A DESCRIPTION OF THE FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO PARENTS CHOOSING

CHRISTIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOR CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A

TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Andrea Leigh Cook

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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ABSTRACT

Education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in Christian schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary school for their students with special needs. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism theory framed this study, as it states that one's knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). The central research question to be answered was: What factors contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for their children with special needs? Criterion sampling was used to select ten participants who chose a Christian elementary school in various states for students with special needs. Data was collected through interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenological approach through epoché, phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. The results revealed that parents find the most value in the following emergent themes: (a) Christian worldview, (b) community, (c) services, resources, and accommodations, and (d) collaboration and partnership. Future research recommendations include quantitative methods, expanding the sample geographically, expanding the sample to include middle school and high school Christian schools.

Keywords: special education, Christian school, elementary, parent satisfaction, special needs, school choice

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this work to my husband. Tim, I would not have started this, let alone finished, if it weren't for your encouragement. You pushed me to see myself the way God created me to be. I began to believe I could so many times because you held me accountable to remember that my identity is not in what people have spoken, but rather what God has spoken over me. You always point me to the truth. You are truly the spiritual leader and partner in my life that I need. I love you and I appreciate you. Thank you for helping me to fulfill God's plan and call for my life. Dr. Park, thank you for your willingness to take on my project among all of the other responsibilities you have. I appreciate your expertise and input. I am thankful that both of you took the time to help me make this dissertation something of which I can be proud.

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I would like to acknowledge my chair and committee member. Dr. Barbara Jordan-White, thank you for giving your time to help me complete this project. Your encouragement and wisdom were exactly what I needed. The numerous phone calls, texts, and e-mails that we have exchanged during this project always provided encouragement and a listening ear to talk through ideas. Thank you for your time and candor.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Abbreviations

The American with Disabilities Act (ADA)

Department of Education (DOE)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

Individual Education Plans (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

King James Version (KJV)

National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)

New International Version (NIV)

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

Obsessive Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Response to Intervention (RTI)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Christian schools seek to provide an education with a Biblical worldview to students, but this option may not be as easily accessible for families of students with special needs. Lane (2017) conducted a study surveying 329 Christian school professionals who revealed that while most of their schools serve students with special needs, 53% of the schools do not have staff formally trained to provide such services. Additionally, 45% of the schools are supporting students with special needs in general education classrooms without any use of a resource room setting. Other studies indicate that many Christian schools deny enrollment to students with special needs (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Lane & Jones, 2015). As a result, many Christian families are faced with the choice of providing a Christian education environment with a biblical worldview, or the support services and accommodations afforded to students in public education (Sargeant & Berkner, 2015).

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Vygotsky's social constructivism provides a framework for the study because it connects the parents' experiences to education planning choices for their students with special needs. This chapter provides an overview of the proposed study. I summarize the most relevant literature on the topic and then described the motivation for study. The problem and purpose statements are introduced within the theoretical framework, social constructivism. The research questions are listed with supporting descriptions and relevant definitions.

Background

Research regarding special education services in Christian schools is sparse. Cheng, Tuchman, and Wolf (2016) believe, parents may not be making the most informed education planning decisions for students with special needs because of the lack of research due to data limitations regarding the effectiveness of options outside of public school for students with special needs. There is also concern over the lack of special education teacher qualifications in private schools (Lane, 2017). The historical, social, and theoretical perspectives relative to special education and Christian schools lay a foundation for this topic of discussion.

Historical

In the United States, education tailored to meet the needs of students with special needs has become a priority and has developed over time. According to Esteves and Rao (2008), students with special needs were largely ignored until the government began to address segregation in schools, which included students with disabilities. It was not until 1965 that schools began receiving public funds for education with the passing of the Elementary and Special Education Act (ESEA). One year after ESEA was passed, funds were specifically allocated for students with special needs. At that time, public schools could choose to accept funds, which meant choosing to allow students with disabilities to participate in these incentive programs. It was not until 1973, with the implementation of Section 504, that public schools were no longer allowed to choose, but must provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). No students with disabilities could be denied benefit from programs or activities in public schools receiving public or private funding. The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) required further compliance, specifically for schools, eventually leading to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004). This started out in 1975 as Education for All Handicapped

Children Act signed by President Gerald Ford. IDEA (2004) has been amended and efforts to ensure students with special needs receive a fair and appropriate education have been made over time to include Individual Education Plans (IEP), Response to Intervention (RTI), and an overall effort towards providing accountability. No Child Left Behind (2002) was established to increase participation in assessing the progress of all students regardless of ability.

While government oversight has ensured public schools provide services for students with special needs, student achievement within these parameters does not always meet familial expectations (Dunn, 2017). Academic dissatisfaction is not the only area that causes families to search for alternative school settings. Some families choose alternative academic settings to shield children from bullying and other negative interactions in public schools (Cheng et al., 2015). One researcher identified 19 areas relating to participants' choice to send students to a Christian school to include: values and religious beliefs, teacher-parent ratios, and child preferences (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). On the other hand, educational professionals are concerned about the lack of formalized special education training that teachers in Christian schools receive (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Furthermore, private schools are not required to adhere to the same laws as public schools and may not have the policies established to serve students with special needs (Lane, 2017; Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). The reality is that parents of students with special needs report satisfaction with academic settings outside of the public school setting (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Dunn, 2017; Prichard & Swezey, 2016; Samuels, 2017). Despite reporting satisfaction with choosing alternatives to public school, these studies do not indicate why parents choose Christian school for students with special needs. Such research may bridge the gap between parents'

reported experiences and professional educators' opinions concerning the quality of services in such environments.

Social

Christian schools should be places of refuge reflecting Christ's church, accepting students regardless of need and ability. Consider the scripture, Luke 14:13-14, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (NIV). Christian schools are not legally required to accept enrollment of students with special needs or provide services and accommodations for students with special needs (Russo et al., 2011). Many faith-based schools have experienced success in inclusion efforts resulting in parent satisfaction (Burke & Griffin, 2016). Current research does mention students with special needs experiencing success, but it is unclear as to what has caused the parents to report success (Samuels, 2017; Burke & Griffin, 2016). Focused research describing the factors parents consider when choosing a Christian school for their children with special needs may provide value and more accurately describe the overall essence of the phenomenon, causing an understanding between parents and education professionals.

Principals, teachers, and parents all play a key role in inclusion efforts, although research is minimal as it relates to special education in faith-based schools (Cheng et al., 2016). Available research does provide valuable insight concerning educators' perspectives (Kryszewska, 2017; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015; Taylor, 2005; Collier, Keefe, & Kirrel, 2015; Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016; Stites Rakes, Noggle, & Shah, 2018). For example, educators and parents alike have found collaboration useful in educating students with special needs in a variety of academic settings (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow, Summers,

Chasson, & Mitchell, 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu, Abercrombie, & Murray, 2016; Slade, Eisenhower, Carter, & Blacher, 2018). Taylor (2005) found that principals' leadership styles have a strong impact on the way in which enrollment and acceptance policies and procedures are implemented. Some schools communicate through mission statements that all students are welcome, the importance of diversity, and meeting the needs of all students, but then do not allow accommodations for students with disabilities during enrollment testing. Policy and practice must reflect the mission, or the philosophy of education then becomes unreliable.

Many parents choose faith-based schools over public schools despite all the accommodations and services available in public schools. Some parents prefer alternatives to public school due to bullying, negative experiences, teacher-student ratios, religious reasons, and the desire for students with special needs to attend with siblings (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Cheng et al., 2015, Prichard & Swezey, 2016). These concerns provide context for the research problem. The problem is education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary schools for their students with special needs. I aim to help fill that gap by describing why parents make this choice. Parents seem to express concern over social issues rather than teacher qualifications and academic concerns (Cheng et al., 2016; Prichard & Swezey, 2016).

Research describing why parents choose Christian school for students with special needs is sparse, and some believe this lack of data may cause parents to make uninformed decisions (Cheng et al., 2016). Faith-based schools are faced with many obstacles in implementing special education programs, according to educators serving in these environments (Sargeant & Berkner,

2015; Stites et al., 2018). There is more research regarding parent satisfaction with special education in public school (LaBarbera, 2017; Lalvani, 2015; Mereoiu et al., 2016).

Describing the factors parents consider when choosing a Christian school for their students with special needs will help education professionals understand what parents value and prioritize when making academic choices for their children. More specifically, it will be beneficial for educators in faith-based schools to understand parents' experiences in order to create or improve upon acceptance policies and school inclusion efforts (Collier et al., 2015; LaBarbera, 2017; Stites et al., 2018). The results of a study such as this could focus on policy and practice in faith-based schools on qualities that parents value and prioritize.

Theoretical

Research is especially sparse relating to faith-based schools and the parents' perspective on the decision to enroll students with special needs in a Christian school. The problem is, education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary school for their students with special needs. I aim to help fill that gap by describing why parents make this choice utilizing Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as a guide.

Most related studies begin with a social constructivist theory in which meaning is constructed based on social interaction with the world around them (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Lalvani, 2015; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). In addition, researchers collecting data on faith-based schools often reference Christian Constructivism, a theory in which the learner develops meaning from one's experiences, including biblical knowledge, experience, and understanding

(Archer 2002; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Depending on the focus of the study, researchers utilize disability studies scholarship, which is derived from Vygostsky's (1978) sociocultural theory, meaning that individual experiences and the surrounding social contexts are linked. One study in particular utilized family systems theory suggesting the family system is most influential (Uhrman, 2017). Each of these theories is linked back to Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, which is the theory I chose to guide this study.

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory allows for a richer, more complete interpretation of social factors that may contribute to the phenomenon as opposed to the other theories mentioned, which specifically relate to family and religion only. The social constructivist theory is based on the principle that knowledge is constructed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). While some parents may choose Christian schools for students with special needs based on family reasons and religion, others may choose for smaller teacher-student ratio or perceived stronger academics (Cheng et al., 2016; Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Vygotsky's social constructivist theory does not specifically mention the application of faith in constructing knowledge, values and beliefs can include religion as a social factor. While Christian constructivism expands the social constructivist theory to include Christian principles, it does not include other social considerations that may be a factor in parents' choice (Archer, 2002). This distinction makes Vygotsky's social constructivist theory most appropriate in guiding this study.

Situation to Self

The social constructivist theory that will guide this study is based on the principle that knowledge is constructed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). This is important as it relates to my role as a researcher. According to Knight (2006), Thomas

Aquinas was a philosopher who merged Aristotle's philosophy regarding knowledge and logic with Christianity. Aquinas believed that one could begin constructing knowledge with human reason and then begin relying upon faith. Like Aquinas, I take a theistic realism point of view in regard to the way one comes to know truth or epistemology. I believe, as Gutek (2011) said, "natural virtues, when infused by grace, could become supernatural virtues" (p. 87). Each human being has a destiny God wishes for them to fulfill. I believe that parents have the primary responsibility to ensure their children are raised to construct their own knowledge based on a biblical worldview. Values are constructed based on what one believes to be truth, this is axiology. I have constructed my values based on the truth I find in the Bible. Furthermore, as spiritual beings, ontologically speaking, a child's education would be incomplete without spiritual instruction. Since I believe that knowledge cannot be constructed in the absence of the absolute truth of the Bible, I have removed my children with special needs from public school in order to provide them with an education that presents a biblical worldview. My personal beliefs and experience with this subject matter present a bias that could have impacted the way in which I conducted the research. I needed to work on ensuring that bias did not impact the results.

My purpose in educational research is to fulfill the Great Commission (Matthew 28:16-20) and show others the Greatest Command, to love (Matthew 22:35-40). Teaching is a high calling and the tool that the Lord chose for me to help make him known to others. Regardless of diversity in learning needs, all students need to know and experience the truth if they are to become well-rounded individuals prepared to fulfill God's desires for their lives. We must not only facilitate learning and familiarize students with the curriculum, but we must be an example of abundant life, drawing them closer to Christ. Moreland (2007) said, "The more certain you are of a belief, the more it becomes a part of your very soul, and the more you rely on it as a basis

for action" (p. 132). Since I believe that my primary goal is to fulfill the Great Commission and to show the greatest command, love, that means that I not only make an effort to show love throughout the research process, but that my deepest desire in conducting research is for others to come to know God, experience his love, and show his love to others. My knowledge of God makes me responsible to him for the way I navigate the world, especially within the field of education. It is the social constructivist viewpoint Vygotsky theorized that guided this study as I sought to describe the lived experiences of the participants.

Problem Statement

The problem is, education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017; Prichard & Swezey, 2016). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary school for their students with special needs. In addition to these concerns, Prichard and Swezey (2016), revealed that Christian parents are not making decisions comprehensively considering all options after having gathered information from a variety of sources. Christian parents are not using a systematic process or evaluating appropriate options based on academic or spiritual goals. They are simply committing once the school meets minimum expectations.

Public schools do not always meet familial expectations and standards for educating students with special needs (Dunn, 2017; Cheng et al., 2016; Falkmer Anderson, Joosten, & Falkmer, 2015; Robert, Leblanc, & Boyer, 2015; Slade et al., 2018; Uhrman, 2017). Researchers indicate that parents and educators of students with special needs value family-teacher partnerships and collaboration consistently regardless of the academic environment (Collier et

al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018; Uhrman, 2017).

While public schools provide an abundance of services and government oversight, parents are declining those services and choosing to enroll students with special needs in private schools (Samuels, 2017; Burke & Griffin, 2016). Issues such as bullying, negative experiences, and the desire for students with special needs to attend with siblings, are just some of the concerns parents have mentioned with public school (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Cheng et al., 2015). One researcher identified 19 areas relating to parents' choice to send students to Christian school (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Although Christian schools are not required to accept students with special needs legally and may not have the policies established to serve students with special needs (Lane, 2017; Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). Lane (2017) conducted a study to determine the qualifications and training that exists in Christian schools and discovered that only 14% of schools surveyed reported employing a staff member formally trained in special education. Some in the field are concerned that parents may be making uninformed decisions since there is a lack of data in these environments as well as lack of special education teacher training (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). Prichard and Swezey (2016) revealed that Christian parents are choosing schools based on satisficing. Satisficing is defined as the decision-making process in which parents settle on a school once their minimum requirements have been met. This particular study did not describe the specific experiences of parents of students with special needs choosing Christian school. The study was broad and further research describing parents of students with special needs choosing Christian school is necessary to provide greater understanding.

This transcendental phenomenological study describes parents' experiences in choosing Christian elementary school for their children with special needs. This research may add to the current body of knowledge by describing the circumstances leading to this choice. If administrators at Christian schools better understand why parents choose Christian school for students with special needs, then administrators can modify enrollment policies and services they offer, to improve services and enrollment practices at Christian schools. This perspective may add to existing research that describes principal and teacher perspectives of special needs in Christian schools. It may also provide clarity and understanding between educational professionals and parents of students with special needs, providing an opportunity for families of students with special needs to feel more valued. The problem is, education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017; Prichard & Swezey, 2016).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with diagnosed special needs throughout the United States. At this stage in research, students with diagnosed special needs were generally defined as students whose parents report having received a diagnosis of one or more special need to include those needs most served under IDEA: specific learning disabilities, speech or language impairment, other health impairment, and autism (NCES, 2019). The theory guiding this study is Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism as it states that one's knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006).

Significance of the Study

This study's significance was examined using empirical, theoretical, and practical perspectives. Increasing the body of research on this topic could add to parents' knowledge concerning education planning for students with special needs. It may also lead to education professionals understanding parents' motivation for sending students with special needs to faith-based schools.

Empirical

The literature regarding special education services in faith-based schools is lacking. Cheng et al. (2016) believe the limited data available on special education in Christian schools may prevent parents from making the most informed choice for their children with special needs. Researchers identify collaboration and family-home communication as valuable to educators and parents alike in a variety of academic environments but do not describe experiences of parents' choosing alternative environments (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018; Uhrman, 2017). Finally, understanding the parents' motivation for choosing a private school for their students with special needs may give educators insight into the priorities these families are placing on various aspects of their students' education. This perspective may also add to parents' knowledge concerning education planning for students with special needs.

Theoretical

The theory that guided this study was Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (Slavin, 2006). According to Gordon (2009), constructivists believe that knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values. Research describing parents' experiences is informative because their interpretations of special needs and descriptions of familial experiences may be

connected to education planning decisions regarding their child with special needs (Lalvani, 2015). Current research is sparse as it relates to parents' education planning for students with special needs, especially as it relates to faith-based schools.

Current research that describes principals' perspectives and educators' perspectives give insight, but in regard to parents' experiences, the information is second hand. Much of the research that describes parents' perceptions and satisfaction is communicated to researchers by the principals and teachers (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). These perspectives provide an incomplete understanding of family experiences. A social constructivist framework promotes that "Reality is constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study may encourage future educational researchers to move beyond number-driven data and consider the social constructivist viewpoint as a part of the effort to better understand parents, school choice, and special education in Christian schools.

Practical

By providing a rich description of parents' experiences in choosing Christian education for students with special needs, professionals in research and the Christian school community may better understand if parents truly are making informed decisions. This study may encourage education researchers and educators in the Christian school community to consider the reasons parents leave public school services and supports, opting for private schools that may not have the professional supports and policies in place. Robert et al. (2015) found that parents' satisfaction depends on the child's best interest, family needs, and whether they feel these things are being adequately addressed by the professionals involved.

Researchers in education are concerned that parents are not making informed decisions because of the lack of teacher special education qualifications in faith-based schools as well as the lack of data available (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). Parent and educator perspectives differ on this topic. Teacher preparation programs have begun to include training for preservice teachers to increase efficacy in collaboration and communication efforts between home and school (Stites et al., 2018; Taylor 2005). However, Lalvani (2015) discovered that general education and special education teachers do not consider communication with education professionals and navigating the special education system to be a stressor for families. On the other hand, parents have reported that trained special education teachers lack knowledge and training to properly educate their students with special needs despite have special education programs and qualifications (LaBarbera, 2017). Evidenced-based practices and the structured services are important, and efforts to improve in teacher preparation programs and professional development must continue, but spiritual and relational aspects of educating students with special needs have been neglected (Uhrman, 2017). There is hope for families of children with special needs who desire something different and wish to educate their children in a Christian environment (Brown, 2016). In providing a description of parents' experiences in choosing Christian school for students with special needs, educators and administrators in Christian schools may gain a deeper understanding of parents' priorities. This understanding may cause a shift in policy and practice regarding special education acceptance, enrollment, and program implementation in Christian schools. Furthermore, this study may allow researchers and educators in Christian schools to market their schools using information that parents value, which could increase enrollment.

Research Questions

The questions to be researched in this study involve the thoughts, ideas, and experiences of parents who have chosen Christian elementary school for their students with special needs. Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory supports the idea that people construct meaning based on their experiences. Results from one study indicate that parents consider social and cultural interpretations of disability, along with family experiences, to be influential in education planning for students with special needs (Lalvani, 2015). This supports the research question and sub-questions because it provides an understanding from which to base the inquiry.

Central Research Question (CQ): What factors contribute to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?

Sub-Question 1 (SQ1): What role does religion play in parents' choosing a Christian school for students with special needs?

Research is incomplete on this topic because it does not specify why parents of students with special needs choose Christian school and to what role religion plays in that choice. One researcher identified 19 areas relating to parents' choice to send students to Christian school but did not specifically address special education (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Other research indicates that parents believe special education qualified teachers in public school lack knowledge and training but does not include information on parents whose children with special needs attend faith-based schools (LaBarbera, 2017). There are a variety of factors that are important to parents in education planning, many of which do not include specific special education teacher qualifications (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018). Providing a description of parents' experiences in choosing Christian school for students with special needs, educators, and

administrators in Christian schools may gain a deeper understanding of parents' priorities. This understanding may cause a shift in policy and practice regarding special education acceptance, enrollment, and program implementation in Christian schools.

