in an inclusive setting in terms of behavior, as an inclusive environment would promote the modeling of appropriate behaviors

through students with special needs observing the behaviors of typically developing students.

Teachers and administrators involved in Christian special education have been studied (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011), but the experiences of parents have not been studied specifically.

The following sub-questions have been designed to support the central research question.

1. Why did the parents choose a Christian education for their children?

Sub-question one was written to determine the reasons for parents choosing a Christian education for their child with special needs, as the reasons that a parent may choose a Christian education may be quite varied (Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Wolf et al., 2012). This information is especially important to understand when a child has special needs because public schools are legally obligated to provide special education services, while private schools are not (Russo et al., 2011).

2. What qualities, concerning such things as teacher qualifications, academics, environment, or special services, did the parents of children with learning differences look for when choosing a K- 12 Christian school placement for their children?

Sub-question two was designed to examine the qualities that parents valued when choosing a K-12 Christian school placement for their children. Studies of parental perception of educational quality indicated that parents believe that their child with special needs is receiving a better education in a special school for a myriad of reasons (Alisauskas et al., 2011; de Boer et al., 2010). Studies revealed that parents consider the social and emotional well-being of their children with special education needs when choosing a school placement, or when evaluating their child's current placement (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Scorgie, 2015).

Additionally, it will be beneficial to understand if parents value inclusion as supported by socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986).

3. What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the challenges of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?

Sub-question three was designed to examine the parental perceptions of the possible challenges to a K-12 Christian school placement along with enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program. Although NILD therapists undergo intensive training in the implementation of educational therapy (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008), Leasure and Sanchez-Fowler (2011) found that some K-12 Christian teachers did not have adequate knowledge of research-based practices for teaching students with learning differences. Ramirez and Stymeist (2011) had similar findings and added that K-12 Christian schools did not always welcome families whose child or children had learning differences.

4. What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the benefits of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?

Sub-question four was put forth to examine the perceptions of the benefits to enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement. Studies have explored the benefits and challenges of providing special education services in a K-12 Christian school environment from the perspective of administrators (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011), but the perceptions of parents have not been explored in the literature.

## Research Plan

This phenomenological study used a transcendental approach. A phenomenological study seeks to describe the experiences of participants who have shared a common experience or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). It is important for the researcher in a phenomenological study to have an intense interest and connection to the phenomenon to be studied (Moustakas, 1994), which is the case in this study. A transcendental phenomenology approach utilizes the notion of *epoche*, or the idea that the researcher will examine the phenomenon while setting aside preconceived understandings and judgements of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences, enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school for at least one school year. By using a transcendental phenomenology approach, it was possible to expose the essence of the phenomenon. The essence can be described as what is real about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The participants in this study included 10 parents, from four geographically diverse locations across the United States, who have a child with a diagnosed learning difference and enrolled in a NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school for at least one full school year. The term co-researcher is used in place of the term participant to reflect the fact that participants in a phenomenological study must also be committed to the time and work that will be involved in the inquiry (Moustakas, 1994), and considered to be equal partners with the researcher (Fraelich, 1989). Data was first collected through an on-line survey that was available to over 150 prospective participants. Then, from this group, 10 participants, who met the criteria as set forth in this study, emerged as co-researchers and participated in individual interviews and wrote letters of advice to other parents of children with learning differences. This data was analyzed

first by bracketing out my own personal experiences with the phenomenon, or employing the notion of *epoche* (Moustakas, 1994), and then by the process of listing all statements made by the co-researchers (Moustakas, 1994). Irrelevant statements were then eliminated, leaving the significant statements to be organized into themes that were relevant to the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). These themes served as the basis for developing a textural description, a structural description, and then a synthesized description, or essence of the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994).

### **Definitions**

1. *National Institute for Learning Development (NILD) Educational Therapy™* –ational Institute for Learning Development (NILD) Educational Therapy™ kas, 1994). e underlying causes of learning difficulties provided by trained educational therapists (NILD, 2014).
2. *Individualized Education Program (IEP)* – An IEP is a written statement that is reviewed by a student’s parents and educational professionals that includes the student’s disabilities, educational goals, special education services, adaptations, and accommodations that the student will require. An IEP is a legally binding document (US Department of Education, 2015).
3. *504 Plan* – A 504 plan is a written statement of disabilities and accommodations required for students who do not qualify for an IEP (US Department of Education, 2015).
4. *Special Education Needs (SEN)* – Special education needs are disabilities in learning, social and emotional functioning, as well as behavioral disabilities that impede a



- student's ability to learn without special intervention or support (Alisaukas et al., 2011, p. 128).
5. *Traditional Christian School* – A faith-based, Christian school serving a student population of primarily typically developing students with possible accommodations for individuals with special education needs (Contreras, 2013). For the purposes of this research, the term Christian will refer to Protestant denominations.
  6. *Inclusion* – Inclusion refers to a system of education that includes all students, regardless of their abilities, into mainstream classrooms (Naraian, 2011, p. 956).
  7. *Learning Difference* – A term to describe a learning disability, which is often used interchangeably with learning disability. Learning difference places emphasis on a person's abilities rather than disabilities (Learning Disabilities Association of New York State, 2008).

### **Summary**

Although a free education is available to all students with special needs through public schools in the United States, parents have the right to place their children in a private school if they choose (Russo et al., 2011). Christian schools are not obligated legally to provide special education services (Russo et al., 2011), but a growing number of traditional Christian schools are providing some level of special education services (Collins, 2001; Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Although few in number, there are also Christian special education schools in existence in the United States (Contreras, 2013). Parents of children with learning differences may have conflicting opinions of the value of inclusion for their children (Alisaukas et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Frederickson et al., 2010; Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al.,

2012). This study sought to examine the perceptions of parents whose children with learning differences have been enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Overview**

This chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical frameworks, socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), that served as the foundation for this inquiry. It then continues with a review of the literature surrounding Christian special education and issues of parental choice in education decisions. The history of special education in traditional Christian K-12 schools ensues, along with the legal issues applying to the servicing of students with special education needs in private schools with an emphasis on faith-based schools. Also discussed is the NILD Educational Therapy™ program available in Christian schools throughout the United States, as well as an exploration of the literature pertaining to parental views and perceptions of inclusion. The chapter concludes with a discussion of Christian special education schools designed to serve students with special education needs in an exclusive, rather than inclusive environment.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Two theoretical frameworks shaped this study. The first is the theory of socio-culturalism as put forth by Vygotsky (1978). The theory of socio-culturalism served as a backdrop in the discussion of inclusion (Freytag, 2008; Gindis, 1999), as it supports the notion that students learn in collaborative environments and with more capable peers that enable them to move through their ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978). The second is social cognitive theory as posited by Bandura (1986). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) supports the notion of inclusion by the belief that children learn through observing others and through modeled behavior. Additionally, social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991) describes the concepts of self-regulation and motivation within a given social environment. Both concepts fit well into the idea of

inclusion as both, self-regulation and motivation, require the observation of appropriate behavior in a social context.

### **Socio-cultural Theory**

Socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) posits that students learn in collaborative environments and with more capable peers. Adults within the environment, such as parents or teachers, can also serve as more capable others (Vygotsky, 1978). These social environments provide the basis for learning, and social development occurs as a result of learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Three essential components of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) include the concept of the zone of proximal development, social development, and internalization.

**Zone of proximal development.** The ZPD can be defined as what a child can do with some assistance from a more capable other (Vygotsky, 1978). What a child can accomplish without assistance is considered above the child's zone of proximal development, while what cannot be done by the child, even with assistance, would be considered outside of the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). It is essential that the child moves through their ZPD within a cooperative social context (Vygotsky, 1978).

. . . an essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 90)

**Social development.** Vygotsky (1978) described social development as a child's ability to interact with his social and cultural environment. Development resembles a spiral pattern in that children build new skills from the basis of previously acquired skills (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that social development came about from this type of learning. Additionally,

Vygotsky (2012) asserted that the development of language was directly related to a child's socio-cultural environment. Through the development of social language, a child will progress through several stages until the child is capable of inner speech, or thought (Vygotsky, 2012). Intellectual development is contingent upon a child's mastery of thought, which can only be achieved in a social context (Vygotsky, 2012).

**Internalization.** When skills become a part of one's nature and have meaning, socio-cultural theory would claim that those skills are internalized (Vygotsky, 1978). Through the process of acquiring language, Vygotsky (2012), asserted that the meanings of words must first be internalized for thought to occur. Communication itself must start from internalized meanings, and then those meanings can flow into the use of words (Vygotsky, 2012). Silent inner speech, or thought, is considered to be the internalization of words (Vygotsky, 2012). Similarly, Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory also supports inclusion through the notion that learning takes place within a social context.

### **Social Cognitive Theory**

Originating from further development of social learning theory (Bandura, 1979), Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory asserts that the interaction of the environment, personal cognition, and behavior shapes human functioning. Observational learning, or learning that takes place through watching behaviors and their consequences, makes way for vicarious learning. Inherent in social cognitive theory is the notion of modeling that Bandura (1986) defined as demonstrated behavior. Self-regulation, the ability to control one's own behavior and motivation, a desire to engage in behavior, can be described through the lens of social cognitive theory as well (Bandura, 1991).

**Observational learning.** Children learn socially acceptable behaviors through observing the behaviors of others within their social environment as well as observing the consequences of those behaviors (Bandura, 1986). This type of vicarious learning “. . . enables people to acquire rules for generating and regulating behavioral patterns without having to form them gradually by tedious trial and error” (Bandura, 1986, p. 19). “Observational learning” (Bandura, 1986, p. 285) can also affect the behavior of an entire social group (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) proposed that the observed consequences that a person receives from a particular behavior within a social setting can affect the behavior of the group itself.

**Modeling.** A continuation of the concept of observational learning, social cognitive theory would assert that behaviors can then be modeled for them to be observed (Bandura, 1986). Modeling can occur unconsciously, through simply interacting with the social environment (Bandura, 1986). This unconscious modeling is considered “abstract modeling” (Bandura, 1986, p. 100). While all modeling is a powerful learning tool, modeling can also be conscious, or deliberate in order to convey a particular behavior, making it an even more effective learning tool (Bandura, 1986). Bandura (1986) calls this deliberate modeling of behavior “guided enactment” (p. 161).

**Self-regulation.** A goal of observational learning would then be for a person to be able to regulate his own behavior, or to self-regulate (Bandura, 1991). In order to self-regulate, a person will need to be able to reflect back on past experiences, personal behaviors and their consequences, as well as the behaviors and their consequences of others (Bandura, 1991). This process of self-reflection allows a person to then be able to make judgements concerning his current behavior, adapting that behavior as necessary within a social context (Bandura, 1991). Additionally, incentives as well as negative feedback contribute to the process of self-regulation

(Bandura, 1991). However, Bandura (1991) did note that negative feedback alone is not an effective means of promoting self-regulation.

**Motivation.** Self-reflection will also allow a person to experience motivation to engage in a particular behavior (Bandura, 1991). By engaging in self-reflection one can then evaluate his behavior and strive for a higher level of satisfaction in his behavior by increasing effort (Bandura, 1991). Setting personal goals and then receiving feedback on performance within a social context contributes to increased motivation more than just having goals or feedback alone (Bandura, 1991). These goals will change based upon feedback, perceived self-efficacy, having high personal standard of performance, and being dissatisfied with a lower performance standard (Bandura, 1991). While extrinsic rewards can be factors in motivation, Bandura (1991) suggested that once a person became invested in the activity, “Satisfaction in personal accomplishment becomes the reward” (Bandura, 1991, p. 265). Social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) provides support for inclusion by asserting that learning occurs in a social context through the observed modeling of appropriate behavior. In the following section, a review of literature related to the subject of K-12 Christian education is provided.

### **Related Literature**

Moustakas (1994) described a review of literature as a means to assess studies relevant to the phenomenon to be studied, and discover how past research designs and methodologies may be different than the approach to be used by the current researcher. A review of literature is also helpful to identify gaps within the literature, or areas relating to the given phenomenon that have not yet been studied (Moustakas, 1994). After a thorough literature review it was found that literature surrounding the topic of Christian special education was quite sparse. Therefore, the literature reviewed on various topics related to special education and parental perceptions of

special education are not necessarily related specifically to Christian special education. The following review is organized so that the literature relating specifically to Christian special education is clearly noted.

### **Legal Issues**

Parents have a legal right to enroll their children in a non-public school, which would include religious schools. This was determined through *Pierce v. Society of Sisters* (1925), that allowed for a Catholic school and a military academy to provide the education required for Oregon's compulsory education laws (Russo et al., 2011). This decision allows for religious schools to comply with state safety and health requirements, but allows the school some freedoms in terms of curriculum and hiring practices (Russo et al., 2011). As all parents have the choice to enroll their child in a school of their own choosing, this legally includes children who have special needs (US Department of Education, 2006).

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act was reauthorized in 1997 and again in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA). At the time, this legislation clarified the public school's responsibility towards students with disabilities who are enrolled in a private school (Drang & McLaughlin, 2008). Public schools, or the local education agency (LEA), are required to identify and evaluate private school students with disabilities, and to use a percentage of their federal funding to provide special education services to those students (Drang & McLaughlin, 2008; US Department of Education, 2006). One of the changes in the 2004 version of IDEA is that the LEA responsible for those services is the one in which the student is enrolled in school, not the LEA where the student resides (Drang & McLaughlin, 2008; Russo et al., 2011; US Department of Education, 2006). This change was made to enable service providers to serve parentally placed students in private schools more efficiently within



their district, rather travelling to many districts (US Department of Education, 2006). Parents can still request that their student receive diagnostic services or evaluations from the LEA in which they reside, however (US Department of Education, 2006). Another change in IDEA 2004 also included specific language to protect the rights of religious private schools (Russo et al., 2011, US Department of Education, 2006). There had been issues with special education service providers not being willing to provide services on site to students enrolled in religious private schools, therefore IDEA 2004 clarified that religious private schools were to be treated as any other secular private school (US Department of Education, 2006). LEAs are still not required, however, to provide the same level of services to students placed in private schools by their parents as they would be provided if the student was enrolled in public school.

In the case of religious schools, when a school accepts government funding, the school may need to follow section 504 of the IDEA (2004) (US Department of Education, 2016). This federal funding typically includes participation in grant programs (US Department of Education, 2016). When a Christian school falls into this category, it is therefore obligated to provide accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities, and cannot discriminate against them (Russo et al., 2011, US Department of Education, 2016). Therefore, a traditional Christian K-12 school needs to carefully consider all legal implications of accepting any type of federal funding.

Several states, including Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Indiana, Louisiana, Maine, Mississippi, North Carolina, Ohio, Oklahoma, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and the District of Columbia, developed special education voucher systems (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Each state's program varies; states may place restrictions as to the family income level, type of disability, and previous placement in a public school (National Conference

of State Legislatures, 2016). The private schools that accept special education vouchers must meet particular state standards, such as accreditation and testing requirements (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). Maine's program specifically excludes religious schools from its special education voucher program (National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016). If a private school can and accepts the voucher, residents of that state can use the voucher to place their child with disabilities in a private school program of their choice. The amount of money the school system would have spent on the student's education per school year determines the dollar value of the voucher (Buck & Greene, 2010; National Conference of State Legislatures, 2016).

In voucher programs designed predominately for students from low-income families such as in Milwaukee, Cleveland, New Orleans, and Washington, D.C., there has been a question as to whether or not students with disabilities using these vouchers are being served adequately by the selected private schools (Wolf et al., 2012). Wolf et al. (2012) found that in Milwaukee, students were 60% more likely to be identified as having a disability in a Milwaukee Public School (MPS) than in a private school that participated in the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program (MPCP). Additionally, the parents of students were more likely to identify their child as having a physical or learning disability when enrolling their child in a public school rather than a private school with the use of a voucher (Wolf et al., 2012). Parents believed that their children with disabilities were being served nearly equally as well in public schools as in private schools participating in the voucher program, although the research did not clearly define which type of placement parents preferred (Wolf et al., 2012). "Similar levels of satisfaction with special education services are reported, regardless of whether the student was in MPCP or MPS" (Wolf et al., 2012, p. 21).

## Parental Choice

In the United States, parents of children with disabilities have the legal right to place their child in a private school, and do not need to partake of services provided by public schools (Drang & McLaughlin, 2008; Russo et al., 2011). Parents may have a myriad of reasons why they may wish to place their children outside of the public-school system and in a private school (Szumski, & Karwowski, 2010; Taylor, 2005), and specifically in a Christian school (Buursma, 2010; Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Cookson & Smith, 2011). Parents may choose a Christian school for religious reasons (Buursma, 2010; Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Reichard, 2012; Sander & Cohen-Zada, 2012; Stegink, 2010; Wolf et al., 2012;), purely due to socio-economic status (Szumski & Karwowski, 2010), or because they have concerns with the education their child has received or may receive in public schools (Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Wolf et al., 2012).

**Religion.** Parental religious preferences are often a major motivating factor in placing a child with special needs in a Christian school (Buursma, 2010; Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Stegink, 2010). One parent said, "...it was our dream that our children would also be able to receive a Christ-centered education in the school setting" (Buursma, 2010, p. 386). In a study of 587 parents who had chosen to place their child in a Christian school, Chang-Ho et al. (2007) found that when parents held strong personal religious beliefs, those beliefs were the main reason for choosing a faith-based school placement for their children. However, parents who did not hold strong personal religious beliefs sought faith-based school placements for their children because of perceived high academic standards and perceived school safety (Chang-Ho et al., 2007). Parent religiosity does indeed increase the desire for a religious, private school education for their children (Reichard, 2012; Sander & Cohen-Zada, 2012). Reichard (2012) found this to be particularly true, "when tuition costs are removed as a barrier to entry" (p. 478). Parents may

also prefer faith-based schools because of perceptions of smaller class sizes and the individual attention offered in a smaller environment, rather than the religious education the school may provide (Wolf et al., 2012).

**Socio-economic status.** Socio-economic status plays another important role in the type of school in which parents of students with special needs place their children (Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). A higher socio-economic status not only allows the parents the economic ability to place their students in a private school, but it also has been found to correlate with the belief that inclusion is an ideal educational placement (Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Szumski and Karwowski (2010) discovered that a higher parental socio-economic status positively correlated with placing their children with special needs in a traditional school or an inclusive school, regardless if the school was public or private.

**Public school concerns.** Parents who place their children with special needs in faith-based schools may also have concerns with the public-school system (Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Wolf et al., 2012,). Some families have felt that a Christian school setting was safer than a public school and would be free from drug problems (Chang-Ho et al., 2007), while others had concerns of a religious nature and preferred a faith-based school education for their children (Chang-Ho et al., 2007). Still, others expressed that their children's special needs were being served as well or better in a private school than in a public school, often because of smaller class sizes (Wolf et al., 2012). Chang-Ho et al. (2007) found that parents with yearly incomes of less than \$60,000 were more likely to choose faith-based schools due to safety concerns than parents with higher yearly incomes.

## **Special Education History**

Originally, special education began as a segregated practice where students received services from special educators in either segregated or self-contained classrooms or pulled out of general education classrooms for services (Kurth, Morningstar, & Kozleski, 2014; Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010). Teacher education programs developed separate tracts of study for special and general education (Kozleski, Gonzalez, Atkinson, Mruczek, & Lacy, 2013). These segregated special education programs, either within a general education school or in their separate school, were believed to benefit students with disabilities by providing smaller class sizes, opportunities for students to improve their self-esteem by not being compared to their general education peers or through bullying, and more effective teaching (Kurth et al., 2014). Special education was also designed to meet the functional needs of students with moderate to severe disabilities that may be markedly different from the general education curriculum (Naraian, 2014). The curriculum to meet those functional needs, such as using a toaster or going to a laundromat, could be a challenge to deliver within the general education setting (Naraian, 2014).