Sub-Question 2 (SQ2): What factors influence parents' decisions to choose a Christian school for students with special needs regarding the administration, teachers, curriculum, and school culture?

There are certain leadership qualities that are said to impact acceptance policies (Taylor, 2005). There are also certain relational and communication characteristics and strengths in educators that parents appreciate (Robert et al., 2015). Describing the specific qualities that parents appreciate when choosing Christian school for students with special needs may provide insight that is not included in current research on parent choice and faith-based schools. This study may allow researchers and educators in Christian schools to market their schools using information that parents value, which could increase enrollment, improve hiring practice, and provide a focus for professional development efforts.

Sub-Question 3 (SQ3): How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools?

It is important to define how parents view success and failure for students with special needs attending a Christian school because research indicates, parents' and educators' perspectives differ (Lalvani, 2015; LaBarbera, 2017). Public schools are scored and ranked by various organizations, usually earning their place based on student achievement scores in various subjects. Achievement scores may not be the defining factor indicating success from the parents' perspective. Academic achievement may not even be a factor for education planning (Lalvani, 2015).

Definitions

1. *Christian School* – Schools claiming a faith-based foundation independently or in association with a particular church or denomination of Christian foundation (Cookson & Smith, 2011).

2. *Constructivism* – Research theory designed to understand or interpret the meaning participants construct of the world around them (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

3. *Inclusion* – Students with disabilities attending school and having needs met with general education population for at least a portion of the day (Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

4. *Special Education* – Specially designed instruction to meet the needs of a child with a disability (IDEA, 2004)

5. *Special Needs* – Learners with learning, physical, and developmental disabilities; behavioral, emotional, and communication disorders; and learning deficiencies (Kryszewska, 2017).

Summary

This chapter offered an overview of the proposed study to describe parents' experiences in choosing Christian school for students with special needs. The problem is, professionals in the field of education are concerned that parents are not making informed decisions in choosing Christian schools for students with special needs because of the lack of data available and lack of teacher special education qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). In providing a description of parents' experiences in choosing Christian school for students with special needs, educators and administrators in Christian schools may gain a deeper understanding of parents' priorities. I provided personal experiences to provide transparency regarding my connection to the study. This chapter provides a framework upon which I built the study. My desire is to

provide an understanding of why parents choose Christian school for students with special needs

to cause a shift in policy and practice regarding special education acceptance, enrollment, and

program implementation in Christian schools.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

I conducted a review of relevant literature to build an understanding of special education in faith-based schools. This chapter includes a review of the literature to support the transcendental phenomenological study that will describe the experiences of parents who choose a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs. The literature review begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework that will guide the study. Current literature, as it relates to the topic, is synthesized so as to provide understanding for the relevance of the topic and problem. Related literature is organized into the following sub-categories: spiritual and legal perspectives, current issues surrounding vouchers and academic achievement in private schools supported through vouchers, as well as special education in Christian schools, educators' perspective and parents' perspective. In reviewing all current literature, the gap regarding the parents' perspective on special education in a Christian school is evident, highlighting the need for further research.

Theoretical Framework

The theory guiding this study is Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (Slavin, 2006). Constructivists believe that knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009). Christian constructivism expands that theory by specifically acknowledging that one's belief in the gospel not only constructs knowledge but shapes practice (Guthrie, 2019). Christian constructivism is too narrow for the purpose of this study because I cannot make the assumption that all parents participating in the study choose Christian school for religious reasons. Furthermore, I cannot assume that all identify as Christians. The purpose of this study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children

with special needs. The social constructivist framework is most appropriate for this study because it includes all social values and perspectives.

Duelen (2013) described Lev Vygotsky as a respected scholar in the field of psychology, and while influenced by Marxism, his work was suppressed by the Russian government for many years because he did not agree with all of the principles of Marxism. Piaget, also constructivist, believed that knowledge construction is independent and biologically developmental. Piaget's work has been more widely recognized initially due to the Russian government's suppression of Vygotsky's work, but Vygotsky's social constructivist theory has received support in research.

The social constructivist theory supports the notion that learners must be active in the learning process and that learners are influenced by individual experiences in culture and social processes (Estep, 2002). This particular belief makes the constructivist theory appropriate for this study because as parents and students with special needs experience a school's culture, they construct knowledge about that school and form opinions, which may lead to decisions regarding enrollment. Furthermore, experiences with educators and the implementation of special education programs in schools previously attended, allow parents to construct knowledge and form opinions regarding satisfaction and dissatisfaction.

Vygotsky theorized that learning takes place in the community (Duelen, 2013). This theory may explain the reason parents choose to send students with special needs to a Christian school. In fact, research on Christian parent school choice revealed that Christian parents relied on social networks in choosing a school (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Relying on social networks to choose a school is an example of making informed decisions by interacting with one's own environment, one of the foundational ideas of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Duelen, 2013).

Vygotsky (1978) taught that the environment played a significant role in knowledge construction. Christian schools endeavor to provide an environment that is based on a biblical worldview. Describing the extent to which the participants' environment contributes to the decision-making process may provide insight for professional educators. While educators look at serving students with special needs from a biological standpoint, parents' perspectives are more typically aligned with social and cultural paradigms (Lalvani, 2015). The educators' perspective on learning may explain the problem that education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary schools for their students with special needs. This line of thought is also in agreement with Piaget's constructivist theory regarding learning, that knowledge construction is biological and individualistic (Duelen, 2013). In other words, parent satisfaction may depend on what parents value and prioritize for the student individually and within the family structure. Therefore, according to Vygotsky's social constructivist theory, parent choice in education planning may be driven by values and priorities deduced from social and environmental experiences.

Research describing parents' experiences, especially regarding special needs and education planning, is reflective of the constructivist theory. Lalvani (2015) found that parents' interpretations of special needs and their descriptions of familial experiences may be connected to education planning decisions regarding children with special needs. Overall, parents identified problems that children with special needs experienced were related to educational and social environments. Prichard and Swezey (2016) discovered that children's preferences and social

needs had a significant impact on Christian parents' decision-making. In fact, in that particular study, the majority of parents made choices based on information from their own experiences. In many cases parents' satisfaction depends on the child's best interest, family needs, and whether they feel these things are being adequately addressed by the professionals involved (Robert et al., 2015).

The research findings discussed in this review support Vygotsky's social constructivist theory of knowledge construction. This may influence outcomes and describe parents' choice in choosing Christian school for students with special needs. While the current research mentions parent choice, there is a lack of specific research that describes parents' choice to send students with special needs to a Christian school.

<div align="center">**Related Literature**</div>

Some professional educators express concern that parents of students with special needs are not making informed decisions because there is a lack of data on academic achievement and a lack of teachers with special education qualifications at Christian schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). It is important for education professionals to understand how parents make education planning decisions for students with special needs before assuming they are uninformed. The purpose of this study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. The next section will provide a discussion of current literature relevant to the topic and problem. Related literature will be organized by spiritual and legal perspectives first. A deeper look into the current issues surrounding vouchers and scholarships as well as academic achievement in private schools supported through vouchers may highlight the motivation behind opposing positions on the topic. Then, research discussing special education in Christian schools from educators'

perspectives as well as parents' perspectives on special education, in general, will provide a foundation for research on the topic.

Spiritual Perspective on Special Education in Christian Schools

Vygotsky's social constructivist theory guiding this study supports the idea that people construct knowledge based on values (Gordon, 2009). Christians may construct knowledge based on Christian beliefs and values (Guthrie, 2019). It is therefore important to lay a foundation in research describing this belief system as it relates to education. "See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the elemental spiritual forces of this world rather than on Christ" (Colossians 2:8, New International Version). Scripture instructs Christians to guard against taking on a philosophy of life that is based on man's ideas of truth. This scripture points out the need for Christians to have a biblical worldview, not only relegated to church on Sundays but in all areas of life. A biblical worldview acknowledges the Bible as absolute truth and allows that truth to permeate every area of one's life. Christian educators and Christian families may view education through a biblical lens, and such values and beliefs may be a significant perspective driving stakeholder decision-making.

There are many reasons parents have reported feeling dissatisfied with public schools regarding special education. Many of these reasons can be linked to social and cultural reasons. Parents have reported poor relationships with educators and feelings of being treated disrespectfully during the referral process as reasons for dissatisfaction with public school special education services (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015).

Pudlas (2004) reports that Christian school communities have not always created a stronger community for students with special needs, either. Part of inclusion means establishing a community of learners who feel accepted and valued as contributing members within the

community. The Bible instructs followers of Christ to "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud but be willing to associate with people of low position" (Romans 12:16, NIV). Pudlas (2004) found that students with special needs attending Christian schools reported feeling less connected with peers than non-disabled students did. Inclusion and biblical instructions for the community are not guaranteed in any academic environment.

Biblical principles and instructions for Christian communities are important for Christian schools. Romans 12:5 describes the importance of a Christian's interdependence on one another, "So in Christ, we, though many, form one body, and each member belongs to all the others" (NIV). This verse goes on to describe that each person has different gifts and abilities to contribute, each being important and useful to the whole. Parents indicate that children with special needs are a blessing and inspiration to those around them (Anzul, 2001). Christians who maintain a biblical worldview believe that this is not simply a principle that starts and ends at the doors of the church but rather carries throughout daily life.

Many times, in addressing inclusion, the discussion focuses on implementation efforts rather than how to be inclusive. The largest part of creating a community in any environment is radiating a genuinely welcoming and hospitable attitude. Inclusion efforts in Christian schools should focus on how to be inclusive. Research supports this assertion. General education and special education educators and students should be relying on one another, which shows that each student has something to contribute (Anderson, 2006; Lane, Kinnison, & Ellard, 2019). By simply providing inclusion without interdependence, students' gifts and talents are ignored and can be seen as less than because of the need for assistance even though every person has needs (Anderson, 2006). If schools providing inclusion can find ways to highlight interdependence, students with special needs will likely begin to feel a part of the community. Anderson (2006)

suggests that moving beyond giving the students with special needs space and moving towards modeling true hospitality by demonstrating acceptance. This is accomplished when the teachers serve the student and not the need. As students view this relationship between the teacher and student with special needs, the teacher can then nurture that type of relationship among the students (Lane et al., 2019). Reciprocal relationships in the classroom, throughout the school, would then develop as students and teachers begin to appreciate one another's strengths and talents, regardless of ability and academic achievement. Inclusion goes beyond inviting students with special needs to participate but moves into interdependence in which every student is seen as a valuable and contributing member of the community (Anderson, 2006). The spiritual perspective of this principle is a contributing factor in parents deciding to send students with special needs to a Christian school (Lane et al., 2019). Inclusion may not be only about meeting academic needs, but also about establishing hospitable classrooms to nurture relationships and develop community and interdependence (Anderson, 2006; Lane et al., 2019).

While the Bible provides clear guidance on the spiritual perspective and responsibility Christian educators and parents have regarding special education, Christian schools have not necessarily been reflective of these qualities (Pudlas, 2004). Parents may not necessarily make choices in education planning for students with special needs based on Christian principles (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Other research has found that the spiritual aspects Christian schools offer do contribute to parents' choice to enroll students with special needs in a Christian school (Lane et al., 2019). Existing research needs to be expanded upon to provide a more accurate and complete description of factors parents consider in choosing Christian school for students with special needs.

Legal Perspective on Special Education in Christian Schools

It is important to be familiar with the laws that govern special education in Christian schools. It is imperative that stakeholders are aware of the legal facts concerning special education and Christian school. Christian schools are not legally required to provide services for students with special needs and have a variety of concerns impacting acceptance and enrollment of students with special needs (Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011). Since many Christian schools do not accept students with special needs, there are fewer options available for parents who desire for their students with special needs to attend Christian schools.

Some of the special education services with which parents are familiar during the transition from public school to private school are required, and others are not. Students attending nonpublic schools do not require an Individualized Education Plan (IEP); however, Christian school educators are required to provide service plans that describe what they will provide for students with special needs (Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011). Research does not reveal the percentage of Christian schools that provide IEPs or service plans and to what extent. There is nothing to prevent Christian schools from providing IEPs outlining students' goals and progress. It is a document that can be extremely beneficial for the students, teachers, and parents regardless of the school. Furthermore, public schools are required to provide services to children attending nonpublic schools, although not necessarily to the same degree as those attending public school. Transportation can even be required for said services from school-to-school (Russo et al., 2011).

Administrators and educators in Christian schools should endeavor to provide the clearest path to success for students with special needs. One way to do this is to provide service plans for these students. Even though IEPs are not required in Christian schools, they do serve as a benefit for students and teachers in providing the best outcome by establishing a focused plan for

instruction. Furthermore, Christian schools that do not receive federal funding are not required to adhere to guidelines under section 504, either. Even those Christian schools who must adhere to these guidelines are exempt if the accommodation would alter the nature of the program, if the accommodation imposes an undue financial burden, or if the presence of the student presents a risk of injury to themselves or others (Russo, et al., 2011).

Under IDEA, parents are only allowed reimbursement for tuition to private school if the courts deem that the student has not received a FAPE (Sutton et al., 2017). There are occasions in which special education services provided within public schools are not adequately meeting students' needs (Dunn, 2017). Whether parents receive reimbursement for tuition is left to the court for interpretations as to whether the student received a FAPE. According to Dunn (2017), one family removed their student with autism and enrolled him in a private school. He improved significantly. The family then took the issue to court in hopes that they could be reimbursed for the expenses incurred by doing so. "While the justices unanimously overturned the Tenth Circuit decision, the standard they articulated required that the educational benefits provided to students with disabilities be meaningful but not necessarily equal to those provided to other students" (p. 2). The contents of this case are significant. The student's parents reported that the child was successful in a private school special education program that did not adhere to the legal requirements of IDEA (2004). This family's situation illustrates that students with special needs may experience success in schools providing special education outside of the guidelines of IDEA (2004).

While the federal government provides guidelines for serving students with special needs, these programs do not ensure that family education priorities are appropriately addressed. Furthermore, research indicates that parents believe special education qualified teachers in public

school lack knowledge and training but does not include information on parents whose children with special needs attend faith-based schools (LaBarbera, 2017). While the federal government has prioritized certain requirements for special education teachers as necessary, parents of students with special needs do not necessarily have those same priorities (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018). Research needs to include parents' perspectives on special education in Christian schools, especially since parents make the choice, often foregoing the government-mandated requirements for services, and incurring additional costs. Providing a description of factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian school for students with special needs will add to the current body of research that may affect change in education policy in public schools and Christian schools.

State Legal Guidance for Special Education and Private School

Participants in this study reside in four different states and cannot be described as belonging to one specific region of the United States. Seven participants reside in Maryland, one in Florida, one in Arizona, and one in Mississippi. Some states released additional to further explain the obligations required of administrative units in response to IDEA (2004).

The Maryland Department of Education (MDE), the state in which the majority of participants reside, released guidance specifically addressing parentally placed nonprofit private school children. According to MDE (2011), each local school system is required to identify, evaluate, and locate students with disabilities in parentally placed private schools. In fact, the location of the private school determines the area of responsibility for child find practices within the state. In other words, it does not matter where the child lives, but the location of the child's private school determines which administrative unit is responsible for child find practices.

Satisfying this requirement includes creating public awareness of child find practices, coordination and implementation with interagency collaboration, and screening procedures. The local school must also provide a service plan and review the IEP as required (MDE, 2011). The private school must request this from the local public school, but it is the public school's responsibility to comply. When parents place their children with special needs in a private school, they no longer have an individual right to receive some or all of the services they would have received in public school (MDE, 2011).

The Florida Department of Education (FLDOE), the state in which one participant resides, has not released guidance specifically addressing parentally placed nonprofit private school children outside of IDEA (2004). Florida provides the Gardiner and John McKay scholarship for students with disabilities (FLDOE, 2021). The participant from Florida utilizes both scholarships and is able to pay for therapists for her son through these scholarships. Her son utilizes therapies at private locations as well as on campus at a Christian school.

The Arizona Department of Education (ADE), the state in which one participant resides, has not released guidance specifically addressing parentally placed private school children outside of IDEA (2004). Arizona may award scholarships to students with special needs attending Christian schools. According to Arizona State Law, public schools may contract and make payments to private schools if they have been approved by the division of special education, within or without the school district or county, for the education of and provision of services to children with disabilities (ADE, 2021).

The Mississippi Department of Education (MDE), the state in which one participant resides, released guidance specifically addressing parentally placed nonprofit private school children. According to MDE (2021), each local school system is required to identify, evaluate,

and locate students with disabilities in parentally placed private schools. The location of the private school determines the area of responsibility for child find practices within the state. In other words, it does not matter where the child lives, but the location of the child's private school determines which administrative unit is responsible for child find practices. Satisfying this requirement includes creating public awareness of child find practices, coordination and implementation with interagency collaboration, and screening procedures. The local school may provide services, but is not required to do so (MDE, 2021).

Current Issues Surrounding Vouchers

Vouchers are a contentious issue in today's political climate and among academics. A review of the literature regarding school choice, to any extent, would be incomplete without at least an overview. Proponents of vouchers argue that the availability of vouchers increases competition, which leads to improved education, whereas opponents of vouchers argue that students in public schools are negatively impacted (Mead & Lewis, 2016; Samuels, 2017; San Jose, 2017). Underwood (2015) lists the following reasons to oppose voucher programs: "Separation of church and state, federal protections for students with disabilities, and state constitution's education clause" (p. 44).

Opponents of vouchers are concerned that such programs encourage racial and socio-economic segregation between public and private schools (Mead & Lewis, 2016; Underwood, 2015). Specifically, the percentage of students with special needs attending private schools are vastly different in comparison to public schools. For example, in one city that supports vouchers, 19.5% of the students in the city's public schools have disabilities, compared to 1.6% of the students in the city's voucher program" (Underwood, 2015). This is one example of a disparity that exists between private schools and public schools. While this is a concerning statistic, there

is a lack of data available concerning special education and Christian schools (Cheng et al., 2016). Many Christian schools do not have the funding to provide additional services for students with special needs (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Russo et al., 2011; Scanlan & Tichy, 2014; Taylor 2005). By adding services and staff to support students with diverse needs, funding needs to increase and must be a consideration (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Taylor 2005). Implementing vouchers could help eliminate the funding obstacle Christian schools face in providing special education services.

Proponents of vouchers believe that in a capitalistic society, school choice supported by vouchers would lead to improvements in education (Underwood, 2015). Although many who oppose vouchers are concerned with government oversight interfering with religious liberties in education, many proponents believe that funding should follow the student to their academic environment of choice. Currently, under IDEA (2004), parents are only allowed reimbursement for tuition to private schools if the courts deem that the student has not received a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (Sutton et al., 2017). If students receive a FAPE is left to interpretation by the courts (Dunn, 2017).

As evidenced in this literature review, the history of educating students with special needs is long and vast. Special education in private schools has only recently begun to surface among those issues. At the heart of the subject today, remains the need to ensure Christian families are making informed decisions regarding special education in Christian schools. Additionally, just as public schools require additional funding to meet the needs of students with special needs, so do private schools. Vouchers and scholarships are one way to do that, and although many have been challenged legally, many successfully provide funding without challenge (Sutton et al., 2017). One could even argue that those challenges have been motivated

by monetary loss due to the redistribution of funds as opposed to academic achievement. Ultimately, parents desire to determine the best academic environment for their child with special needs without incurring financial hardship (Dunn, 2017). Christian schools desire to work towards becoming more inclusive, eliminating segregation so as to truly reflect the heart of Jesus to minister to "…the least of these…" (Matt. 25:40, NIV) (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Kryszewska, 2017; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015; Taylor, 2005). Vouchers are a means that may address the financial hardships that parents may face in choosing a Christian school as well as the obstacles Christian schools face in providing special education services. The current political discussion surrounding vouchers may contribute to parents constructing knowledge that impacts their decision-making for education planning.

Academic Achievement in Private Schools Supported with Vouchers

Some professional educators express concern that parents who choose a Christian elementary school for their students with special needs are not making informed decisions because of a lack of data on academic achievement (Cheng et al., 2016). However, there has been minimal research on this topic. Ford (2015) sought to determine whether nonprofit religious schools perform higher academically than nonsectarian schools. The sample specifically included schools participating in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's voucher program servicing low- to middle-income students. The results indicated religious schools participating in the voucher program have higher academic proficiency school-wide than non-religious counterparts. These results are significant to this particular research topic because it illustrates a positive academic proficiency in schools with low- to middle-income students utilizing a voucher system in a private school environment. While specific school-level demographic information regarding special needs is not released in relation to this voucher program, the overall demographics for

this voucher program reflect somewhere between 7% and 14% of students participating have special needs. Results such as this may alleviate concerns from opponents of voucher systems because it eliminates one of the primary concerns, segregation surrounding special education in Christian schools. Vouchers could provide funding for Christian schools, which would eliminate the concern that Christian school educators and administrators cite for opposing acceptance of students with special needs. This information can serve to better inform parents who are concerned about enrolling students with special needs in private schools. Furthermore, this data may begin to alleviate some professional educators' concerns that parents who choose a Christian elementary school for their students with special needs are not making informed decisions because of a lack of data on academic achievement. These results cannot be generalized since data is generated from one city, and the study does not describe parents' experience in choosing to participate in the program.

One author's research proved that nonprofit religious schools are more likely to establish fundraising efforts in addition to government voucher payments than non-religious counterparts (Ford, 2015). While those opposing voucher programs for private schools remain concerned that students' needs will not be met and that these schools will remain segregated, these results disprove that in part (Ford, 2015). Many demographics were not reported in this study, but income-level specifically was addressed. Students with special needs were not addressed in this study either, but the information gleaned from this research is valuable because it shows that the private religious schools have the potential to produce improved results academically, while also continuing to provide necessary funding through fundraising efforts.

Many families have experienced success with private, religious education (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Ford, 2015). One study indicates that choice boosts student achievement,

particularly in reading (Shakeel, Anderson, & Wolf, 2016). This specific study specified that private school choice voucher programs can only be defined as such if receiving funds from the government as opposed to tax credits or scholarship programs. The authors also stated that while parent satisfaction is high with school choice, private school voucher programs and out of country programs experienced greater impact than stateside private school voucher options. Rhinesmith (2017) points out that parent satisfaction could be the result of parents simply thinking the school is better because it is different.

Statistical results outside of testing and reported parent satisfaction levels supports the idea that academic outcomes are better in private schools. Graduation rates for private religious schools were most recently reported to be just over 97% compared to the public school's graduation rate of 85% (Broughman, Kincel, & Peterson, 2019; NCES, 2019). Despite the fact that private religious schools often lack funding, these programs have experienced success. This research still does not indicate the academic success of students with special needs attending a Christian school compared to those attending public school. This type of information would be beneficial in providing parents with information that would be valuable in the decision-making process. Since research is so sparse, it is important to build a strong foundation in research on this topic by describing the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs.

Special Education in Christian Schools

Again, a review of literature directly related to special education in Christian schools is sparse, especially in the context of non-denomination or evangelical Christian schools. Research has been developed relating to Catholic school inclusion efforts, and despite doctrinal differences, these efforts do add to the body of knowledge. To provide inclusivity, Catholic

schools in St. Louis implemented the Learning Consultant Model (LCM) in which schools bring in an education professional with strong communication skills and special education training to work alongside classroom teachers rather than providing direct instruction to students with special needs (Scanlan & Tichy, 2014). Students do not leave the classroom for additional help or instruction in a special education classroom, but rather the LCM floats around to the general classrooms to assist the students and share knowledge and experience with the classroom teachers. While this is an excellent approach for small Christian schools with limited budgets, the research does not describe why parents decide to enroll students with special needs in this type of school.

It is a common complaint within the field of education that there is a lack of teacher training in special education (Falkmer, Anderson, Joosten, & Falkmer, 2015; LaBarbera, 2017; Lalvani, 2015; Lane, 2017). This idea of employing LCMs to help with inclusion may address this concern while working in tandem with the spiritual perspective of creating community through interdependence. The interdependence is modeled by the classroom teachers and LCM because the professionals are working together toward inclusivity. The population of students with special needs in the schools employing the LCM is only five percent, and they have been able to serve a broad spectrum of student abilities as a result (Scanlan & Tichy, 2014).

If other Christian schools are to implement a similar program utilizing LCMs successfully, certain skills may be necessary. In fact, researchers identified three leadership skills these schools employed: boundary spanning, social innovation, and mission-focus (Scanlan & Tichy, 2014). Boundary spanning expands communication between educators, parents, and the LCM through learning summaries and meetings giving stakeholders the opportunity to share information that can contribute to students' development (Scanlan & Tichy, 2014). Approaching

teacher training through social innovations such as the LCM model also reflect interdependence because they contribute to the community, not just the individual with special needs. These Catholic schools may be leading the way in that their classrooms through efforts to reflect their mission statements teaching all students regardless of ability.

Providing special education services to students in Christian schools is difficult to begin due to lack of resources and educator training (Falkmer, Anderson, Joosten, & Falkmer, 2015; LaBarbera, 2017; Lalvani, 2015; Lane, 2017; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Research has been conducted to determine teacher qualifications and the way in which services were delivered to students with special needs in Christian schools (Lane, 2017). Some report that private schools are not reflective of the community in which they serve (Mead & Lewis, 2016; Samuels, 2017; San Jose, 2017). Lane (2017) reports that Christian schools serving students with special needs are reflective of public school counterparts. Many of the schools surveyed serve students with special needs in a resource room, but 45% serve students in the general classroom. These percentages do not reflect interdependency or promote true community through established relationships; the majority of students are served separate from the general school population. This study also does not indicate why parents enroll students with special needs in Christian schools. The results describing special education services reported in Christian schools are surprising considering the value parents place on the community (Cheng et al., 2016; Slade, et al., 2018).

Early identification is important in meeting the needs of students with Specific Learning Disabilities (SLD) and as a result, child find activities are essential for many families. Parents often choose Christian schools for preschool and primary grades, a time in which child find activities are important. Identifying and describing child find practices in Christian schools is

valuable (Lane & Jones, 2015). Often, Local Education Agencies (LEA) and Christian schools communicate concerning child find activities (Lane & Jones, 2015). Specifics regarding frequency, responsiveness, and nature of communication have not been reported, which highlights the need for further studies regarding this topic. It is unclear as to whether parents whose children with special needs attending a Christian school are aware of child find practices and what services are offered in public school. Describing the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs may give insight into parents' perceptions, and experiences with child find practices.

Educators' Perspective on Special Education in Christian Schools

It is a difficult and daunting task to create a program to meet the needs of students with special needs in a Christian school. It is not impossible, and it can be done successfully. Research has been conducted to describe principals' experiences in implementing special education programs (Cookson & Smith, 2011; LaBarbera, 2017; Taylor, 2005). Cookson and Smith (2011) made a significant point in their research that when creating inclusive classrooms in Christian schools, principals utilized local special education professionals for help in accomplishing this goal and even ended up hiring some of these professionals. These principals observed other successful programs and interacted with other educators who had already successfully implemented special education programs. In the end, the principals interviewed truly believed they were more following biblical principles in their admissions policies and services to students. The leaders in this study reflected Vygotsky's constructivism in the choice to implement special education programs by citing beliefs as a reason for doing so. While principals' perspectives are important regarding the topic of special education in Christian

schools, the parents' perspective was limited. The study did not describe parents' decision to enroll students with special needs in a Christian school.

There is no argument that funding requirements for educating a student with special needs can bring an increase in cost, and so funding can be accomplished in different ways by participating schools. Some require families with students having special needs to pay higher tuition, hoping to eventually cut that cost down as the school grew (Cookson & Smith, 2011). Others simply include the additional costs in the overall budget, which means that the tuition fees for all families are equal. The boards in these schools do not want families to feel less part of the community than others and wanted each family to contribute equally (Cookson & Smith, 2011). This commitment is reflective of the interdependent mindset previously mentioned. This may be an important theme as Christian schools begin to implement more inclusive settings. It even stands to reason that this type of attitude, especially reflective in monetary matters, could go a long way in helping families with children having special needs to feel a sense of belonging within the school community. This is something that is often missing for families that have children with special needs (Cheng et al., 2016). Still missing in this research is the description of parents' decision to enroll students with special needs in a Christian school.

Principals' leadership styles have a strong impact on the way in which enrollment and acceptance policies and procedures are implemented (Taylor, 2005). Some schools communicate through mission statements that all students are welcomed, the importance of diversity, and meeting the needs of all students, but then do not even allow accommodations for students with disabilities during enrollment testing (Taylor, 2005). If the mission statement is not created and accepted by all stakeholders, the philosophy of education then becomes unreliable. This

statewide study indicated that there is no common theme in the ways participating private schools implemented inclusion, but principals play a significant part in this (Taylor, 2005).

Teachers' perspectives on special education are abundant in research within the public school sphere but strikingly sparse within private school research. However, researchers did interview 17 teachers to describe experiences and perceptions regarding inclusion efforts within the Seventh Day Adventist schools in which they taught (Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Most of the participants had a positive attitude toward inclusion and the way in which it was being implemented within their specific school (Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). Participants did note challenges, however. Out of the 17 participants, 15 indicated that their schools did not have written policies and procedures addressing inclusion practices (Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). This is consistent with concerns from other researchers regarding policies and teacher qualifications in special education in Christian schools (Lane, 2017). Additionally, there are no formal methods to aid in identifying students with special needs outside of teacher observation (Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). This is another concern regarding Christian schools and special education that has been revealed in previous research (Lane, 2015). However, in the states that participants in this study reside, administrative units are required to provide child find services to students attending private schools and IEPs (MDE, 2021, MDE, 2011). Furthermore, this research does not describe why parents choose Christian school for students with special needs.

It would add to the current body of research to follow up with comparable studies by working on describing the parents' perspective in these participating environments. As it is, the studies seem incomplete, only telling a part of the story from a portion of stakeholders. By describing the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs, educators currently implementing inclusion and educators wishing to

implement inclusion may gain greater insight as to parents' priorities and values regarding education planning for students with special needs.

Parents' Perspective on Special Education Services

Families desire something different for their students with special needs (Burke & Griffin, 2016; Dunn, 2017; Samuels, 2017). Many parents choose to homeschool students with special needs because they are dissatisfied with the services in public school, or are concerned about bullying, stigma, or other negativity in the public school community (Cheng et al., 2016). Still, others cite religious beliefs and safety concerns (Gaither, 2017). There are many options for parents when they are dissatisfied with public schools, but parents do report greater satisfaction with charter schools over public schools and private schools over charter schools (Barrows, Peterson, & and West, 2017). Overall, research indicates that parents are satisfied with schools of their own choosing, but it is unclear as to why parents are satisfied (Rhinesmith, 2017). Parents are one of the primary motivating factors behind Christian schools implementing special education programs (Cookson and Smith, 2011). Inviting parents of students with special needs to partner with educators by encouraging participation, valuing their expertise, and understanding family needs is of significant importance (LaBarbera, 2017). Current research, however, does not describe why parents specifically choose Christian school for students with special needs.

Many Christian schools do not implement inclusion to the same extent as public schools because they lack the ability to meet special needs students' requirements (Lane, 2017; Russo, Osborne, Massucci, & Cattaro, 2011). Limited ability to meet special needs students' requirements may not be a great a concern for parents, but lack of research leaves educators guessing as to why parents enroll students with special needs in Christian schools. Robert,

Leblanc, and Boyer (2014) endeavored to describe parent satisfaction with support services. Some parents are satisfied believing that the professional service providers are meeting their child's needs. Many parents would like to be more involved in making decisions about interventions and services. Mostly, parents' satisfaction and well-being depend on how responsive service providers are to their needs. For example, parents report feeling less stressed when support professionals listen to concerns, viewed as partners, and are provided with useful information. Parents perceive professionals are working to address special needs not based on professional qualifications, but values of human qualities such as empathy and commitment. More specifically, parents prefer service professionals to display feelings of empathy and support. This does support the idea that parents' perspectives are more typically aligned with a social and/or cultural paradigm (Lalvani, 2015). Due to the lack of specific research describing why parents of students with special needs choose Christian school, one cannot say for sure.

Some Christian schools provide students with IEPs, some do not, and still, others may provide a similar document choosing to rename it to reduce the potential stigma associated with IEPs. Regardless, some type of document indicating goals and accommodations for students with special needs can help educators and parents better guide students to access the curriculum within their full potential. While beginning to implement more inclusive environments, it is beneficial to consider parent perspectives on IEP processes in other schools. Even as relating to the IEP process, parents value the feelings of community and consistently relate satisfaction to "parent-school involvement and parent-teacher relationship quality" (Slade, et al., 2018).

Bray and Russell (2016) sought to gain a better understanding of why parents and students typically have minimal participation in the IEP meetings. This is important to understand because while educators consider the IEP meeting as a partnership between parents

and educators, lack of participation from parents may indicate otherwise. Special educators dominate these meetings by speaking more words and assuming the lead role in creating IEPs. Parents maintain a relatively passive role and speak much less than special educators during these meetings. General educators were even silent unless referred to by special educators. The parents generally agree, listen, and acknowledge. This study revealed that the IDEA-mandated documents, the IEP, served as a script for the meeting that provided structure. Reading through the script, the IEP, solidified participants' roles. This same structure was found to be consistent across multiple IEP meetings, with a similar number of words spoken at each IEP meeting.

Bray and Russell (2016) also described disruptions during IEP meetings, or when participants veered away from the structured script of the written IEP. The majority of disruptions were from parents, students, and educators. When disruptions pertained to instruction and learning, participants were redirected back to the script. Lack of authentic dialogue and the use of abstract language during IEP meetings discourages open discussions and makes it difficult for parents to understand the supports and services provided. While IDEA (2004) gives parents the power to advocate and participate in decision-making regarding special education services that students receive, the structure of the IEP process does not encourage open dialogue and equal participation from parents. Ultimately the study found that while the educators met legal mandates, parents did not actually play a significant role in the IEP process. This is significant because it shows that true collaboration occurs in meaningful dialogue and equal partnership in decision-making between parents and educators. While IEPs provide a guide for the direction of instruction, they do not necessarily reflect the partnership.

Strong parent-teacher relationships are obviously important to families of children with special needs, but such a strong relationship is not often easily fostered. Parents of students

diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) often experience a lack of success in attempts to resolve issues at school that their children were experiencing (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). Many times, mothers even feel blamed and silenced when making an effort to resolve such issues (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). This supports the idea that families describe experiences from a social and cultural perspective and value feeling connected to the community, not just for the students but also for parents (Lalvani, 2015).

ADHD has become common, but Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses have recently increased and so it is just as valuable to look specifically at parent perspectives from this specific viewpoint. Since students with ASD often struggle with social situations, it is very likely that interdependence and feeling a part of a community is highly prized by these families, especially. Simply allowing students to attend a school, does not make it inclusive. In fact, results from a recent study indicated that it is important for educators and school personnel to not only understand ASD but also to be familiar with strategies in guiding students with ASD to access the curriculum in the most successful way possible (Falkmer et al., 2015). By providing for students in this way, the school environment then becomes truly inclusive, creating a stronger community that is more interdependent.

LaBarbera (2017) conducted a study to evaluate caregivers' and teachers' satisfaction with collaboration efforts within a school. Collaboration is successful when intentional efforts to create partnerships with families. This study found that caregivers of students with ASD had statistically significantly lower ratings of satisfaction with education practices than what teachers rated themselves. Parent and teacher perceptions differ. Despite the difference in ratings, parents and teachers did report overall satisfaction with collaboration efforts. Teachers' willingness to hear and understand caregivers' concerns as well as making students feel welcome were the

strongest predictors of satisfaction with collaboration. Parents viewed the efforts teachers made toward collaboration as critical to their child's education. Teachers believed that the strongest predictors of parent satisfaction with collaboration were their understanding of ASD, advocating for students, informing caregivers, and suggesting strategies for caregivers to use at home. Effective and frequent communication was important to both caregivers and teachers. The significantly lower ratings that parents gave teachers on collaboration efforts show that there is a difference in what parents value in comparison with what teachers prioritize in collaboration efforts. Further studies describing the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary schools for students with special needs are necessary to help educators understand parents' values, priorities, and concerns.

Collier et al. (2015), reveal that parent involvement not only helps students succeed, but parents of students with special needs can be utilized as experts regarding their student with special needs. In creating inclusive environments, it is beneficial for teachers to work toward establishing a relationship with parents of students with special needs in which their expertise is valued and respected as opposed to criticized. Researchers have found parents are more apt to become involved at home and at school when receiving individual invitations from teachers (Collier et al., 2015; Fishman & Nickerson, 2015). Furthermore, teacher candidates expressed increased understanding and appreciation for family challenges, which caused them to develop more empathy for the families and value the parents' knowledge, experience, and voice (Collier et al., 2015). Building and sustaining relationships with parents and students encourages collaboration (Collier et al., 2015). The proposed research will provide a focused look at parents who have chosen Christian school for students with special needs, determining if this current research applies to all subgroups of parents.

Parents' School Choice

There are many factors that affect parents' school choice. In choosing Christian school and homeschool, families have reported not only a lack of community, but concerns for the moral and spiritual philosophies taught in public schools (Cheng et al., 2016). Many families have left public schools based on moral/religious reasons, with some citing terms like humanist philosophy, secular-based education, and public school worldview (Thomas, 2019). Other parents choose other options because they desire to provide students with a Christian foundation in education (Lane et al., 2019). Religious liberty is something that our nation was founded upon, but it has been a recent topic of concern in our nation politically in the way businesses are run and even in the way schools are run (Olson, Bindewald, McCorkle, & Rosenblith, 2020). While teachers in public schools do support an overall general idea of religious liberty, the specific expression of such liberty differs depending on a variety of variables (Olson et al., 2020).

Love, Zagona, Kurth, and Miller (2017) found that parents express difficulty in establishing true collaboration and decision-making within the special education school setting in public school. For example, the institutionalized processes, IEP structured meetings, and school hierarchies made collaboration difficult. Parents expressed that making an effort to build relationships with teachers was the most helpful, enabling them to make decisions for their children with special needs. Some described volunteering and giving gifts to teachers as part of efforts to build a relationship in order to get services for their children. Much of the decisions parents made in this study were a result of decisions made already by the school. For example, some parents paid for private therapies that the school did not provide in an inclusive environment. Another parent paid for specialists to train the teachers. Ultimately the parents in this study were not partners with educators or equal team members but simply brought into the

IEP process last minute as a requirement. This is significant because it shows the need for true collaboration that is built from established relationships as opposed to implemented procedures and processes that attempt to meet a requirement for collaboration.