## **Inclusive Education**

The concept of inclusive education largely moved into the consciousness of American educators in 1975 when the law mandated special education services (Kurth et al., 2014). The definition of inclusion varies widely among educators and researchers (Ball & Green, 2014; Gehrke, Cocchiarella, Harris, & Puckett, 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). While some view the definition of inclusion in a broad sense as the right for all humans to participate fully in activities (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014), others view inclusion as a spectrum in which students with special education needs are only included in general education activities when possible and appropriate for the individual student (Ball & Green, 2014; Gehrke et al., 2014). One's

interpretation of the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) informs these definitions (Ball & Green, 2014; Gehrke et al., 2014; Marks, Kurth, & Bartz, 2014). The LRE can be defined as full inclusion into the general education classroom for all students with disabilities regardless of the severity of those disabilities (Ball & Green, 2014; Marks et al., 2014), or as a continuum of services in which students are first placed into a general education classroom and then moved into more segregated setting as is best and most appropriate for the individual student (Gehrke et al., 2014). Some maintain that the LRE is full inclusion for every student, while others disagree and posit that the LRE can look very different depending on the student (Gehrke et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2014). There is even disagreement as to the legal definition of the LRE as outlined in IDEA 2004, and whether the law mandated full inclusion (Ball & Green, 2014; Dusty & Schneider, 2012; Marks et al., 2014). Some assert that IDEA 2004 legally mandated full inclusion and believe that the LRE is indeed full inclusion (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Others would claim that while IDEA 2004 places a strong preference for students to be included in the general education classroom as much as possible, IDEA 2004 leaves room for more segregated placements if it would be in the best interest of the student's individual needs (Marks et al., 2014). It is important to note, however, that schools cannot legally move students into more segregated placements purely to meet the needs of the school (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Even with inclusive models of education in place, children with disabilities spend less time integrated into the general education setting than do their typically developing peers (Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013).

**Inclusion implementation.** Due to the wide variety of inclusion definitions, the implementation of inclusive education also varies widely. Research revealed that the attitudes and definitions of inclusion held by administrators has the most impact on the quality and level

of inclusion services provided by a school (Ball & Green, 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013), although the attitudes of both teachers and parents influence inclusive practices as well (Marks et al., 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Negative biases and stereotypes held by both administrators and teachers can become barriers to inclusion (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Teachers and administrators who have had more years of experience tend to have more negative views of inclusion (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Administrative and teacher training directly impacts their attitudes about inclusion and its implementation, as well as the higher numbers of students with IEPs being educated in general education classrooms for longer periods of time (Ball & Green, 2014; Mackey, 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Many administrators held a negative view of inclusion when it was framed in the context of mandated inclusion, although when put forth in more general terms they claim to hold a more positive view (Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). When teachers and administrators had more training and professional development opportunities, their attitudes towards inclusion grew more positive (Ball & Green, 2014).

The level of student disability can be a major determining factor in whether or not, and for what portion of the school day, that a student is included into the general education setting (Ball & Green, 2014; Kurth et al., 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013). Many educators and administrators believe that students with higher incidence disabilities, such as mild learning disabilities or mild ADHD, can easily be accommodated in the general education setting (Ball & Green, 2014; Kurth et al., 2014). However, it has been more challenging to fully include students with lower incidence and most severe disabilities into general education classrooms (Kurth et al., 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013). Some teachers and administrators have questioned the usefulness of fully including students with severe disabilities into general education settings,

especially in secondary school and the unique challenges present there such as high-stakes testing and exit exams (Ball & Green, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013). In keeping with the idea that special education is a support rather than a place (Marks et al., 2014; Naraian, 2014), proponents of full inclusion would put forth that students with even severe and profound disabilities benefit from access to general education settings with appropriate support and modifications (Naraian, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013).

**Inclusion models.** There are many different models for inclusive education delivery methods. Most involve some level of cooperation between general and special educators (Carter et al., 2015; Dusty & Schneider, 2012; Marks et al., 2014; Naraian, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013). Giangreco, Sutter, and Hurley (2013) found that the number of special educators in a given school community directly impacts the efficacy of inclusive services. With this need for collaboration, research suggested that teacher preparation programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels should concentrate more on teaching collaboration skills for general and special educators, and create more cohesive preparation programs with less separate general education and special education departments (Kozleski et al., 2013; Mackey, 2014). Gehrke et al. (2014) found that student teaching placements impact how well-equipped new teachers are for working in inclusive environments and that special educators should prepare for the wide variety of roles they may play within a school community.

**Collaboration.** The idea of collaboration can be extended to working with paraprofessionals, or instructional assistants as well (Carter et al., 2015; Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2013). Often students with significant disabilities are assigned a paraprofessional throughout or for a significant portion of the school day, making collaboration between them and both special and general educators necessary (Carter et al., 2015; Causton-



Theoharis et al., 2011). When paraprofessionals are unclear as to their role within the classroom, conflict can occur between teachers and paraprofessionals (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Mackey (2014) found that one teacher had, “. . . acknowledged that she had not attempted to communicate her specific classroom expectations to the paraprofessional, but she wished that the paraprofessional would better assist students in the class” (p. 11). Teachers need to make sure that there is adequate time for collaborating with paraprofessionals, and that paraprofessionals have adequate training as to their specific roles within the classroom (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2013).

***Differentiated Instruction.*** Differentiated instruction is one technique helpful to reach diverse learner needs within a given classroom (Anderson, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Mackey, 2014). Teachers, with or without the assistance or support of a special education teacher, can create lessons that will reach all learners in their classrooms by understanding the strengths and weaknesses of their students and teaching towards those strengths while supporting weaknesses (Mackey, 2014). Mackey (2014) found that one teacher, “. . . acknowledged that the inclusion of students with disabilities in her classroom forced her to think through her lessons more thoroughly in order to make sure she presented the material in such a way as to help every student understand it. (Mackey, 2014, p. 10)

***Response to intervention.*** A promising, research-based intervention for inclusion is Response to Intervention (RTI). RTI is a multi-tiered approach to education, delivering evidence-based, high-quality instruction in the general education classroom. Implementation of RTI in public education began in earnest after the introduction of IDEA 2004, which required schools to use evidence-based teaching methods for purposes of early intervention and as a new way to determine whether or not a student had a specific learning disability (SLD) (Clarke, et al.,

2011, Jenkins, Schiller, Blackorby, Thayer, & Tilly, 2013; Kerins, Trotter, & Schoenbrodt, 2010; Martinez & Young, 2011; Orosco & Klinger, 2010; Swanson, Solis, Ciullo, & McKenna, 2012).

If a student is not meeting assessment-based standards of achievement at the general level of instruction, the student is given more intensive instruction and monitored more closely. If the student still does not meet standards of academic achievement, the student is placed in an even more intensive level of instruction and monitored at an even higher level (Clarke et al., 2011; Fagella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011; Jenkins et al. 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2011; Kerins et al., 2010; Mellard, McKnight, & Jordan, 2010; Orosco & Klinger, 2010). These levels of intensity of instruction and monitoring are referred to as tiers. Generally, RTI is a three-tiered system, with tier one being the lowest level of intensity or the general education classroom, and tiers two and three becoming increasingly more intensive (Clarke et al., 2011; Fagella-Luby & Wardwell, 2011; Jenkins et al., 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2011; Kerins et al., 2010; Mellard et al., 2010; Orosco & Klinger, 2010). Occasionally, some schools implement systems of two or four tiers (Mellard et al., 2010). Tier two may include a variety of interventions including smaller group sizes, increased instructional time, and instruction from a special education teacher or other specialists (Johnson & Smith, 2011; Kerins et al., 2010; Mellard et al., 2010; Shapiro et al., 2012). Tier three usually includes students who have been officially determined to have special needs and utilize the most intensive, individualized instructional techniques at this level. Special education teachers usually provide the predominance of instruction in tier three (Johnson & Smith, 2011; Kerins et al., 2010; Mellard et al., 2010; Shapiro et al., 2012).

However, some schools do not include special education students in the RTI tier system at all, but rather deliver instruction to this population separately (Mellard, Frey, & Woods, 2012). Decisions are made as to student tier placement using data-based information from a variety of

assessment tools (Shapiro et al., 2012). Ideally, general, and special education teachers, administrators, and other service providers should collaborate in this decision-making process, as well as the general implementation of the methodology. It is important to note that interpretation and implementation of RTI varies widely from state to state, district to district, and school to school (Jenkins et al., 2013; Martinez & Young, 2011). As such, it is difficult to formulate precise definitions of tiers and the interventions provided at each tier. Being a relatively new approach to instructional delivery, there are not many large-scale studies related to student outcomes available to guide the practice of RTI, especially for middle and high school students (Erickson, Noonan & Jenson, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2013; Johnson & Smith, 2011; Mellard et al., 2012).

***Co-teaching.*** Co-teaching or cooperative teaching is another means of delivering inclusive services (Carter et al., 2015; Dusty & Schneider, 2012; Mackey, 2014; Naraian, 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013). In most models of co-teaching in inclusive classrooms, one general education teacher and one special education teacher work together to deliver curriculum and to provide student support (Carter et al., 2015; Mackey, 2014; Nichols & Sheffield, 2014). Some teachers may choose to have one teacher, usually the general education teacher, deliver the curriculum and then have the other teacher, usually the special education teacher, circulate around the room supporting students who are experiencing challenges (Mackey, 2014). Other teachers may choose to collaborate and work together in all aspects of classroom activities (Mackey, 2014; Naraian, 2014). Planning and having adequate time for that planning is essential for co-teaching to be effective (Dusty & Schneider, 2012; Naraian, 2014). Naraian (2014) put forth that the most effective method of co-teaching involves the general educator and the special educator developing relationships with all of the students in the

classroom, rather than the special education teacher working exclusively with students with special education needs (SEN) and the general education teacher working exclusively with the general education students.

No matter what techniques or delivery methods are used within inclusive classrooms, establishing relationships with students can be an educator's most effective means of reaching all students (Naraian, 2014; Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). This is especially true if a student has severe disabilities or has challenging behavioral issues (Naraian, 2014; Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013). When teachers establish relationships with students, their feelings of success in reaching those students increases (Mackey, 2014; Naraian, 2014). Orsati and Causton-Theoharis (2013) found that teachers who had established positive relationships with students with behavioral challenges were better able to work with those children within the classroom, as opposed to removing students from the classroom to address behavioral concerns.

***Educational Outcomes.*** Although there is some evidence to suggest that more segregated forms of education assist in providing more positive educational outcomes, such as the case with pulling students out of class for additional small group or individual support, research points to inclusion providing more positive education outcomes for both general education students and students with disabilities (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2014; Naraian, 2014; Wendelborg & Tossebro, 2011). Students with SEN can make academic progress in inclusive environments that would not have been possible in segregated environments, with some researchers suggesting that inclusion is essential for students with SEN to make academic progress (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Pierson & Howell, 2013). Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, and Theoharis (2013) found that achievement in math and English increases with more access to the general education setting.

Observable conditions in some self-contained classrooms are part of the explanation for the increase in educational outcomes in an inclusion classroom (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Distractions in self-contained classrooms in terms of noise and behaviors can be severe, and the curriculum can appear to be meaningless with little effort to align the curriculum with state standards (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011). Another area of concern in self-contained classrooms is that instruction is often delivered by a paraprofessional with little to no special education training (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Giangreco et al., 2013). As emotional safety is a pre-requisite for learning (Naraian, 2014), inappropriate behavior management techniques observed in self-contained classrooms like restraints and physical removal to time-out rooms may cause a hindrance for students to learn well in these classrooms (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011).

***Social Outcomes.*** Proponents of more segregated special education services often note that inclusion may have negative social outcomes in the form of reduced self-esteem by comparisons made to general education students (Kurth et al., 2014; Marks et al., 2014) or through increased incidences of bullying. The incidences of bullying are greatly increased in special education populations across all grade levels (Estell et al., 2009; Rose, Espelage, Aragon, & Elliott, 2011). Alisauskas et al. (2011) found that parents felt that their children had better social outcomes and experienced less incidences of bullying in exclusive school placements.

***Inclusive and exclusive environments.*** Students with mild to moderate disabilities have been found to feel better socially in full inclusion settings (Pierson & Howell, 2013). Wendelborg and Tøssebro (2011) argued that the segregation of students with disabilities hinders social outcomes. While some researchers maintained that students with disabilities need a more protective, exclusive environment to feel safe socially (Alisauskas et al., 2011), Causton-

Theoharis et al. (2011) found no evidence to suggest that self-contained classrooms offer either a sense of community or a protected community. Conversely, Elbaum (2002) determined that students with learning disabilities not fully included in general education classrooms did not exhibit lower self-esteem than fully-included students with learning disabilities. When a student has a one-to-one assistant teacher with him or her in the general education setting, classroom participation was found to increase, but social participation in leisure activities decreased (Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010). Physical disabilities have been found to be less impactful on social participation with peers outside of the classroom than intellectual disabilities (Wendelborg & Kvello, 2010). Some students with disabilities may need support to engage socially in inclusive or exclusive environments (Wendelborg & Tossebro, 2011).

### **Inclusion in Christian Communities**

Before the topic of Christian special education can be fully addressed, it is necessary to discuss the inclusion of young people with special education needs into Christian communities such as churches and other Christian organizations. Biblically, God values every human. Therefore, faith communities should include everyone (Eurich, 2012; Jacober, 2010). The topic of Christian inclusion can refer to the inclusion of the entire body of Christ in a Christian environment, regardless of their abilities or disabilities (Collins & Ault, 2010; Griffin, Kane, Taylor, Francis, & Hodapp, 2012), that in turn results in an inclusive community.

In an inclusive community, the overall philosophy of the congregation is one of acceptance of differences among people, awareness of disability issues, a willingness to solve problems, and a commitment to include all people into the life of the congregation regardless of their labels or differences. (Collins & Ault, 2010, p. 128)

Since many Christian schools are operated in cooperation with a founding church (Contreras, 2013), it is important to understand how churches support both adults and children with special needs as well as their families.

A rich spiritual life, that often occurs at least in-part within the acceptance of a faith community, has been shown to be physically and emotionally healthy for all people, including persons with disabilities (Ault, Collins, & Carter, 2013; Baines & Hatton, 2015; Griffin et al., 2012; Liu, Carter, Boehm, Annandale, & Taylor, 2014). Both adults and young people with disabilities indicated that they consider their spiritual life to be important (Amado, Degrande, Boice, & Hutcheson, 2012; Griffin et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2014). Students with disabilities often have a desire to be fully involved within their faith communities (Amado et al., 2012; Liu et al., 2014).

Sadly, families with children with special needs are not always welcomed by faith communities, and may experience difficulty finding an inclusive church community (Ault et al., 2013; Collins & Ault, 2010; Jacober, 2010; Richie, 2015). A supportive faith community can play an integral role in helping parents to cope with their child's disabilities and to assist both the parents and their children in their spiritual walks (Ault et al., 2013; Baines & Hatton, 2015). While initially many churches may first wish to address issues of physical accessibility to their churches, faith communities should address both physical and social accessibility (Amado et al., 2012; Collins & Ault, 2010). When churches actively and purposefully educate their congregations on issues surrounding the acceptance of adults and children with special needs, social inclusivity can be increased (Amado et al., 2012; Collins & Ault, 2010). What many families with children with disabilities would most appreciate from their faith communities is an atmosphere that is both welcoming and safe (Richie, 2015).

## **Christian Special Education**

Offering Christian special education services in either traditional schools or special schools is a relatively new phenomenon (Anderson, 2011; Buursma, 2010; Stegink, 2010). While there are Christian schools that service the needs of special education students only (Contreras, 2013; Stegink, 2010), research has shown that there are benefits to including students with disabilities into general education classrooms (Naraian, 2011; Pudlas, 2004; Stegink, 2010). Traditional Christian schools desiring to serve students with special needs need to examine the various aspects of inclusion, and then implement changes to serve them well (Anderson 2003, 2006a, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Pudlas, 2004; Stegink, 2010). NILD Educational Therapy™ programs can help struggling learners within traditional Christian schools (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). While empirical research on inclusive Christian education is scarce (Contreras, 2013), Anderson (2003, 2006a, 2006b, 2011, 2012) has written extensively on the topic of inclusive Christian education. Anderson (2003, 2006b,) has likened the conception of Christian inclusion to biblical hospitality, spiritual warfare, and reconciliation. “I suggest that the Christian virtue of hospitality, besides being a distinctive feature of individual Christians and the church, is also a necessary quality for classrooms to be truly inclusive” (Anderson, 2011, p. 14-15).

Stegink (2010) documented the work of the Christian Learning Center (CLC) Network that provides inclusion assistance to Christian schools. While the CLC does not believe that full inclusion is possible for all students, they do promote the idea that all students can be served in some type of Christian school (Stegink, 2010). “Instead, we recognize that each person is made in an image of God and that as such, each has a multitude of gifts to offer and to bring” (Stegink, 2010, p. 375).



**Establishing special education programs.** Several qualitative studies have documented the process that traditional Christian and faith-based schools have undergone to establish special education programs (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011;; Stegink, 2010). Schools often face financial issues (Cookson & Smith, 2011), concerns from parents of typically developing students, and concern from teachers (Cookson & Smith, 2011). Although, research revealed that private schools service the needs of students with special needs well, private schools can often accomplish the task at a lower cost than public schools (Wolf et al., 2012). Several principals describe a deep biblical conviction to admitting students with special needs into their schools (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2005). “Each student is a valued individual created by God with unique physical, social-emotional, and intellectual needs and abilities” (Taylor, 2005). Christian schools that establish such programs need to determine what services they will be able to provide, their admissions policies, and how they will prepare their staff (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2005).

**Teacher preparation.** Proper teacher preparation is another key element of inclusion (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag 2008; Naraian, 2011; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). Researchers identified a lack of teacher training in special education as a primary barrier to inclusive Christian education programs (Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). There is a need to provide training to veteran teachers (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011), and to properly equip student teachers coming from Christian universities (Anderson, 2011; Pudlas, 2004).

**Inclusion strategies.** With teacher preparation comes the need to understand both social and academic inclusion strategies. Academic program modifications and accommodations are needed so that students will be successful (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler,

2011; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). Knowledge of research-based intervention and differentiated instruction strategies are also required (Anderson, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011). “Employing scientifically based strategies in combination with such well-intentioned efforts to meet the needs of students with low achievement is expected to bring desired results” (Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011, p. 178).

Social inclusion strategies are also important to the success of inclusive Christian special education (Anderson, 2006b, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Pudlas, 2004). Pudlas (2004) found that students with special needs in inclusive Christian schools felt significantly less connected to their peers than students with comparable special needs in inclusive public school settings. “It would seem Biblical injunctions to love one another have not been effectively lived out” (Pudlas, 2004, p. 76). Creating an atmosphere of community within an inclusive classroom or school provides an essential backdrop for a quality inclusion experience that requires the efforts of all teachers, administrators, and staff in a learning environment (Anderson, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Naraian, 2011). Schools and classrooms using specific, intentional means of socially including students with special needs have had excellent outcomes (Buursma, 2010; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Naraian, 2011).

**Student outcomes and achievement.** There is sparse information in the literature about student outcomes and achievement with regards to Christian special education and inclusion in general. Szumski and Karwowski (2010) found that the achievement of students with special needs was more closely related to parental involvement than was student placement in an inclusive setting. Achievement levels among students with special needs may be linked with teacher knowledge of learning differences and research-based instructional methods for students with learning differences (Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011).

**NILD Educational Therapy™ Programs.** Many traditional Christian schools use one such program designed by NILD to meet the needs of students with learning differences or challenges designed (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). Deborah Zimmerman originally developed this system of educational therapy throughout the 1960's and formally implemented it in a Christian school in 1973 (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008; NILD, 2014). NILD was created in 1982 as a non-profit organization to train educators and to assist with the development of programs for students with learning disabilities within Christian schools (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008; NILD, 2014). NILD now has 600 trained educational therapists serving students in 35 states and 16 countries (NILD, 2014). Educators who are trained NILD educational therapists can obtain three levels of training, with each level requiring additional and more intense training as well as supervision from master therapists (NILD, 2014). More than 100,000 students have been enrolled in NILD programs since the organization's inception (NILD, 2014). NILD trains educators in its unique system of educational therapy designed for students in Grades 2-12 (Collins 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). Therapy is provided to students on a one-on-one or small-group basis and is often offered to parents for an additional fee over and above their tuition (Hopkins, 1996; Keafer, 2008).

***Program methodology.*** The work of Gillingham, Stillman, and Orton influenced Zimmerman's approach to educational therapy (Keafer, 2008). Additionally, NILD educational therapy™ uses the mediated learning experience (MLE) methodology designed by Feuerstein (Brown 2016; Keafer, 2008). MLE employs a mediator, in this case an educational therapist, to, “. . . convey a particular meaning or skill to a child and encourages him or her to transcend, that is, to relate the meaning to some other thought or experience” (Brown, 2016). This therapy also

uses the idea of scaffolding, or taking the child from a starting point at which he is struggling, and gently moving them through higher levels of understanding and meaning by way of teacher-student interaction (Keafer, 2008). Presented to the student in a series of exercises that are tailored to fit the child's specific learning needs in both language and math, NILD Educational Therapy™ moves beyond remediation of skills to address the processing skills necessary to complete given academic tasks (Collins, 2001; Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). "Intervention for weak perceptual processing noted within the child is accomplished in conjunction with academic tasks" (Keafer, 2008, p. 24). Rather than simply providing the student with tutoring, this educational therapy strives to, "... strengthen the underlying causes of learning difficulties" (NILD, 2016, p. 1). Tutoring can imply that a student is passively receiving information from the tutor, but educational therapy requires that the student actively engages in learning (Hopkins, 1996).