Duman, Aydin, and Ozfidan (2018) sought to understand parent choice in public charter schools. After the quality of the academic program, parents value schools' culture and climate that provides high expectations and accountability. Respect for diversity and safety were also included in this category. When citing concerns for public schools, low expectations, lack of respect for authority and student accountability ranked highest. The student to teacher ratio and safety and discipline issues were of primary concern as well. Some parents expressed dissatisfaction with school-home communication and feeling that they were not welcome to come to the school and participate or assist. While these issues are not mentioned to have a religious or faith-based origin, they are similar to the reasons parents mention sending students to Christian school and homeschool. This likeness may demonstrate that parents, regardless of religious background, may have similar concerns with their children's academic environment. When describing the attributes of the chosen charter school, parents referred to academic rigor, loving and caring teachers, strong communication, and being known and part of the community. While academic quality is significant, the social and cultural attributes of a school are prized by parents, which is consistent with other research (Cheng et al., 2016; Duman et al., 2018; Prichard & Swezey, 2016).

Carlon, Carter, and Stephenson (2015) researched parent decision-making regarding early intervention for students with ASD. Their results indicated that, in addition to meeting the needs of the child, staff attributes and intuition or gut feelings weighed more heavily than research-based evidence when selecting the intervention approach. This is significant because it supports

the notion that parents make education planning decisions based on social/cultural factors. Parents' impression of staff, specifically interpersonal skills, may be a contributing factor in this decision-making. This study is limited in that it describes only parents of children with ASD and applies to service providers and not the school environment.

Goldrich Eskow et al., (2018) determined in researching parents of students with ASD that family-teacher partnership satisfaction is associated with parent-reported academic improvement and family quality of life. This study did not prove causality but rather showed that parents perceived greater academic improvement and reported improved family quality of life. Teacher communication skills that supported the child significantly contributed to parent satisfaction, but it was not the parent-teacher relationship that was most valued by parents. Parents most valued the relationship that provided for the child's needs was most meaningful and effective. These results differ from other research results (Duman et al., 2018; Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Researchers acknowledged that a variety of variables could have impacted this to include parenting style, needs, and school climate (Duman et al., 2018). Researchers recommended developing professional competencies for establishing teacher-student relationships, rather than just assuming this skill is based on personality rather than a skill to be taught. Also, further research describing parent satisfaction with parent-teacher partnerships is recommended. Proposed research may provide insight into parent satisfaction with parent-teacher partnerships as it relates to parents of children with special needs attending Christian schools.

Thomas (2019) reports some parents leave public school due to religious reasons. Even within this category of reasoning, there are specific differences. Some parents use terms like humanist philosophy, secular-based education, and public school worldview. Other parents refer

to the lack of moral instruction, poor moral atmosphere, and not trusting the government to teach

morals and ethics. Some parents simply feel called to teach their own children in line with

personal faith beliefs. Additional reasons include specific instruction approaches in public school

and concern for negative influences and a secular worldview. While this study showed reasons,

parents choose to homeschool and not to participate in public school programs of any kind, it

does not show Christian school parents' perspective and it does not address students with special

needs.

Some additional reasons that parents of children with special needs leave public school

are to avoid bullying, stigma, and other negative experiences (Cheng et al., 2016). Students with

special needs consistently experience higher rates of bullying victimization and perpetration than

their peers (Rose & Gage, 2017). Hazeltine and Hernandez (2015) report that Christian school

students overall report fewer incidents of physical bullying compared to public school students,

but overall patterns of bullying in Christian schools are consistent with public school. Stigma is

another reason for parents to remove children with special needs from public schools and can be

described in four components: labeling, stereotyping, status loss, and discrimination (Link &

Phelan, 2001). Research shows that stigma is lessened when knowledge about disability is higher

(Toye, Wilson, & Wardle, 2019). This research does not identify specific ways in which students

with special needs leaving public schools for Christian schools have experienced components of

stigma. Nor does research specify how parents came to the conclusion that students with special

needs would not experience stigma in their Christian school of choice.

Lalvani (2015) described parent and teacher perceptions on stigma and labeling regarding

disability. Parents link perceptions about disability with sociocultural attitudes. Many parents in

this study disagreed with teachers concerning specific labels for their children, but not the need

for special education services. Some parents reported concerns for lower expectations, being treated differently, and being noticed by other students and looked down upon for having special education teachers in the classroom. Most teachers believed these concerns unnecessary. A few teachers did share sociocultural concerns with parents of students who received separate education outside of the general education classroom, but this was minimal and not the norm.

Lalvani's (2015) study shows that parents of students with special needs and teachers have different perceptions of disability and family experiences with disability. Perceived negative societal attitudes about disability as well as general education teachers' willingness to teach students with special needs causes concern for parents. For example, parents' concern for students with disability feeling socially isolated in the classroom is prominent. Parents believe there is a need for attitudes of non-disabled peers towards disability to be addressed. Interestingly, teachers in this study did not mention sociocultural issues like marginalization, societal attitudes toward disability, or stressors in the navigation of the special education system. Teachers in this study believe that many parents are in denial about their child's ability, while parents maintain that they are simply concerned about the way in which their child will be perceived and treated. Ultimately, the study shows that teachers understand disability as defined by neurological, physical, and cognitive impairments, which is in line with medical perspectives on disability. Parents, on the other hand, conceptualize disability with sociocultural paradigms constructing meaning based on social and cultural experiences linked to stigma and marginalization.

The differences between parents' and teachers' perceptions of Lalvani's (2015) study is significant. While teachers see grief and denial, parents feel rejected and misunderstood. The need for further research describing parents' experiences in all matters of special education

would be beneficial in helping educators understand family experiences, expectations, and concerns, which may affect policy and practice in relation to special education. While this study did not describe school choice for parents of students with special needs, it does give insight into parents' perceptions about disability, and it shows that parents' description of their experiences and outlook on disability aligns with a sociocultural perspective.

Prichard and Swezey (2016) conducted a study of Christian parents to identify decision-making practices in choosing schools. These researchers found that participants did not employ a thorough search, but families employed limited information gathering in the process and relying on input from limited social networks. The researchers chose five code families to categorize the data: decision-making process, influences on or by the child, parents, academic/extracurricular activities, and religious influences. Those parents who chose Christian schools are more likely to cite religious influences in the decision-making process. All parents consistently lacked a thorough process or plan in choosing which school was best. Some parents admitted to not exercising their own choice even though they were able to do so. Some chose public school for extracurricular activities, but when their kids experienced trouble, they allowed them to stay because that is what the child wanted. Some parents admitted that public schools do not reflect the same values but did not consider other options.

Prichard and Swezey (2016) found that Christian parents choose schools for their children based on the theory of satisficing. This theory means that people settle on a decision once they are faced with the option that meets minimum requirements. This study, while beneficial, cannot be generalized to the problem that parents may be making uninformed decisions in sending students with special needs to a Christian school. The study was too broad to address this problem because the participants were Christian parents choosing a public,

charter, or Christian schools. It was general. Students' abilities were not addressed in any part of the study. Further researcher narrowing the participants to parents of students with special needs choosing Christian school is necessary to provide a more accurate and complete picture.

Ultimately, many Christian families desire a place for students to experience feelings of community in agreement with their philosophical and religious beliefs and values. This research agrees with Vygotsky's social constructivist framework guiding the proposed study. The research does give an incomplete picture because it focuses on experiences in education planning for families choosing to homeschool and does not include families of students with special needs specifically. Describing the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs is essential because it will provide understanding within the field of education that may affect change in education policy and practice in public schools and Christian schools.

Summary

While educators have begun conducting research regarding special education in faith-based schools, there is very little regarding parents' perspective toward education planning. Cheng et al. (2016) believe parents may not be making the most informed decisions because of the lack of research due to data limitations regarding the effectiveness of options outside of public school for students with special needs. Other researchers have expressed concern over the lack of special education teacher qualifications in private schools (Lane, 2017). Current research addressing the topic is too broad. Some researchers describe factors contributing to parents choosing Christian school and homeschool but do not address choices for students specifically with special needs (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2019; Thomas, 2019). Other research highlights parents' concerns with public school such as low expectations and dissatisfaction with

collaboration efforts (Cheng, et al., 2016; Love et al., 2017; Duman et al., 2018). Parents have also reported religious reasons as a reason for leaving public schools (Thomas, 2019). None of this research specifically addresses parents of students with special needs. As the primary researcher, I intend to conduct a transcendental phenomenological study to describe factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

Chapter Three describes the methods used to conduct the study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. The study's design, along with a reiteration of the research questions, is also detailed. In addition to the design, a description of the setting, participants, and procedures are included along with the researcher's role, and data collection and analysis methodology. Data analysis and ethical considerations close out the chapter.

Design

Moustakas (1994) describes phenomenology as being rooted in philosophy according to its founder, Husserl, who believed in acquiring knowledge through experience, even relating to scientific matters, an unpopular opinion during his time. The design used in this study, transcendental phenomenology, is further described as the foundation for all knowledge, presenting a fresh beginning for investigation. It is the way in which a person experiences a phenomenon in a new way without bias or influence of preconstructed ideas concerning the phenomenon. Essentially, it is one's path to knowledge based on fresh experience.

Moustakas (1994) asserts that results from transcendental phenomenological research provide the basis for future research. This type of design is appropriate for providing new and different perspectives from participants whose experiences with the phenomenon may not have been included in previous research. This type of design is reflective, providing a textural description that includes ideas, thoughts, feelings, and examples as they relate to the experience or phenomenon. It is essential in transcendental phenomenology for the researcher to have an

awareness of oneself, especially in relation to the essence being studied. While any experience is fitting for this type of study, looking at the experience separate from one's own values and beliefs is the challenge according to Moustakas (1994).

This study describes parents' experience in choosing Christian elementary schools for their children with special needs, ensuring a phenomenological design and a transcendental approach is most appropriate. Qualitative studies explore issues and groups of people that are not often identified or heard (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The percentage of students with special needs attending private schools has increased in recent years (U.S. DoE, NCES, 2019). While this number has increased, research is lacking on this subject from the parents' perspective. As those numbers rise, the need to understand parents' experiences and factors they consider in choosing Christian elementary schools for their children with special needs continues to become increasingly more important, making the qualitative, phenomenological approach most appropriate. With such little research presently on parents' experiences with the topic, phenomenology is an appropriate beginning for initial research efforts. By utilizing this approach, describing the essence of the phenomenon may describe what is real (Husserl, 1931).

Transcendental research, specifically, includes bracketing personal experiences, textural descriptions, and structural experiences, which served as a critical component of this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). First, acknowledging bias was important for me as a researcher because I have experience with the phenomenon as a teacher in a Christian school and as a mother of two sons with special needs. This bias could have impacted the results of my study, if not properly communicated and set aside. This is important in this study because, as Moustakas (1994) points out, transcendental phenomenological studies are concerned with seeking meaning and describing experiences from multiple perspectives. This aligns with the study's topic.

Additionally, viewing the phenomenon with a fresh start may be valuable for educators and parents who choose Christian school for students with special needs. The problem is, professionals in the field of education are concerned that parents are not making informed decisions in choosing Christian schools for students with special needs because of the lack of data available and lack of teacher special education qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). Research describing this phenomenon will provide a foundation for future research on the topic.

Research Questions

CQ: What factors contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?

SQ1: What role does religion play in parents' choosing Christian school for students with special needs?

SQ2: What factors influence parents' decisions to choose a Christian school for students with special needs regarding the administration, teachers, curriculum, and school culture?

SQ3: How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools?

Setting

This study was conducted at Christian elementary schools throughout the United States to include: Arizona, Florida, Mississippi, and Maryland. The Christian elementary school setting was relevant for the study because while research on this topic has been conducted in other settings, only a limited number of studies have been conducted at all (Cheng, et al., 2016). At the time of this study, the U.S. Census Bureau (2019) reported demographics for the nation with a population with over 5.7 million people. Over 22% of the population was under the age of 18.

Over 76% of the population was white, over 13% was black or African American, and almost

19% Hispanic or Latino. The median household income was $62,843. The participants in the

study have children with special needs attending a variety of Christian elementary schools

throughout Maryland, Florida, Mississippi, and Arizona. For the purposes of this study, I referred

to the schools and participants with pseudonyms.

According to Craft (2020), one of the schools, Charlotte Academy, offers some special

education services and resources while providing accommodations as needed. The special

education director attends formal IEP meetings with parents at the local school district to provide

appropriate service plans and accommodations for students with special needs. Not all of the

staff is specifically trained in special education, but they have a team of educators tasked with

providing support inside the general education classroom and pull-out services as necessary. This

is a large school, with over 900 students in attendance across four campuses. Student

demographics include 51% male and 49% female, 76% Caucasian, 15% African American, and

2% Hispanic or Latino. The majority of participants chose this school for their students with

special needs. Demographics data was not available for participants who chose other Christian

schools.

Participants

I utilized purposeful sampling in choosing participants. Purposeful sampling is a

sampling method that specifically chooses participants that will best inform me about the

research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I identified 10 participants utilizing this method. The

participants were parents of students with special needs attending Christian school. Purposeful

sampling adds credibility (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, because the problem studied

refers to parents of students with special needs attending Christian schools, criterion sampling

was necessary. Intentional sampling such as this best informs the researcher about the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The initial efforts to recruit participants through Christian schools did not yield the preferred number of participants, so I utilized snowball, or chain sampling (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling is another form of purposeful sampling in which the researcher asks for participants to recommend additional participants that have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2015).

I began by asking administrators at Christian schools across the region if they would be willing to forward an e-mail to parents of students with special needs enrolled at their schools requesting participation (Appendix A). I requested consent from the schools willing to participate (Appendices B and C). The only criteria for participation included parents who chose Christian school for their students with special needs. Once IRB and setting approval was granted, I began contacting potential participants by letter via e-mail describing the purpose of the study and the expectations as well as permissions (Appendices D and E). I required that participants sign the consent forms and return them to me via e-mail (Appendix E). While several schools did grant setting consent, I only successfully recruited eight participants who met the criteria. I then began asking participants and friends if they knew of anyone who may meet the criteria and be willing to participate. I successfully recruited two participants this way.

I distributed a survey electronically via e-mail to gather demographics data and to ensure participants meet criteria for participation (Appendix F). This is important for qualitative research guided theoretically by the social constructivist framework because cultural backgrounds can shape interpretation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). A survey questionnaire is a list of questions that participants answer independently and return to me for review and analysis (Creswell, 2015). Surveys describe the characteristics of the participants (Creswell, 2015). This

type of data collection was an important and appropriate first step for this study. The participants

in this study completed the survey questions prior to being interviewed in an effort to collect

demographic data and basic personal information. This also ensured that participants met the

criteria for participating in the study. The only criteria required for participants was that they

have an elementary child with special needs attending Christian school. Special needs in this

case is defined as learners with learning, physical, and developmental disabilities; behavioral,

emotional, and communication disorders; and specific learning challenges. Many Christian

schools do not provide IEPs for students, so this was not a requirement. While most of the

questions used to solicit demographic information were open-ended, they were designed to allow

for easy and short responses (Creswell, 2015). I conducted a pilot study prior to distribution to

determine any problems with question construction of the demographics survey. Changes were

made based on feedback (Creswell, 2015). Survey questions are as follows:

1. Please enter your name, e-mail address, and phone number.

2. What is your age?

3. What is your gender?

4. With what nationality do you and your child affiliate?

5. How old is your child and in what grade is your child?

6. What is your child's biological gender?

7. Has your child been formally diagnosed with a special need either by a school
   psychologist or outside professional? If so, please identify the diagnosis.

8. Please describe your child's learning differences.

9. In what school is your child currently enrolled?

10. Does your child participate in a general education inclusive classroom?

11. Does your child receive services outside of the general education inclusive classroom during the school day? If so, how many hours per week?

12. Please describe the services your child receives for his/her emotional, behavioral, and/or learning differences at the current school of enrollment.

13. What is the last level of education you completed?

14. Are you willing to contribute to this study as a co-researcher by participating in an interview either in person or electronically and responding to a journal prompt regarding your experience in choosing Christian school for your elementary student with special needs? Yes _____ No _____

Procedures

There are essential steps included in qualitative research (Creswell, 2015). I solicited approval from each Christian school whose administrators agreed to forward participation requests via e-mail (Appendix A). I requested and received IRB approval (Appendix B). After IRB approval, I sent consent forms for parental signatures to the sites (Appendix C). I asked the administrators at the sites to forward a recruitment letter via e-mail to potential participants (Appendix D). I then sent e-mail consent forms to the respondents for completion within two weeks (Appendix E). Additionally, I e-mailed to confirm that participants met the required criteria and to gather demographic data (Appendix F). This type of data collection can provide useful information about participants to support theories and concepts (Creswell, 2015).

Prior to conducting research, I sent the survey, focus group questions, and interview questions to be reviewed by a panel of educators and the parent of a child with special needs (Appendices F, G, and H). I chose two educators who have bachelor's degrees and are both certified teachers in their state, one of whom is an autism specialist in her school district. I chose

one parent to check for sensitivity from the parents' perspective. This parent has a master's

degree in teaching and has a child with special needs. These experts offered input and suggested

potential changes in an effort to improve upon the interview questions. I considered those

suggestions and made changes as necessary.

Following the IRB approval, I conducted a pilot interview. I chose one parent of a child

with special needs. This person does have a child enrolled in a Christian school. I located this

person through convenience sampling by asking parents I know who have children with special

needs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This person is a close friend that I have known for many years.

The purpose of this pilot interview was to determine the ease of interview questions, the

feasibility of the study, and to give me practice interviewing.

The data collection included interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Triangulation

is an important validation strategy in qualitative research because collecting and analyzing data

from multiple sources increases chances for an accurate description of the participants'

experience with the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once consent forms were completed

and returned, I asked the participants via e-mail to schedule the interviews (Appendix I).

Participants chose the most convenient time for the interview and each interview took place over

Zoom. I took notes and recorded interviews via my personal computer. I transcribed the

interviews by hand and sent them to the participants for member checking. Some participants

provided clarification, while others simply gave approval. The recordings were protected via

password and maintained at my personal residence until the participants agreed with the

transcription.

Next, I scheduled focus groups. It was most convenient to conduct focus groups via

Zoom due to participants' geographical locations and public health restrictions. I divided

participants into two focus groups and provided two days and times that were similar to the interview times. One participant was unable to attend either focus group due to professional commitments and another participant forgot to attend. I ensured participants were aware that they could participate with audio only and that they could replace their names with pseudonyms during the focus group if they desired. I took notes and recorded the focus groups via my personal computer. I transcribed the interviews by hand and sent them to the participants for member checking. Some participants provided clarification, while others simply gave approval. The recordings were protected via password and maintained at my personal residence until the participants agree with the transcription, until the dissertation defense, or for three years.

At the end of the interviews, I asked participants to respond to the following journal prompt describing their experience in deciding to send their child with special needs to a Christian school. Participants were asked to draw from personal experiences as they formulated a response. This type of data collection provides an opportunity for the families to reveal details of their story regarding the phenomenon, which is suggested for this type of research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). These journal entries were sent to me electronically via e-mail. If the journal entries were not completed, I sent a reminder and also reminded them after the focus groups. I received the journal prompts from each participant. I then began analyzing data.

The Researcher's Role

I am a child of God, mother, homeschool teacher, and student. I am a mother to two elementary-aged boys with mild special needs. As a mother, I have often felt as though our family is misunderstood. Outsiders do not see the trauma that my children have experienced, and the special needs with which they have been diagnosed are not visible. It can appear as though they are naughty or undisciplined. As a result of this misunderstanding, I sometimes feel judged

and unwelcome in certain Christian settings. As Christians, we should first seek to understand and help rather than judge, exclude, and even shame. While this happens in both public and Christian settings, it has been most disappointing to me as a mother in Christian settings because my expectations for Christians is higher than others. The most valuable thing a teacher has said to me about my son is, "I see him." It is my desire as a researcher and educator to not only provide an exceptional education to children with special needs but also to give voice to their parents. I want them to know from researchers and educators, "We see you." In an effort to give voice to these parents, I must also remember that all voices are important in this study, despite experience or opinion. I will need to bracket my experiences in order to prevent bias (Creswell & Poth (2018).

As a believer in Jesus Christ, I am in love with my merciful, heavenly father. I believe in the truth of his holy word. I believe that he has put the burden on my heart to share the stories of parents caring for children with special needs so that educators may be prompted to answer his call in Matthew 25:40, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (NIV). I support Christian education for students with special needs because I believe it is what God expects for those who desire such a thing. I will also have to bracket this opinion in my data collection and analysis. In an effort to ensure that I eliminate bias, I will provide personal responses to the interview questions for review in the appendix, but I will not include them in the data analysis.

As a researcher, it is necessary for me to bracket my experiences (Moustakas, 1994). As a mother of two children with special needs, my husband and I decided to remove them from public school and homeschool them. We based this decision on many factors, but primarily due to behavioral difficulties, my oldest son had in public school. Initially, my son had an IEP, but

the IEP was determined to no longer be required because it did not impact his academic performance. When this happened, he no longer received services but did have accommodations outlined in the 504 plan. He got into trouble at school often and his father and I did not feel that he received the appropriate consequences. Sometimes he would sit in the office for an entire afternoon for something relatively minor. Other times, he would have no consequence for something we viewed to be a significant infraction. We began to notice that he was regularly unhappy upon returning home from school. This was out of character. While the teachers had the required special education training, I do not believe they understood trauma. My sons are adopted through foster care. The trauma that they have experienced impacts on behavior and emotion. We also believed that the goals that the academic expectations were extremely low for both boys and that I could provide more complete and well-rounded instruction at home and in line with our values.

While we have chosen to homeschool my sons for this time, I do believe strongly in Christian education, but it simply is not an option for us financially at this time. While I have never seen judgment from professionals concerning my education decisions for my sons, it does not mean that everyone agrees with my choices. Strangers are completely comfortable with questioning my choices. Both of my sons' current therapists are positive about their progress. Bracketing those experiences and working to remove bias throughout the duration of this study will be essential.

I recently moved out West from the East Coast and have no connections here in this region where I plan to conduct my study. I do not have any connection to the school or the participants of my study. I am a complete stranger to the school and participants. I have no professional or personal affiliation with the staff, administration, or participants.

Data Collection

The qualitative data was collected through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and journal entries. By employing three methods of inquiry, data triangulation was accomplished, ensuring trustworthiness as well as providing more opportunities to get a complete picture of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Triangulation increases chances for an accurate description of the participants' experience with the phenomenon, increasing validity (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Collecting data from multiple sources provides variety and establishes credibility, according to expert researchers (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data collected describes factors parents consider when choosing a Christian elementary school for their students with special needs. Since there is such a lack of data on this topic, this type of research is most appropriate. Furthermore, these data collection methods align with Vygotsky's social constructivist theory that guided this research because it allows for "empathic and aesthetic aspects of the researcher-participant relationship" (Kim, 2004).

Semi-Structured Interviews with Field Notes

Interviews can be defined as researchers asking participants general, open-ended questions, and documenting those answers (Creswell, 2015). Interviews are the primary means of collecting data in phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). Interviews may build reciprocal relationship between interviewer and participant, allowing for more open sharing of information (Galletta, 2012). The interview also provides flexibility for the researcher, who can then ask follow-up questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree (2006) describe semi-structured interviews as being designed with pre-determined and open-ended questions, allowing for additional questions to emerge from dialogue during the interview. Also,

the individual semi-structured interview allows the interviewer to delve more deeply into personal experiences, which is appropriate for qualitative phenomenological research.

Parents of students with special needs attending the Christian elementary schools previously mentioned will be contacted and asked to participate. I chose participants utilizing random-purposeful sampling (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Additionally, because the problem to be studied refers to parents of students with special needs attending a Christian school, criterion sampling will be necessary. Intentional sampling, such as this, will best inform the researcher about the research problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Initial efforts with purposeful sampling did not yield enough participants, so snowball, or chain sampling was utilized (Patton, 2015). Snowball sampling is another form of purposeful sampling in which the researcher asks for participants to recommend additional participants that have experienced the phenomenon (Creswell, 2015).

Ten parents met the criteria and agreed to participate. I interviewed the participants one time, with each interview lasting an hour or less. The only criteria required for participants was that they must have an elementary child with special needs attending Christian elementary school.

Throughout the interviews, I took field notes to aide in later analysis and understanding. According to Krueger and Casey (2014), field notes should include quotes, key points and themes, follow-up questions, big ideas, hunches, or thoughts from the researcher, and other factors like body language and tone. I created a field notes template based on this guidance (Appendix J). I also recorded the interviews via my personal computer and transcribed the data by hand for analysis. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), observation is one of the key tools for data collection in qualitative research, which is why this researcher chose to observe during

interviews and document observations. The data collected in the interviews contributed to answering the Central Question and Sub-questions.

Open-Ended Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about your child's learning differences.

2. What supports and/or accommodations does your child receive at school?

3. Describe your experience as a parent of a student with special needs in choosing Christian elementary school?

4. Describe the factors, events, and interactions that were challenging in choosing Christian elementary school for your child?

5. How did your interactions with other parents and groups on social media impact your decision?

6. What factors led you to choose Christian school over other school options?

7. What role did religion play in your choice?

8. If your child attended another school, describe why you left that school.

9. How do the supports that your child received in their previous setting compare to their current Christian school setting?

10. What does the current Christian school provide that others do not?

11. How do you define success for your student's time in elementary school?

12. Describe the qualities you look for in the administration when choosing a school.

13. Describe the qualities you look for in the teachers when choosing a school.

14. Describe the qualities you look for in the curriculum when choosing a school.

15. Describe the qualities you look for in the school culture when choosing a school.

16. What will cause you to continue your child's enrollment at a Christian school?

17. Please add anything that we did not cover in our interview up to this point.

All questions are open-ended questions. This type of question is designed so that the participants can give voice to their experiences without consideration of outside influences (Creswell, 2015). I designed each question using Vygotsky's social constructivist theory as a guide, with the understanding that knowledge is constructed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). Interaction with social media may contribute to knowledge construction as well (Kimmerle, Moskaliuk, Oeberst, & Cress, 2015). Furthermore, parents' interpretation of special needs and descriptions of familial experiences may connect to education planning (Lalvani, 2015). These ideas are reflected in each question. Questions one and two will give me an understanding of the degree of support the family receives from the private school and will provide insight into the central research question. These questions are knowledge questions intended to be easy for the participants to answer, which may relieve tension (Creswell, 2015).

Questions three through ten seek to provide comprehensive descriptions of the participants' experiences with the phenomena (Moustakas, 1994). Answers to these questions are very specifically related to the circumstances surrounding the parents' experience in choosing Christian elementary school for their child with special needs and may answer the overall research questions and research sub-questions one and two. These questions specifically allow for participants to answer questions uninhibited, an important aspect of the interview process in transcendental phenomenological research (Creswell, 2015).

Question eleven directly answers the research sub-question, how do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools? Parents' satisfaction depends on the child's best interest, family needs, and whether they feel these things

are being adequately addressed by the professionals involved (Robert, Leblanc, & Boyer, 2015). Research also indicates that collaboration and home-family support is important (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018; Uhrman, 2017).

Questions 12 through 15 focus on teachers, administrators, curriculum and school culture relating to parents' perceptions concerning students with special needs directly relating to the central research questions and sub-question two. This perspective is important because it will fill the gap in current research (Cookson & Smith, 2011; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015). When parents answer these questions and describe their experiences on this topic, education professionals will gain greater insight that could contribute to change in practice and policy regarding special education in Christian schools. These questions align with the guiding theory of this study, social constructivism. The answers may reveal that the decisions participants made regarding education planning was formed through interaction with others, a characteristic of social constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Furthermore, questions 16 through 17 will provide the participants with the opportunity to use their voice to communicate any additional experiences relevant to the phenomenon. The answers to these questions may add to missing data in research on why parents choose to send students with special needs to a Christian school (Burke & Griffin, 2016). Questions that describe qualities of staff, curriculum, and culture will help to engage all of the participants thereby sustaining passionate involvement, which is an important characteristic, according to Moustakas (1994). Data from this question may answer the central research question as well as sub-questions one through three.

Focus Group

Creswell (2018) describes focus groups as interviews that take place in a group with participants that share experiences. Typically, four to six participants are optimal, so I scheduled two focus groups. I provided two days and times for the focus groups to meet via Zoom. This type of interview yields the best data when participants are similar and cooperative. Moustakas (1994) instructs that beginning the interview with an ice breaker helps participants feel comfortable and respond more honestly. Krueger and Casey (2014) provide an outline for conducting focus group interviews that include the following steps: welcome, topic discussion, guidelines, opening question, and ending questions. Additionally, field notes should include quotes, key points and themes, follow-up questions, big ideas, hunches, or thoughts from the researcher, and other factors like body language and tone. I created a field notes template based on this guidance (Appendix J). The questions listed below will add to the data collected during the interview and may provide insight into the central research questions and sub-questions. The following list of questions is a guide used in the focus group discussions and may be changed at any time as necessary:

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us about your vocation.

2. Describe your experience in choosing Christian school.

3. What factors did you rely on in making this choice?

4. Do you think that you made an informed decision? Why or why not?

5. What do you think is the most important factor for parents to consider in making this choice?

During the interview, I took field notes, but also added to those notes upon reviewing the recorded interview (Appendix J). My primary attention during the focus group interview was to ensure participants were comfortable and that everyone was participating and staying on topic as

much as possible. After the focus group, I then transcribed the discussion by hand and sent transcriptions to participants to be member-checked for accuracy. I made any requested amendments.

Journals

I asked the participants to respond to a journal prompt in writing (Appendix I).

The prompt is: What would you like Christian teachers, administrators, and board members to know about your experiences with special education in choosing Christian school for your student with special needs?

The responses to this prompt added to the data collected during the interviews and focus groups and provided a rich description answering the central research question and sub-questions. This data collection method also provides an opportunity for reflective data collection (Clandinin and Connelly, 1989). Written journals are documents in which participants record feelings and experiences complete with examples relative to the topic of study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While this type of data collection is more common with case studies and narrative research, it does provide a depth of understanding that may not be gleaned from interviews (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This data collection method is characteristic of social constructivism, which states participants construct meaning based on interactions with others (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) describes three considerations that are essential to analysis in transcendental phenomenological research: epoché, transcendental-phenomenological reduction, and imaginative variation. Epoché is the process of taking what is understood to exist based on experience, judgment, and personal perception and setting it aside. Throughout the research process, I endeavored to perceive the phenomena in a new way. The practice of epoché is

particularly characteristic of this type of qualitative study, transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994; Ivey, Ivey, & Zalaquett, 2010).

Next, as Moustakas (1994) outlines, in transcendental-phenomenological reduction, the researcher moves beyond the everyday experience with the phenomenon in an effort to perceive it as though for the first time. Taking nothing for granted, the phenomenon is described in a new way in its entirety without the assumption of prior knowledge or experience. This is also known as the textural description. Finally, in imaginative variation, the researcher creates a structural description of the essence of the experience. These descriptions are then combined to describe the overall experience with the phenomenon.

In data analysis, I utilized Moustakas (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis. Prior to analysis, I transcribed all interview data by hand, and listed every expression relevant to the experience. This is called the process of horizonalization (Moustakas, 1994). I determined if each item was necessary and sufficient for describing the experience while carefully eliminating any expressions that were vague or repetitive. Throughout each step of data analysis, I used memoing procedures. Memos are key ideas or phrases that stick out for the purpose of synthesizing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). By tracking the development of ideas systematically with dates and comments that reflect the content, memoing helped with sorting (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Next, I will organize data into clusters and themes as they relate to my research questions utilizing descriptive coding by hand. Descriptive coding is appropriate for qualitative research with multiple participants and sites while analyzing various sources of data, such as interview transcripts, journals, letters, and artifacts (Saldaña, 2014). In descriptive coding, researchers analyze the data by categorizing it into topics in order to provide an inventory (Saldaña, 2014).

This process allowed me to identify ways in which participants experience the phenomenon and worked to describe the essence, a key aspect of phenomenological research (Moustakas, 1994). I utilized multiple methods of data collection from different individuals, to accomplish triangulation. Triangulation enhances the accuracy of a study (Creswell, 2015).

I then reviewed the listed experiences and ensured that they explicitly described the experience and that they were relevant to the participants' experience. Once the experiences and themes were confirmed reliable and explicitly expressed, I used them to build each participants' individual textural description using specific examples and quotations from the interview. This is phenomenological reduction, the process of looking at the data multiple times from a variety of perspectives in an effort to gain revelation (Moustakas, 1994).

Finally, I constructed a composite description. I carefully analyzed the textural description and drafted a structural description from that analysis. In structural descriptions the researcher focuses on common experiences among participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I then combined both textural and structural descriptions to provide a complete understanding of participants' experience with the phenomenon.

Trustworthiness

In any research it is important to establish trustworthiness. I ensured trustworthiness through many approaches seeking to establish credibility, dependability, and transferability. Specific approaches include member checks, audit trails, and peer reviews.

Credibility

Since transcendental phenomenological research is based on the participants' perspective, it is important to establish credibility. Establishing credibility is accomplished by checking accuracy and interpretations with the participants (Creswell, 2015). Once I collected and

analyzed data, I e-mailed participants a copy of my findings. I member checked and ask them to review their contribution and the overall results of the study to provide feedback. I asked that the feedback include suggestions for alternative language if necessary, to provide the most accurate interpretations. This contributed to increasing the reliability of the study. I utilized triangulation and multiple methods of data collection, in analyzing interview data, journal entries, and memos.

Researchers can address credibility by being forthcoming about personal biases and assumptions as well as describing limitations in the study (Creswell, 2015). I further established credibility through detailed bracketing and by clearly identifying limitations with the study. I set aside my experiences throughout the process of data collection and data analysis in an effort to eliminate bias. I did not describe my own interpretations based on my personal experiences, but I described the participants' experiences with the phenomenon.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability is important for further research. Describing methodologies in such a way so that the study can be repeated in the future is an important consideration (Creswell, 2015). This is often accomplished in qualitative studies through auditing (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I selected a peer in the field of education, who is familiar with the topic, to review the data and research process. This helped strengthen the credibility of the findings by providing another unbiased review of the research. It is essential to systematically gather data in a way that ensures a transparent representation of the data as opposed to choosing only data that fits the researcher's assumptions concerning the topic (Lambert, 2019).

Transferability

Transferability refers to external validity (Creswell, 2015). "Transferability readily acknowledges the uniqueness of the local conditions in an initial qualitative study" (Yin, 2015).

Transferability may be a concern with this study since it is limited in geographic location. This concern was addressed by comparing cases between interviews and highlighting any local uniqueness (Yin, 2015). Selection criteria for participation, as well as seeking to identify patterns within those interview experiences, also enhanced transferability.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to conducting the study, I was granted approval with the IRB from Liberty University in an effort to comply with the American Educational Research Association (AERA) Code of Ethics and the Virginia Department of Education endorsement (Appendix A). Participants signed appropriate consent documents with my assurance that participation was voluntary while reiterating the purpose of the study (Appendix E). Participants' identities were masked by using pseudonyms. Also, the school and faculty identity were masked by pseudonyms so as not to reflect negatively.

During the data collection phase, I took ethical precautions, as well. For example, I reiterated that participation was voluntary and reminded participants of the purpose of the study. I took every precaution so that the interviews were conducted in the most private setting available assuring confidentiality. I stored the data on my personal computer at my personal residence and password protected the data. I will keep the data for at least three years or until my dissertation is complete, and then I will destroy it.

I disclosed comprehensive findings, ensuring that analysis reflects multiple perspectives, providing a complete and accurate picture of events. I provided opportunities for participants to review analyses and interpretations for the purpose of ensuring accuracy. Finally, I stored data on my personal computer and hard drive, password-protected, for three years used only for the

purpose of this study. These steps along with measures to protect participant confidentiality, are necessary for conducting an ethical phenomenological study (Creswell, 2015).

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Some education professionals are concerned that parents may be making uninformed decisions in sending students with special needs to faith-based schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There is a gap in the literature regarding special education in Christian schools and an even larger gap as it relates to parent education planning experiences. I collected data through interviews, focus groups, and a journal prompt. Data collected answers the central research question and sub-questions. By describing the factors parents consider in choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs, Christian educators may gain a better understanding of parents' needs and desires for their children. Additionally, this study may serve to encourage other Christian parents to enroll their elementary children with special needs into Christian schools.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

Chapter Four presents the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study that described the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. This chapter details the findings from interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. It begins with a description of the ten participants and then describes the results. Next, it outlines the themes that emerged from data analysis. Finally, responses to the central research question and sub-questions are included.

Participants

Ten participants who have chosen Christian elementary school for their children with special needs were selected utilizing purposeful sampling. Criterion sampling was necessary because the topic of study, parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs, was so focused. The initial recruitment for participants yielded only eight participants meeting the criteria, so snowball sampling was used. Once participants submitted consent forms and surveys, interviews were scheduled (Appendices E and F). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and transcribed by the researcher by hand. Transcriptions were member-checked by each participant and focus groups were scheduled. Participants were divided into two focus groups. Four participants attended each group and two participants were unable to attend the focus groups; one due to professional commitments and another because she forgot. Ten participants wrote a response to a journal prompt and returned them via e-mail.

The following section describes each participant.

Mary

Mary (age 37) has two children and holds a bachelor's degree. She works as the creative director for a technology company. While both children have been diagnosed with special needs, the youngest child is an elementary student enrolled in a Christian school and has been diagnosed with anxiety, ADHD, dysgraphia, and Tourette's/tic disorder. Her child participates in the general education classroom and receives preferential seating, fidgets, redirection, movement breaks, and understanding. Her child also has permission to type or have a scribe when possible. Mary mentions one of the things she appreciates most about Christian school is, "A truly loving community that gets to know and value their families. I find that when there's relationship and rapport, there's far more grace and patience through the difficult times that goes both ways."

Ellen

Ellen (age 42) has three children and holds a master's degree. She works as a school social worker. Her child has been diagnosed with ADHD, OCD, specific learning disability reading, and dysgraphia. She receives services in the general education classroom up to three times weekly in addition to reading support. Accommodations include modifications to her work, extra time for completion, and reduced distractions. There are a few things that Ellen would like Christian teachers, administrators, and board members to understand.

> Parents of students with special education needs have often been on a long journey before they get to your door. They are often seeking the option of a Christian environment that is also inclusive and supportive of all types of learners. Being progressive and adapting to the needs of these students ensures that the school can include a group which has been historically excluded and underserved in Christian schools or forced to go to public schools to get the services they need. Parents and students are looking for this in their Christian school communities.

Danielle

Danielle (age 45) holds a bachelor's degree and works as a technology partner manager. She also owns her own business. Her son has been diagnosed with high-functioning autism. A support instructor will come to the general education classroom when needed, although he has not needed that support up to this point. Danielle chose the Christian school her son attends because, "They have a program in place to ensure all children, even those who have special needs or who learn differently, can be educated alongside neuro-typical children and still get the same wonderful Christian experiences as their peers."

Michelle

Michelle (age 37) holds a Ph.D. in geographical sciences and works as a professional researcher in her field. Her son has been diagnosed with ADHD and exhibits characteristics of dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia. During the school day, he may receive up to two hours per day of small group work for reading skills and sensory breaks as needed. He receives modifications to assignments. He can complete quizzes verbally and is given exams orally, rather than written. Michelle feels heard at the Christian school her son attends. "While at our Christian school I have felt listened to, and I have felt like part of the team in determining how to best care for my child with special needs. This has made all the difference for us."