NILD Educational Therapy™ techniques are designed to help students in the academic content areas of language arts and math. In language arts, it utilizes techniques that strengthen a student's understanding of phonics, phonemic awareness, spelling, and reading comprehension (Keafer, 2008). Phonics is taught primarily through the Blue Book exercises (Hopkins 1996; Keafer, 2008). The Buzzer, Moveable Alphabet, and Memory Cards exercises support phonemic awareness (Hopkins, 1996; Keafer, 2008). Spelling skills are gathered through the previously mentioned exercises, but also in the Dictation and Copy exercise (Keafer, 2008). Reading comprehension is explored through the Oral Reading and the Reading and Thinking exercises (Keafer, 2008). The Oral Reading exercise also addresses reading fluency (Keafer, 2008). The Math Block exercises, as well as the Design Tiles and Tangram exercises, strengthen math concepts and support visual discrimination and processing (Keafer, 2008).

Processing skills are specifically targeted in NILD Educational Therapy™ techniques (Keafer, 2008). Visual processing is addressed in the Design Tiles and Tangram exercises, but also in the Rhythmic Writing exercises. The Rhythmic Writing exercises support visual-motor integration and can increase attention as well (Hopkins, 1996; Keafer, 2008). Auditory discrimination and processing is strengthened through the Auditory Memory, Dictation, and Copy, as well as the Listen My Children exercises (Keafer, 2008).

***Program outcomes.*** Keafer (2008) found that both elementary and middle school students with language-based learning differences gained two and a half grade levels of reading and written language achievement after two years of receiving NILD Educational Therapy™. NILD intervention methods were found to begin to close the reading and written language achievement gap between typical students and students with low achievement or learning differences (Keafer, 2008). Hopkins (1996) discovered that students with learning disabilities made statistically significant gains in the content areas of reading, spelling, and math as well as in verbal and non-verbal cognitive functioning. These gains occurred over a three-year span of intensive NILD Educational Therapy™ (Hopkins, 1996). The most significant cognitive gains were determined to be in the areas of general and verbal intelligence (Hopkins, 1996). It should be noted, however, that the control group in the Hopkins study also experienced academic and cognitive growth over the three-year period, though not as great as the experimental group.

**Christian special education schools.** While very few, there are some Christian K-12 schools that exclusively serve students with special education needs (Contreras, 2013; Stegink, 2010). These schools exist to serve students for whom inclusion in a traditional Christian school has not been possible, or for students whose parents desire an education in an exclusive rather than inclusive environment. The programs offered by these schools may be limited to serve a

select population of students or students with a broader range of special education needs (Contreras, 2013). In a similar fashion to the attitudes that parents have on the topic of inclusion, parental perceptions of both Christian special education schools and other types of special education schools also vary (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Contreras, 2013).

For some students with special education needs, full inclusion into a traditional K-12 Christian school is not always possible (Contreras, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Stegink, 2010). In the case of certain students, their local Christian school has tried, but not been able to meet their educational or social needs (Contreras, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011), while other students have been denied acceptance because the school will not be able to meet their educational needs (Contreras, 2013). Christian special education schools have been created to serve this population of students, although they are few in number (Contreras, 2013). Most Christian special education schools serve a specific group of students with disabilities ranging from very severe disabilities that require 24-hour residential care to learning differences and social disabilities such as dyslexia or ASD (Contreras, 2013). Contreras (2013) found that one Christian special education school that served students with dyslexia predominately, was created as a separate school rather than an inclusive school to shelter students from bullying that stem from having a disability without any visible signs of a disability.

### **Parental Views of Inclusion**

Research found that parents of students with special education needs have a wide variety of views and perceptions of the topic of inclusion (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Earey, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011; Scorgie, 2015; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Some parents view inclusion as positive and necessary for their child to succeed both academically and socially (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Conversely,

some parents had negative experiences with inclusion and preferred or sometimes fought for an exclusive learning environment for their child with special education needs (de Boer et al., 2010). Research has shown a discrepancy of parental views regarding inclusion when their child has a learning disability (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Contreras, 2013; de Boer et al., 2010). Additionally, parents who may have been pleased with an inclusive education for their student with special education needs in the primary and upper elementary years may experience a change of heart during the secondary school years (Byrne, 2013; Tobin et al., 2012).

**Negative views.** A body of research has found that parents prefer their child with special education needs be served in a more segregated environment (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Contreras, 2013; de Boer et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2014). “This new generation of parents is more critical towards inclusive education as it functions in practice . . . they are not always pleased with what they find” (de Boer et al., 2010, p. 178). Some school districts found that parents are looking specifically for segregated programs that might be tailored to a specific disability such as autism (Marks et al., 2014). Academically, parents have discussed the feeling that their children’s needs could be better met in a segregated placement, especially if their child’s disabilities were severe (Byrne, 2013). In more segregated environments, parents have expressed that their children with special education needs experience less bullying and that their child feels safer (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Elbaum, 2002; Scorgie, 2015). Parents have also expressed that their children do not have the pressure of dealing with the stigma surrounding being a special education student in a segregated environment (Scorgie, 2015), although, Scorgie discovered that parents did not feel that their children with special education needs felt included socially in either a fully inclusive or more segregated setting. Parents whose children were in

specialized schools have expressed that their children with behavioral concerns were not wanted in inclusive settings (Broomhead, 2013).

How parents of children with special education needs experience community in inclusive school environments has also been a topic of research (Frederickson et al., 2010; Scorgie, 2015). In more segregated environments, parents have reported hearing fewer complaints about their children's behavior from school personnel (Scorgie, 2015). The parents themselves have also reported that they feel socially isolated from other parents in inclusive settings, often due to their own child's behavior (Frederickson et al., 2010; Scorgie, 2015).

**Positive views.** There is evidence to suggest that parents believe that inclusive schools best serve students with special education needs (Contreras, 2013; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Many parents of students with special education needs have expressed the need to fight for their child's legal right to be in the LRE or fully included in the general education classroom (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Beauregard, 2011; Mueller & Buckley, 2014). Parents who have higher levels of education, as well as parents who are well educated in special education law tend to favor fully inclusive settings (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Parents have cited that their child with special education needs is more successful academically and socially in an inclusive environment (Bacon & Causton-Theoharis, 2013; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010, Tobin et al., 2012). Collins (2001) found that parents who had a child enrolled in an NILD program within an inclusive Christian school, “. . . wanted to take an active role in helping their children learn how to learn” (p. 147).

**Learning differences.** Some unique challenges to inclusion have been reported among populations of students with learning differences (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Contreras, 2013; de Boer et al., 2010; Elbaum, 2002). Peleg (2011) found that adolescent students with learning



disabilities had higher levels of social anxiety in both special education and inclusive classrooms, but that when peers were more accepting of students with learning disabilities, levels of social anxiety decreased. Students with learning differences may have academic issues requiring accommodations and modifications within the general education environment that may single them out as different from their general education classmates (Contreras, 2013; Elbaum, 2002).

I find the kids to be more empathetic to kids where the disability is visible. You would never ask a child in a wheelchair to stand up for the pledge [of allegiance]. But you would expect another child [to say the pledge of allegiance] who has an inability to remember it, and they'd be punished because they don't know, and they're as handicapped as the one in the [wheel]chair. (Contreras, 2013, p. 55)

However, de Boer et al. (2010) found that parents of students with mild disabilities were still more apt to favor inclusion for their child, than parents of students with moderate or severe disabilities.

***Secondary School Years.*** The secondary school years present unique challenges for parents in determining the best educational placement for their child with special education needs (Byrne, 2013; Tobin et al., 2012). Parents of children with special education needs that are between the ages of 13 and 18 have been found to have a less positive view of inclusion (Byrne, 2013). A child's academic and social needs (Tobin et al., 2012), as well as the child's prior experience with inclusion (Byrne, 2013) may influence the parents' decision regarding placement of their child in a fully inclusive environment. When students experienced inclusion in a negative way during their elementary school years, parents were more likely to choose a segregated secondary school placement (Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). Parents have expressed a desire for their child not to be isolated from the real world and to keep pace

academically by being included as much as possible in a general education environment as the child reaches closer to young adulthood (Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). Often, the social skills gap between students with disabilities and their typically-developing peers grows during the secondary school years (Byrne, 2013; Tobin et al., 2012), causing parents to choose a specialized secondary school for their children who were possibly fully included previously (Tobin et al., 2012). Parents might desire for their children to develop more life and work skills, the opportunities for which are not always available in general education schools (Byrne, 2013). Parents who have made the decision to have their child with special education needs placed in a special school indicated that there can be a sense of loss of the social activities, such as school dances, clubs, and athletic events that their children may be missing because of the nature of their school placement (Scorgie, 2015).

### **Summary**

Informed by Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socio-culturalism and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, this study explored how parents perceived their children's experiences in traditional Christian schools and a Christian special education school. The literature available surrounding Christian special education is sparse (Contreras, 2013). However, the literature that is available has shown that traditional Christian schools may not always support the needs of students with special education needs (Contreras, 2013; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Parents have the legal right for their child with special education needs to receive a free and appropriate public education or to place their child in a private school (Russo et al., 2011). Whether or not a Christian school provides special education services is shaped by their biblical worldview (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011), but may be hindered by a lack of financial or human resources (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011,

Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011). NILD Educational Therapy™ programs can offer services for students with learning differences in traditional K-12 Christian schools (Collins, 2001, Hutchison, 1999; Keafer, 2008). Even if their child is in an inclusive setting, parents may have conflicting opinions about whether or not inclusion is the best choice for their child (Alisauskaus et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Frederickson et al., 2010; Scorgie, 2015; Tobin et al., 2012). While few in number, Christian K-12 special education schools do exist to serve students with special education needs that may have not thrived in an inclusive environment or by parental choice (Contreras, 2013). While there have been studies that have examined the perceptions and attitudes of administrators regarding the inclusion of students of special education needs in traditional Christian schools, as well as Christian special education schools (Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011), there have been no studies conducted that specifically address the perceptions of parents of children who have learning differences regarding a K-12 Christian education.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

This chapter details the methods that were used to carry out this study. Also, included in this chapter is a description of the study's design and a reiteration of the research question. Further provided is the portrayal of the setting, participants, the role of the researcher, and procedures, as well as the detailed accounts of the data collection techniques that include a survey, individual interviews, and written letters of advice. A discussion of data analysis techniques following the seven steps as outlined by Moustakas (1994) ensues, followed by the ethical considerations of this study.

### **Design**

This study is qualitative in design and employed a transcendental phenomenological approach. Husserl (1931) described the focus of phenomenological inquiry to be the rich description of the essence of the phenomenon, and in doing so to ultimately describe what is real. Moustakas (1994) described a phenomenology as rich descriptions of experiences, which makes it an appropriate choice for this study. Additionally, Schutz (1967) put forth that lived experiences, those experiences that have already been experienced and can now be reflected upon, are the only experiences that can be determined to be meaningful. More specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used. Moustakas asserted that transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to ultimately be conscious of her own personal experiences and perceptions of reality and to then be intentional about understanding those experiences and perceptions when conducting a phenomenological inquiry. Transcendental phenomenology aims to reduce the phenomenon being studied to its essence, or a purified view of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1931). A transcendental phenomenological inquiry could

potentially find common themes among this group of co-researchers, giving a voice to this population of parents (Creswell, 2013). As I have had extensive personal experiences with this phenomenon, a transcendental phenomenology best served the need to be aware of my own experiences and to be intentional about when it will and will not be appropriate to draw upon those experiences when analyzing the research data. This notion is what Moustakas has called *epoche*, or the setting aside of prejudgments and suppositions by the researcher to clearly examine the phenomenon.

### **Research Questions**

The following central research question guided this transcendental phenomenological study that examined the experiences of parents whose child with special needs was enrolled in a K-12 Christian school:

What are the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who has been enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school?

The following sub-questions have further guided this inquiry:

1. Why did the parents choose a Christian education for their children?
2. What qualities, concerning such things as teacher qualifications, academics, environment, or special services, did the parents of children with learning differences look for when choosing a K-12 Christian school placement for their children?
3. What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the challenges of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?

4. What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the benefits of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?

### **Setting**

The setting for this study was one K-8 and four K-12 Christian schools in the United States that offer NILD Educational Therapy™ for students with learning differences. These five schools represent diverse geographical areas of the United States. Of the K-12 Christian schools, one school is in the Northeast, two schools are in the Southeast, and one is in the West. The K-8 school is in the Midwest. These schools all serve students with learning differences in inclusive, general education classrooms. Of these five schools, two represent Baptist denominations and three are non-denominational. The two Baptist schools are operated as ministries of sponsoring churches, but neither limit their enrollment to students from those churches. The three non-denominational schools are independently operated, but also hold Protestant doctrinal positions. These five schools are accredited by the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI). The average tuition cost of a private school in the United States for the 2015-2016 school year was \$9,518 (Private School Review, 2016). Typically, parents pay an additional fee over and above tuition to enroll their child in an NILD program (Keafer, 2008). This is true in all five participant schools.

### **Participants**

Using convenience sampling, I located potential participants through contacting NILD educational therapists in various regions across the United States. Due to the sensitive nature of the phenomenon of interest, I employed convenience sampling, or the selecting of cases, “because they are available and easy to study” (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007, p. 185). However,

once I identified potential participants, I utilized purposive sampling to select co-researchers. Purposive sampling can increase the amount and range of data elicited from the participants by intentionally choosing participants using some specific criteria (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2002). The criteria for participation included having a child with a diagnosed learning difference, the child was enrolled in a K-12 Christian school, and received NILD Educational Therapy™ for at least one year. Additionally, the educational therapists serving each parent's child held a level three certification, the highest level of NILD training. From the five participating schools, there was a pool of 150 potential parent participants given the opportunity to complete the first data collection tool, a survey designed to provide information that allowed me to select the co-researchers for this study. This tool provided a means to identify potential participants who were open and willing to share their stories, and thereby providing rich data for analysis. Those selected for the study were as diverse as possible in terms of the age and gender of their child, geographic region, and type of learning difference. While every effort was made to recruit parents of both genders, only female parents responded. There were 10 parents of a child with diagnosed learning differences selected as co-researchers in this study. Coined by Fraelich (1989), the term co-researcher used in this study described the participants; and as the term implies, participants have a shared responsibility and interest in the study of the given phenomenon. The co-researcher and the researcher form a partnership in conducting phenomenological research (Fraelich, 1989). The co-researchers were all Caucasian and from a middle to upper middle-class socio-economic status, despite an attempt at maximum variation regarding participant ethnicity and socio-economic status. Maximum variation allows for detailing, “. . . the many specifics that give the context its unique flavor” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 201).

## Procedures

After receiving IRB approval (see Appendix A), potential participants were recruited through NILD educational therapists across the United States. Potential participants received an initial recruitment email that briefly explained the study (See Appendix B), and included an attached Informed Consent form (see Appendix C), as well as a link to access the on-line survey (see Appendix D). Potential participants who agreed to be in this study had two weeks to send me their digitally signed Informed Consent form via my personal e-mail address, and complete the on-line survey via the link provided with the recruitment e-mail. After reviewing the surveys of potential participants who submitted their digitally signed Informed Consent forms, I selected 10 co-researchers who best fit the qualifications for this study and provided for maximum variation in terms of age and gender of the children, types of learning differences, and geographic region. I then sent an e-mail to the selected co-researchers to schedule an individual interview (see Appendix E) and to provide them with instructions for writing a letter of advice to other parents of children who have a learning difference (see Appendix F).

Prior to the submission of the IRB application, I conducted an expert review of both the survey and interview questions used in the data collection process of the study for content and face validity. A panel of three experts offered input and proposed possible changes to the survey and interview questions. The first panelist was a teacher holding a master's degree with extensive experience teaching in both public and Christian schools at the late elementary level. The second panelist was an education doctoral candidate and student teacher supervisor who has a son with a learning difference enrolled in a K-12 Christian school. The final panelist was a former private school administrator with six years of experience directly related to the admission of students to the school, some of whom had special needs. Per the suggestions of the expert



panel, no changes were made to the survey, but minor changes were made to the interview questions for purposes of clarity.

Following IRB approval, I conducted a pilot study using participants that were not a part of the main study (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). These parent participants were located through an NILD educational therapist working in private practice, holding a level three certificate and did not participate in the main study. Although certainly not a guarantee, pilot studies help to ensure that the main study will be feasible in terms of scale and data collection (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001). A sample of two parents who have a child with learning differences who had attended a Christian K-12 school and enrolled in an NILD program for at least one school year participated in both the survey and individual interview. Both participants agreed that the on-line survey was easy to use and understand and that the interview questions were also clear and concise. After conducting this pilot study, there were no recommended changes to either the survey or interview questions.

The data collection procedures included a survey, individual interviews, and a written letter provided by the co-researchers. I scheduled interviews at a time convenient for the co-researcher. I conducted nine interviews via telephone, and one interview via Skype™, a web-based videoconferencing tool. Initially, Skype™ was the sole platform for conducting the interviews. This was later changed to include the use of Google Hangouts™ or telephone to allow co-researchers to have additional options for participating in the interviews. The IRB approved this change, although the original IRB approval form (see Appendix A) does not include this revision, it was noted in the Audit Trail (see Appendix L). The semi-structured interviews included 12 questions, allowing for follow-up questions to clarify answers or to elicit further responses. Using the audio-recording feature on my personal computer, I recorded

interviews that lasted between 18 and 45 minutes. To serve as a back-up recording measure, I also employed a smartphone audio recording application. I personally transcribed the interview data. Additionally, co-researchers submitted to me a letter of advice to other parents of students with learning differences via e-mail.

### **The Researcher's Role**

I am the parent of two children with special needs, and have lived the experience of needing to move my children from a traditional K-8 Christian school into the non-inclusive environment of a secondary Christian special education school. Our family's experiences with traditional Christian schools were not entirely positive; we experienced a wide range of challenges. None of the traditional Christian schools that my children attended offered NILD Educational Therapy™, although one of my children spent a summer working twice per week with an independent NILD therapist. The Christian special education school was the first school environment in which my children have thrived both socially and academically. This, in turn, has impacted our entire family structure in a positive manner. However, I am aware that other families with children who have learning differences may have had positive experiences with traditional Christian schools, and that parents have felt that their children were served well and welcomed by Christian schools in general. I have chosen to conduct this research as a transcendental phenomenology as I desire to explore the phenomenon in an in-depth manner. I also feel a deep connection to the phenomena due to my professional and personal experiences, a notion that Moustakas (1994) put forth was essential to conducting a phenomenological study.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection tools for this study included an on-line survey, an individual interview with each co-researcher, and a letter of advice to other parents of a child with learning

differences written by the co-researchers. The on-line survey served as an initial means of gathering demographic data, as well as learning about the nature of the child's learning difference and school history. The survey was also used to select the co-researchers for this study. Individual interviews were held via telephone or Skype™ using a semi-structured format. Finally, co-researchers wrote a letter of advice to other parents who have children with learning differences and wish to enroll their child in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school. I asked the co-researchers to write these letters after the interview, so that they could use the topics addressed by the interview to aid in their reflection of their personal experiences when writing the letter. By employing three distinct methods of data collection, data triangulation was achieved. Data triangulation refers to the use of multiple and varied sources of data to increase trustworthiness and to gain additional insight into the phenomenon of study (Creswell, 2013; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

### **Surveys**

Potential participants in this study first completed an on-line survey which served to collect demographic data as well as data on the nature of their children's learning differences and school history. The survey took the form of a structured questionnaire and included questions that are open-ended and required short answers. In the case of this study, the survey was used to initially screen and gather data from potential participants. The survey was used to select co-researchers for the study by choosing 10 individuals who exhibited maximum variation in terms of age and gender of their child, geographic region, and type of learning difference. I provided the survey questions below, and in Appendix D.

#### *Survey Questions*

1. Please enter your name, email address, and phone number.

2. How old is your child and what grade is your child in?
3. What is your child's gender?
4. Please describe the nature of your child's learning difference(s).
5. Is your child currently enrolled in a Christian school? If so, for how long has your child been enrolled in this school?
6. Is your child currently enrolled in a general education inclusive class within the Christian school? If so, do you feel that his/her educational needs are being or were addressed in that classroom environment? Why or why not?
7. Is your child enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program? If so, how long has your child been enrolled in this program?
8. Do you feel that your child has experienced positive academic and/or social gains as a result of his/her enrollment in the NILD Educational Therapy™ program? Why or why not?
9. Please describe any type of services, other than NILD Educational Therapy™, that your child has received for his/her learning differences through a Christian school placement(s).
10. What is your age group?
11. What is your gender?
12. Are you willing to participate in this study as a co-researcher by completing an individual interview via Skype™, Google Hangouts™, or by phone and write a letter of advice to another parent who has a child with a learning difference?
13. Please enter your preferred method to conduct the interview: Skype™, Google Hangouts™, or phone.