Ruth

Ruth (age 39) holds a bachelor's degree in education and teaches at the school her daughter attends. Her daughter has been diagnosed with ADHD. While participating in a general education classroom, she is allowed to leave for brain breaks if she feels overwhelmed. She is allowed to use a fidget in class and longer time to complete assignments. The education support team works with her to practice problem-solving skills, social skills, and conflict resolution.

When talking about the teachers at her daughter's Christian school she mentioned, "They see the whole person. They love them and look for ways to use their differences to help them succeed and do well with others."

Melinda

Melinda (age 40) holds a Ph.D. in educational psychology and works in higher education as a senior director for the dean. Her son has been diagnosed with ASD. He is provided breaks throughout the day with the education support staff outside of the general education classroom. He takes some tests in the school's resource room. He also receives accommodations in the classroom, focused specifically on preparing him for times of transition and future assignments that may require more time and preparation. Melinda believes, "Because of his experiences with his teachers, classmates, and others at the school, he is confident in himself and has a strong sense of belonging. As his parents, we are blessed to have a true partnership with our son's teachers and administrators."

Abigail

Abigail (age 42) holds a bachelor's degree in communications and works as a real estate broker. Her son has been diagnosed with ADHD and anxiety. He receives pull-out services from the special education team for one-on-one help with difficult subjects and skills. He receives private occupational therapy (OT) in the general education classroom during the pandemic. After restrictions are lifted, he will receive that therapy outside of school. Additionally, he receives private tutoring after school. Abigail chose this particular Christian school because of "Their openness and willingness to work with the needs of my child."

Catherine

Catherine (age 36) holds a bachelor's degree in special education and works as the manager at a local storage facility. Her son has been diagnosed with ASD, ADHD, developmental delay, a history of extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO), and stroke. According to medical professionals, the ASD and ADHD diagnoses are the result of the ECMO machine as a newborn. He receives one hour of language therapy per week and 45 minutes of OT per week through the school. Additionally, he receives 30-minutes of private speech and 30-minutes of private OT. The public school district provides these services at his private school. The Christian school provides a one-on-one aid in the general education classroom as needed along with two 30-minute math tutoring sessions per week. Classroom accommodations include oral instructions for assignments and tests, he is allowed to answer questions on tests and assignments orally. Time requirements for tests are not required. Finally, he is allowed to work outside of the classroom when necessary. Catherine said, "I've found the private school setting to be flexible, compassionate, and understanding of neurodiverse children. They have been able to foster an accepting environment, which benefits all of the student population."

Carol

Carol (age 46) holds a master's degree in teacher leadership. She works as the high school principal at the same Christian school her son attends. He has been diagnosed with dyslexia by a reading specialist. The Christian school he attends does provide pull-out services for one-two hours daily, during which time he is provided one-on-one assistance and he can work at his own pace. He has an aide for his time in the general education classroom. Additionally, he receives accommodations for projects and written assignments. He is allowed to have someone read questions out loud to him and he is allowed to give verbal responses. Although her son tested below-average intelligence and performance with the local school

district, the state does not recognize dyslexia as a learning difference. As a result, the district would not recommend services, but only accommodations. Carol said, "So, that was one reason I was very grateful to be in a Christian school because he wouldn't have gotten any help."

Julie

Julie (age 40) holds a bachelor's degree in business and works as a realtor. Her son has been diagnosed with ADHD, Sensory Processing Disorder (SPD), anxiety, and very mild ASD. He receives up to one hour per week of support outside of the general education classroom. This includes assistance with reading comprehension, organization, and the processing of information. The parent shared that not very much information is shared with her regarding these services. Sometimes her son does not get the pull-out services that were agreed upon because the resource teacher has also been working as a substitute teacher during the pandemic. She said, "We chose a Christian school so that he could get into sports and stuff like that because I think in the public sector, I think more people would make fun of him, whereas in a Christian school, I think is a little more understanding."

Results

The purpose of this study was to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Data collected from ten interviews, two focus groups, and ten written responses to a journal prompt were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis. The remaining portion of this chapter outlines steps to analyze the data and develop themes as well as responses to the research question and sub-questions.

Theme Development

To answer the research question and sub-questions, data was analyzed, and themes were developed to describe the factors that contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for students with special needs. Themes emerged as described in the steps below.

Epoché. Epoché is the process of taking what is understood to exist based on experience, judgment, and personal perception and setting it aside. Throughout the research process, I endeavored to perceive the phenomena in a new way. (Moustakas, 1994) Because of my experience as a teacher in a Christian school and a mother of two children with special needs, it was important for me to set aside my bias and experience in both roles. Serving as my audit trail, I kept a spreadsheet to record participant documentation receipt, interview completion, focus group completion, and member checking, which serves as my audit trail.

Interviews. Participants were interviewed from October through December via Zoom using semi-structured, open-ended questions (Appendix G). I tried to make the participants comfortable, without sharing my personal experiences with the phenomenon so as not to lead them in their responses. The interviews lasted between 24 to 60 minutes each, with an average length of just over 38 minutes. Interviews were recorded on my personal laptop via the Zoom application and then saved to my personal computer, password protected. I transcribed by hand and sent the document to the participants for member-checking. I made changes when requested by participants and used the edited transcripts for data analysis.

Focus groups. After transcripts were confirmed through member-checking, I divided participants into two groups based on the times they scheduled their interviews. I then scheduled two times for focus groups and sent e-mails to individual participants inviting them to attend their assigned group. Two participants requested to switch groups due to scheduling conflicts.

Eight out of ten participants attended a focus group via Zoom. Each of the two focus groups had four participants. One participant was unable to attend due to work commitments and one participant forgot. The first focus group lasted 57 minutes and the second focus group lasted 43 minutes. I transcribed both focus groups by hand. I sent each participant the transcript from the focus group in which they participated for member-checking. Participants did not wish to edit transcripts, so the originals were used for data analysis.

Journal prompt. Each of the ten participants responded via e-mail to the journal prompt I provided after the interviews were completed (Appendix I). Participants were provided the following prompt: What would you like Christian teachers, administrators, and board members to know about your experiences with special education in choosing a Christian school for your student with special needs? Participants' responses were used for data analysis.

Horizonalization and coding. After collecting data via interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts, Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis was utilized in analyzing data. Part of analyzing the data includes horizonalization. Moustakas (1994) explains the process as "Regarding every horizon or statement relevant to the topic and question as having equal value" (p. 118). After listening to the interviews and reading the interviews several times, I highlighted statements that were relevant in various colors. Statements relating to worldview were highlighted pink. Statements relating to community were highlighted in yellow. Statements relating to services and or resources were highlighted in green. Any criticisms or concerns were highlighted in orange. Statements relating to finances were highlighted in blue. Statements relating to academics were highlighted in red. Finally, statements highlighted in purple were miscellaneous. I wrote short phrases in the margins to describe the essence of those statements. Saldaña (2014) identifies this as descriptive coding, the process by which researchers

analyze the data and categorize it into topics to provide an inventory. Themes emerged through

this process. Table 1 outlines the categories and themes that emerged during this process of

analysis.

Table 1

Codes

Code	Subcategory	Category
role of religion in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs	curriculum	Christian worldview
	character development	
	evident in relationships throughout community	
community factors influencing parent decisions regarding administrators, teachers, and culture	Feeling known and understood	community
	extra-curricular activities	
services, resources, and accommodations as factors driving choice	smaller class size	services, resources, and/or accommodations
	ability to meet students' needs	
	willingness to partner with family to meet students' needs	
administration, teachers, and culture as factors driving choice	communication	collaboration and partnership
	openness and willingness to work together	

Themes. Utilizing horizonalization during data analysis to code and categorize common experiences, led to themes emerging (Table 1). Four themes emerged during this process that helped to answer the central research question, "What factors contribute to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?" The four themes are Christian

worldview; community; services, resources, and accommodations; and collaboration and partnership.

Christian worldview. Eight out of ten participants cited worldview as a top priority in choosing a Christian school. One participant stated that while she is not opposed to a secular school if it met her child's needs, she would not pay for a private school of a different faith. Michelle expressed that Christian worldview was not a primary goal in choosing a school, but her family has been very pleased with the school's "God-centered focus on learning." She mentioned in her interview,

> I really like how at our Christian school they focus on teaching you who you are as a learner and who you are as a person of God. Who you are as God's child and how those pieces fit together. How you learn is how God made you and that's ok and that's how it can all work together.

Eight participants mentioned expectations that the curriculum should reflect a Christian worldview. Carol expects a Christian school to have a curriculum with a biblical worldview woven through each subject. This is such a high priority that she expressed, "If it wasn't being used, I'd ask why. I'd ask why that is." Two participants did not mention biblical worldview in relation to the curriculum at all.

Participants not only appreciate a Christian worldview throughout the curriculum, but that it would also be evident in the way teachers, staff, students, and families apply those principles. Ruth expressed, "I love that Bible is taught every day and it's not just a curriculum. It's not just a check box of what you're teaching. It's modeled in the teachers' lives, and it's taught in every subject. It's our worldview as a school." Melinda mentioned, "With being a Christian school, we definitely have an expectation that folks would be open and kind and

supportive, and we've absolutely found that with everyone we've interacted with who works with the school and also parents and other family members we've met."

Participants believe that a Christian worldview is a priority in a school because it contributes to character development and growth. Danielle expressed the importance her family places on her child's spiritual growth, "We want him to be a well-rounded child of God." Catherine mentioned, "I think it's good not just for my children, but for all of the kids to be learning the Bible curriculum. I think it plays a part in how their character develops and how the teachers handle situations." Ruth said, "She's obviously going to church and we're teaching her about the Lord here at home, but to learn about it from the teacher and to see other students learning that and developing their own faith is a big factor."

Overall, Christian worldview plays a primary role in the majority of parents' decision-making and/or satisfaction with a Christian school. Participants appreciate having a biblical worldview woven throughout the curriculum. They value when a Christian worldview is modeled throughout the community and fostered in such a way that it develops the students' character.

Community. Community is an important consideration for many parents in choosing a school and their satisfaction with school choice oftentimes relates to community. Three of the participants mentioned extra-curricular activities were a consideration in choosing a school. Many participants reported already having ties to the school community. Furthermore, each participant expressed satisfaction with feeling welcomed, wanted, understood, and known within the school community. Some participants even attributed their students' abilities to experience success to these positive community attributes.

Seven of the participants had ties to the Christian school of their choice in some way. Two participants work at the school their children attend. The other five participants mentioned either having attended the school themselves, knowing families whose children attend, or knowing teachers or staff on a personal level or through the church they attend.

Each participant mentioned some aspect of the community concerning their satisfaction with their Christian school or why they chose a Christian school. Catherine mentioned in her journal prompt, "They have been able to foster an accepting environment, which benefits all of the student population." Mary said one of the things she appreciates most about the school is that it is, "A truly loving community that gets to know and value their families. I find that when there's relationship and rapport, there's far more grace and patience through the difficult times that goes both ways."

Michelle's son previously attended a neighborhood public school and was not allowed to participate in social activities with students because he was unable to finish his work. The teachers would not allow him to finish his schoolwork outside of the classroom and they would not meet with him before or after class to help him complete his work. When the parents tried to advocate for their son by requesting testing and accommodations, they were put off. In the current Christian school, Mary said she is getting Christian and spiritual community, support services, academics, and the social aspect. When asked why they chose a Christian school over other options, she said, "It was the desire to have this welcoming community for him. One that was really going to focus on understanding him in terms of who he was as a future man of God."

Melinda attributes her son's confidence and sense of belonging to the school community. She said, "Because of his experiences with his teachers, classmates, and others at the school, he is confident in himself and has a strong sense of belonging." She also expressed that the teachers,

support staff, and principal have taken the time to get to know them as a family. She even said that their effort to do this felt like a commitment.

Ruth is a teacher and she came to her daughter's current Christian school to work as an aid for a child with Down Syndrome. Her daughter had been kicked out of her previous Christian school placement in kindergarten due to behaviors. The teachers at this school told Ruth that she needed to discipline her daughter. When she began attending the current school, the teachers lovingly expressed the potential that they saw in Ruth's daughter and suggested that she see her pediatrician for testing. Ruth's daughter was diagnosed with ADHD and they prescribed medication. It was at that point that the Christian school was able to provide resources and accommodations to help Ruth's daughter experience success. Once she began medication, she was able to focus and do well academically. The education support staff works with Ruth's daughter to practice problem solving skills, conflict resolution, and social skills. While Ruth was drawn to this school because of scheduling convenience and worldview, she expressed satisfaction in large part due to the community. "I love that it feels more like a community than just a school. The kids know each other, and we get to know the families and spend time together." These efforts and the approach that is taken by teachers to help foster community and relationships have helped Ruth's daughter grow. When asked how she defines success for her student, she said, "I would say socially, she's developing good relationships with peers and if problems arise, she's able to help be a problem solver. Just being happy to go to school."

One participant mentioned a negative experience regarding community. Ellen is a school social worker and prefers a social-emotional school environment that values relationships. She mentioned that when her family switched from public school to a Christian school, they lost community connection within their neighborhood. The family attends the church that is

associated with the school, so they know families who attend, but those families are geographically spread out as opposed to in their same neighborhood. This geographical separation makes playdates more difficult and less frequent. While this was a concern initially, Ellen said the environment has been beneficial. "She knows every single student in her class very well and has best friends and has made an incredible community with the kids there. I think that has met all her emotional needs and has made her love school, which made it easier for her to learn."

Danielle echoed what many of the other participants said about their Christian school of choice. She appreciates the teachers, education support staff, and principal taking the time to get to know their child and them as a family. This starts during the admissions process but continues throughout the school year. Danielle witnessed community and acceptance at this school while waiting to speak with the admissions director. "When we went in to speak with the admissions director, there was a little girl who had Down Syndrome. It was picture day, and she was right along with everyone else and she looked adorable. The admissions director knew her. She was engaging with the students." Creating an environment where students with special needs are socially accepted and able to grow socially is extremely important to Danielle. She believes her family has found that for her son.

Julie, more than any other participant, mentioned the importance of extra-curricular activities. In addition to art and music lessons, her son's school offers sports. Julie and her husband want to provide these opportunities for their son so that he can have the social interactions that come along with participating in these activities. She mentioned that her son's occupational therapist suggested that he will benefit from social interactions with neurotypical

children. She feels he will be more socially accepted at a Christian school and will not have to worry about bullying as much as if he were attending public school.

Services, resources, and accommodations. Participants consider services, resources, and accommodations when choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. Seven participants expressed negative experiences or dissatisfaction with services, resources, and accommodations offered at public and private schools their children attended previously. Three participants discussed negative experiences with the public school regarding services, resources, and accommodations. One parent, although they did not have a negative experience while attending public school, reported being dissatisfied with the process of getting her child the services, resources, and accommodations needed. Two participants discussed negative experiences with services, resources, and accommodations while previously attending Christian schools with a classical approach to learning.

Each of the ten participants expressed gratitude and satisfaction with the services and accommodations their child receives at their current Christian school. Carol lives in a state that does not recognize dyslexia as a learning difference for which they provide services. She took her son to the public school for testing and although he tested below-average intelligence and below performing, they said they would not provide services. His current Christian school provides remediation for students with dyslexia. She said, "That was one reason I was very grateful to be in a Christian school, because he wouldn't have gotten any help." Not only has he been through the remediation for dyslexia, but he has an aid in the classroom, he receives pull-out services, and additional accommodations.

Furthermore, Abigail mentioned that she considered public school, but the IEP process was difficult because they lied and have been unprofessional. She tried to observe the special

education classroom before enrolling her son and she was not allowed, despite being a licensed teacher. She expressed frustration that the school would allow her to come into the class to help decorate, but not to observe the school day. The Christian school her son attends has been very accommodating. They allow outside therapists to come to his classroom and help meet his needs. They are considerate of his sensory issues. "At our school, he gets very anxious about fire alarms. So, what they've started doing is they let him pull the fire alarm now, so he knows when it's coming. There's little things like that, that I know he wouldn't get in a public school." She shared a few stories just like this one to describe the compassion, understanding, and individualized attention they give.

Each participant's child receives some combination of services, resources, and accommodations at their current Christian school. Each participant's child has a service plan outlining services and accommodations. Seven of the participants attend a school in which the educational support director attends IEP meetings with parents at the public school. Every one of them mentioned that they appreciate the small class size. Participants believe that their student with special needs receives more individualized education because of this. They also state that the current administration and teachers are more open, understanding, and willing to accommodate than what they have previously experienced in other schools. When asked why she chose a Christian school over other options, Abigail said, "Their openness and willingness to work with the needs of my child."

Having administration and teachers who understand differences in learning and diagnoses is important to parents. During the focus group, Catherine shared that her son was not bowel trained until he was seven. She needed to find a Christian school willing to accommodate that. "Is there going to be an environment that's going to work for him, and teachers are going to be

understanding of that." Some parents expressed frustration when educators misinterpret that children with special needs choose to behave poorly as opposed to taking the time to be educated and understand the diagnoses. Danielle had no prior connections with the school, but she found the school online and has been pleasantly surprised and satisfied that they reflect what they advertise online regarding services, resources, and accommodations. She mentioned in her interview that it is difficult to find a Christian school for a student with special needs. They do not often accept these students because they misunderstand the child's abilities and learning needs.

  Collaboration and partnerships. Parents appreciate collaboration and having partnerships with teachers and administrators. Eight out of the ten participants discussed the importance of collaboration and partnership in their interview, journal prompt, and focus group. They all discussed these things multiple times throughout their interviews. Melinda wrote in her journal prompt, "As his parents, we are blessed to have a true partnership with our son's teachers and administrators." She gave examples in her interview of how she receives phone calls regularly from teachers and the administrator about her son. Sometimes these are phone calls that require brainstorming ideas for how to help him with a particular struggle or difficulty. Other times, the teacher lets her know future assignments that may cause him distress so they can prepare and practice at home. She said, "We, parents, teachers, and administrators, share a common purpose and that is exemplified in the communication, planning, and coordination that goes into our son's education."

  Participants expressed the importance of being understood. Abigail described feeling as though the previous Christian school, which rigidly adhered to the classical approach to learning, misunderstood her son as being defiant when she believed he needed a diagnosis and

accommodations. When the current Christian school walked with her through the IEP process through the public school, she broke down in tears. The educational support director at the Christian school approached her and her son with understanding and she said it's helpful "Knowing you're not the only mom or kid." She appreciates the "Willingness to have parental input." She expressed this idea several times throughout the interview, "The ability to work with me, not against me, in any challenges that may come up." She also pointed out, "We're all supposed to be on the same team."

Participants expressed the importance of being heard. Mary stated, "While at the Christian school I have felt listened to, and I have felt like part of the team in determining how to best care for my child with special needs. This has made all the difference for us." She expressed the need to be heard and understood throughout the interview and she kept using the pronoun, we, when discussing efforts to meet her child's needs in school. This indicates that she sees herself in partnership with the teachers, educational support staff, and administrator. Another participant, Ruth, in describing the administrator said, "She just really invests in the families and students. You feel loved, heard, and appreciated. The students feel loved and heard when they end up in her office, which my daughter has." This is an important thing that most of the participants mentioned during interviews.

Catherine is an involved parent who wants to develop that partnership and collaboration between home and school. "I have found that Christian schools are more open to parent involvement, which benefits the whole child." Catherine also shared that she is always willing to help teachers understand. "Every year is an opportunity to teach these teachers about a different diagnosis, really about a different child, because every kid, disability or not, is different. I know it takes some time each school year to get to know their class, but I think it can be an opportunity

to, as a parent, educate the teachers too." In her child's school, they do not offer all of the therapies that her son needs, but the school has welcomed outside therapists to come into her son's classroom and meet his needs. Catherine also mentioned during the interview that it is important to her. She said, "Every home and family is different, but for me that's really important to be consistent with what the therapists are doing and what the school's doing."

Participants specifically mentioned the importance of the school coming alongside families to provide support, partnership, and collaboration. This is something Breanna's current Christian school does for families that other schools do not. She explained, "When you can have rapport with your teachers and they understand your family and they get it and you're not one in a million, they work with you a little bit more intentionally." Danielle stated, "Where there's an issue the teachers and administration recognize it, support it, and figure out how to resolve it." She appreciates the way that the teacher engages with her and communicates. Julie also mentioned how important communication is to her. She expressed that she would prefer more communication than what she is currently receiving from her son's Christian school. She has expressed frustration with the lack of communication. Due to current public health concerns, her child does not receive the educational support that she was promised because the special education teacher is being used as a substitute teacher instead. She said, "Other than what my son tells me, I don't know what they're doing." This was the only negative experience with collaboration and partnership that participants are experiencing at their current Christian schools.

There are only two participants who did not mention the importance of collaboration and partnership. One parent is the high school principal at the Christian school, so she did mention that she has to make sure to express to her child's teachers that when she is coming to them, she is coming to them as a parent, not as an administrator. Her professional ties to the school may be

a factor in why she did not mention collaboration and partnership. The other parent is a school social worker in the public school. Her responses focused primarily on her daughter's social and emotional needs in relation to learning and attending school.

Summary of themes. In summary, the four themes which emerged from data analysis are: (a) Christian worldview, (b) community, (c) services, resources, and accommodations, and (d) collaboration and partnership. Table 2 displays the frequency of these emergent themes.

Table 2

Frequency of Emergent Themes

Themes	Frequency
Christian Worldview	69
Community	130
Services, Resources, and Accommodations	130
Collaboration and Partnership	70

Note. Data contained in this table was generated based on responses from ten participants.

Textural and structural descriptions. After themes emerged and were analyzed, Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method led to textural and structural descriptions in data analysis. Textural descriptions explained the participants' experiences, within emergent themes, in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. Based on textural descriptions, structural descriptions described the factors parents considered when choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. Finally, textural-structural descriptions explained the essence of the participants' experiences with choosing a Christian school for students with special needs and the factors contributing to that choice. Following this process led to creating the composite textural and structural descriptions.

Composite textural-structural descriptions. Transcendental phenomenological research requires analyzing individual textural and structural descriptions to create a composite textural description that describes the overall participants' experience with the phenomenon. After analyzing individual participants' experiences, I created a group description. While Christian worldview is a benefit and priority to the majority of the participants in their choice to send their child with special needs to a Christian school the majority of the participants expressed that they would give up a school with a Christian worldview if their child's needs were not being met. As a group, participants chose the Christian school that their child attends for the effort and approach taken to foster community and the benefits their children and families gain from this. As a group, participants expressed gratitude and satisfaction with the resources, services, and accommodations their child receives at their current Christian school. Most of the group values collaboration and having partnership with teachers and administrators. This seems most important to those participants who have had negative past experiences in this area. Overall, the group prioritizes community and resources, services, and accommodations most among emergent themes.

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Research Question Responses

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To answer the central research question and sub-questions, ten participants were selected via criterion sampling to collect rich descriptions of factors that contribute to parents choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. One-on-one interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis. This section provides answers to the research questions.

Central research question. What factors contribute to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs? This is the primary question that drove

this research. The answer to this question is that parents choose a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs based on Christian worldview; community; resources, services, and accommodations; as well as collaboration and partnership.

While participants describe the benefits of a school with a Christian worldview, most are unwilling to sacrifice resources, services, and accommodations for this type of environment. Mary described religion as the number one reason for choosing a Christian school. When asked what will cause her to continue her child's enrollment at a Christian school, Mary said, "I need to know they support and are able to give the resources that would have been given to us in public education." She continued to explain that if the school does not have the resources and if the financial obligation to provide those resources on their own exceeds what they can do, "Well, we'll have to do something else. And maybe that's not their fault. Maybe we'll just have to face that." This indicates that she would not sacrifice her child's academic needs for the Christian worldview in the school setting.

Community proved to be the top priority among emergent themes, alongside services, resources, and accommodations. Participants responded to the journal prompt, "What would you like Christian teachers, administrators, and board members to know about your experiences with special education in choosing a Christian school for your student with special needs?" Ellen's response to the journal prompt succinctly describes what parents of students with special needs are looking for in a Christian school as it relates to community.

> Parents of students with special education needs have often been on a long journey before they get to your door. They are often seeking the option of Christian environment that is also inclusive and supportive of all types of learners. Being progressive and adapting to the needs of these students ensures that the school can include a group which has been

historically excluded and underserved in Christian schools or forced to go to public schools to get the services they need. Parents and students are looking for this in their Christian school communities.

While collaboration and partnership are valued as something that parents look for in a school, it is not a consistent priority over community or resources, services, and accommodations. During the interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts, the participants mentioned collaboration and partnership fewer times. While this is something that many participants value, it was not as frequently or passionately discussed as other emergent themes. It is an important consideration that may contribute to parents' impressions of efforts in fostering community. Furthermore, the parents who expressed the importance of collaboration and partnership most, have had negative experiences at previous schools in this area. Overall, while each of the four emergent themes is valued, community and resources, services, and accommodations are the most important factors in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs.

Research sub-question 1. What role does religion play in parents' choosing a Christian school for students with special needs? The purpose of this question was to explore the priority parents place on religion in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs in comparison with other factors. Participants appreciate the Christian environment, Bible curriculum, and learning biblical principles from teachers and other students. In response to, "What factors led her family to choose Christian schools over others?" Ruth said, "She's obviously going to church and we're teaching her about the Lord at home, but to learn about it from the teacher and to see other students learning that and developing their own faith is a big factor."

While religion is a benefit to the group, eight out of the ten participants mention it as being a factor in choosing a school, only two participants said that they would not send their children to public school. Melinda said during the focus group, "Being in a Christian school setting is, I mean, we would do whatever it takes to keep him there. It really is absolutely the right thing for him and a true blessing."

Those whose children previously attended public school did not leave for religious reasons alone, but primarily due to poor experiences regarding collaboration and partnership or resources, services, accommodations. Michelle mentioned leaving the public school her son previously attended because, "How poorly the public school was handling the special needs he has." She is appreciative of the "spiritual community" at the current Christian school her son attends. "I really like how at our Christian school they focus on teaching you who you are as a learner and who you are as a person of God. Who you are as God's child and how that all fits together." While religion is a factor, most parents do not rely solely on this factor in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. Mary said, "Before knowing they had special needs, the priority was a biblical worldview and comparable academics, but now I can't send him just for the biblical worldview if they don't have special needs stuff."

Research sub-question 2. What factors influence parents' decisions to choose a Christian school for students with special needs regarding the administration, teachers, curriculum, and school culture? The purpose of this question was to explore to what degree parents consider special education teacher qualifications, leadership qualities, school and home collaboration and partnership, and community factors in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs. The answer to the question is that participants consider all of these things to some degree.

Parents appreciate an administration that is supportive of their child's needs and that fosters an environment that is accepting. Parents also want to be heard and understood by the administration and teachers. Melinda, who works in higher education administration, described the admissions process. "The principal took the time to meet with us. They observed him in his kindergarten classroom. They interviewed us. They took time to understand him and what the needs were and also communicated what they wanted. I mean, the principal said, 'We want more kids with varying abilities in our school.' I mean, who says that? It was a no-brainer decision."

Ruth's daughter was asked to leave a Christian school that she attended previously because of behaviors she was exhibiting due to ADHD. At a different school, she was simply sent to the principal's office without trying to figure out what was wrong, only to go back to class and have the same things happen all over. At her current school, where Ruth is also a teacher, the teachers and educational support team take time to teach her problem solving, and "There's constant communication between the teachers, between ed support, so that is a constant. They're great about letting us know if they're seeing anything or wondering if we're seeing anything. There's good communication and I feel the support is continual." When she described the teachers, Ruth said, "They see the whole person. They love them and look for ways to use their differences to help them succeed and do well with others." When asked about the administrator, Ruth had a lot to say.

> Our principal has been, this is her third or fourth year, but she's never just sitting in her office. She's walking around talking to the students and coming into the classroom. One day I was doing a read-aloud and she asked if she could finish reading it to the class. She's very personable. She's easy to talk to. Easy to approach. I think you can really tell she loves what she's doing. She just really invests in the families and students. She just

doesn't see it as a job she has to get done every day. You feel loved, heard, and

appreciated. The students feel loved and heard when they end up in her office, which my

daughter has. She's calm with them. She tells them the truth, what they need to hear. She

speaks to them in love. All the students that I've seen interact with her just have a very

good relationship with her. I think that that's the most important thing, personable and

good relationship with staff and students.

The participants value a culture that builds a community for students and families to

enjoy. Multiple participants described the importance of a welcoming and inclusive environment.

Ellen, a school social worker, said that before attending her current Christian school, her

daughter "hated school very much." After realizing that it would take a long time for her

daughter to receive supports in public school, she wanted her to go to a school where "She was

gonna get a lot more attention and help right away." While she noticed a disconnect in their

neighborhood community initially, she now "Has best friends and has made an incredible

community with the kids there. I think that has met all her emotional needs and has made her

love school, which made it easier for her to learn." She says they are paying for the environment.

"There's a personal touch. The greeting of a hug every morning by the principal. Everyone in the

building knows her name. That sort of environment has been beneficial for her." While she

believes the curriculum and education at this school "Is not necessarily as strong as public

school," she has prioritized the social-emotional needs of her daughter and appreciates that the

administration fosters that type of environment.

Research sub-question 3. How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their

students with special needs in Christian schools? The answer to this question does partially

include academics. Participants prioritized the characteristics of confidence and perseverance

over academics although they want students to perform at grade level and be prepared for upper grades too. Melinda said, "Being able to perform, for lack of a better word, with peers in a structured setting." She described this to mean they are following directions and completing assignments on time. Michelle said, "I define success for him, where he learns who he is as a learner and then he learns how to approach assignments based on the skillset he has." Parents want their students to be happy and excited about school and learning. Even more important to parents are the social benefits their children experience through friendships, feeling loved by teachers, and overall social acceptance. Ruth said, "Socially, she's developing good relationships with peers and if problems arise, she's able to help be a problem solver." Danielle describes success for her son,

> I think for me it is creating an environment where he is socially accepted. So where the kids don't look at him any different than anyone else and they have empathy. Not that they pity him, but they treat him just like everyone else and he's able to make friends just like everyone else can, and then when there's an issue the teachers and administration recognize it, support it, and figure out how to resolve it.

While parents of students with special needs want their children to progress academically, these participants define success more frequently based on social and emotional considerations.

<h3 style="text-align:center">Summary</h3>

Chapter Four presented the findings of this transcendental phenomenological study that described the factors contributing to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Ten participants were chosen utilizing purposeful sampling. Criterion sampling was necessary because the topic of study was so focused. The initial recruitment for participants yielded only eight participants meeting the criteria, so snowball sampling was used.

This chapter triangulated the findings from interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Data were analyzed utilizing Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis. Codes were shared along with theme frequency (Table 1 and Table 2). Emergent themes were presented as listed below.

1. Christian worldview

2. Community

3. Services, resources, and accommodations

4. Collaboration and partnership

Finally, responses to the central research question and sub-questions are included. Findings will be discussed in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The problem is education professionals have expressed concern that parents' decisions to enroll students with special needs in faith-based schools are ill-informed due to lack of data surrounding student outcomes in such environments and lack of teacher qualifications (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). There has been very little research on why parents choose Christian elementary schools for their students with special needs. I aim to help fill that gap by describing why parents make this choice. The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with diagnosed special needs throughout the United States. Chapter five concludes this transcendental phenomenological study briefly summarizing the study's findings and discussing the findings and implications in light of the theoretical framework, empirical literature as well as how the findings relate to previous research. The study's delimitations and implications are discussed. Recommendations for future research are outlined.

Summary of Findings

One central research question and three sub-questions guided this study. Ten participants were chosen utilizing purposeful sampling. Criterion sampling was necessary because the topic of study was so focused. The initial recruitment for participants yielded only eight participants meeting the criteria, so snowball sampling was used. This chapter triangulated the findings from interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. The central research question asked participants, "What factors contribute to parents choosing a Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?" The answer to this question is that parents choose a Christian school for students with special needs based on a Christian worldview; community; resources, services, and

accommodations; as well as collaboration and partnership. Participants described the Christian worldview as a benefit, some even say it is the primary reason, however, most are unwilling to sacrifice resources, services, and accommodations for this type of environment. Each participant expressed satisfaction with feeling welcomed, wanted, understood, and known within the school community. The participants discussed the community connection frequently and with passion during interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Participants expressed that resources, services, and accommodations are the most important factor that contributed to their choice in sending students with special needs to a Christian school. Seven of the participants left previous public schools or Christian schools, who rigidly adhered to the classical approach, due to negative experiences or unmet expectations in this area. Participants also mentioned lack in this area would cause them to leave their current school. Finally, most of the participants value collaboration and having a partnership with teachers and administrators. This seems most important to those participants who have had negative past experiences in this area.

Research sub-question 1 asked, "What role does religion play in parents' choosing a Christian school for students with special needs?" The answer to SQ1 is that most participants view religion as a primary reason, but this was not always evident in their discussions. Overall, the group sees religion as a benefit but is willing to sacrifice the religious environment for a school that better meets the students' academic and social needs via community connection and resources, services, and accommodations along.

Research sub-question 2 asked, "What factors influence parents' decisions to choose a Christian school for students with special needs regarding the administration, teachers, curriculum, and school culture?" The answer to SQ2 is that parents appreciate administration, teachers, curriculum, and a school culture that foster an environment with strong

social/emotional connections and opportunities for growth. Parents value partnership and collaboration with teachers and administration to best meet their children's needs.

Research sub-question 3 asked, "How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools?" The answer to SQ3 is that, in addition to academic success, parents want their children with special needs to experience confidence in learning, happiness, acceptance, being loved, preparedness for future grades, self-advocacy skills, and the ability to develop peer relationships and problem-solving skills. Most of these reasons can be categorized as social/emotional reasons and are not provided through a class alone but are fostered in the school community at every level.

Discussion

This section discusses findings in light of relevant literature from Chapter two. The findings are first discussed in relation to the theory that framed this study. Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist theory states that knowledge is constructed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). Finally, the findings are discussed in light of the empirical literature relating to parents choosing a Christian school for students with special needs.

Theoretical

Constructivists believe that knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). Since the purpose of this study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs, the social constructivist framework proved to be most appropriate for this study because it includes all social values and perspectives. Four themes emerged in data: (a) Christian worldview, (b) community, (c) services, resources, and accommodations, and (d) collaboration and partnership. Participants discussed worldview as a reason for choosing a Christian school for students with

special needs and expressed this to be a benefit at their current Christian school. Data analysis reveals that a Christian worldview shapes participants' values and contributes to school choice and satisfaction.

Participants discussed community factors as a primary reason for choosing a Christian school for students with special needs, which also supports Vygotsky's social constructivist theory. Vygotsky theorized that learning takes place in the community (Duelen, 2013). Data analysis supports this theory. Additionally, data supports the research on Christian parent school choice that Christian parents rely on social networks in choosing a school (Prichard & Swezey, 2016). Relying on social networks to choose a school is an example of making informed decisions by interacting with one's environment, one of the foundational ideas of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory (Duelen, 2013). Many participants have a previous connection to the school's community in some fashion.

Lalvani (2015) found that parents' interpretations of special needs and their descriptions of familial experiences may be connected to education planning decisions regarding children with special needs. Prichard and Swezey (2016) discovered that children's preferences and social needs had a significant impact on Christian parents' decision-making. In previous studies, the majority of parents made choices based on information from their own experiences. In many cases, parents' satisfaction depends on the child's best interest, family needs, and whether they feel these things are being adequately addressed by the professionals involved (Robert et al., 2015). Data in this study supports this research. Seven participants described negative experiences in previously attended Christian schools with a classical approach as well as public schools, specifically concerning the social and emotional needs, as well as resources, services, and accommodations not being adequately addressed by school professionals.

Empirical Literature

Some professional educators express concern that parents of students with special needs are not making informed decisions because there is a lack of data on academic achievement and a lack of teachers with special education qualifications at Christian schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). Data from this study does not support this notion. While there is a lack of data on a national level in research that tracks academic achievement, that is not true on a local level. Parents that participated in this study report continuous communication with teachers and administration regarding service plans, daily accomplishments and struggles, and standardized testing. While parents do report that they believe there is a lack of special education training for teachers in Christian schools, they report being satisfied with the resources, services, and accommodations that they are receiving. The teachers and administrators are open to collaborating and partnering with parents in developing a plan and updating that plan as needed to meet their children's needs. This is something that parents value, and while teachers may not have formal special education training, being open to learning from parents regarding what their children need may be just as valuable. Finally, the participants in this study were not ill-informed in choosing to send students with special needs to a Christian school. Four of the ten participants are teachers with degrees in education. One of those is a principal at her school and another one is a school social worker in a public school. Furthermore, two of the ten participants hold PhDs.

A spiritual perspective on special education in Christian schools. Christians may construct knowledge based on Christian beliefs and values (Guthrie, 2019). Data in this study supports this idea in that every participant believes there is a benefit to the Christian curriculum and spiritual community. One participant believes that her child will be treated better in a

Christian school. She mentioned that she believes her child would be bullied in public school and he has experienced acceptance in the current Christian school her son attends.

Parents have reported poor relationships with educators and feelings of being treated disrespectfully during the referral process as reasons for dissatisfaction with public school special education services (Gwernan-Jones et al., 2015). Participants who have attended a public school and a Christian school adhering to a classical approach, report being dissatisfied with the referral process and resources, services, and accommodations. This is the primary reason that led these participants to search for a Christian school that accepts and accommodates students with special needs. This was the main reason that these families chose their current Christian school. Participants' children attend one of four schools. Each of the schools provides resources, services, and accommodations as well as accepting parents' suggestions and ideas for helping their children achieve success. One of the schools allows outside therapists into the school to provide necessary one-on-one support.

Pudlas (2004) reports that Christian school communities have not always created a stronger community for students with special needs, either. Part of inclusion means establishing a community of learners who feel accepted and valued as contributing members within the community. Each of these participants reported feeling accepted and valued as contributing members within the community. Community is one of the most frequently discussed themes during the interviews and focus groups. Participants marveled at the way the administration and teachers foster a community environment of acceptance.

Anderson (2006) suggests that moving beyond giving the students with special needs space and moving towards modeling true hospitality by demonstrating acceptance. Melinda said, "They took the time to understand him and what the needs were and also communicated that they

wanted him. I mean the principal said, 'We want more kids with varying abilities at our school.' I mean, who says that?" This effort demonstrates hospitality and true acceptance, which works to build true inclusion.

A legal perspective on special education in Christian schools. Christian schools are not legally required to provide services for students with special needs and have a variety of concerns impacting acceptance and enrollment of students with special needs (Lane, 2017; Russo et al., 2011). While this is true, the participants in this study each have chosen Christian schools who do accept students with special needs and provide them with resources, services, and accommodations. Three of the participants previously chose Christian schools with a classical approach for their students with special needs and had negative experiences in which their children did not receive services or accommodations while still being expected to perform at the same level as other students. Ruth described feeling frustrated because her daughter was asked to leave and the school never worked with her to try and help her daughter experience success. Instead, her daughter's kindergarten teacher e-mailed her and told her, "You need to have more discipline at home. That was fun. We were doing everything we could to try to help her and figure out what was going on."