14. Please enter the contact information (email address or Skype name) associated with your Skype™ account, Google Hangouts™, or the best phone number to reach you for the interview.

Questions one, and 10 through 14 collected basic demographic data about the potential co-researchers as well as their contact information. Questions two and three collected demographic data about the co-researchers' children who have learning differences. Question four served to begin to answer the central research question as it ensured that a potential co-researcher's child has a diagnosed learning difference, while questions five and six served a similar purpose in determining that a potential co-researcher's child has also been enrolled in a K-12 Christian school for at least one full school year. Question seven aided in answering research sub-question two as it addressed services the child was or had been receiving within the Christian school as well as the parent's experience with inclusion. Question eight directly addressed the parent's experiences with the NILD program, and was useful in answering sub-questions three and four. Question nine addressed any other educational services received by their child while he was attending a K-12 Christian school. Question nine helped to answer the central research question as it will cause parents to elaborate upon their experiences with Christian education apart from NILD services.

## **Interviews**

Individual interviews were the second method of data collection in this study. Patton (2002) stated, "Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories" (p. 341). Moustakas (1994) posited that the interview was a primary means of data collection in phenomenological research. The researcher

should develop broad questions designed to obtain a rich understanding of the co-researcher's core experience with the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). However, the researcher may also slightly alter the questions while conducting the interview as the co-researcher responds to gain a deeper understanding of the co-researcher's experience (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, semi-structured interviews suited this study best as they allowed the participants to share their personal experiences with the lived phenomenon of interest. In keeping with a transcendental phenomenological inquiry, I engaged in the process of *epoche*, or bracketing out my personal experiences with the phenomenon, throughout the interview process (Moustakas, 1994). I conducted the interviews at a time convenient to each participant via Skype™ or telephone, with each interview lasting between 18 and 45 minutes. Using the semi-structured approach to interviews provided the opportunity to use the topics as a formal guide, and allowed me to ask follow-up questions where appropriate to encourage further dialogue (Bernard, 1988, p. 205). I designed the interview questions (see Appendix G) to address the research questions of the study, but more importantly to address the reasons that parents chose a Christian education as well as the challenges and benefits perceived throughout their child's educational placements. I audio recorded the interviews using my personal computer's audio recording capability and a smartphone application as a back-up measure. Additionally, I wrote field notes throughout each of the interviews to gather data that could not be recorded via audio recording (see Appendix H). Field notes can add contextual data to the audio recordings, and increase the richness of data gathered through the interview process by describing anything observed during the interview (Patton, 2002; Tessier, 2012). Additionally, extensive field notes were taken immediately after each interview to further record any other observations or thoughts that arose after each interview.

*Semi-Structured Interview Questions*

1. Please tell me about your child's learning differences.
2. When and how did you first notice that your child was experiencing challenges with learning?
3. What other types of challenges was your child experiencing in school or at home when learning challenges were discovered, if any?
4. How many and what types of different school placements has your child had through his or her school years?
5. What qualities were you looking for in a school once it was determined that your child was diagnosed with learning differences?
6. Why did you choose a Christian education for your child?
7. Please describe the best parts about having a Christian school placement.
8. Please describe any challenges you or your child experienced in that or those placements.
9. Please describe your experiences with your child's enrollment in an NILD Education Therapy™ program.
10. What do you believe have been the academic and/or social benefits of your child's enrollment in an NILD program?
11. What challenges have you experienced with your child's enrollment in an NILD program, if any?
12. Drawing from your experience as a parent of a student with learning differences, is there anything else that you believe would be important for Christian school educators to understand?

Question one allowed the co-researchers to describe their child's learning differences to provide the background information about the kind of challenges their child experienced. This measure was meant to create an initial dialogue and to establish a positive, honest interaction between the co-researcher and myself, described as important by Moustakas (1994). Question one helped to answer the central research question by establishing that the co-researcher experienced the phenomenon and began to open the story of the co-researcher's experience with it. Questions two and three provided information as to how the challenges were discovered, diagnosed, and dealt with initially. These two questions helped to answer both the central research question and research sub-question two by determining if the school in which the child was enrolled offered any support or assistance during the diagnosis process. Earey (2013) found that some parents delayed in obtaining a diagnosis of their child's learning disability to have their child continue in a fully inclusive setting and to not have the child labeled. As Vygotsky (2012) put forth, thought development, the basis of further intellectual development, is dependent on the sociocultural experience of the child. It was, therefore, important to understand the school environments of co-researchers' children when they were first diagnosed with a learning difference. This line of inquiry continued with questions four and five and assisted in answering research sub-questions one and two. The responses to these questions determined if the co-researchers chose a Christian school prior to or after a diagnosis of learning differences, and whether the co-researcher's child attended a Christian school after the diagnosis. I also used the questions to examine whether the co-researcher's child was in inclusive or exclusive learning placements, and if that was important to the co-researcher. While socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986) generally support inclusive education, not all K-12 Christian schools are able to accommodate children with learning



differences (Contreras, 2013; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Some traditional K-12 Christian schools do not employ research-based practices for students with special needs (Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Ramirez & Stymeist, 2011). Especially during the secondary school years, parents may feel that an inclusive education is not the best option for their child with special needs (Alisaukas, et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Scorgie, 2015). Question six helped to establish the co-researchers' beliefs about the value of a Christian education and directly answered research sub-questions one and two. Not all parents choose a Christian education for spiritual or religious reasons (Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Wolf et al., 2012). Questions seven and eight addressed the co-researchers' perceptions of a K-12 Christian school placement. These questions assisted in answering research sub-questions three and four, and specifically addressed the gap in the literature concerning parental perceptions of K-12 Christian special education. Questions nine through 11 directly addressed the central research question as well as sub-questions three and four with the focus being on NILD program perceptions specifically. While Keafer (2008) found that NILD program participants experienced education gains in language skills after two years of NILD Educational Therapy™, her work did not address the parents' perceptions of the educational therapy. Parents do not always feel that educational gains are paramount to their child's success in school when dealing with learning differences, but rather focus on their child's social development and success (Alisaukas et al., 2011; de Boer et al., 2010; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010) Question 12 served as a concluding question that gave the co-researchers an opportunity to share any other information that they were not able to cover during the interview process, therefore addressing any of the research questions depending on the co-researchers' responses. Moustakas proposed that it was important to end an interview with a

question that allows the co-researchers to add any additional information that he feels will be important to his experience with the given phenomenon.

### **Letters of Advice**

The final method of data collection was the gathering of letters written by the co-researchers using given instructions as a guide. Written work serves as a means of cross-checking oral data, as collected in interviews, and can be considered a primary data source (Harris, 2002). Clandinin and Connelly (1989) said that, “Data may also be generated by participants through personally reflective methods such as journal keeping, story-telling, letter writing, and autobiographical work. . .” (p. 14). For this study, I provided co-researchers instructions on how to write the letter in the e-mail given to them upon selection to the study (see Appendix F). I asked co-researchers to complete the letter within two weeks after the individual interview. I sent a follow-up reminder e-mail to any co-researchers who did not submit the letter within two weeks after their interview (see Appendix I).

The instructions invited the co-researchers to write a letter of advice to other parents who desire for their child with learning differences to be enrolled in a Christian school. Using open-ended instructions allowed each co-researcher to reflect on their personal experiences and to provide information to other parents that they felt would be most beneficial.

#### *Letter of Advice Instructions*

Please write a letter of advice to another parent who has a child with a learning difference, and would like to enroll his child in a Christian school. Draw from your own experiences as you write. You may wish to provide information such as how to obtain a diagnosis, how to best work with teachers and administrators, or what types of services one should look for when seeking out a Christian school for a child with learning

differences. Please offer some words of encouragement to other parents by letting them know what benefits an NILD program can offer and ways to overcome any challenges associated with NILD programs. This letter has no required length. This letter is not meant for distribution and will only be seen by the researcher for data analysis.

This letter assisted in answering the central research question by focusing the co-researchers' attention to their own experiences in a reflective manner (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989). I gained further insight into sub-questions one and two by suggesting that the co-researchers reflect on what types of services one should look for in a Christian school. Keafer (2008) found that NILD Educational Therapy™ aided students with language based learning differences to gain an average of two and half grade levels in reading and writing. Therefore, in relation to sub-question two, the possibility existed for parents to mention services such as those provided by NILD educational therapists in their letters. In giving advice to other parents, it could also be expected that co-researchers would consider the challenges and benefits they may have experienced with Christian education and aided in answering sub-questions three and four. See Appendix J for sample letters, and Appendix K for an example of notes taken while examining the letters.

### **Data Analysis**

Throughout the data analysis process, *epoche* or bracketing was employed (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Bracketing can be defined as focusing solely on the phenomenon of study without adding personal thoughts or views of the phenomenon as much as is possible (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Husserl (1931) further described bracketing as intentionally disconnecting personal beliefs or judgements concerning the phenomenon to be studied to

examine the phenomenon. Transcendental phenomenology employs *epoche* to truly determine the essence or reality of the phenomenon (Husserl, 1931).

Prior to data analysis, I transcribed all recorded data. I recorded field notes by hand throughout the interviews. After each interview, I took extensive handwritten notes. I employed extensive memoing while examining the letters of advice written by the co-researchers. Memoing, the process of writing notes about perceptions, themes, or topics, becomes apparent while reading the documents (Creswell, 2013). I analyzed the data from the three collection methods as a whole set of data. As this was a transcendental phenomenological study, the most appropriate means of data analysis was to employ the method of data analysis as outlined by Moustakas (1994).

Initially, I analyzed the data gathered through the surveys, and selected the co-researchers for the study to allow for maximum variation. I eliminated the survey data from the surveys of potential participants not selected to participate as co-researchers in the study, and did not include that data in any future analyses. I then transcribed the audio-recorded data from the individual interviews as soon as possible after each interview. Through extensive memoing, I thoroughly examined the letters of advice written by the co-researchers. I analyzed all data as a whole set of data to establish preliminary groupings, significant statements, and broad themes. Moustakas (1994) refers to this initial step in data analysis as horizontalization. It is essential that no perception discovered in the data at this stage be overlooked (Moustakas, 1994).

I identified broad themes then reduced them to eliminate any that repeat or overlap with others (Moustakas, 1994). When reducing and eliminating themes, it is essential to ask if the theme carries meaning pertinent to understanding the phenomenon and if the theme can be

abstracted and labeled (Moustakas, 1994). This process of reduction and elimination exposed the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994), or main themes of the experience.

After identifying the invariant constituents, I further categorized, or clustered them into themes and sub-themes (Moustakas, 1994). Next, I labeled each of these themes and sub-themes (Moustakas, 1994). In this step, I further clarified and supported the themes by using direct quotations found in the data (Moustakas, 1994).

I provided a textural description of the data to describe the co-researchers' experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) defined a textural description as a full, rich description of what the co-researchers experienced. Using the significant statements organized into themes, I wrote a rich detailed account including co-researcher quotes.

To frame the phenomenon in its context, the next step resulted in a written description of how the co-researchers experienced the phenomenon, or a structural description (Moustakas, 1994). I thoroughly explained the setting and context of the phenomenon in great detail. Moustakas (1994) described the structural description thusly, "This means turning one's focal attention to the conditions that precipitate the textural qualities, the feelings, sense experiences, and thoughts, the structures that underlie textures and are intimately bound within them" (p. 78).

Lastly, I provided a synthesized textural and structural description to create a composite summary of the data (Moustakas, 1994) that revealed what is real about the phenomena of study. Husserl (1931) identified this reality having been reduced by transcendental phenomenological analysis as the essence of the phenomena. As a result, I provided the reader with a final analysis of the co-researchers' experiences of the given phenomenon.

## **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness can persuade the reader that the, “. . . findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 290). For this to occur, the study must establish means by which the study can be deemed credible (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In this study I employed tools to ensure that I obtained the four measures of trustworthiness: credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

### **Credibility**

Credibility refers to establishing the truthfulness of a study’s findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This study sought to establish credibility by using triangulation of data collection and member checking. I triangulated the data in this study by using an on-line survey, personal interviews, and letters of advice written by the co-researchers as three separate data collection strategies. Triangulation, or using various sources of data collection can, “. . . shed light on a theme or perspective” (Creswell, 2013, p. 251). Member checking is a process by which co-researchers examine the data they provided, checking for accuracy, and confirming or further clarifying statements made (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking in this study occurred by emailing each co-researcher a transcription of their interview. I gave each co-researcher the opportunity to clarify any statements made, or to correct any perceived errors. None of the co-researchers felt it necessary to make any corrections or clarifications upon reviewing the transcripts.

### **Dependability**

Dependability indicates how well a study could be replicated if the study was conducted with similar co-researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As previously described, member checking of transcriptions supported dependability. Additionally, an audit trail (Appendix L) was

maintained throughout the data collection and analysis phases of the study. An audit trail refers to maintaining accurate, detailed records throughout the research process for an outside auditor, an objective reviewer, to scrutinize the, “. . . processes and results” (Halpern, 1983, p. 47). I maintained accurate records of data collection methods as well as data analysis methods throughout the study.

### **Transferability**

Transferability refers to how well the study could be generalized to other populations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Descriptive data reporting allowa the reader to, “. . . transfer information to other settings” (Creswell, 2013, p. 252). The data provided must be clear enough to allow the reader to apply the findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I obtained transferability using thick, descriptive data throughout the data collection and data analysis processes.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability specifies how well the findings represent the perspectives of the co-researchers rather than the biases of the researcher (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I achieved confirmability in this study using co-researcher quotations, peer review, enumeration, and bracketing. Co-researcher quotations throughout the reporting of the data supported the findings of this study. I conducted a peer review, or consultation with colleagues familiar with the topic but not directly involved with the research (Lincoln & Guba, 1986). Two highly-experienced educators, who each had two children with learning differences enrolled in Christian schools, were asked to review the data analyses and provide feedback on analysis accuracy. After extensive review and conversation, the reviewers only recommended minor changes regarding the presentation of the data analysis to provide visual clarity. For further confirmability, I also

provided an enumeration of themes after completion of all data analyses (see Appendix M). Enumeration refers to maintaining a record of how many times each co-researcher mentions a theme (Halpern, 1983). Additionally, I employed bracketing or clarifying researcher bias.

### **Ethical Considerations**

First, data collection did not begin until I received approval for the study Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). Participation in this study was voluntary, and I obtained informed consent from all co-researchers. Co-researchers were free to withdraw from this study at any time. Co-researcher confidentiality was of paramount importance. Care was taken to ensure the confidentiality of all co-researchers by assigning each a pseudonym. The findings of this study could potentially give a negative perception of schools or their teachers. Therefore, the names of the schools were kept confidential by using pseudonyms instead. I took care not reveal the geographical location of the schools except in terms of the region of the United States. I withheld the names of NILD educational therapists and instead used pseudonyms. I conducted the interviews via telephone or Skype™ privately in my home office. The co-researchers participated in the interview via telephone or Skype™ in a location of their choosing. I have all recordings and transcriptions stored in a password protected laptop computer, and all written data stored in a locked file container. All audio recordings will be erased and all written data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

### **Summary**

I employed a transcendental phenomenological approach in this qualitative study. In this chapter, I discussed that co-researchers consisted of parents of students with learning differences enrolled for at least one full school year at a K-12 Christian school in the United States that offers NILD Educational Therapy™. I further discussed data collection strategies that included



online surveys, individual interviews conducted via telephone or Skype™, and letters of advice written by the co-researchers. Additionally, I discussed data analysis using the steps as outlined by Moustakas (1994). I concluded the chapter by discussing trustworthiness and the importance of ethical considerations.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who is or has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school for at least one school year. In this chapter, I present the analysis of the data collected per the methods outlined in the previous chapter. I provide a profile of each of the ten co-researchers, and a composite textural description organized around the themes revealed during the data analysis process. This chapter concludes with a composite structural description, then a composite textural and structural description revealing the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

After receiving recruitment information from NILD educational therapists serving in five K-12 Christian schools from four geographical locations throughout the United States, 13 prospective participants completed the on-line demographics survey. From this group of prospective participants, 10 individuals continued in the study, becoming co-researchers. Co-researcher is a term developed by Fraelich (1989) to describe the role of a participant in a study as an equal partner with the researcher. All co-researchers were females of middle to upper-middle class socio-economic status. Three participants were in their fifties and all other co-researchers were in their forties. Four of the 10 co-researchers are or have been educators employed by the Christian school that their child attends or attended, and two others are or have been employed by the Christian schools that their child attends or attended in non-educational capacities. Three co-researchers were from the Northeast, two were from the Southeast, three were from the Midwest, and two were from the West. The children of the co-researchers, the

focus of this study, ranged in age from 10 to 27 years, six females and four males. The length of time each of the co-researcher's children spent enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program ranged from 18 months to seven years. I used pseudonyms for all co-researchers, their children, and any schools or educational therapists mentioned.

### **Judy**

Judy was the mother of a 13-year-old son who was in eighth grade at the time of the study. Her son was diagnosed with reading comprehension difficulties and had an IEP to address his challenges. He was enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program for three years. Judy's son has been in the same Christian school placement since preschool, and Judy hoped that he would graduate from 12th grade from this Christian school. This was her son's first school year not participating in NILD since he was first enrolled in it, and Judy was prepared to re-enroll her son in the program if his grades began to slip or if he showed any signs of needing continued educational therapy.

### **Sara**

Sara was also the mother of a 13-year-old son who was also in eighth grade. Her son had been diagnosed with both visual and auditory processing disorders. He was enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program for six years. Sara's son began his schooling in public school, but after his first-grade year, Sara decided to homeschool him because she felt as if he was getting lost in public school. Although he made progress while being homeschooled, Sara chose to enroll her son in a Christian school with an NILD Educational Therapy™ program beginning in his third-grade year. This was his sixth year in this school placement.

**Hannah**

Hannah was the mother of a 27-year-old young woman who graduated from high school in 2007. Her daughter was diagnosed with learning comprehension challenges. Hannah's daughter attended a public school through the end of fifth grade, and then transitioned to a Christian school in sixth grade. Hannah decided to change her daughter's placement in an effort to find a school with additional academic help for her daughter. She remained at the Christian school until graduating from 12th grade. For her seven years at the Christian school, Hannah's daughter was continuously enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program.

**Elizabeth**

Elizabeth was the mother of a 14-year-old daughter who was in ninth grade at the time of this study. Her daughter was diagnosed with a reading disability had a 504 plan. Elizabeth's daughter attended the same Christian school since starting kindergarten, and was receiving NILD Educational Therapy™ at the time of this study. Her daughter was enrolled in the NILD program for three years, and also received reading support through her school in addition to NILD Educational Therapy™.

**Barbara**

Barbara was also the mother of a 14-year-old daughter who was in ninth grade at the time of this study. Barbara's daughter was diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome, and was enrolled in one Christian school from kindergarten through eighth grade. Her daughter then transferred to the Christian high school she was attending at the time of this study. In her first Christian school placement, Barbara's daughter received NILD Educational Therapy™ from kindergarten through fifth grade.

**Kate**

Kate was the mother of a 12-year-old son who was in seventh grade at the time of this study. Kate's son was diagnosed with short term auditory memory issues and had a 504 plan. Her son attended kindergarten at one Christian school, and then attended a different Christian school when he was in first grade, the same school he was attending at the time of this study, where he received NILD Educational Therapy™ for eighteen months. Before enrolling him in the NILD program, Kate sought educational support for her son through a private tutoring service.

**Jan**

Jan was the mother of a 10-year-old daughter who was in fourth grade at the time of this study. Jan's daughter, the youngest child represented in this study, had been diagnosed with dyslexia and dyscalculia. Her daughter attended kindergarten in a Catholic school, first and second grade in one Christian school, and then transferred to her current Christian school in third grade. Jan transferred her daughter to her current school to enroll her daughter in the school's NILD Educational Therapy™ program, and to alleviate the stress her daughter was under from what Jan described as an intense, fast-paced learning environment that she was in during her first and second grade school placement. Her daughter was receiving NILD Educational Therapy™ at the time of this study and had been in the program for one and a half school years. Jan often attends dyslexia conferences to stay current on dyslexia research and treatment.

**Rachel**

Rachel was the mother of a twelve-year-old daughter who was in sixth grade at the time of this study. Her daughter was diagnosed as having an auditory processing disorder with a specific learning disability. Rachel's daughter had been in the same Christian school since

beginning kindergarten. Throughout her third through fifth grade school years, Rachel's daughter was enrolled in her school's NILD Educational Therapy™ program. At the time of this study, Rachel's daughter was no longer receiving NILD Educational Therapy™.

### **Megan**

Megan was the mother of an eleven-year-old son who in sixth grade at the time of this study. Her son was diagnosed with ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder, anxiety, issues with executive functioning, as well as social issues. Megan's son had been in his Christian school placement upon entering third grade. She moved her son from the Christian school placement he had been in since preschool and moved him to the Christian school he was in at the time of this study because she desired to enroll him in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program. From third through fifth grade, Megan's son was continuously enrolled in his school's NILD Educational Therapy™ program. Megan's son transitioned out of the NILD program in sixth grade.

### **Heidi**

Heidi was the mother of a 27-year-old young woman who was a high school graduate. When Heidi's daughter was in second grade she was diagnosed with ADD, and two years later was diagnosed with Auditory Processing Disorder. Frustrated with the lack of services her daughter was receiving at her public school, Heidi sought the services of an NILD educational therapist at a nearby private Christian school when her daughter was in fourth grade. Although her daughter was not able to attend the school until sixth grade, she began receiving NILD services through the school while she attended public school. Upon entering this Christian school in sixth grade, Heidi's daughter continued receiving NILD Educational Therapy™ until she graduated from the school in eighth grade. Heidi's daughter entered a Christian high school

in ninth grade and continued at that school until she graduated with minimal academic accommodations.

## **Results**

The following section presents the results of the analysis of the data gathered in this study. The themes identified from the analysis are presented in relation to their corresponding research questions, creating a composite textural description of the phenomenon. Quotes from the co-researchers provide support for the composite textural description. These quotes are direct transcriptions from interviews, letters written by the co-researchers, and the on-line surveys. The quotes include vocal tics, pauses, or grammatical errors that may occur in the course of a typical conversation. A composite structural description of the phenomenon is offered. Finally, a composite textural and structural description of the phenomenon is given, providing the essence of the phenomenon.

### **Themes**

Upon collecting data from the on-line surveys, personal interviews, letters of advice written by the co-researchers, and all notes and memos, I analyzed the data as one complete set. While employing the technique of *epoche* (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994), or bracketing out my own personal thoughts and attitudes regarding the phenomenon of study, I first engaged in the process of horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). Treating each statement with equal value and bearing in mind the research questions, I developed an extensive list of significant statements that and sorted them into broad themes. I then further sorted and refined the significant statements, eliminating repeated or irrelevant statements, and combining similar statements (Moustakas, 1994). This process revealed the invariant constituents (Moustakas, 1994). Themes and sub-themes were organized in relation to the research questions (see Appendix M).

### Central Research Question

I developed the central research question, “What are the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who has been enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school?” as a primary means of describing the shared phenomenon of the co-researchers. Four co-researchers described their experiences with their children as a journey. Sara noted, “As a parent of a child with a learning disability, the journey can be frustrating and lonesome” (Sara, Letter of Advice, 2016). Megan described it this way, “This is a journey, and there will be good days and bad days, but your child is worth it! We are still on this journey ourselves, and I’m sure we will be for a long time” (Megan, Letter of Advice, 2017). This section will present the themes that answer the central research question by describing the challenges that the co-researchers’ children have faced, how the co-researchers sought answers, and the work the parents engaged in throughout their journeys thus far.

**Child challenges.** All 10 co-researchers described various struggles that their children faced prior to finding a diagnosis, as well as throughout the therapeutic process and beyond. These challenges could be described as academic, emotional, social, behavioral, and those challenges that were ongoing.

**Academic challenges.** Academic challenges were described most often and by all co-researchers. Jan described her daughter’s challenges with math concepts this way:

She didn’t know. She had to count everything. So even simple math for longest time counting by ones, using her fingers. . . not being able to group numbers um, into clumps. So, everything was either counting by ones or subtracting by ones. So, we’re working on that, too. So, and clocks is a big one, um sequencing, days of the week, calendars, um, any number patterns, anything like that are all difficult for her. (Jan, Interview, 2017)



Hannah recollected her daughter's difficulties with reading comprehension:

. . . towards the end of first grade and in second grade there were so many times that her assignments would, um, her answers would not make sense. And so, the teacher would sit down with her and ask her about it; she was able to answer her. And so, we thought she was just rushing through her work. And then, um, when she got to third grade, um, that got a lot more noticeable of course and we began to see, I mean she was a hard worker and so she, we knew she wasn't just rushing through her work and um, hmm, we were in the public school at the time, and so they tested her at the end of third grade and she did test for a learning disability in reading comprehension. And so, she could read any, I mean she was above grade level on like oral reading fluency. But it was how many words she could read a minute, but she did not understand what she was reading. A lot of it was vocabulary, she just did not know the meanings of words. So, it, she had a difficult time with that. (Hannah, Interview, 2016)

***Emotional challenges.*** Co-researchers mentioned emotional challenges, especially challenges with anxiety, 33 times across the data set. The children of co-researchers often experienced frustration and anxiety surrounding their academic work and school experiences. Megan told this anecdote about one way her son dealt with school anxiety:

It didn't matter how quiet it was or what type of music it was, he just wanted silence in the car. He didn't want any talking, you know, on the way to school. He needed that time to be completely silent so that he could get ready for the day because school was so taxing for him. (Megan, Interview, 2017)

Rachel's daughter experienced anxiety at school as a result of her auditory processing challenges:

I remember um, in second grade she had to um, you know I would usually, a lot of times I'd walk in and pick her up. Well I started just doing the drive in to pick her up and they would call the name you know, over the loudspeaker. And I couldn't figure it out, but she was just completely terrified of that and just upset. I mean physically and emotionally upset when I would do that because she was so afraid she wasn't gonna hear her name called. And I thought again it was just, 'Oh, she's so attached to me,' or you know, she's having separation issues, whatever. And then you know, when she was diagnosed with auditory processing problems it made sense. (Rachel, Interview, 2017)

For several children, these anxious feelings generalized into other unrelated areas of their lives.

Jan described it this way:

She would follow me around the house crying, crying, crying, and you know, nearly screaming at me um, 'I want to do my homework. I need help.' And it was, and then it was spreading outside of that. So then if she had any difficult choosing what pants she was gonna wear that day, all of a sudden emotion usually reserved for the academic piece started coming over into those areas. That was probably the low, second grade. (Jan, Interview, 2017)

***Social challenges.*** Although one co-researcher stated that her child did not experience any social challenges, seven co-researchers shared that their children experienced varying degrees of social challenges. These challenges were either directly related to their learning differences or the perceived social stigma surrounding being a part of the NILD program.

Megan's son's learning differences hindered his socialization skills:

And socially he was having so many issues with the other kids that you know he would want to be a friend with somebody, but he didn't really understand how to make friends

or how to be a friend to other people. And he was so self-centered that it really affected the other kids and really alienate them. And when he did have conversations with them he would talk about random things to try and be funny but it came off that, ‘This is weird.’ (Megan, Interview, 2017)

Elizabeth’s daughter perceived a stigma from being pulled out of class for services:

. . . the only negative aspect I would say is, I mean she is a young teenager and sometimes um, kids who get pulled out for different things, or go to different programs are viewed differently. And her friends, I don’t really think view her differently, but she has a perception that she’s viewed differently, so battling that a little bit, um, is sometimes an issue. (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016)

Three co-researchers also described incidents of bullying. Rachel stated:

Um, and but she had a lot of issues, like every year we would have an issue with a girl and you know in her class or you know, it’d be someone different every year that was kind of bullying her and so forth. And you know, she couldn’t think get her words to stick up for herself or the confidence. (Rachel, Interview, 2017)

Megan’s son experienced bullying as well:

And when this kid was baiting him, and calling him stupid, and saying you know, ‘All cats should be put to death,’ you know, things like that because all the kids knew how much he loved cats that the kids would you know - there’s somebody different. I’m gonna tease him about it because it gets a rise out of him. And he would lose his mind over stuff like that. (Megan, Interview, 2017)

Barbara spoke of an incident of bullying her daughter experienced:

She's in the main classrooms but if she needs more time she can take it. Ah, a teacher didn't give her more time one time early in the semester and she started crying. In class because of that. Um, you know, then a boy took a um, video of her doing that. It got out and somebody said to her, 'I saw a video of you crying.' So, all of that was very frustrating because of um, what happened because the teacher hadn't given her more time. So, I talked to the boy's mom, and I talked to um, the teacher. And she was you know, very sorry that she had done that and um, so she um, talked to her, apologized the teacher did. The boy called and apologized too which was great. And the mom did. So, little frustrations like that I jump on and you know then they get solved, and you move on, so. (Barbara, Interview, 2016).

**Behavioral challenges.** Although not the case for every child represented in this study, three co-researchers described behavioral challenges that their children faced because of their disabilities. Prior to her diagnosis of ADD, Heidi's daughter experienced behavioral challenges at school and at home, "And I knew that she probably might have like a little ADD 'cause she couldn't sit still and was getting in trouble in the classroom and would do you know, some stuff at home" (Heidi, Interview, 2017). Barbara's daughter experienced behavioral challenges as well.

Back when she was younger it was um, trouble respecting one's personal space. So, if you, if you were eating next to her, and she thought something looked interesting she would take it off your plate and that caused problems as she got a little older, first grade, second, because her friend next to her didn't want her touching her food, or next to her locker taking things that were, you know in her locker just to look at, not to actually steal them or anything (Barbara's Interview, 2016).

**Ongoing challenges.** Every co-researcher identified that their children experienced successes. However, co-researchers did point out that some challenges were ongoing in their children's lives. Rachel had this thought about her daughter's continued challenges with social communication, ". . . she still struggles just because I mean, that's just gonna be a struggle for her" (Rachel, Interview, 2017). Jan described her daughter's spelling difficulties, "So spelling, spelling is hard, but um, it always, that's, that will always be hard for her" (Jan, Interview, 2017). Heidi commented about her adult daughter, "I mean to this day she has a problem with math and money" (Heidi, Interview, 2017).

**Seeking answers.** Each co-researcher recounted the process by which they sought answers for their child's learning challenges and how their children were ultimately diagnosed. Judy commented, "As parents, we sometimes struggle with finding answers to questions" (Judy, Letter of Advice, 2016). Heidi wrote, "If you think your child needs help, then seek it and don't let anyone tell you NO" (Heidi, Letter of Advice, 2017). Megan spoke of repeated visits to her son's pediatrician and her search for answers:

. . . then second grade came along and he was still struggling and so we took him to the doctor again and said, 'I really think there's something going on. I don't know what it is, but there's got to be something going on'. . . and so in third grade, you know I was getting really concerned and thinking, 'Enough is enough. I'm a teacher. I can see that he's not doing what he needs to do. I can see that he's struggling' (Megan, Interview, 2017).

**Early detection.** For all but two co-researchers, symptoms exhibited themselves early in their children's lives. Sara recounted her observations of her son's symptoms in kindergarten.

It was, it was difficult. And you know, you could just tell, right? I was a room mom, I was very active in the kids' school, so I could just kind of know that, you know, he, he was one of the ones that was struggling, even though I worked with him, you know?

(Sara, Interview, 2016)

Kate recollected her son's early symptoms, "Actually we probably noticed it when he was in first grade, when he was, during the learning to read process. It was very difficult for him" (Kate, Interview, 2016).

**Testing and diagnosis.** All co-researchers described the testing that their children received and how that led to a diagnosis. Elizabeth's daughter underwent two rounds of testing before finding a diagnosis.

. . .she underwent testing in second grade and it was um, really inconclusive, really didn't show any disability at all. Um, she continued to struggle through elementary school and then we had her tested again in fifth grade, and um, that's when the disability showed up in her testing. (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016)

Judy's son received his diagnosis after testing was done by both his Christian school and the area public school system.

He was first diagnosed when he was struggling with comprehension and his teachers began to question his ability. Due to the fact that the school already had a learning difference program in place, he was seen by those in charge of the program. Once they tested him, they then referred him to the district so that he could be evaluated. . . After reviewing the results, we knew that it was evident, that he needed some extra help.

(Judy, Letter of Advice, 2016)

Rachel expressed her overwhelming feelings at the time of her daughter's diagnosis:

And I had been in contact with Mrs. Jones and once we got her results I met with her and said, ‘This is what she has. I feel like I’m completely over my head. I don’t know what to do.’ (Rachel, Interview, 2017)

In contrast, Megan felt relief upon receiving a diagnosis for her son, “And suddenly I thought, ‘Hurray.’ Not that you want something to be wrong, but after all this time I was glad there was kind of a diagnosis” (Megan, Interview, 2017).

**Parental work.** The theme of parental work emerged from the data as each co-researcher expressed how much time and energy they spent, or felt that they should have spent working with or on behalf of their children.

**Intervention.** Each co-researcher described interventions that they either undertook themselves or interventions they sought out through outside resources to help their children with their challenges. Sara took her son out of public school and homeschooled him for a year to personally address his learning challenges before enrolling him in a Christian school. She noted, “And so, um, I worked with him. I homeschooled him in second grade. He was reading. He was reading simple chapter books by the time we got done” (Sara, Interview, 2016). Barbara decided to personally work with her daughter’s social challenges and allowed her NILD educational therapist to work with her academic challenges.

So, um, I just took that social part, I took on myself as trying to encourage and build up as well as um, and then let Mrs. Smith and her other teachers in the um, tutoring program work on specifics with her handwriting. . . and all the other little details that they saw, um, that needed to be worked on. (Barbara, Interview, 2016)

Judy expressed that there were times when she could have done more for her son, who is now doing well in school, “. . . I was probably not as proactive as I could have been as a mother of a

child who has you know, that has comprehension issues” (Judy, Interview, 2016). Megan discussed moving from intensive intervention with her son at home in addition to other therapies he was receiving to becoming a facilitator:

And so, I’m thrilled that we’re at that point. So that’s pretty much my role now as more of a facilitator. I’m not having to be the one on one teacher every time he gets home like I used to be. And if he had a full day at school and then he’d come home and have mom and teacher at home, and that was really stressful because he needed mom to be mom. (Megan, Interview, 2017)

**Advocacy.** All co-researchers mentioned that they needed to advocate for their children throughout their educational journeys. These co-researchers described the need to advocate for their children in the areas of testing and diagnosis, obtaining services, and ensuring that accommodation plans are followed. Elizabeth wrote, “Once a diagnosis is made, you should work closely with all people involved to make sure your student receives modified instruction, accommodations, or whatever else is necessary to obtain the education that is best suited for your child” (Elizabeth, Letter of Advice, 2017). Barbara noted, “Don’t just put them in pre-school or school thinking that it is the teacher’s job to teach your child. You must be your child’s advocate. . .” (Barbara, Letter of Advice, 2017). Heidi expressed the need for parental advocacy this way, “These children need us to stand in the gap for them. Trust your mother intuition, fight for your child and don’t give up even amidst any obstacle” (Heidi, Letter of Advice, 2017).

**Frustration.** Working for their child could be frustrating for these co-researchers; frustration was mentioned 30 times across the data set. Megan recounted this interaction with one of her son’s teachers:



I would email her, she would forget to email me back, or not get back to me for a week, or maybe sometimes not at all, or you know, I would have concerns and I would have to you know, I would try to talk to her and she would say, ‘Oh yeah, we’re going to do this, and this, and this,’ and things wouldn’t get followed through. So, that was a little bit frustrating. . . (Megan, Interview, 2017)

Sara mentioned a similar frustration,

I think the greatest aggravation for me is when a teacher does not follow the school policy about putting stuff on, they call it RenWeb™, which is where their um, homework assignments each night, their grades, and also their lesson plan for the following week, because my son, having a learning disability, he has to work weekends, or at least some, at least one of the days on the weekend. And when they don’t post something until Monday that, that was very aggravating because it’s not, I didn’t feel it was fair to him. (Sara, Interview, 2016)

### **Sub-question One**

Sub-question one, “Why did the parents choose a Christian education for their children?” was designed to further support the central research question by examining the reasons behind the decision to place the children represented in this study in a Christian school. The data analysis revealed four themes when addressing this research question: Christian beliefs, public school challenges, Christian school environment, and family.

**Christian beliefs.** Every co-researcher referred to some aspect of their Christian beliefs when discussing why the choice was made to place their child in a Christian school.

**Values.** The desire for children to have an education that reflected the family’s value system was cited most often. Rachel explained it this way,

. . . we are a Christian family and we wanted our values um, you know, put in school as you know what are the values we were teaching her at home. We wanted her to have that at school as well. That was our, um, our first. (Rachel, Interview, 2017)

**Worldview.** Related to the notion of values was the desire for their children to be surrounded by and develop a Christian worldview. Kate said, “. . . for the biblical worldview. That’s what it boils down to” (Kate, Interview, 2016). Barbara stated, “. . . having that Christian worldview, that was very important for us” (Barbara, Interview, 2016). Jan echoed this idea, adding that she desired for her children to develop a Christian worldview:

. . . the worldview is important. It’s a crazy place. We want independent thinkers who can analyze and think for themselves. God willing, it will be a Christian worldview. Where, where they get to um, see humanity as it is and work within God’s confines. (Jan, Interview, 2017)

**Prayer.** Prayer was another spiritual issue related to the co-researchers’ choice of a Christian school placement. Co-researchers wanted to know that their children were receiving prayer and that their children were able to pray at school. Jan spoke about her daughter’s school administration and prayer, “I think they really get it. They’re so prayerful and I believe in prayer, and the power of prayer, and the ah, families need prayer, marriages need prayer, kids need prayer” (Jan, Interview, 2017). Judy had this to say concerning prayer at her son’s school, “. . . the prayer time, the ability to know that you can pray at any time” (Judy, Interview, 2016).

**Biblical.** Additionally, co-researchers mentioned that the desire for their children to have a biblically based education was another reason for choosing a Christian school. Elizabeth supported this idea by stating, “. . . we wanted it to be, um, in alignment with God’s word. And

um, we wanted what they're learning to be scripturally accurate" (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016).

Hannah described how she felt about her daughter memorizing scripture:

I also loved that she had to memorize scripture. So that was just going into her brain, and um, you know, also hopefully her heart, and so, and that was, that was important to me. Especially with her learning difficulties, because she had such a hard time with memorizing and learning things, you know, I definitely want her to learn scripture. (Hannah, Interview, 2016)

**Public School Challenges.** Three co-researchers had children enrolled in public schools for at least one full school year, and all three mentioned challenges with those placements.

***Lack of help.*** For Heidi and Hannah, both of whom have children who are now adults, the challenges surrounded the belief that their children were not receiving the help they needed.

Heidi told her story this way:

My daughter had a learning disability while enrolled in the public school but she did not meet state criteria for special assistance. I knew something was seriously wrong and that my daughter was desperately crying out for and needing help. Her frustration was mounting and she needed my help every school night to relearn what she had learned in class that day. Our whole family was affected. . . (Heidi, Letter of Advice, 2017)

Hannah's account is similar:

And so therefore in the public school, she didn't qualify. She was just labeled as a slow learner. So, I knew that she was getting zero help, and she needed help, um, and that I just felt like she was, of course I was her mother, but (laughs) even as an educator I felt like, that she was too smart in too many areas to be labeled as just, 'slow learner', and this is the best it's gonna get. (Hannah, Interview, 2016)

***Social environment.*** Sara had concerns about the social environment in which her son was likely to be placed in public school due to his learning differences, “. . . like I said, my concern with his, with the environment around him, of him being in the lower classes that he’ll probably be in till he graduates high school. I did not want him with, other, ah, distractions” (Sara, Interview, 2016). Megan’s son did not ever attend public school, but she expressed concerns about the school he was zoned to attend.

It had a bad reputation, and it was, you know it was the lower end of town, lower socio-economic you know, type of, so you know, which may not necessarily be a bad thing. All kids deserve a great education, but when I talked to friends whose kids were currently going to that school they said, ‘Oh, at the old school we had 20 kids in a class. Here, they’re pushin’ ‘em in, you know, thirty plus kids in a class with two teachers in this big open area, with all these classes around. There’s so much noise, nobody can focus, they have foolishness and chaos.’ (Megan, Interview, 2017)

***Christian school environment.*** Co-researchers spoke of the type of learning environment they believed a Christian school provided.

***High quality.*** Co-researchers believed that a Christian education would be high quality. Barbara commented, “. . . we felt that the education at the Christian school was um, definitely um, of more quality than the public school” (Barbara, Interview, 2016). Megan also felt that her son’s Christian school offered a quality education, “And he would come home singin’ the songs, and had this excellent education that went right along with it” (Megan, Interview, 2017).

***Social and emotional environment.*** A Christian school’s social and emotional environment was also important to the co-researchers. Jan explained her daughter’s school’s

philosophy concerning students with learning differences that created a positive emotional environment:

She's not a, she's not a broken project for them that they're trying to fix. They're just walking alongside her, helping her to discover her strengths, helping her strengthen her weaknesses, and recognizing that every other kid in the class has strengths and weaknesses too. (Jan, Interview, 2017)

Similarly, Elizabeth described the positive social environment at her daughter's school:

. . . just the nurture and growth that she has in her spiritual life among her peers, and just developing relationships with her teachers, and um, I just think the overall um, education that is happening for the whole person, not just the academic side. . . (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016)

Judy also spoke about the social and emotional environment of her son's school, "You know, the comfortable atmosphere that is there knowing that the kids can reach out to any teacher for any reason at any time and they're, they're heard" (Judy, Interview, 2016).

**Family.** The subject of family emerged when discussing the choice of a Christian school placement.

***Parent attended.*** Three of the co-researchers attended Christian schools themselves. Judy explained that her husband graduated from the same Christian school that her son now attends (Judy, Interview, 2016), while Kate graduated from the same Christian school that her son currently attends (Kate, Interview, 2016).

***Siblings attended.*** Six co-researchers mentioned that all of the children in their family attended Christian school. When asked why she chose a Christian education for her daughter, Elizabeth's first response was,

Well, um, all my, all my kids have gone through um, the Christian school, and she's the youngest of our four. Um. I've had two graduate from Christian school already and the, um, she and her older brother are still in high school (Elizabeth's Interview, 2016).

### **Sub-question Two**

I identified the theme of services and support when addressing the second sub-question, "What qualities, concerning such things as teacher qualifications, academics, environment, or special services, did the parents of children with learning differences look for when choosing a K- 12 Christian school placement for their children?"

**Programs.** Nine co-researchers mentioned that when looking for a school, or if they ever needed to look for another school, having a program to address learning challenges would be important. Rachel shared this story about looking for a new private school,

Oh, I would definitely be looking for a school that had a program in place. Um, you know, that could accommodate her, because I actually, um, I did look at another private school. I think in her fourth-grade year. I thought, 'Oh, I'm just gonna look.' We had to put, my son was going to be starting kindergarten soon. And I thought, 'Oh, well maybe you know, there's just this one right here. I'm gonna go look at that one.' They had no program whatsoever for, um, anyone with learning challenges or anything and I thought, 'No way.' It's less tuition, and no way. It's not worth it, you know, so. That is our number one priority for her is a school that has got a program like NILD in place.

(Rachel, Interview, 2017)

Both Jan and Hannah pointed out that when choosing a school for their children, having a program to support children with learning differences was paramount to having a Christian school placement. Jan stated that, "So, but I will say that if it was a non-Christian school that

had the NILD program, then I probably would have tried it” (Jan, Interview, 2017). Hannah echoed this notion and explained:

However, to be honest, that is not why we chose Christ Academy (a pseudonym). The reason that we chose Christ Academy is for their learning program. . . and so I really wasn’t looking for a Christian school, even though that’s where I headed. You know, because I was looking really for a private school that might have something that could help her. I was looking for a school that just had anything to meet her needs. (Hannah, Interview, 2016)

**Teachers.** The desire for supportive teachers who were willing to partner with parents was another important aspect considered by the co-researchers when looking for a Christian school. Heidi described the teachers at her daughter’s Christian school and noted,

The teachers were loving and sought how to best help my daughter learn. The teachers sought how to best help my daughter and met with me and the NILD director to sincerely understand how to best help my daughter learn. The teachers sought to understand my daughter’s learning disability and not label her but treat her with God’s grace. My daughter did not need more stigma. She needed to believe she could succeed. (Heidi, Letter of Advice, 2017)

Elizabeth wanted a Christian school that encouraged parent teacher communication, “. . . a school that really, um, encouraged communication between parents and teachers” (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016). Elizabeth went on to say, “. . . I’m very, very active in her education, so, I would definitely look for a school that would facilitate that” (Elizabeth, Interview, 2016).

**Attitudes.** The attitudes of the school towards the nature of children and learning differences were of great importance to the co-researchers. Co-researchers desired for schools to

acknowledge that their child was an individual. Sara wanted Christian schools to understand that:

. . . not every kid is gonna fit in the same box. Um, every child learns differently and even though they, you know, may not be good in this school skill they may, you know, they may be really great at something else. Um, because honestly, not, you know, school's not for everybody. But that doesn't mean that they're not gonna be successful in their life. (Sara, Interview, 2016)

Kate put it this way, "We have found that Christian schools look at the child as an individual and not as 'student number x'" (Kate, Letter of Advice, 2017). Jan appreciated her daughter's Christian school's biblical approach to learning differences, "And the fact that they look at my child as a perfectly formed child of God and not a project to be labeled and fixed is refreshing and inspiring for me" (Jan, Letter of Advice, 2017).

### **Sub-question Three**

I developed the third sub-question, "What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the challenges of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?" to allow parents to express any difficulties they encountered with NILD Educational Therapy™. I identified the theme of commitment from the data. Co-researchers noted that NILD could be difficult, and that the program required a significant parental commitment of both time and money. Kate touched on both ideas when she wrote, "While it can be expensive from both a time and financial standpoint, we have found that our son has more self-confidence and is a much better student because of his experience with a Christian school NILD program" (Kate, Letter of Advice, 2017).



**Time.** Co-researchers commented on the time required to complete NILD work at home. Jan stated, “NILD is a lot of work. Hang in there” (Jan, Letter of Advice, 2017). Heidi described her experience this way:

Um, it was a lot. It was a huge commitment. Um, it required a lot of the parents because we had to do that at home. Um, it was stress, it was stressful because you know, I knew it was good for her and we had to do it, but we had to get there early and she had to be pulled out of class and she had to the, she had to do the um, exercises in the morning (pause) or in the afternoon. Um, I mean so it was a choice and a commitment that I had to do. Um, and my daughter had to do and you know there’s a lot of, I mean there was a lot of frustration. It was not easy. Um, but you know, a lot of things that we do that are not easy are for our good. (Heidi, Interview, 2017)

**Money.** Having to pay an additional fee for NILD Educational Therapy™ was a hardship for co-researchers; the subject of finances in relation to NILD program fees surfaced 15 times across the data set. Rachel expressed, “. . . it was a struggle for us to have to pay the additional for it. Um, that was a, it was a challenge. But we you know, by God’s grace we were able to, you know?” (Rachel, Interview, 2017). Barbara wrote this about the financial commitment involved, “There were a few struggles that my husband and I worked through. One is the significant cost of the annual program on top of paying a large amount for the Christian school” (Barbara, Letter of Advice, 2017). Hannah wrote of the financial commitment as well:

NILD programs are expensive, but you really can't put a price on changing your child's life in a way that will allow him/her to be successful. Plan for it and know that it will be the best sacrifice you could ever make for your child. (Hannah, Letter of Advice, 2016)

#### **Sub-question Four**

I designed the final sub-question, “What did the parents of children with learning differences perceive to be the benefits of enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school placement?” to allow for continued investigation of the co-researchers’ experiences, thereby further exploring the central research question. I identified five themes from the data analysis regarding the perceived benefits of the NILD program within K-12 Christian schools: therapist attributes, academic benefits, emotional benefits, social benefits, and spiritual benefits.

**Therapist attributes.** Barbara asserted, “The NILD program is only as good as the teachers who works with the child” (Barbara, Letter of Advice, 2017). All co-researchers spoke in glowing terms about their children’s NILD educational therapists, sometimes referring to them as an NILD teacher. Speaking of her son’s educational therapist, Sara stated, “I met her and she had a huge heart, she understands children with learning disabilities. . .” (Sara, Interview, 2016). Judy reported, “. . . they’re just incredible in there. I mean just the techniques they use to help him learn and grow um, are just phenomenal in my opinion” (Judy, Interview, 2016).

**Equips.** Co-researchers appreciated that their NILD educational therapists equipped them to understand their child’s strengths and weaknesses and the NILD program. Barbara explained,

I think they did a good job with, they had quarterly reports. And so, we would, my husband and I would come in and um, and go over with the teacher the reports. There was um, talk of the strengths that she had so it wasn’t always about you know, not being able to do something but where she, where her weaknesses were, and then what had been

um, what had been worked on and what they were gonna work on the following quarter. (Barbara, Interview, 2016).

Co-researchers also commented that NILD educational therapists equipped them with the knowledge that allowed them to work with their children at home to complete NILD homework. Heidi explained, “Yes, NILD equipped me. They showed me how to do it” (Heidi, Interview, 2017). Megan wrote,

The therapist did a fantastic job and accomplished a lot, but she could only do so much during the two weekly sessions. If you want your child to get the most benefit from the NILD program, you MUST complete the practices at home!!!! I can’t stress this enough. We did practice 4-5 days per week. We did not practice on the days that he had NILD therapy, as he had just worked with the therapist. But, we faithfully did the practice exercises on the other days. It is this practice and repetition of skills that really gives your child the most benefit and the greatest strides of success. You will be paying good money for the NILD therapy, so you might as well put in the time, so that you can reap the most reward! You don’t have to be a teacher in order to lead the exercises for your child. The therapist will show you exactly what to do. (Megan, Letter of Advice, 2017)

**Advocates.** Co-researchers also appreciated that their NILD educational therapists advocated for their children. Sara explained that she needed her son’s educational therapist to be his advocate:

And that was my, that was probably one of my other biggest thing is my, my concern especially in elementary school was things are so hard for him, I needed the therapist to be an advocate for, for him as well. . . (Sara, Interview, 2016)

Megan was thankful for a lighter parental workload because of her son's educational therapist working as an advocate. "My favorite part was she worked with his classroom teacher so I wasn't the one having to do all the work. . ." (Megan, Interview, 2017). Often, NILD educational therapists would work with teachers to provide accommodations and explain why they were essential, especially when teachers did not understand the child's disability. Hannah described the process this way:

The biggest challenge I think is that you're gonna always have teachers who don't understand. And never had a child like that, or the just don't, you know, really, in any private Christian school, you don't have, it's definitely not your majority that have these difficulties, they're the minority. So, they, the teachers just don't understand it. And, I think they get frustrated too, you know, 'Why don't you study more?', or whatever but, so I do think there were times that the teachers weren't understanding. And um, you know Mrs. Jackson had to go and kind of, um, fight (laughs) for her you know, with them. Not really fight but, you what I'm saying? Um, and be real supportive, and just, you know, try to explain again why she didn't, you know why she made a D on that test and she has been studying and you know why this accommodation needs to be made, and things like that so that was probably the biggest challenge, just getting all the teachers on board and understanding what was going on. (Hannah, Interview, 2016).

Heidi recounted an experience she had in this area:

Like she cheated on a test. And um, the NILD director had met with the teachers and tried to explain what auditory processing was. They had no idea. So, Mrs. Brown was able to explain that, and how it affected her. There was no, I mean there was no excuse

for her cheating, but it helped the teachers understand why she might have done that.  
(Heidi, Interview, 2017)

***Caring and firm.*** Co-researchers also mentioned that their children’s educational therapist would strike a balance between being caring and firm when working with their children, a stance that the co-researchers appreciated. Megan shared, “And she was so incredibly patient with him, but yet she had a firm hand when she needed to. . . which was fabulous because he needed that” (Megan, Interview, 2017). Sara discussed her son’s two different educational therapists:

He kinda had his therapist then on at an elementary level was more like a grandma, and I think over time, he needed more, so now that he’s in middle school and um, his therapist is different and she’s um, she, she’s tough, but then she also knows when to stop, when he’s to his fullest. (Sara, Interview, 2016)

***Academic benefits.*** By far, the most discussed topic across the entire data set was that of academic success, surfacing 40 times. All co-researchers were eager to share all that their children had accomplished in academics.

***Academic success.*** All co-researchers noted that their child’s academic success was a direct result of their enrollment in NILD. Megan explained, “So it was really, really amazing just to see the leaps and bounds that he was able to make, and I really do attribute a lot of that to NILD” (Megan, Interview, 2017). Judy’s son experienced significant gains, “I mean the growth I saw in him, um, just in comprehension alone was dramatic” (Judy, Interview, 2016). Barbara noted improved grades, “She got all A’s and a B plus for the semester” (Barbara, Interview, 2016). Kate expressed her son’s success this way:

. . . so his grades have improved. I mean, you can see that. And the results of the testing, the standardized testing, where he was and the amount of improvement where he is now, is a miracle. He's a poster child for the program. So, he has done very well (Kate, Interview, 2016).

Jan shared this success story:

Oh academic, like through the roof. So she jumped three grade levels in the first year. And she reads all the time now. I mean, I remember three months ago she wouldn't come to dinner and she was on the couch and I thought, 'She's on the iPad.' And I yelled at her, 'Get off the iPad.' And she popped off the couch and she looked at me and she goes, 'I'm reading a book, Mom.' I almost had to go in the bathroom and just cry because she does that all the time now. She really enjoys books. (Jan, Interview, 2017)

***Accommodations.*** Co-researchers attributed some of the success to the accommodations their children received at their Christian schools and their child's enrollment in an NILD program. Barbara explained accommodations this way:

. . .she is currently enrolled in the general education school classes which is going well because she also has in place some additional 'privileges' (i.e. able to take extra time on a test if needed) that her teachers know about but not necessarily the other students.

(Barbara, Survey, 2016)

Sara's shared her son needs his accommodations to be successful.

With us being in the NILD program, and like I said, it's the study guides earlier, and lesson plans on time so that it gives him you know, enough time to be successful because he's not the night before studier. He can't, he just can't do that. (Sara, Interview, 2016)

***Self-advocacy.*** Co-researchers also described how their children were learning to advocate for themselves to receive those accommodations, also contributing to academic success. Elizabeth wrote that her daughter’s educational therapists, “. . . have given her the confidence to self-advocate and ask for time extensions or clarifications when needed” (Elizabeth, Letter of Advice, 2017). Kate’s son’s teachers are aware of her son’s accommodations, but his educational therapists have taught him to self-advocate.

They basically taught him that he needed to go to teachers and ask for more help if he needed more help, or ask for more time if he needed more time. . .so the teachers are aware, but he actually needs to speak up and say, ‘I need, you know, I need to have more time. (Kate, Interview, 2016)

***Emotional benefits.*** Co-researchers expressed that NILD had emotional benefits for their children.

***Confidence.*** A major benefit noted by co-researchers was that their children now exhibited confidence. Jan said, “I think for the first time in her life she felt like she could do something well. . . And really, I think she spent the first six months building confidence” (Jan, Interview, 2017). Hannah’s daughter had a similar experience, “And so when we started her in the program here, you know, she began, she gained a lot of confidence very quickly because she began to have success in the classroom” (Hannah, Interview, 2016).

***Independence.*** Additionally, co-researchers noticed that their children became more independent. Sara explained that her son was more independent with his homework, “. . . it’s the only class that I have to sit with him each night, um, which is a wonderful thing because it used to be every single class, so he’s come great strides, let me tell ya” (Sara, Interview, 2016). Barbara also spoke of her daughter’s new independence with homework, “I mean, that’s a good

thing. She's one that will come home right from school and start right in on her homework and what mom wouldn't want that?" (Barbara, Interview, 2016).

**Social benefits.** Co-researchers found their children received social benefits from NILD. Megan's son worked on social skills with his educational therapist.

Like she would talk to him about situations that had happened in class, or things that I had told her that were happening in his class or that type of thing and she would help him try to work out some of those social situations. (Megan, Interview, 2017).

Rachel described her delight with her daughter's social success with her peers:

But compared to where she started, I mean, I have never, this is her first year in junior high, and I have never seen her so relaxed and so happy socially. . . . Before she had a lot of social anxiety, and she couldn't you know, stick up for herself, or speak for herself, or really form relationships as well. And this year is just, she has just completely blossomed and she loves school, she loves being with her friends, you know, more so than the work of course. (laughs) You know that makes me so happy because I've never had such an easy year as far as no drama. (laughs) No social drama; it's been fantastic. (Rachel, Interview, 2017)

**Spiritual Benefits.** Spiritual benefits surrounding the NILD program is a theme that surfaced when analyzing the data in light of sub-question four. Heidi asserted that the success of NILD was directly related to it being implemented by Christians, "But I think, I just really think because there's a lot more compassion and um, because it's a Christian and the teachers are Christians, for the NILD program to work" (Heidi, Interview, 2017). Megan wrote that because of NILD she now had hope, "We are in such a better place than we were when we started! Now, I'm hopeful for the future and excited to see what blessings God has in store for our family"



(Megan, Letter of Advice, 2017). Hannah spoke of her own spiritual journey while her daughter was enrolled in the NILD program,

Well, I just think that, you know, I had to keep reminding myself um, often, especially in the beginning time, beginning years of the program that she was my daughter, and she was fearfully and wonderfully made by God just like every other child. And sometimes we, um, sit back and maybe, you know, forget that. So, I just had to keep reminding myself and, and her that this is exactly how God made her, and this is something that we're gonna get through, but He's gonna teach us a lot of things along the way, and I just had to be open to the lessons instead of angry that we were having to go through this. Um, and you fight that as a parent, you know, within. You kind of, um, you know you're just frustrated because you don't want your child to suffer. And so you just, I don't know, I just had to keep just really staying focused on, on Christ and how he has um, what gifts he has given us, and um, and so I think that, so I think parents in this situation need a lot of encouragement. They need a lot of just reminders that this will pass, and there will be another, you know, a day where the struggle won't be so hard. (Hannah, Interview, 2016).

Jan spoke of her own daughter's spiritual growth and the role NILD played in that growth,

I think the NILD program is life changing for my daughter. I do. I just think um, totally, yeah. Just, I can't underestimate how much it has helped her and I don't know if every kid responds that way but I think even from a self-esteem. I think it'll actually build her faith in God too because I think she sees all that hard work as a, as a partnership with God, walking with Him. And doing the hard things. And um, you know as an adult I've been through things where, you go through hard things and you don't necessarily get the

pay off at the end. And you kind of wonder, ‘What was that all about, Lord?’ And she was already starting to ask, ‘Why did God make me this way? Why is this so hard?’ I found a note once that said, ‘I hate dyslexia.’ She spelled dyslexia completely wrong. (laughs) It’s kind of cute, but not. And I just think that what could have been turned into a stumbling block for her faith is now actually gonna be a cornerstone. Like, ‘God got me through that. God put the right people at the right time and you know, I worked hard, but God put me through that.’ And I think that’s important in a young person’s life to have that like Exodus moment where you can go back and say, ‘God parted the waters. He brought me through on dry land. I’m in the desert now but I’m gonna be ok because looking back. And I know that He has helped me in the past and He get me through again.’ (Jan, Interview, 2017)

### **Composite Structural Description**

Moustakas (1994) defined a composite structural description as, “. . . a way of understanding how the co-researchers of a group experience what they experience” (p. 142). The composite structural description is derived through the process of imaginative variation that takes place after the process of phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994). Imaginative variation looks to discover, “. . . the underlying and precipitating factors that account for what is being experienced. . .” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 98). All co-researchers in this study had a child with a learning difference who was previously or at the time of this study, was enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a traditional K-12 Christian school. The children of the co-researchers had all been enrolled in the NILD programs for at least 18 months. Except for one co-researcher whose daughter began NILD Educational Therapy™ in kindergarten, all co-researchers experienced their children being enrolled in either a public school or Christian school

without being enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program. Upon examining the composite textural description, and reflecting on my impressions of the data gathered, I could determine the composite structural description of the phenomenon. Ultimately, all co-researchers had a positive perception of NILD Educational Therapy™. This positive perception resulted from a decrease in parental stress and an increase in their children's improvement. The co-researchers explained that the advocacy provided by their children's educational therapists decreased their frustrations, workload, and anxiety that resulted from a constant need to advocate for their children at school. As a result of NILD Educational Therapy™, all of the co-researchers' children exhibited academic improvement, and most exhibited growth in the social, emotional, and spiritual realms as well, causing decreased co-researcher stress and positive perceptions of NILD.

### **Composite Textural and Structural Description**

This composite textural and structural description provides, “. . . a synthesis of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 144). These 10 co-researchers each had unique stories to tell, but they shared the phenomenon of having a child who was enrolled in a NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school. The synthesis of the composite textural and composite structural descriptions shows that each co-researcher experienced varying levels of challenge and success, usually in direct relation to their child's type and severity of learning difference. For co-researchers who had children whose learning differences affected their academic performance exclusively, their searches for answers and the amount of work their child's learning difference required of them was significant and certainly not without challenges. For co-researchers, whose children's learning differences affected them socially, emotionally, or spiritually, the challenges were more pronounced. There was also a

difference between co-researchers who had a child who was already in a school with an established NILD program at the time of his or her diagnosis, and those who had the added challenge of seeking out an NILD program, creating the need to change their child's school placement.

The co-researchers had similar reasons for choosing a Christian education for their children. All co-researchers mentioned their desire to have their children attend a school that either aligned with their value system or presented a Christian worldview. The perceived educational quality as well as the social and emotional environments of the school was highly valued. Additionally, they required a school that offered services and support for their children with learning differences. Of paramount importance was a program to meet their children's educational needs, but these co-researchers also placed value on caring, supportive teachers, as well as a school philosophy that embraced their children with learning differences as valuable members of the school community.

While all co-researchers noted that having their children enrolled in an NILD program was a tremendous commitment of time and financial resources, all of them also attributed a level of success to their children's enrollment in NILD. The co-researchers reported how their children's educational therapists equipped them to support their children at home, advocated for their children at school, and related to their children with care and firmness when necessary. All co-researchers gladly shared their children's academic successes that occurred as a result of NILD Educational Therapy™. The co-researchers spoke of how their children gained both confidence and independence, especially regarding homework or school-related issues. There were social benefits observed by the co-researchers as well; co-researchers whose children experienced new social success with their peers looked to NILD as the cause. Finally, having a

relationship with God was referenced 13 times across the data set. For either themselves or their children, co-researchers found there to be spiritual benefits resulting from their child's enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program.

### **Summary**

I have included in this chapter the results of the data collected from co-researchers who shared the lived experience of having a child with learning differences who had been enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school. Through the analysis of the data, I identified themes which served to answer the research questions. When addressing the central research question, data analyses revealed the themes of child challenges, seeking answers, and parental work. The themes of Christian beliefs, public school challenges, Christian school environment, and family surfaced during data analyses when addressing the first sub-question. I identified the themes of services and support, and commitment, respectively when addressing sub-questions two and three. Lastly, I identified the themes of therapist attributes, academic benefits, emotional benefits, social benefits, and spiritual benefits when addressing sub-question four. I provided both a structural description of the phenomenon and a composite description. The composite textural and structural description revealed the essence of the phenomenon, summarized as follows:

1. Co-researchers experienced varying levels of challenge before their children were enrolled in NILD and success resulting from their enrollment in NILD.
2. Co-researchers shared spiritual reasons for enrolling their children in a Christian school.

3. Although the co-researchers all experienced some level of challenge regarding their child's enrollment in NILD, the benefits, especially those in the academic arena, more than outweighed those challenges.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

Through this research, I sought to fill the gap in the literature regarding parental perceptions of Christian special education. This gap was identified through a thorough review of literature of topics relating to this phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who is or has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school for at least one school year. This chapter begins with a summary of the findings, followed by a discussion of the relation between the findings and the literature, and a discussion of the findings in the light of the study's theoretical framework. Then, I present the implications of the results, as well as the delimitations and limitations of the study. Lastly, I discuss recommendations for further research.

### **Summary of Findings**

When addressing the central research question, the themes of child challenges, how the co-researchers sought answers for their children, and the work that the co-researchers engaged in to support their children with learning differences surfaced. All co-researchers described their children's academic challenges, while others also described their children's emotional, social, and behavior challenges. The co-researchers all described how their children's challenges were detected and diagnosed through various forms of testing. Additionally, all co-researchers explained the interventions they sought for their children, with all co-researchers mentioning taking on varying levels of intervention tasks themselves and advocating for their children. The theme of parental work brought out the sub-topic of frustration, with co-researchers describing frustration with schools, teachers, and their child's learning differences in general.

Seeking to further answer the central research question, I engaged in analysis that answered four sub-questions. When addressing sub-question one, I identified the themes of Christian beliefs, challenges with public schools, Christian school environment, and family. Each co-researcher stated that their decision to place their child with learning differences in a Christian school related to the desire to have their home morals and values echoed or a Christian worldview encompassed in their child's school environment. Co-researchers took note of perceived challenges with public school placements, and parents perceived the environment within a Christian school as attractive. Co-researchers also reported that other family members, either parents or siblings, also attended Christian schools.

While addressing sub-question two through data analysis, I identified the theme of services and support. Co-researchers agreed that having a learning differences support program of some kind was important for their children. High quality, caring, supportive teachers were also a top priority for these co-researchers. Finally, co-researchers mentioned that the school's attitudes towards the nature of children and learning differences was an important area of support for their children.

Sub-questions three and four provided the themes of commitment, therapist attributes, as well as academic, emotional, social, and spiritual benefits. The challenges co-researchers experienced with NILD could be condensed into time and financial commitment. While these were indeed challenges, none of the co-researchers expressed that these challenges took away from the benefits they and their children experienced. The co-researchers overwhelmingly agreed that their children experienced academic benefits resulting from NILD enrollment. Newly found confidence and independence were among the social benefits described, and



improved peer interaction was a social benefit. Lastly, co-researchers described spiritual benefits of NILD enrollment for themselves and for their children.

A composite synthesis of the textural and structural descriptions revealed the essence of this phenomenon and included the following:

1. Co-researchers experienced varying levels of challenge before their children were enrolled in NILD and success resulting from their enrollment in NILD.
2. Co-researchers shared spiritual reasons for enrolling their children in a Christian school.
3. Although the co-researchers all experienced some level of challenge regarding their child's enrollment in NILD, the benefits, especially those in the academic arena, more than outweighed those challenges.

### **Discussion**

This section discusses the findings of this study in relation to the empirical literature base in addition to the study's guiding theoretical frameworks: Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Both theories are well-suited as the framework for this study as they both support the notion of inclusion. All of the co-researchers' children were placed in inclusive environments.

#### **Empirical Literature Discussion**

Although I found the literature regarding Christian special education to be sparse, I did observe that most of the findings in this study supported or extended the available literature. Parental views on why a Christian education was important for their child with learning differences, their ideas about inclusion, as well as the best means to implement inclusion concur with the findings of past studies. In cases where the literature offered opposing opinions about

parental views, this research supported the efficacy and desirability of inclusion. Finally, these results generally support previous findings with regards to educational and social outcomes.

**Christian education.** The religious beliefs and preferences of parents have been found to be the main reason that a Christian school placement is chosen for children with special needs (Buursma, 2010; Chang-Ho et al., 2007; Stegink, 2010). These co-researchers all considered the schools' moral and value systems as well as the adherence to a Christian worldview to be of primary importance for their family, although two co-researchers did admit that while spirituality was very important to them, the school's NILD program was of a higher priority.

The results of this study also supported literature that found parents chose a faith-based education for their children with special education needs due to concerns with the public-school system (Chang-Ho et al, 2007; Wolf et al., 2012). Co-researchers described concerns with the social environment of the public schools, as well as concerns with the level of help their children were receiving in public schools. This concern with the level of help received extends the finding that parents with special education needs would be better served in a Christian school because of class size (Wolf et al., 2012). The results of this study take this idea further by suggesting that parents may also find that the services available to their children in the public school are not enough, and that a Christian school offering NILD services may be able to provide what parents perceive to be more appropriate and intensive support services.

The co-researchers noted that the administrators of their children's Christian schools upheld philosophies that asserted that all children are made in the image of God, and that each student should have his or her unique talents and abilities affirmed. This finding is in keeping with literature that supports the idea that Christian administrators that support having students with special education needs within their school communities do so out of biblical conviction

(Contreras, 2013; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Taylor, 2005). The general warm, inviting atmospheres of the Christian schools offering NILD Educational Therapy™ that the co-researchers described were consistent with Anderson's (2011) discussions of biblical hospitality and its relation to successful Christian school inclusion.

**Inclusion.** All co-researcher's children in this study were placed in inclusive, general education classes at all points in their academic careers thus far. While two co-researchers did mention they were thankful that their children were able to be in regular classrooms, none of the co-researchers presented any thoughts to suggest that their children may need or ever needed a more segregated school placement. These findings support research that had suggested that parents believe that children with special education needs are best served in inclusive schools (Contreras, 2013; Szumski & Karwowski, 2010). Therefore, these findings do not support research that has found that parents would prefer that their child with special education needs be placed in a segregated environment (Alisauskas et al., 2011; Byrne, 2013; Contreras, 2013; de Boer et al., 2010; Marks et al., 2014). In similar fashion, these results also do not support previous research that indicates that parents may have preferred an inclusive education for elementary school, but changed their opinion once their children reached secondary school (Byrne, 2013; Tobin et al., 2012). With one exception, all children represented in this study were either of secondary school age or adults. None of these co-researchers expressed any change in their opinion about their child's inclusive school placement during their child's secondary school years. While the topic of middle school presenting unique social challenges did arise, the desire to change the child's placement did not accompany it. In fact, quite the opposite was true for these co-researchers. These co-researchers often continued their child's placement in an inclusive Christian school because they felt that it would better address the

challenges of middle school. It should be noted that Byrne (2013) found that when parents experienced negative inclusive placements when their children were in elementary school, they were more likely to be against inclusion for secondary school. In the case of these co-researchers, the Christian school placements that offered NILD Educational Therapy™ were generally positive.

**Means of inclusion.** In the current study, the primary means of inclusion experienced by the co-researchers was their children's enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program while being enrolled in a general education classroom. The co-researchers' children received educational therapy through pull-out services, and all children had the benefit of accommodations and modifications within their general education classrooms when necessary. These accommodations were typically coordinated and supported at least in part by the child's educational therapist. This is aligned to past studies that have shown that cooperation between general and special educators is necessary for inclusion to be successful (Carter et al., 2015; Dusty & Schneider, 2012; Marks et al., 2014; Naraian, 2014; Pierson & Howel, 2013). Those accommodations and modifications were also found to bring the co-researchers' children academic success. This finding upholds literature that suggested students with learning differences in traditional Christian schools need modifications and accommodations to be successful (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Leasure & Sanchez-Fowler, 2011; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). Co-researchers explained that their children's educational therapists served as an advocate, not only in terms of coordinating accommodations and modifications but also to advocate for their children by educating the general education teachers about the children's learning differences. Co-researchers acknowledged that once teachers were educated, their children were much more successful. This agrees with past studies that asserted that proper

teacher preparation and education is necessary for inclusion to be successful (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Naraian, 2011; Stegink, 2010; Taylor, 2005). Past studies also indicated that teachers need to establish relationships with students to effectively reach all students in an inclusive classroom (Naraian, 2014; Orsati & Causton-Theoharis, 2013), and that student feelings of success increase when those relationships are established (Mackey, 2014; Naraian, 2014). The co-researchers in this study echoed these previous findings through their comments about the positive relationships their children experienced with their educational therapists and general education teachers.

**Student outcomes.** Overwhelmingly, the co-researchers in this study expressed that their children experienced academic success that was attributed to their child's enrollment in NILD. This corresponds with previous studies that presented that students in NILD programs made gains in both math and reading over two and three year periods (Hopkins, 1996; Keafer, 2008). Since students represented in this study were all in inclusive, general education classrooms, it also supports research asserting that educational outcomes are more positive for students with learning differences who are in inclusive placements (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; Marks et al., 2014; Naraian, 2014; Wendelborg & Tossebro, 2011). Leasure and Sanchez-Fowler (2011), found that in inclusive Christian settings, achievement for students with learning differences may be linked to teacher understanding of those learning differences and the use of research-based instruction. The co-researchers affirmed that notion by their descriptions of the NILD educational therapists educating their children's general education teachers about learning differences as well as using researched-based techniques with their children during NILD educational therapy sessions.

Additionally, the findings of this study address the social outcomes of students who have received NILD Educational Therapy™. Recent literature has shown that social inclusion strategies are important for creating successful inclusive Christian classrooms (Anderson, 2006b, 2011; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Freytag, 2008; Pudlas, 2004). Although co-researchers acknowledged that NILD Educational Therapy™ did not have specific interventions or strategies for social inclusion, one co-researcher explained that her son's educational therapist took time to work on social issues with her son, and co-researchers described many social and emotional benefits to their children's enrollment in NILD. These included better relationships with peers, self-advocacy skills, and increased self-confidence. Contreras (2013) and Elbaum (2002) suggested that students with learning differences may feel singled out because of their accommodations and modifications. This study found that some parents felt that their children felt a perceived social stigma surrounding being pulled-out for NILD Educational Therapy™. However, this study also found that parents believed that their children thought the gains they received from educational therapy was worth any stigma, that their true friends did not treat them differently, or think it was a big deal. Additionally, several co-researchers noted that teachers were sensitive to these feelings of perceived social stigmas and did their best to alleviate any stress that caused.

### **Theoretical Discussion**

This research was framed by both socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). These theories were chosen because they provide support for the efficacy of inclusion. This is appropriate because the children of all 10 co-researchers were placed in general education, inclusive classroom within their Christian schools. The following discussion examines the findings of this research through these theoretical lenses.

**Socio-cultural theory.** Socio-cultural theory asserts that learning occurs in the context of a social environment with the assistance of more capable peers or adults within that environment (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development, social development, and internalization form the fundamental concepts related to this theory (Vygotsky, 1978). The zone of proximal development (ZPD) refers to tasks that a learner can accomplish with the assistance of a more capable other (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) believed that true learning occurred in this ZPD. In this research, NILD educational therapists served as more capable others for the co-researcher's children with learning differences. Although co-researchers did not specifically mention the ZPD, co-researchers did explain that the educational therapists took time to establish relationships with their children, learning the students' limitations, strengths, and weaknesses. The educational therapists were said to not allow the co-researchers' students to work below their zones of proximal development, but also didn't push so hard that the students were overwhelmed, or working above their zones of proximal development. This is illustrated in the discussion of co-researchers' descriptions of their children's educational therapists being both caring and firm when working in NILD sessions. Jan spoke of her daughter's educational therapist providing work that built confidence by not being too hard, but also modifying overwhelming work this way:

I think she almost got into this thing where it's not hard in some ways, why, you know, why am I doing it if it's not hard? . . . she was completely overwhelmed with some other parts of the NILD. So um, the for example the um, the buzzer words have, the page was so busy with dots and dashes and it's auditory so she's sitting there trying so hard to, you know, to remember the last letter in her head, listen for the buzzes – buzzes and dashes,

and then search the whole page of you know, all these letters and dots and dashes so um, the, we had to modify some of the projects, some of those like that (Jan, Interview, 2017).

Barbara described how her daughter's educational therapist pushed her daughter to work within her ZPD.

Whereas her, she asked her a question to tell a story line that they had just read, or tell me what you're thinking or what you're feeling. Um, her favorite words, her words that came out right away when she was younger was, "I don't know." And so her NILD teacher wouldn't accept that. She would wait till. That one on one personal attention was huge. . . (Barbara, Interview, 2016).

A child's ability to interact within the context of his social environment constitutes his social development (Vygotsky, 1978). Language development must occur within a social context, progressing through several stages until the child is capable of thought (Vygotsky, 2012). Mastery of thought lays the foundation for intellectual development (Vygotsky, 2012). Additionally, the meaning of words must be internalized for thought to occur, allowing communication to materialize (Vygotsky, 2012). Because the students represented in this study were placed in inclusive environments, they were provided with a rich social environment in which to interact. Included in this social environment were not only their typically developing peers and general education classroom teachers, but also their NILD educational therapists. Especially for the co-researchers' children who had language-based learning differences, being in a social environment that allowed for interaction with peers whose language skills may be more advanced than their own, as well as interaction with educational therapists who were understanding of their challenges and could provide interaction tailored to further develop language skills. In light of socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), this would support optimal



intellectual development. The academic and social success reported by the co-researchers could be interpreted by socio-cultural theory.

**Social cognitive theory.** Social cognitive theory posits that behavior is molded through the interaction of the environment, personal cognition, and behavior (Bandura, 1986). The concepts of observational learning, modeling, self-regulation, and motivation construct the foundations of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986). Observational learning refers to the learning of socially appropriate behaviors and their resulting consequences by observing the social environment (Bandura, 1986). Modeling, a powerful learning tool, describes either conscious modeling of behaviors, or unconscious modeling through social interaction (Bandura, 1986). Deliberate, or conscious modeling is considered particularly effective. Of these 10 co-researchers, seven described social challenges faced by their children; all were directly or indirectly related to their learning differences. An inclusive environment can provide models of socially appropriate behavior and consequences of appropriate behavior that allow children to engage in observational learning. In one case, a co-researcher described an interaction between her son and his educational therapist that illustrated conscious modeling.

Behavioral self-regulation, a goal of observational learning, involves an individual reflecting on past personal behaviors, their consequences, as well as other's behaviors and consequences (Bandura, 1991). This self-reflection allows the individual to adapt personal behavior to appropriately fit the social context (Bandura, 1991). Self-reflection also provides the motivation to work towards more socially appropriate behavior (Bandura, 1991). Two co-researchers reported that their children were still working on their social challenges. Social cognitive theory would interpret this to mean that they were still working on self-reflection and motivation. However, all seven co-researchers who described social challenges also reported

social successes. In addition to the help that NILD Educational Therapy™ provided these children, just being a member of an inclusive community could explain the social gains achieved when examined through the lens of social cognitive theory.

### **Implications**

This study was designed to give a voice to parents with the shared experience of having a child with learning differences enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school. This study describes the challenges that parents face when they have a child with learning differences and the benefits achieved from enrollment in an NILD program. The findings of this study have implications for parents, Christian school teachers, and Christian school administrators.

### **Parents**

As one facet of the data collection for this study, co-researchers provided a letter of advice addressed to other parents who have a child with learning differences and were considering an NILD Educational Therapy™ program at a Christian school. The analysis of these letters provided implications for parents who are searching for an appropriate educational placement for their children. Co-researchers advised parents to advocate for their children, and to never give up searching for the right program for their child. Co-researchers also advised parents to seek out the support of other parents whose child is also enrolled in the NILD program, noting that the challenges they are facing can make them feel lonely at times. For parents who already have a child enrolled in NILD, or has been previously enrolled, these results show that seeking out other parents for whom they could be a support would be extraordinarily helpful. Every co-researcher suggested giving an NILD program a try and to trust God to help them find the financial resources to cover the costs of enrollment.

**Christian School Teachers**

The results of this study indicate that children with learning differences may experience greater academic and social benefits when they have a teacher who understands learning differences. For educators who are unfamiliar with the diagnoses of the children in their classrooms, it would be beneficial to take it upon themselves to learn all they can about the diagnoses. Additionally, teachers would be wise to learn ways to best support those learners in their classrooms with differentiated instruction. The findings of this study also revealed that it was helpful to parents and students when teachers were willing to collaborate with NILD educational therapists to make accommodations and modifications for students with learning challenges. General education Christian school teachers would serve their students with learning differences well to embrace this collaboration and to implement the accommodations and modifications.

**Christian School Administrators**

Co-researchers expressed the support they received from Christian school administrators either directly or indirectly through the upholding of school philosophies of biblical inclusion. Co-researchers appreciated the schools' willingness to support their children by allowing them to be admitted to their school, but more often, for providing a support program for their children. School administrators would be encouraged to begin an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in their schools to meet the needs of students with learning differences, especially if the administration has a heart to include such children but is unsure how to serve students with learning differences best. NILD educational therapists can provide students with support, parents with education and support, and teachers with training and support to implement accommodations and modifications.

Although the small sample size of this study cannot support a definitive finding with regard to the longevity of NILD Educational Therapy™, it would be valuable to note that the two co-researchers who had adult children reported the same level of satisfaction with NILD as did the co-researchers whose children were still of school-age. These two co-researchers were able to vividly recall their children's experiences with NILD just as easily as the other co-researchers. Administrators would find information as to the consistent success of NILD helpful when making decisions about implementing this program in their schools.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitation refers to intentionally limiting the requirements of the co-researchers (Joyner, Rouse, & Glatthorn, 2013). Co-researchers in this study had a child with a diagnosed learning difference enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school. Parents whose children were receiving or had received NILD Educational Therapy™ privately or outside of their Christian school were also delimited. This was necessary in order to examine the parental perceptions of services provided within an inclusive school setting. The parents of children who had been receiving NILD therapy for less than one year, or were enrolled in a Christian school for less than a year were delimited as well. This delimitation was put in place to make sure that parents had ample time to experience the phenomenon. Finally, the parents of children whose NILD educational therapist had less than a level three certification were delimited. This delimitation was to help ensure that the children of these parents were receiving or had received the most competent educational therapy available.

This study has several limitations. Limitations refer to the potential constraints a study may have (Joyner et al., 2013). Although the use of purposive sampling in this study made every attempt to achieve maximum variation, this study has limitations regarding co-researcher gender,

co-researcher age, the ages of co-researcher children, and the types of learning differences experienced by co-researcher children. All of the co-researchers were female, and between the ages of 40 and 59. The co-researchers' children had been diagnosed with a finite number of learning differences. This study examined the lived experiences of only 10 parents. An unexpected limitation was the fact that six of the 10 co-researchers had been previously, or were employed by Christian schools at the time of this study. This may have contributed an unintended bias in the research. The results of this study cannot be generalized to other populations such as the parents of children enrolled in NILD programs that may employ educational therapists with less than a level three certification. Additionally, this study may not be generalized to parents of children enrolled in NILD programs in Christian special education schools, or the parents of children receiving NILD Educational Therapy™ from an educational therapist in private practice.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The results of this study suggest several recommendations for further research. Co-researchers in this study mentioned stress and frustration frequently, and several noted that those decreased through their child's enrollment in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program. A quantitative study examining both parent and sibling stress levels prior to their child's enrollment and after their child had been enrolled for a full school year may yield noteworthy results. It would be informative to Christian school administrators to know if there was a significant decrease in parental and family stress when their child is enrolled in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program.

Hannah, Megan, and Jan all mentioned that it was helpful to find support from other parents whose children were also enrolled or had been enrolled in an NILD program, although

that was not a primary focus of the study. An avenue for future study would be to explore the efficacy of a parental support group within a Christian school community for parents of students enrolled in the school's NILD program.

Finally, there were three parents in this study who mentioned significant bullying incidents that occurred while their child was enrolled in a Christian school. In all three incidents, the bullying was directly related to the child's disability. Rates of bullying can be higher in special needs populations (Estell et al., 2009; Rose et al., 2011). To raise awareness and help Christian schools alleviate this problem for students with learning differences, further study in the area of Christian school bullying would be of tremendous value.

### **Summary**

Informed by both socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978) and social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), this transcendental phenomenological study sought to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with learning differences who had been enrolled in an NILD™ Educational Therapy program in a K-12 Christian school. This study fills a gap in the literature concerning parental perceptions of Christian special education services for students with learning differences. Data in the form of on-line surveys, personal interviews, and letters of advice written by the co-researchers was collected and analyzed. The data analysis revealed themes, child challenges, seeking answers, parental work, Christian beliefs, public school challenges, Christian school environment, family, services and support, commitment, therapist attributes, academic benefits, emotional benefits, social benefits, and spiritual benefits. Textural and structural descriptions were synthesized in a composite description of this phenomenon that revealed its essence. The essence of this phenomenon can be summarized as:

1. Co-researchers experienced varying levels of challenge before their children were enrolled in NILD and success resulting from their enrollment in NILD.
2. Co-researchers shared spiritual reasons for enrolling their children in a Christian school.
3. Although the co-researchers all experienced some level of challenge regarding their child's enrollment in NILD, the benefits, especially those in the academic arena, more than outweighed those challenges.

The findings of this study provide practical implications for parents, Christian school educators, and Christian school administrators. Parents of a child with learning differences would be encouraged to enroll their child in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a Christian school as this study has shown the favorable results this program can provide in academic, social, emotional, and spiritual areas of life. Christian general education teachers would be encouraged to educate themselves about the learning differences present in their classrooms, research methods of intervention, and collaborate with educational therapists or other special education professionals. Christian school administrators would be encouraged to implement NILD Educational Therapy™ programs in their traditional Christian schools to serve students with learning differences well.

The co-researchers in this study were eager to share their personal journeys and stories of success. Each co-researcher ultimately shared a story that can provide hope to other parents experiencing the phenomenon of having a child with a learning difference who desire for their child to be enrolled in a Christian school, but also need support services for their child. This study supports the findings of Hopkins (1996) and Keafer (2008) that showed that NILD Educational Therapy™ provides academic benefits. The Hopkins study was conducted more

than 20 years prior to this study, contributing to the evidence that NILD Educational Therapy™ programs have provided these academic benefits consistently. This study added to those findings by exposing that NILD programs can also build social, emotional, and spiritual benefits as well. As the parents of children with learning disabilities struggle to find the academic support and oftentimes the social, emotional, and spiritual support they desperately desire to provide their children, these findings demonstrate that help is available; and growth and success are possible. Hannah offered hope to parents by referring to Psalm 139:14, “I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well” (NIV).



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## APPENDICES

## Appendix A Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

**LIBERTY UNIVERSITY**  
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

7/7/2016

Wendy Bayer

IRB Approval 2578.070716: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study Examining Parents' Perceptions Regarding the Enrollment of Children with Learning Differences in an NILD Program in a K-12 Christian School

Dear Wendy Bayer,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty 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.

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***Liberty University | Training Champions for Christ since 1971*

## Appendix B Co-Researcher Recruitment E-Mail

Dear Parent:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for an Ed.D. in Curriculum and Instruction. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of parents who have a child with a learning difference who is or has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school.

If you have a child with a diagnosed learning difference such as ADHD, a language-based learning difference, or math deficit who is or has been enrolled for at least one school year in an NILD Educational Therapy™ program in a K-12 Christian school, you are invited to participate in this study. If you are willing to participate, please return the attached consent form with your typed name as your digital signature to [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) and participate in a brief, on-line survey (See link below.).

If you are selected to participate further in the study, you will be asked to complete an individual interview, conducted through the digital communication tool Skype™ at a time convenient to you; to write a letter of advice as if writing to other parents who have children with a learning difference(s) who wish to enroll their children in a Christian school; and to agree to review the transcripts of your interview. Skype™ can be used for free for video conferencing from your home computer. The interview will be audio-recorded to ensure accuracy in data collection. The letter will only be shared with the researcher. It should take approximately two and one-half hours to complete the procedures listed. Your participation will be completely confidential, and you will be assigned a pseudonym. The school names and locations will also be completely confidential as pseudonyms will also be assigned.

To participate, please complete and return the attached consent form with your typed name as your digital signature to [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) and complete the on-line survey found at: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/P8F2BB2>. If you have questions that I can answer prior to your agreement to participate, please feel free to email or call me at 301-602-8444. If you are unfamiliar with Skype™, these brief tutorial videos explain how to set up an account and to participate in video calls: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDArMK69\\_yU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fDArMK69_yU), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pyUG0Tbje0o>. Once you have agreed to, and have been selected to participate in this study, I will contact you to arrange for an individual interview.

Sincerely,



Wendy Bayer

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## Appendix C Co-Researcher Informed Consent Form

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
7/7/2016 to 7/6/2017  
Protocol # 2578.070716

### Informed Consent Form

#### A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY EXAMINING PARENTS' PERCEPTIONS REGARDING THE ENROLLMENT OF CHILDREN WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES IN AN NILD PROGRAM IN A K-12 CHRISTIAN SCHOOL

Wendy Bayer  
Liberty University  
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study of parents whose children with learning differences have been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian School. You were selected as a possible participant because you have a child with a diagnosed learning difference who was enrolled for at least one year in a K-12 Christian school. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Wendy Bayer, 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 parents who have a child with learning differences who is or has been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school. The study may help Christian educators to best serve the needs of students with learning differences.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following:

1) Complete an on-line demographics survey. This will take approximately 20 minutes.

In order to complete this research study, I will select a group of participants using the survey data to become co-researchers with me. If you agree to participate as a co-researcher, you will be asked to do the following:

2) Participate in an individual interview with the researcher using Skype™ lasting approximately 45 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded.

- 3) Write a letter of advice to other parents with children with learning differences who are enrolled in a Christian school. This letter will not be written for distribution and will only be shared with the researcher.
- 4) Review transcripts of your individual interview and inform the researcher of any corrections that you feel are necessary.

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
7/7/2016 to 7/6/2017  
Protocol # 2578.070716

### **Risks and Benefits of being in the Study:**

No study is without risk. The risks are no more than the participant would encounter in everyday life.

There are no direct benefits to the participants of this study.

### **Compensation:**

You will not receive compensation for taking part in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, I might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records and audio recordings will be stored securely and only the researcher will have access to the records. Your privacy will be protected throughout the study: all participant names will be confidential and replaced with pseudonyms. The name of any schools mentioned will be withheld as well as the schools' specific geographical locations. Student names will be withheld completely and no students will be observed or interviewed in this study. All interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed; notes made by the researcher will be typewritten. All written data will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University, the NILD program in which your child is enrolled, or with the K-12 Christian school in which your child is enrolled. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or 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 or phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### **Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Wendy Bayer. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) or 301-602-8444. You may also contact the research's faculty advisor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [glcollins2@liberty.edu](mailto:glcollins2@liberty.edu).

The Liberty University Institutional  
Review Board has approved  
this document for use from  
7/7/2016 to 7/6/2017  
Protocol # 2578.070716

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, Carter 134, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Please notify the researcher if you would like 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.

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature of Investigator: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix D Survey Questions

1. Please enter your name, email address, and phone number.
2. How old is your child and what grade is your child in?
3. What is your child's gender?
4. Please describe the nature of your child's learning difference(s).
5. Is your child currently enrolled in a Christian school? If so, for how long has your child been enrolled in this school?
6. Is your child currently enrolled in a general education inclusive class within the Christian school? If so, do you feel that his/her educational needs are being or were addressed in that classroom environment? Why or why not?
7. Is your child enrolled in an NILD educational therapy™ program? If so, how long has your child been enrolled in this program?
8. Do you feel that your child has experienced positive academic and/or social gains as a result of his/her enrollment in the NILD educational therapy™ program? Why or why not?
9. Please describe any type of services, other than NILD educational™ therapy, that your child has received for his/her learning differences through a Christian school placement(s).
10. What is your age group?
11. What is your gender?
12. Are you willing to participate in this study as a co-researcher by completing an individual interview via Skype™, Google Hangouts™, or phone and write a letter of advice to another parent who has a child with a learning difference? Yes  No

13. Please enter your Skype™ name and/or your email address associated with your Skype™ account, Google Hangouts™ account, or telephone number.

### **Appendix E Co-Researcher Interview Invitation**

Dear [Insert Name],

Thank you for agreeing to participate in a research study of parents whose children with learning differences have been enrolled in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian School entitled, “A transcendental phenomenological study examining parents’ perceptions regarding the enrollment of children with learning differences in an NILD program in a K-12 Christian school ”. I would like to schedule an interview with you via Skype™ at your earliest convenience. The interview should last approximately 45 minutes. Please e-mail me at [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) to schedule your interview. I have also attached the instructions for writing the letter of advice to this e-mail.

Sincerely,

Wendy Bayer

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## **Appendix F Letter of Advice Instructions**

Letter of Advice Instructions:

Please write a letter of advice to another parent who has a child with a learning difference, and would like to enroll his child in a Christian school. Draw from your own experiences as you write. You may wish to provide information such as how to obtain a diagnosis, how to best work with teachers and administrators, or what types of services one should look for when seeking out a Christian school for a child with learning differences. Please offer some words of encouragement to other parents by letting them know what benefits an NILD program can offer and way to overcome any challenges associated with NILD programs. This letter has no required length. This letter is not meant for distribution and will only be seen by the researcher for data analysis.

Please email this letter to Wendy Bayer at [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) within two weeks after completing your interview. The letter can simply be an email or you may attach the letter in either a Word document or PDF file. Thank you for your participation.



### **Appendix G Interview Questions**

1. Please tell me about your child's learning differences.
2. When and how did you first notice that your child was experiencing challenges with learning?
3. What other types of challenges was your child experiencing in school or at home when learning challenges were discovered, if any?
4. How many and what types of different school placements has your child had through his or her school years?
5. What qualities were you looking for in a school once it was determined that your child was diagnosed with learning differences?
6. Why did you choose a Christian education for your child?
7. Please describe the best parts about having a Christian school placement.
8. Please describe any challenges you or your child experienced in that or those placements.
9. Please describe your experiences with your child's enrollment in an NILD Education Therapy™ program.
10. What do you believe have been the academic and/or social benefits of your child's enrollment in an NILD program?
11. What challenges have you experienced with your child's enrollment in an NILD program, if any?
12. Drawing from your experience as a parent of a student with learning differences, is there anything else that you believe would be important for Christian school educators to understand?

## Appendix H Interview Field Notes Sample

### *During Interview:*

Questions 1-5

She is speaking very fast. Is she nervous? She is a teacher. She was son's teacher in K. Noticed: fine motor delays, very active, strange behaviors (socially)

Saw an OT – helped him with problem solving

Still struggled in first grade, very high IQ, very verbal, large vocabulary

Second grade - still struggled: eye tracking difficulties – sought vision therapy, 2x per week, improvement noted. Behavioral issues still ongoing at school, poor grades

Social issues at the time – didn't understand social rules, self-centered

Suggested by testing professionals: school with a resource program for pull-out support

Changed schools for NILD

Changing schools was hard socially

He had an adjusted work load

Mom was allowed to observe NILD sessions, NILD therapist worked with classroom teacher (advocate)

Memory issues surfaced surrounding math, required daily practice

Other treatment: social thinking class outside of school

In fourth grade moved from having 45 minute sessions 2x week to 80 minute sessions 2x week (NILD) – seemed to help him mature, reading level jumped dramatically to well above grade level

Now in 6<sup>th</sup> grade, more independent, but still needs help to hand in homework

No NILD but has math tutor

Jr. High has an educational consultant

Mom is now a facilitator rather than teacher at home

1<sup>st</sup> school was PreK-start of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade – small Christian school

Question 6:

Budgeted carefully (with regard to school tuition)

Came home singing about Jesus

Question 8:

First school: teachers tolerated behaviors too much, “teacher’s kid”, too lenient, no programs

Current school: 5<sup>th</sup> grade teacher – hard to keep in touch with her

Question 11:

(paused before answering) No challenges really, therapist trained her, stressed importance of home practice

Question 12:

New principal – not as experienced with special needs

Kids could be really mean to him

Playground altercations

Med adjustments

***Post Interview Notes:***

Very enthusiastic, but seemed nervous. Wanted to tell her whole story quickly.

She’s been through very challenging circumstances:

- 1) physical altercations @ school
- 2) multiple medication trials and adjustments
- 3) sleep issues

- 4) daily phone call about her son's behavior
- 5) stomach issues (upset due to meds)
- 6) her son's social behaviors seemed weird and/or strange to other adults, peers, and even to herself
- 7) needing to be his teacher and not just his mom at home for many years

*Yet:*

She exuded an extremely positive attitude. Even when I asked her about challenges, she would briefly share a challenge and then would quickly turn it around and explain what was positive about the situation.

She felt that being an educator helped her to understand the NILD techniques better.

She attributes most of her son's positive changes to NILD therapy in both academic and social arenas.

She took participation in the study seriously and was eager to participate.

**Appendix I Letter of Advice Reminder E-Mail**

Dear [Insert Name],

Thank you so much for participating in the study entitled A Transcendental Phenomenological Study Examining Parents' Perceptions Regarding the Enrollment of Children with Learning Differences in an NILD Program in a K-12 Christian School. I have not yet received your letter of advice. I have attached the instructions for completing the letter to this e-mail. Please submit the letter to [wbayer@liberty.edu](mailto:wbayer@liberty.edu) at your earliest convenience.

Sincerely,

Wendy Bayer

Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

## Appendix J Sample Letters

### *Sara's Letter of Advice:*

Dear Parent,

As a parent of a child with a learning disability, the journey can be frustrating and lonesome as many private schools accept only children who fit "in the box". Meaning children who test well or are high achiever. What has gotten us through our child's education journey is finding a Christian school with a NILD program. The NILD program has certified educational therapist working with our child whom challenges, advocates and leads our son to the best of his ability. The NILD program has helped with his learning issues as well as leading him to be an advocate for himself. Having open communication with the child's therapist and director of NILD will help overcome any challenges that arise. Look for a Christian school that has similar values/ethics as your family. Even though the journey is long and frustrating at times, remembering God has a plan for your child and He is in control has helped calm the challenges.

### *Hannah's Letter of Advice:*

To Whom It May Concern,

If you are trying to decide whether or not to invest in an NILD program in a Christian School, do it! It will be the best decision you have ever made for your child. The school will do several academic and achievement tests to find the specific struggles and deficits. They will also work with the classroom teachers to develop a plan of accommodations and/or modifications for your child. This will help your child be more successful in school. It will also give them the needed confidence for growth.

You will have struggles and setbacks. Your child will most likely dislike the therapy sessions and homework, because it is hard. No one likes to do things that are hard. Just be patient, but

firm with them. The few years in the program compared to the rest of their life makes it worth it. Encourage your child. Continue to tell him/her how smart they are in the areas they are not struggling and encourage in those areas they are.

NILD programs are expensive, but you really can't put a price on changing your child's life in a way that will allow him/her to be successful. Plan for it and know that it will be the best sacrifice you could ever make for your child.

Talk with other families in the program. It is always helpful to be reminded that you are not alone in this journey.

Lastly, PRAY! Pray for God to use this program to heal your child emotionally, physically, and academically. Pray for your child's therapist. Pray for a great relationship and communicate often your appreciation.

Your child is "fearfully and wonderfully made."

## Appendix K Sample of Letter Notes

Jan's letter of advice

- shorter and smoother path
- Seeking solutions
- repeated statements of concerns and struggles, sadness
- Speaks of the difference between NILD educational therapy™ and tutoring – presents the differences well, and the strengths of both ideas
- Academic benefits/successes
- Increased confidence and decreased anxiety
- Christian school attributes: support, prayer, flexibility (accommodations)
- Spiritual connection
- Top ten tips – encouragement for struggling students and their parents
  - parenting techniques
  - spiritual connections, ultimately God is in control of your child's life
  - Matthew 19:26 – nice way to conclude letter
- Acknowledges challenges but offers hope and a story of success
- Caring tone
- Well organized and written, it is obvious that she spent a great deal of time and thought composing this letter



### **Appendix L Audit Trail**

June 2016 – Successfully defended my proposal, submitted documentation for IRB approval

July 2016 - Received IRB approval. Made contact with a level three NILD educational therapist who assisted me in finding participants for my pilot study. Sent participant recruitment information to six schools that have agreed to help recruit participants for the main study.

August 2016 – Completed pilot study. So far none of the schools have sent out my recruitment information.

September 2016 – Four out of the six school have sent out my recruitment information to potential participants, but I have not received any responses.

October 2016 - Secured one participant and began collecting data. One school mentioned that my lack of responses may be due to parents' lack of familiarity with the use of Skype. An additional school was located and agreed to send out my recruitment information to potential participants. I obtained IRB approval to change my research protocol to include the use of Google Hangouts™ and telephone for the interview portion of my data collection, and to include one additional school.

November 2016 – Four schools agreed to resend my recruitment information to potential participants to reflect the change of protocol. One additional participant was secured.

December 2016 – Many emails have been sent to schools. One school who had not yet sent out recruitment information agreed to send out information to past parents. NILD educational therapists from three schools personally spoke to parents to ask them to participate in the study. As a result of these efforts, by the end of December I have six participants. A post has also been placed on the NILD website in an effort to recruit more schools to recruit potential participants for the study.

January 2017 – An additional school contacted me after seeing the post on the NILD website and agreed to recruit potential participants. I obtained IRB approval to add another school to my list of recruitment sites. Two additional participants have been obtained.

February 2017 – Final interview is conducted and transcribed.

March 2017 – All letters of advice have now been received and data analysis has been completed. Chapters four and five have been written and submitted for review from my dissertation chair.

Appendix M Enumeration Table

Open Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Academic Challenges	34	<i>Central Research Question:</i> Child Challenges
Emotional Challenges	34	
Social Challenges	16	
Behavioral Challenges	12	
Continued Challenges	6	
Testing	21	Seeking Answers
Early Detection	17	Parental Work
Diagnosis	16	
Intervention	40	
Frustration	30	
Advocacy	24	
Values	11	<i>Sub-question 1:</i> Christian Beliefs
Worldview	10	
Prayer	7	
Biblical	5	
Lack of Help	7	Public School Challenges
Social Environment	3	Christian School Environment
Educational Quality	8	
Social and Emotional Environment	13	
Siblings Attended	6	Family
Parents Attended	3	
Programs	15	<i>Sub-question 2:</i> Services and Support
Teachers	13	
Attitudes	9	
Time	25	<i>Sub-question 3:</i> Commitment
Money	15	
Equips	15	<i>Sub-question 4:</i> Therapist Attributes
Advocates	12	
Caring	6	
Firm	3	
Academic Success	40	Academic Benefits
Accommodations	23	Emotional Benefits
Self-advocacy	7	
Confidence	18	
Independence	7	Social Benefits
Peer Interaction	9	
Relationship with God	13	Spiritual Benefits