While Christian schools are not legally required to provide services or even accept students with special needs, many do. The schools that participants' children attend provide service plans, which are similar to IEPs. These schools also provide classroom accommodations tailored to students' needs. They even respond to social and emotional difficulties as they come up with mediation. Ruth describes the support as continual.

> We have regular meetings where we look at the plan, we make changes, we take anything out that we think she doesn't need anymore. There's constant communication between

the teachers, between ed support, so that is a constant. They're great about letting us

know if they're seeing anything or wondering if we're seeing anything. There's good

communication and I feel the support is continual.

These were common sentiments shared among most of the participants.

There are occasions in which special education services provided within public schools

are not adequately meeting students' needs (Dunn, 2017). Four of the participants report having

experienced this. Most report that the time it would have taken to get a diagnosis and implement

an IEP would have been detrimental to their child's academic progress and self-esteem. One

participant described frustration with the lack of support in the process and the way her child was

treated. She kept asking for help and asking if he needed an IEP and the teachers kept telling her

that he did not and that they would modify his work. They never did modify his work, but kept

making him do it at the same level as his peers and would not allow him interaction with his

peers or to do any other activities unless his basket of work was complete. He was never able to

complete the work. The final straw was perhaps when her son soiled himself because they

refused to let him go to the restroom and the teacher never even noticed. When Michelle reported

it to the administration, she received no support and was told she supports the teacher. After two

years, they finally agreed to an IEP, but at that point, they just felt it was best to move on. That is

when they decided upon their current Christian school and they have been satisfied with the

community and resources, services, and accommodations. Michelle described what students

receive at her school, "It's a Christian community, you're getting some ed support services,

you're getting the academics, which you want, but you're also getting the social aspect." The

federal government indeed provides guidelines for serving students with special needs in public

schools, but these programs do not ensure that family education priorities are appropriately addressed.

Inviting parents of students with special needs to partner with educators by encouraging participation, valuing their expertise, and understanding family needs is of significant importance (LaBarbera, 2017). Participants' description of their experiences in this study corroborates this research. The teachers and administrators are open to collaborating and partnering with parents in developing a plan and updating that plan as needed to meet their children's needs. This is something that parents value, and while teachers may not have formal special education training, being open to learning from parents regarding what their children need may be just as valuable. Finally, the participants in this study were not ill-informed in making the choice to send students with special needs to a Christian school. Of the ten participants, four hold degrees in the field of education and two hold PhDs.

Implications

This transcendental phenomenological study describing the factors contributing to parents choosing a Christian school for students with special needs holds theoretical, empirical, and practical implications for parents of children with special needs and Christian school educators and administrators.

Theoretical

The theory that guided this study was Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (Slavin, 2006). According to Gordon (2009), constructivists believe that knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values. Data from this study corroborates existing research that states familial experiences may be connected to education planning decisions regarding their child with special needs (Lalvani, 2015). Most participants in this study described family experiences that

led them to choose to enroll, or continue enrollment, in a Christian school for their students with special needs. A social constructivist framework promotes that "Reality is constructed between the researcher and the researched and shaped by individual experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This theory does not just apply to students, but any person constructing knowledge. Parents construct knowledge to make choices about their children's education and well-being. Educational researchers must move beyond number-driven data and consider the social constructivist viewpoint as a part of the effort to better understand parents, school choice, and special education in Christian schools. Without this perspective, research is incomplete.

Empirical

Cheng et al. (2016) believe the limited data available on special education in Christian schools may prevent parents from making the most informed choice for their children with special needs. While participants in this study did not describe researching data on special education in Christian schools, they did describe a variety of factors that were important in their choice. Four themes emerged in data: (a) Christian worldview, (b) community, (c) services, resources, and accommodations, and (d) collaboration and partnership. Other studies highlighted the importance of Christian worldview and collaboration to an extent for all students in different environments (Collier et al., 2015; Cookson & Smith, 2011; Goldrich Eskow et al., 2018; LaBarbera, 2017; Mereoiu et al., 2016; Slade et al., 2018; Uhrman, 2017). Participants in this study truly highlighted the importance of community and services, resources, and accommodations in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs.

Practical

The findings of this study hold practical implications for education researchers and educators in the Christian school community as well as the public school community. There are

Christian schools that provide services and supports that meet students' needs and familial expectations for students with special needs. Robert et al. (2015) found that parents' satisfaction depends on the child's best interest, family needs, and whether they feel these things are being adequately addressed by the professionals involved. In this study, the participants' experiences could be generalized to support this research. For example, some participants in the study expressed dissatisfaction with their public school experience in trying to get services and accommodations for their children with special needs. Rather than waiting through the process, they decided to enroll in a Christian school where their children's needs were immediately addressed and accommodated while going through the formal process of getting a formal service plan in place. Other participants left a Christian school, who rigidly adhered to the classical approach, because instead of accommodating for their child's special needs, they were made to feel as if it were a choice or a discipline problem, and the children were expected to perform academically, socially, and behaviorally in the same way as neurotypical students.

There are Christian schools that can successfully provide resources, services, and accommodations for students with special needs. Each of the participants chose a Christian school whose administration decided to provide more than what is required by law to meet the needs of parents who wish to provide a Christian education for their children with special needs. Each school began as a traditional Christian school that did not accommodate students with special needs. Each school now provides for students with special needs in a different way, but each school is committed to doing so. While many participants acknowledge that their children may likely receive more resources and services in the public school environment, they remain satisfied with the extent of services and accommodations their children receive at their current Christian school. This is especially apparent when considering the other benefits that emerged in

data: Christian worldview, community, and collaboration and partnership. Christian schools should look to become more inclusive and provide resources, services, and accommodations for students with special needs, by fostering community and building a partnership with families through consistent collaboration. These things are most valued by participants in this study. That is something every Christian school can do.

Researchers in education are concerned that parents are not making informed decisions because of the lack of teacher special education qualifications in faith-based schools (Cheng et al., 2016; Lane, 2017). Many participants agreed that educators in Christian schools need more training (LaBarbera, 2017; Stites et al., 2018; Taylor 2005). Participants in this study appreciate being valued as partners in their children's education. This fact also has implications for educators in Christian schools. Parents are willing to partner and collaborate with teachers to provide the best opportunities for success while in school. School administrators and teachers should rely more on parents in trying to meet the needs of students with special needs. While teacher special education training is important, the emergent themes, Christian worldview, community and collaboration, and partnership, confirm the importance of spiritual and relational aspects of educating students with special needs (Uhrman, 2017).

In describing parents' experiences in choosing a Christian school for students with special needs, educators and administrators in Christian schools may gain a deeper understanding of parents' priorities. This understanding may cause a shift in policy and practice regarding special education acceptance, enrollment, and program implementation in Christian schools. Finally, this study may allow researchers and educators in Christian schools to market their schools using information that parents value, which could increase enrollment.

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations of this study pertain to characteristics of the design or methodology. I chose phenomenology because parents of children with special needs are often misunderstood and their voices absent in research (Kryszewska, 2017; Sargeant & Berkner, 2015; Taylor, 2005; Collier, Keefe, & Kirrel, 2015; Marteney & Bernadowski, 2016; Stites Rakes, Noggle, & Shah, 2018). I found that to be true in a review of literature on the topic. Phenomenology attempts to fill that gap as an effort is made to describe participants' experiences with a phenomenon (Creswell, 2018). The optimum sample size for this type of study is 10 to 15 participants, which places delimitations on the study. I also chose only participants who chose a Christian school for elementary students and the students had to be currently enrolled. This eliminated those who no longer attend a Christian school or are attending a Christian middle or high school.

This research was limited geographically due to the small sample size. I originally intended to keep the sample to participants in my current state but had to expand my recruitment efforts to states throughout the nation. While this may be beneficial in studies with larger samples, it is difficult to generalize with a small sample that is largely spread out geographically. It was further limited because of human interaction. While I made efforts to eliminate bias by bracketing my personal experiences with the phenomenon, I am flawed as a human and this contributes to the study's limitations (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, participants described experiences and events from their personal perspectives and memories but relying on these memories and judgments is a limitation as well.

Recommendations for Future Research

Several areas warrant future research. Replicating the current study with an expanded sample would be beneficial. This would allow researchers to more accurately generalize

findings. For example, expanding geographically may give a better idea of what Christian schools in other states provide as well as any cultural considerations that may be limited by geographical location. Furthermore, the study's sample only included parents of students attending an elementary Christian school. I had to turn away several willing participants because their children attended a Christian middle school. Replicating this study to include parents choosing a Christian middle school and high school would be beneficial because their experiences with the phenomenon would be different. Since many of the participants in this study have advanced degrees or are professionally associated with the field of education in some way, it would be beneficial to narrow the sample and describe why educators choose a Christian school for students with special needs.

Future research on this topic might include quantitative research. Quantitative research could include a larger sample size and specific options for responses to questions that would more narrowly describe emergent themes. Research could also describe specific types of Christian schools. For example, participants in this study referred to negative experiences with Christian schools implementing the classical approach to learning. Case studies on family experiences with special education in Christian schools maintaining the classical approach may be beneficial.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. The central research question that guided this study was, "What factors contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?" Sub-questions included the following: (SQ1) "What role does religion play in parents' choosing a Christian school for students with

special needs?" (SQ2) "What factors influence parents' decisions to choose a Christian school for students with special needs regarding the administration, teachers, curriculum, and school culture?" (SQ3) "How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools?" Ten participants were chosen utilizing purposeful sampling. Criterion sampling was necessary because the topic of study was so focused. The initial recruitment for participants yielded only eight participants meeting the criteria, so snowball sampling was used. Data collection was triangulated via interviews, focus groups, and journal prompts. Data was analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) modification of van Kaam's method of analysis. Responses to the research questions revealed that parents find the most value in the following emergent themes: (a) Christian worldview, (b) community, (c) services, resources, and accommodations, and (d) collaboration and partnership.

These findings hold theoretical, empirical, and practical implications. Lev Vygotsky's social constructivist idea that knowledge is informed by perspective and shaped by values does not just pertain to students (Gordon, 2009; Slavin, 2006). Participants in this study constructed knowledge based on their experiences, which informs their decisions in education planning for their children with special needs. Parents choose a Christian school based on whether the school can provide resources, services, and accommodations for their children with special needs and will leave if those needs are not being met. Parents also value administration and teachers that foster community within the school as well as prioritizing collaboration and partnership with parents in meeting their children's needs. I hope that this study will give voice to parents whose voices have been misunderstood or altogether ignored.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Setting Permission Request

Dear [School Administrator]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education. The title of my research project is Parents' Experience in Choosing Christian Elementary School for Children with Special Needs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Based on a transcendental phenomenological approach, it is important to understand the rationale behind parents' choices in education planning for students with special needs, specifically as it relates to faith-based schools.

I am writing to request your permission to conduct my research in/at your school and contact parents of your school to invite them to participate in my research study.

Participants will be asked to contact me to schedule a video interview through Zoom. Participants will be presented with informed consent information prior to participating. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary, and participants are welcome to discontinue participation at any time.

Thank you for considering my request. If you choose to grant permission, please provide a signed statement on official letterhead indicating your approval. A permission letter document is attached for your convenience.

Sincerely,

Andrea L. Cook
Doctor of Education Candidate

Appendix B: IRB Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

September 17, 2020

Andrea Cook, Barbara White

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY20-21-152 A DESCRIPTION OF THE FACTORS
CONTRIBUTING TO PARENTS CHOOSING CHRISTIAN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL FOR
CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL
STUDY

Dear Andrea Cook, Barbara White:

The Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) has reviewed your application in
accordance with the Office for Human Research Protections (OHRP) and Food and Drug
Administration (FDA) regulations and finds your study to be exempt from further IRB review.
This means you may begin your research with the data safeguarding methods mentioned in your
approved application, and no further IRB oversight is required.

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in
which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:
101(b):

Category 2.(iii). Research that only includes interactions involving educational tests (cognitive,
diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of
public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) if at least one of the following criteria is
met:
The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that the identity of the
human subjects can readily be ascertained, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects,
and an IRB conducts a limited IRB review to make the determination required by §46.111(a)(7).

Your stamped consent form can be found under the Attachments tab within the Submission
Details section of your study on Cayuse IRB. This form should be copied and used to gain the
consent of your research participants. If you plan to provide your consent information
electronically, the contents of the attached consent document should be made available without
alteration.

Please note that this exemption only applies to your current research application, and any
modifications to your protocol must be reported to the Liberty University IRB for verification of
continued exemption status. You may report these changes by completing a modification
submission through your Cayuse IRB account.

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether

possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

Sincerely,
G. Michele Baker, MA, CIP
Administrative Chair of Institutional Research
Research Ethics Office

Appendix C: Setting Consent Form

[Insert Date]

Dear [Researcher's Name]:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Parents' Experience in Choosing Christian Elementary School for Children with Special Needs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct research in/at our school and contact parents of your school to invite them to participate in your research study.

Mark the following boxes, as applicable:

☐ [The requested data WILL BE STRIPPED of all identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

☐ [The requested data WILL NOT BE STRIPPED of identifying information before it is provided to the researcher.]

☐ [Add applicable option or delete check box.]

☐ [Add applicable option or delete check box.]

☐ [I/We are requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.]

Sincerely,

Andrea L. Cook
Doctor of Education Candidate
Liberty University

Appendix D: Participant Recruitment Request

Dear Parent:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor of Education. The title of my research project is A Description of the Factors Parents' Consider in Choosing Christian Elementary School for Children with Special Needs: A Transcendental Phenomenological Study. The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to describe the factors contributing to parents choosing Christian elementary school for children with special needs. Based on a transcendental phenomenological approach, it is important to understand the rationale behind parents' choices in education planning for students with special needs, specifically as it relates to faith-based school. Christian educators may gain a better understanding of parents' needs and desires for their children, enabling administrators and teachers to better provide for students with special needs. Additionally, this study may serve to encourage other Christian parents to enroll their elementary children with special needs into Christian schools.

If you are 18 years of age or older, have a child with special needs attending Christian school, and are willing to participate you will be asked to participate in a video interview with me via Zoom. It should take approximately one hour for you to complete the interview and any follow-up questions. I will ask for you to respond to a journal prompt, which may take ten minutes. Finally, you will be asked to participate in a focus group with other parents online via Zoom. This will take no longer than an hour of your time. Your participation will be completely anonymous, and no personal, identifying information will be collected. Your name and/or other identifying information will be requested as part of [your participation, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, complete and return the consent document to the researcher and contact me to schedule an interview (include contact information here).

Provide information about your consent document/information by editing the following sentence(s). A consent document is attached to this letter. The consent document contains additional information about my research. Please sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the interview.

Sincerely,

Andrea L. Cook
Doctor of Education Candidate

Appendix E: Participant Consent

CONSENT FORM
Parents' Perspective of Special Education in Christian Elementary School:
A Transcendental Phenomenological Study
Andrea L. Cook
Liberty University
School of Education

You are invited to be in a research study on the experience of parents with students of special needs attending Christian school. You were selected as a possible participant because you have chosen for your student to attend Christian school. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Andrea Cook, a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, is conducting this study.

Background Information: The purpose of this study is to answer the following questions:
What factors contribute to parents choosing Christian elementary school for their children with special needs?
Sub Question 1: Why do parents of children with special needs choose Christian school?
Sub Question 2: What role does religion play in parents' choosing Christian school for students with special needs?
Sub Question 3: How do parents define success and failure as it relates to their students with special needs in Christian schools?

Procedures: If you agree to be in this study, I would ask you to do the following things:
1. Answer interview questions that will be recorded for transcription lasting approximately one hour.
2. Answer any follow-up questions after the interview that will also be recorded for transcription and could last up to one hour.
3. Respond to a journal prompt in writing.
4. Participate in a focus group discussion via Zoom.
5. Review final analysis for accuracy and provide feedback if necessary.

Risks: The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

Benefits: Benefits to society include filling a gap in research by voicing experiences of having a student with special needs attend Christian school. This could help encourage other Christian schools/educators to provide more inclusive settings. This could help education professionals and researchers better understand parents' priorities and values for students with special needs.

Compensation: Participants will not be compensated for participating 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 will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participants will be assigned a pseudonym. I will conduct the interviews via Zoom where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password locked computer and may be used in future presentations.
- Interviews will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years, or until the dissertation is complete, and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.

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 or the Christian school your child attends. 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/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 Andrea Cook. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her. You may also contact the researcher's faculty chair, Dr. Barbara White.

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., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

Please notify the researcher if you would like a copy of this information 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/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Signature of Participant   Date

_____

Signature of Investigator   Date

Appendix F: Survey Questions

The information contained in this survey is important to the researcher because it gives demographic information that determines if you meet the criteria to participate. The purpose of transcendental phenomenological research is to describe experiences of a group of people who have experienced the same phenomenon. In the case of this study, that shared phenomenon is choosing Christian school for special education students.

1. Please enter your name, e-mail address, and phone number.

2. What is your age?

3. What is your gender?

4. With what nationality do you and your child affiliate?

5. How old is your child and in what grade is your child?

6. What is your child's biological gender?

7. Has your child been formally diagnosed with a special need either by a school psychologist or outside professional? If so, please identify the diagnosis.

8. Please describe your child's learning differences.

9. In what school is your child currently enrolled?

10. Does your child participate in general education inclusive classroom?

11. Does your child receive services outside of the general education inclusive classroom during the school day? If so, how many hours per week?

12. Please describe the services your child receives for his/her emotional, behavioral, and/or learning differences at the current school of enrollment.

13. What is the last level of education you completed?

14. Are you willing to contribute to this study as a co-researcher by participating in an interview either in person or electronically and respond to a journal prompt regarding

your experience in choosing Christian school for your elementary student with special

needs? Yes _____ No _____

Appendix G: Interview Questions/Guide

1. Tell me about your child's emotional, behavioral, and/or learning differences.

2. What supports and/or accommodations does your child receive at school?

3. Describe your experience as a parent of a student with special needs in choosing Christian elementary school.

4. Describe the factors, events, and interactions were challenging in choosing Christian elementary school for your child.

5. What role did your interactions with other parents and groups on social media impact your decision?

6. What factors led you to choose Christian school over other school options?

7. What role did religion play in your choice?

8. If your child attended another school, describe why you left that school.

9. How do the supports that your child received in their previous setting compare to their current Christian school setting?

10. What does the current Christian school provide that others do not?

11. How do you define success for your student's time in elementary school?

12. Describe the qualities you look for in the administration when choosing a school.

13. Describe the qualities you look for in the teachers when choosing a school.

14. Describe the qualities you look for in the curriculum when choosing a school.

15. Describe the qualities you look for in the school culture when choosing a school.

16. What will cause you to continue your child's enrollment at a Christian school?

17. Please add anything that we did not cover in our interview up to this point.

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

The following is a list of questions to be used in the focus group interview:

1. Please introduce yourself and tell us about your vocation.

2. Describe your experience in choosing Christian school.

3. What factors did you rely on in making this choice?

4. Do you think that you made an informed decision? Why or why not?

5. What do you think is the most important factor for parents to consider in making this choice?

Appendix I: Journal Prompt

What would you like Christian teachers, administrators, and board members to know about your experiences with special education in choosing Christian school for your student with special needs?

Appendix J: Field Notes Template

Date, Time, and Duration:
Setting:
Participant:

Key Points and Themes:
Big Ideas:
Thoughts from Researcher:
Other Factors:

Quotes:
Follow-up Questions: