LIVED DISCIPLESHIP EXPERIENCES OF FOURTH- AND FIFTH-GRADE STUDENTS

IN CHRISTIAN SCHOOLS

by

Krystal Dawn Morrow

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

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APPROVED BY:

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. The theory guiding this study was Vygotsky's impact of social and environmental factors on development because of the connection between relationships and discipleship. The phenomenon of discipleship was explored through a theoretical lens as upper elementary students shared their lived discipleship experiences. Ten students who experienced discipleship in selected Christian school settings were selected for this study using criterion sampling. This study took place in three different Christian elementary school settings in the state of Kentucky, where data were collected via student interviews, student focus groups, and a projective technique of word association. Common themes were identified through data coding to describe the discipleship phenomenon. The central research question guiding this study asked, How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools? Ultimately, the study revealed the essence of relationships to understand the discipleship phenomenon, which may benefit Christian families, students, Christian school teachers, Christian school leaders, churches, and discipleship development leaders who seek to develop elementary student discipleship.

Keywords: disciple, discipleship, Christian elementary school, spiritual maturity, The Great Commission

Dedication

I dedicate the process and product of this dissertation to my Lord and Savior, Jesus. I am confident that he led me to and through this journey. From the sleepless nights and the struggle to do hard things, it has consistently been the Lord who has encouraged me and given me all that I need to press on. On days when I questioned and felt exhausted, I was reminded that He goes before me. Through His Word I have been encouraged and reminded to keep my eyes on Him. "The LORD himself goes before you and will be with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged." ~Deuteronomy 31:8

As a 14-year-old girl, I have no doubt that the Lord sent a handsome gentleman to teach me about authentic love. I will always recall the first day of Spring in 1992, five years after our first date, when he got down on one knee and asked me to grow old with him. When he opened the jewelry box and showed me my beautiful engagement ring, I replied with words that I would have never expected. I asked, "Is it real?" Reflecting on that moment, I realize that my question had more to do with authenticity of unconditional love than it did with the physical nature or worth of that engagement ring. I wondered how, despite my imperfections, he would choose me . . . for life. Those words, "Is it real?" have a deep connection with my understanding of Christ's redemptive love for me. As I enter the final stages of my doctoral studies and prepare for my final dissertation defense, I acknowledge that Christ is the "why" and He has blessed me with my husband.

Chad, you are my dedicated encourager and you have helped me to become all that I am today. Thank you for leading our family in obedience to Him. I acknowledge that my life is better because we are together. United in faith in Christ . . . thank you for choosing to grow old with me! I love you.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my parents, who relentlessly encourage me. Spring Lake Farms was the perfect place for me to write and rewrite. Graham, thank you for shooting straight! Mom, thank you for being my biggest cheerleader.

Thank you, Austin and Meagan, for your encouragement as you witnessed the firsthand impact of dedication and perseverance needed to stay on course. We sacrificed family time yet still found ways to connect and encourage. Austin, thank you for being a great listener like your dad. Meagan, thank you for the many notes of encouragement and for going on stress-relieving adventures with me.

Thank you, Dr. Swezey, for your feedback, guidance, and support throughout this dissertation journey. You have pushed me and encouraged me to watch the clock. I appreciate your honesty and investment as you held me accountable and focused on alignment.

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Thank you, D-group friends, for praying for me, encouraging me, and reminding me of Truth. I would also like to thank my family (including my future son-in-law), friends, church family, our Sunday lunch crew and coworkers for your encouragement, assistance, and understanding throughout this doctoral journey. We are better together!

Special shout out to the school administrators, teachers, and parents who helped make the research possible. Thank you, students, for allowing me to share your voice. I pray that I served you well.

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List of Abbreviations

Association for Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Institutional Review Board (IRB)

More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)

New International Version (NIV)

Sub-Question (SQ)

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

With the growing demand for spiritual accountability emphasized by Christian education, according to the Association of Christian Schools International (n.d.), Christian schools often identify their primary mission as discipleship, and the skills learned will impact the rest of their students' lives (Cox & Swezey, 2011). The mission of discipleship is reflective of The Great Commission (Matthew 28:19–20), given and modeled by Jesus Christ and supported by the local church. For Christian elementary schools, discipleship opportunities are rooted in partnership with families as well as the local church (Schultz, 2002). Due to the relational aspect of discipleship, the social interaction and development needs of those involved (Alarid, 2015) in the process of discipleship are essential. Upper elementary students are the most likely to have experienced discipleship development in the elementary school setting. New research is needed to understand the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools.

This chapter will provide the background of discipleship in Christian education. Discipleship is understood as the process of guiding individuals to grow in spiritual maturity and to discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities to fulfill Christ's mission (Allotta, 2013; Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Keely, 2000). For the purposes of this study, discipleship focuses on helping students understand their relationship with Christ (Adams, 2017), which impacts identity and purpose (Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994). The situation to self will discuss the motivation, assumptions, and possible biases related to this study. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory provides an understanding of contributions that society makes on individual development (Kozulin, 2007). Focus on the problem statement, purpose statement, and significance of the study will help

clarify this research. The research questions and definitions will further focus on qualitative research, and methodology will be shared as the implications of the phenomenology surface. At the same time, the study seeks to understand student experiences (Andrews, Tynan, & James, 2011).

Background

Christian education extends from the home and church into the Christian school arena. The mission of Christian education is rooted in the words of Christ spoken to His church, emphasizing the importance of going and making disciples (Matthew 28:19). This charge to make disciples is known as The Great Commission and focuses on developing disciples of Christ, who later make more disciples (Allotta, 2013).

Historical

The term *disciple* refers to Jesus' followers in the Gospel accounts and is a common term used to identify the early church as believers in Christ, Christians (Hull, 2006). The term was used 230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in the book of Acts, demonstrating the importance of discipleship (MacArthur, 1989). Discipleship is prominent in Christian education in the local church as well as private Christian schools in the education arena (Allotta, 2018; Van Brummelen, 2009). The charge to make disciples is based on the Greek word, *matheteusate*, which focuses on the action of reproducing disciples and impacts Christian education, churches, and schools (MacArthur, 1989). Mark 9:30–31 explains that Jesus focused attention on His disciples while also balancing time with multitudes of people. Jesus was intentional about investing in small groups and individuals. The gospel of Mark mentions Jesus' investment in His disciples in 268 of 550 total verses. Discipleship begins with personal obedience and commitment to Christ first (Bonhoeffer, 2001), which keeps the focus on the individual.

In the mid-20th century, discipleship focused on one-on-one mentoring, disciplined Bible study, Scripture memorization, and witnessing training which emphasized knowledge and measured performance through programs (Hull, 2006). Following the reformation revivals, the process of discipleship shifted focus first to an individual relationship with Jesus that leads to individual growth that radiates through relationships with others (Dempsey, 2008; Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Hull, 2006). Spiritual formation (Chandler, 2014) with intentional reflection and application paved the way for the discipleship movement (Hull, 2006). As disciples spent time with Jesus, they began to transform and replicate through generations of discipleship through community and relationships.

The experiences may vary, yet the commission to make disciples has been at the forefront of Christian education throughout history. Christian educators want to know how discipleship is impacting students at each level of their growth and education. Many Christian schools analyze the spiritual impact upon high school graduates as the church retention rate is examined (Kaiser, 2015). Analyzing the impact upon graduation may seem to be too late for many educators, and there is an interest in understanding more at the elementary level. This research addressed the problem of discovering the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students at Christian schools.

Societal

Social interaction, relationships with other spiritually mature people, and focus on individual development are essential aspects of Christian education's discipleship experiences (Steibel, 2010) and curriculum delivery (Burggraff, 2015). Though students may develop spiritually through independent reading and study of the Bible, such skills are often taught and enforced through intentional modeling from others including parental influence in the home

(Bunnell, 2016; Vanhoozer, 2015). The Great Commission emphasizes the importance of teaching others to obey everything Christ commanded (Matthew 28:20) and links discipleship to the social interaction of teaching others (Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Hudson, 2018; Hull, 2006). It all started when Jesus called a few to follow Him, and they share their experiences with others (Coleman, 1993). The disciples followed and modeled Jesus with others as they focused on investing in relationships using compassion to build trust (Gibson, 2015) through service (Veas & Veas, 2018).

Christian schools focus on students' spiritual maturation (Glanzer & Alleman, 2018; Kinnaman, 2011), which impacts society as individuals make an impact. The development of students' spirituality is deeply rooted in relationships and intentional discipleship experiences (Campolongo, 2009). In our society, students spend an average of 7 hours per day, 5 days a week, and 180 days in the school environment (Allotta, 2018). The amount of time spent with other people affects everyone (Bowland, 1999). Schools focused on discipleship capitalize on the social interactions (Hudson, 2018) of students to promote spiritual maturity.

Educationally, the goal is student growth for their calling, which impacts society (Van Brummelen, 1986). Teaching and equipping students through discipleship is relational and intentionally capitalizes on the school environment as they mature spiritually (Putman, 2013; Shepherd, 2017). The social impact of discipleship is undeniable as Christian education focuses on making disciples who know Christ through a personal relationship, follow Christ, and make disciples (Bradfield, 2014).

Theoretical

Though discipleship is interwoven with spiritual maturity through faith development, the emphasis of social interaction and the impact of the experiences guided this research (Glassford,

2016; Keeley, 2008; Steibel, 2010). A basic strategy of discipleship is to help students understand their identity in Christ and provide experiences that help them grow and enhance their relationship with Christ (Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994). This strategy is linked to teaching and investing in the students as experiences and community are vital in discipleship (Steibel, 2010; Vieth, 1957). With consideration of James Fowler's (1995) faith development theory, it is understood that students grow in spiritual maturity in stages. As faith develops, the impact of changes plays a role in relationships (Hiebert, 1992; Streib, 2001).

The impact of social interaction through intentional relationships is foundational for discipleship in Christian elementary schools since the interactions can be impacted through experiences. This involves a process of spiritual formation through Christian education, which is not consistently linear (Cox & Peck, 2018). Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, including the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), was the lens through which the discipleship phenomenon was studied (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007).

Created as relational beings (Beagles, 2012), students are influenced by interaction with material and relationships (Vygotsky, 1978). The idea of social learning through a constructivist framework emphasizes the positive impact of social interactions (Vygotsky, 1978) and has the potential to greatly impact educators. The role of relationships and the need to build relationships can be better understood by getting a glimpse into the lived experiences of upper elementary students. Vygotsky's theories are linked to community and relationships, which enhance discipleship through support and interaction. Vygotsky, along with other constructivists, agreed that relationships are key to thinking and growth, especially through interactions with peers and teachers in the school setting (Vygotsky, 1978). It is important to

note that Vygotsky did not claim that development comes through copying others. Instead,

Vygotsky explained that social interaction impacts transformation at an individual level as the

learner internalized the interactions resulting in diversity rather than carbon copies (Vygotsky,

1978).

Through intentionally relating to students, teachers can support individual development

that varies from person to person through collaboration (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD emphasizes

support in relation to student development: "What the child can do in cooperation today he can

do alone tomorrow" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 188). With an understanding that each student develops

at different times, it is important to note that sequential ordering of development is not possible

for all students at the same age (Vygotsky, 1986). Likewise, development can move both

forward and backwards (Wink & Putney, 2002). Student understanding is enhanced as students

become active participants in their learning through social interaction (Wells, 2000), and the one

impacting the student should seek to lead ahead of development (Vygotsky, 1978). Simply put,

the ZPD focuses on the potential of what students will know and understand and captures the

essence of seeing discipleship as a process of spiritual maturity. This zone is the distance

between where the student is and where they are going next.

The movement in distance from where a student is and where they are going next, ZPD is

enhanced through guidance of the MKO. Guidance within the ZPD will eventually lead to

students being able to share their own understanding with others specifically concerning spiritual

growth through discipleship. The idea of scaffolding by moving student growth toward

independent learning is an important role of the MKO (Vygotsky, 1997) and an integral part of

the discipleship process. The supportive strategies begin to lessen as individual students gain

more independence (Vygotsky, 1997) in spiritual growth and the discipleship process. The

MKO is someone with more experience and knowledge. In discipleship the MKO is more spiritually mature and is most often the teacher in the school setting.

Situation to Self

Being a Christian elementary school principal and former upper elementary Christian school teacher, I have direct experience with students who have discipleship experiences. In addition to my career, I have also served as a children's ministry leader and pastor's wife through the local church. I personally accepted the gift of salvation through a personal relationship with Jesus when I was 9 years old. I attended public school until college, and I did not experience discipleship firsthand in my elementary school. My first experience at a faith-based school was in college. My spiritual growth seemed to flourish once my biblical worldview was impacted through integration of Truth in my home, school, and church. The realization that God has used specific individuals to guide my faith development sparked my interest in discipleship, which led me to research discipleship further. My husband and I homeschooled and later invested in private Christian education for our two children as we desired for our children to be discipled through Truth. Through home, school, and church experiences in my personal life and professional life, discipleship has become a passion of mine. This prompted my desire to understand the discipleship experiences of upper elementary students.

I sought to examine how participants develop their individual meaning based on lived discipleship experiences in a Christian elementary school through this transcendental phenomenology. It has been my desire to study and learn about discipleship specific to Christian elementary students. I hold the axiological value where the discipleship experiences of elementary students in Christian schools is valued. My axiological assumptions, combined with my personal and professional experiences, are grounded in biblical worldview. The inerrancy of

God's Word is foundational to this study because it is a filter for the way I see the world and discern between Truth and nontruth.

The emphasis of this study was to identify the common themes among the student experiences. I also hold the ontological belief that the experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools are multifaceted, and it is necessary to gain the lived experiences from multiple participants (Creswell, 2013). It was essential to understand that the participants' experiences are subjective and lead to a pattern of meaning (Moustakas, 1994). I set out to describe the discipleship phenomenon from the perspectives of fourth- and fifth-grade students as accurately as possible by remaining true to the facts and develop a fresh perspective of the phenomenon of discipleship. I brought a constructivist framework into this research paradigm. I believe that individual experiences develop meaning for individuals and my worldview influences how I interpret data, which aligns with a qualitative design and social constructivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013).

I found a gap in the literature regarding qualitative studies on discipleship in Christian elementary schools. I prepared to discover more about this topic of discipleship in Christian schools to deepen the overall understanding of students' lived experiences. I desire to give voice to students who have experienced the discipleship phenomenon. The voice of the participants was conveyed through the lived experiences of the students, which was described in a personal and descriptive manner through qualitative methodology (Creswell, 2013) with the potential to positively impact Christian elementary students.

Problem Statement

While discipleship in the high school and beyond has been studied, there has been little research regarding the lived experiences of discipleship in upper elementary (Allotta, 2013;

Brady, 2004; Coyl, Jones, & Dick, 2004). The problem of this study was to investigate the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students who have experienced discipleship. The literature regarding discipleship in the church and upper school is becoming more readily available. However, there is less literature available concerning discipleship in the elementary school setting (Allotta, 2018; Glassford, 2016; Hull, 2006). Christian schools typically focus on physical, relational, academic, and spiritual development of the whole person (Chandler, 2015), which is crucial in younger grades (Blount, 2018; Schultz, 2002). Most Christian elementary schools' mission is linked to the discipleship of students (Blount, 2018; Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994; Schultz, 2002). Schools often provide discipleship experiences in various formats, including devotions, chapels, spiritual emphasis weeks, Bible reading, and Christian textbooks (Burggraff, 2015; Frye, 2019). The gap in the literature related to the lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools was addressed through this study.

Discipleship is an ambiguous term. For schools to provide intentional discipleship, the term *discipleship* must be defined. Research related to discipleship in high schools and higher education (Glanzer & Alleman, 2018) has been published (Hall, 2010). However, research is scant on revealing the real, lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students. This study is needed so that the lived experiences of elementary students can have a significant impact on the triangular partnership of home, school, and church, which will ultimately impact Kingdom work (Frye, 2019). There is evidence that some individuals have walked away from the church after high school (Kaiser, 2015; Kinnaman, 2011). Students who receive the same foundational reinforcement at school, church, and home will be more likely to continue in spiritual maturity when they move away from those environments (Nelson & Appel, 2000). Students' spiritual development plays a crucial role in Christian education and can impact student worldview and

relationships (Fowler & Dell, 2006; Gibson, 2015; Hudson, 2018). Findings could help elementary schools discover how discipleship impacts students' spiritual maturity, implementation of individual gifts, abilities, and talents, which may impact Christian educators' best practices. Therefore, the problem is discovering the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. Discipleship is understood as guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities to fulfill Christ's mission (Dempsey, 2008). For this study, discipleship focuses on helping students understand their relationship with Christ (Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994). The theory guiding this study is Vygotsky's impact of social and environmental factors on development, because of the connection between relationships and discipleship (Glassford, 2016; Keeley, 2008; Kozulin, 2007). In Christian elementary schools, both theory and phenomenon attempt to address the problem of discovering the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is described from an empirical, theoretical, and practical perspective. Empirically, this study added to the literature for Christian elementary school education that addresses discipleship experiences of upper elementary students and provides additional information for a variety of stakeholders. Fourth- and fifth-grade students are nearing the end of their elementary experiences and they are both looking back on elementary as well as looking ahead toward middle school. Interviews, focus groups, and projective techniques helped

explore the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students. Giving a voice to elementary students and describing the themes of their discipleship experiences provided valuable information to Christian schools desiring to disciple students. The study sites included in this study were members of ACSI and the findings have implications for other ACSI elementary schools.

Theoretically, the study can help Christian schools to communicate a phenomenon as it relates to their mission. This research helps describe various lived experiences of upper elementary students within the context of discipleship through relationships with others. The findings of this study may help elementary schools to discover how discipleship is impacting students' spiritual maturity, implementation of individual gifts, individual abilities, relationships, and individual talents through a process of formation (Vanhoozer, 2015). The formational process of spiritual formation in this study has utilized the framework of Vygotsky theories of social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD (Devries, 2000; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007). These developmental theories that offer a framework to understand the lived discipleship experiences where relationships are conduits for formation and development.

Practically, this study is vital to Christian school educators, stakeholders, and students. It can be used further for curriculum and instruction, community, and mission impact as Christian elementary schools' address discipleship of students. Additionally, discipleship practices can be examined as they relate to elementary, and consideration can be given to experiences leading up to and following fourth and fifth grade. Christian school stakeholders may use the findings of this study to understand how discipleship aligns with the school's mission and to further develop a partnership between school and church. Ultimately, the lives of students, families, churches, and community can be affected by this study because it may uncover useful trends about upper

elementary discipleship experiences and improve overall experiences for current and future students. Understanding the perceptions of discipleship experiences in upper elementary could also impact best practices concerning educational opportunities and spiritual formation experiences.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this phenomenological investigation of the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students. One central research question (CRQ) and three sub-questions (SQs) guided this study.

CRQ: How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

The CRQ sought to identify the phenomenon of discipleship as it emerged in participant experiences. The information gleaned has the potential to impact student spiritual growth positively. The SQs are deeply embedded in Vygotsky's theoretical framework associated with the relational impact of discipleship (Estep, 2002).

SQ1: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by peers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

This question explored how relationships with peers impact discipleship in Christian elementary students (Bowland, 1999). Social interaction impacts development as each function in the child's development appears twice (Hull, 2006; Kozulin, 2007): first socially, and later, individually (Kozulin, 2007). Interpersonal relationships lead to independent ownership later (Klima & Repetti, 2008).

SQ2: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by teachers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

This question sought to discover how relationships with teachers impact discipleship in Christian elementary students. The teacher, being the MKO, refers to anyone who has a better understanding of a concept or skill than the learner (Kozulin, 2007).

SQ3: How have fourth- and fifth-grade student discipleship experiences influenced spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools?

Lastly, the third sub-question sought to discover how discipleship experiences have influenced the students' spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools. The ZPD is the distance between a student's ability to perform a task under guidance or with peer collaboration and the student's ability to act independently (Kozulin, 2007).

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Definitions

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1. *Disciple* – A disciple is a person who is following Christ. The term *disciple* is derived from the Greek word *mathetes* (Thayer & Smith, n.d.), which means a *learner,* or a *pupil*, and all Christians are disciples (Wilkins, 1998). Disciple implies relationships and pursuit of Christlikeness (Hull, 2006). Dr. Rod Dempsey defined a disciple as "a trusted Christ for salvation and has surrendered completely to Him. He or she is committed to practicing the spiritual disciplines in community and developing to their full potential for Christ and His mission" (Allotta, 2013, p. 8).

2. *Discipleship* – Discipleship is the process of guiding individual disciples to grow (Hull, 2006) in spiritual maturity and discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities to fulfill Christ's mission (Dempsey, 2008). The term *discipleship* is commonly used to describe the ongoing life of a Christian or the process of maturation (Hull, 2003). Discipleship is a process that guides individuals to discover and use personal abilities, gifts, and talents to impact others for the Kingdom (Dempsey, 2008).

3. *Christian Elementary School* is defined as a K–5 school that distinctively uses biblical Truth to teach general education content through the lens of a biblical worldview (Van Brummelen, 2009).

4. *Spiritual Maturity* – The process of a Christian becoming more like Jesus (Hull, 2006).

5. *The Great Commission* – Matthew 28:19 describes the Great Commission as the church's (believers') responsibility to "go and make disciples of nations, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Bible version). The commission focuses on the command to go and make disciples (Bowland, 1999).

Summary

The term *discipleship* has been rooted in ambiguity. This study explored the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools to fill the research gap. Limited research is available concerning discipleship in elementary schools. This study sought to provide Christian elementary schools with a better understanding of upper elementary students' lived discipleship experiences and to explore the impact of relationships with others in discipleship. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools.

The research presented in this study is only a sample and is not a reflection of every Christian elementary school student. It is also important to note that this study focused on the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students as communicated through interviews, focus groups, and projective techniques. Questions and prompts were limited to those directly connecting discipleship with the specified theoretical framework. There may have been some limitations to the study considering the ages of the students. The next chapter focuses on the existing research and literature that is available as it relates to discipleship.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The literature review is essential as articles were selected to confirm that there is research concerning the discipleship phenomenon. Reviewing research validates the need for new studies. Specifically addressing elementary-aged students, the literature emphasizes parents' importance as the primary influencers of children's spiritual growth (Bunnell, 2016). Though parents are the first and most influential, there are also many other influencers on a child's spiritual development as community impact becomes evident (Steibel, 2010; Vieth, 1957). In addition to individual relationships with others, collective groups of individuals may also impact spiritual growth and making disciples (Barna, 2001; Bowland, 1999; Dreyer & Hermans, 2014). Churches and often Christian schools have the privilege of partnering with parents to develop children's biblical worldview and invest in the spiritual growth and maturity of their students and others (Allotta, 2018; Arnold, 2012; Dreyer & Hermans, 2014; Ferguson, 2012). This term of spiritual growth is also referred to as spiritual development and spiritual maturity. Spiritual formation has been used as a synonym for discipleship, though only focusing on one's spiritual growth does not reveal the impact of investing in others (Moreland & Issler, 2006). This investment takes intentionality to lead students to learn more about Jesus, to know Him personally, and to teach them to glorify Jesus by obeying God's Word (Bonhoeffer, 2001; Hull, 2006). This partnership is emphasized through discipleship opportunities and collaboration between the parents and the church (Bradfield, 2014; Bunnell, 2016; Whitaker, 2014/2015). For this study, a partnership between home and church were necessary partnerships that potentially impacted discipleship in Christian schools (Graustein & Schultz, 1995; Kaiser, 2015; Mohler, 2016; Mullett, 2015/2016; Simmons, 2012/2013).

Not all Christian parents have chosen to send their child(ren) to a Christian school. Approximately 20% of Christian parents have chosen to educate their children outside of public schools (Newman, 2017). The institutions of home, church, and school often strengthen spiritual development and make a more cohesive foundation for a life of discipleship (Allotta, 2018; Blount, 2018; Bunnell, 2016; Van Brummelen, 2009). Parents who have chosen to partner with Christian schools typically expect to strengthen spiritual growth through a triangular approach to discipleship (Allotta, 2018; Barna, 2001; Cox & Peck, 2018; Whitaker, 2014/2015). This partnership begs the question, what is the prime time for students to grow spiritually through intentional discipleship? Available literature appears to have a stronger emphasis on the high school years and beyond concerning most current research of discipleship in children (Allotta, 2018; Blount, 2018; Ham & Beemer, 2009; Ng, 2012).

Despite the efforts to increase partnership with an intentional focus on the discipleship of children, research shows that when young men and women leave high school, there has been an increase in the number of young adults who are leaving the church (Barna Group, 2009; Ham & Beemer, 2009; Kinnaman, 2011). After leaving the church, some still claim to be Christians who read the Bible, yet little evidence is shown through the fruits of the Spirit as followers of Christ (Nehemiah Institute, 2012). Primary influencers of children need to grasp the impact of discipleship at earlier ages, which has the potential to impact Christian elementary school involvement through intentional relationships (Mohler, 2016) and could potentially serve as a factor to decrease the number of students who leave the church after high school. Intentional focus on the student's whole life and purpose to continue to do God's will are emphasized through discipleship (Estep, 2002). Without consideration of ages and the impact of discipleship, there is a possibility that students may leave high school spiritually underdeveloped

(Arnold, 2012) and could contribute to departure from the church after high school.

    This chapter deepens the understanding of the research surrounding the phenomenon of discipleship. The theoretical framework used to support this study meshes a specific theory of Vygotsky with the central phenomenon of discipleship. The emphasis on relationships through discipleship and development in upper elementary students impacted most of the research questions driving this research. Primarily, this literature review focuses on discipleship in the Christian education of elementary students. However, discipleship through various venues, including the church, are also considered in this review, since research for discipleship in Christian schools is limited. A gap in the literature, specifically regarding discipleship in Christian elementary schools (Alarid, 2015; Allotta, 2013), supports the need for this study.

    The literature informs the importance of this study as well as the gap that exists for addressing this phenomenon in elementary students through a qualitative, phenomenological study. This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature related to this study and serves to understand better the lived experience of discipleship in Christian elementary schools. The first section discusses the theories of Vygotsky as a framework and their relationship to discipleship (Kozulin, 2007). The second section synthesizes the recent literature about discipleship, including discipleship and spiritual formation of elementary students in Christian schools. I evaluated discipleship information with an intentional focus on social interaction and development needs in the discipleship process.

Theoretical Framework

    Spiritual growth and intentional development of godly students is the overall goal of Christian education (Evans, 2012; Frye, 2019; Jolliffe, 2014). The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19–20a emphasizes the declaration to "go therefore and make disciples of all the

nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you" (New International Version [NIV]). Because of this verse's focus on relationships with others concerning discipleship, this research focuses on the relational aspect and spiritual maturity development of discipleship in upper elementary Christian schools. Intentional modeling of obedience is necessary as we depend on the Holy Spirit's leadership and the Truth found in the Word of God (Nason, 2019).

Understanding the development of children, specifically the importance of relationships, is valuable to the understanding of upper elementary discipleship (Cox & Peck, 2018; Estep, 2002). This research is grounded in Lev S. Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the more knowledgeable other (MKO) and the zone of proximal development (ZPD; Devries, 2000; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007) as a developmental theory approach to understanding lived discipleship experiences.

The emphasis on social interaction in Christian schools involves learning from both the teacher and peers, which upholds the very nature of discipleship (Allotta, 2013; Mullett, 2015/2016) through experiences in discipleship development (Estep, 2002; Furman & Buhrmester, 1992; Powell & Kalina, 2009). Vygotsky focused on the importance of development preceded by social learning, which occurs through social relationships as the child develops (Kozulin, 2007) and uses scaffolding to encourage independence (Estep, 2002). Unlike other developmental theorists, Vygotsky focused on development as being nonlinear (Frawley, 1997). Spiritual growth takes time, which may or may not align with physical development (Beagles, 2012). Vygotsky (1978) defined the ZPD as "the stance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration

with more capable peers" (p. 87). Being created in God's image, we can think, question, observe, learn, and act on what we know and experience (Pue, 2021). This is important to note since there is the possibility that a student's spiritual growth may shift or appear to regress. This growth does not occur at a particular age, yet research can show patterns that may or may not evolve at specific times in a person's life.

The Apostle Paul points out the potential impact of social relationships as one follows the other. First Corinthians 11:1 states, "Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ" (NIV). This verse is clear that there must be both a follower and a leader. Most often, the leader is more knowledgeable, seeking to share knowledge with the follower (Barna, 2001). In Christian elementary schools, the MKO is most commonly a teacher or older adult. However, the MKO could also be a peer, depending on the spiritual standing of everyone involved. The passing of knowledge and experiences is linked with the purpose of education. Christian schools often claim to make biblically-based, Christ-centered disciples as knowledge and experiences are passed from one to another (Mullett, 2015/2016). George Barna (2001) defined a disciple as "someone who is a learner or follower who serves as an apprentice under the tutelage of a master" (p. 17). Ultimately, disciples seek to make more disciples of Jesus, not copies or replicas of self (Shirley, 2008; Willard, 2010). For that reason, focusing on a relationship with Jesus first (Ferguson, 2012) is a foundational part of discipleship.

The proximal development zone reveals the gap between what a student can independently replicate and what they need support with to be successful (Crain, 2005). As an upper elementary student prepares to move away from elementary school, the gap of dependence decreases as students develop independence. However, support is still needed in the upper elementary years. Concerning discipleship, a fourth- or fifth-grade student may replicate apart

from the one who was modeling and teaching. Some students seem to lose focus on spiritual matters as they seek to understand things from a worldlier stance (Barna Group, 2009). However, with spiritual growth, this process (Kaiser, 2015; Mohler, 2016) will only occur naturally through a relationship with Jesus.

As Bonhoeffer (2001) stated, "Christianity without discipleship is Christianity without Christ" (p. 17). Following Jesus is an essential step in faith and spiritual development (Carson, 2014; Loewen, 2016). John 15:5 points to dependence on Christ: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me, you can do nothing" (NIV). Discipleship places an intentional focus on reinforcing identity and equipping students to honor Him now while focusing on eternity (Cox & Peck, 2018) as being sanctified to become more like Jesus. Our sinful nature makes this intentional relationship focus challenging (Pue, 2021). This is a process that takes time and intentionality.

Vygotsky acknowledged that learning happens automatically through maturation, yet he also emphasized the importance of social interaction with someone more knowledgeable (Crain, 2005). The MKO transfers concepts and skills by intentionally modeling and providing opportunities for the other to practice applying said skills and concepts with intentionality. This process of modeling started with Jesus (Allotta, 2013; Keinath, 2001; Pazmino, 2008) as he intentionally called his disciples to follow him. It is essential to point out that Jesus knew each disciple well, and he was able to meet them right where they were in the growth process. All disciples followed Jesus and witnessed his intentional modeling, yet not all replicated precisely the same.

Vygotsky's theories impact teaching and transferring content and skills during certain times in student growth. The ZPD is the ideal time for learners to move toward independence

(Estep, 2002). Since discipleship is a developmental process, Vygotsky's theory of proximal development helps justify why this research is essential. It is important to note that though a child may know concepts or skills, knowledge alone will not automatically lead to transfer (Burggraff, 2015; Rupcic, 2018). In the proximal development zone, the amount of support required to follow through is crucial (Devries, 2000; Estep, 2002).

To better understand fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived experiences in a Christian elementary school, an assessment of biblical knowledge is not enough (Estep, 2002; Graham, 2009) to measure spiritual maturity or growth. It is common for schools to assess student spiritual growth with a focus on performance and checklists (Bradfield, 2014). However, assessing spiritual growth can be challenging to measure. It is easier to measure biblical knowledge through assessment than it is to measure individual student spiritual growth (Jolliffe, 2014). For example, classic discipleship is most often linked to a commitment to mentoring, Bible study, memory verses, and focuses on curriculum and programs (Hull, 2006). Focus on programs does not address discipleship concerning intentional relationships (Campolongo, 2009). Observations, evidence, and opportunities to independently transfer (Francis, 2019) or multiply as a disciple with limited assistance from another person is an essential measure of an application of the discipleship process (Estep, 2002). This type of transfer is often best supported through scaffolding and observation (Estep, 2002). Specific methods or opportunities are provided with direct support through modeling relationships (Allotta, 2013; Beagles, 2012; Crain, 2005; Willard, 2009). The amount of support gradually tapers off as the student takes more ownership and begins to replicate (Estep, 2002; Francis, 2019), independent of the teacher or mentor. Scaffolding should intentionally include opportunities for students to be exposed to information and skills at a slightly higher level each time to ensure that they are in the proximal

development zone (Estep, 2002). This process of spiritual formation (Vanhoozer, 2015) takes

intentionality (Keeley, 2008).

Discipleship involves training and transfer of knowledge, rather than compartmentalizing

in one area of life (Cox & Peck, 2018). Training is often simple modeling of the expected

outcome as one person models and the other person observes (Adams, 2017; B. Hull, 2006;

Willard, 2009), much like how Jesus modeled for his disciples. This modeling from Jesus led to

a partnership between Jesus and his disciples and later independent transfer, which often leads to

multiplication or reproduction. Following this model, over time, schools can implement Truth in

non-compartmentalized methods that infiltrate all areas of education. The intentional transfer

can impact retention and dedication to the church beyond high school and can increase the

impact on future generations.

For churches and schools, there is an understanding that Jesus modeled making disciples

through the preaching and intentionally emphasizing small group relationships (Allotta, 2013;

Malphurs, 2009; Pazmino, 2008). Christian resources and literature often focus on the

community and discipleship that occurs through such small group relationships. Since sin

entered the world, the broken relationship is restored through Christ alone. It is through

relationships that the follower becomes more like the one who leads in the relationship.

Likewise, Vygotsky focused on the interactions between people and the shared experiences of

those interactions, which leads to higher thinking skills and independence of application (Fani &

Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007).

Understanding the importance of discipleship during the upper elementary years has

impacted the plan for this study of fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived experiences. The focus

on fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived experiences can also be supported by James Fowler's

(1995) faith development theory that emphasizes the stages of spiritual maturity. Unlike

Vygotsky, Fowler focused on traditional linear development (Estep, 2002). Between preschool

and middle school, also known as Stage 2 of faith development, children understand the world

more logically and begin to understand and accept ideas shared through relationships (Fowler,

1995). This stage is on the brink of the stage where children may rely on their church, school,

family, or other institutions to provide spiritual stability for individuals (Allotta, 2013).

Understanding the lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students may help to

impact the 40% of students who have doubted biblical truths during middle school (Ham &

Beemer, 2009). At the middle school level, students begin to seek more individuality. Though

Fowler spoke of growth in stages, there is an understanding that the length of the stage of

development may vary from individual to individual. In addition to the stages of development,

Fowler's research also supported the understanding that the individual's age may vary from stage

to stage, depending on various lived experiences of individuals involved (Fowler & Dell, 2006).

Therefore, it is beneficial to learn more about upper elementary students' lived experiences to

understand discipleship better.

The process of Fowler's theory is based on formation instead of completion (Cox &

Peck, 2018; Willard, 2002), which aligns with spiritual growth. Acknowledging the variance in

spiritual maturity and development stage is critical to understand as schools emphasize

individual learners (Cobb, 2014) through various experiences (Mohler, 2016). However,

focusing exclusively on life stages can be detrimental if not understood within the confines of

transformation to become more like Christ through spiritual formation (Blount, 2018; Nason,

2019). The emerging windows of time are essential for educators seeking to promote growth and

develop spiritual maturity. During elementary, students are most impressionable before the teen

years (Moll, 2014; Tough, 2012). The most impressionable times are important for relational

impact through discipleship.

     As upper elementary students are preparing to transition to middle school, where peer

relations will have a significant impact, schools need to acknowledge that discipleship is a

continuous process rather than a one-time program (B. Hull, 2006; Mullett, 2015/2016).

Through experiences, development of gifts, and emphasis on community, disciples have

resources to introduce the truths of following Jesus through discipleship. When elementary

students enroll in middle school, spiritual perspectives are primarily formed, and becoming a

Christian is highest during school age (Barna Group, 2017; Culbertson, 2015). This information

places importance on the discipleship process in spiritual formation.

     The process of discipleship involves internal changes as individuals progress in their

faith, which can be identified as spiritual formation and maturation in the discipleship process

(Adams, 2017; Bonhoeffer, 2001; Fowler, 1995; B. Hull, 2006; Sire, 2015; Willard, 2005).

Spiritual formation occurs as students are supported as they grow in Christ (Howard, 2008), and

individual spiritual development can be underdeveloped (Arnold, 2012). Linked with

Vygotsky's theory of development, spiritual formation and development are contingent upon

intentional instruction through social interaction (Estep, 2002).

Related Literature

     The related literature includes key components of the discipleship phenomenon. The

literature outlines the impact of discipleship through relationships, individual uniqueness,

Christian education, the church, Christian schools, and partnership. Literature related to

discipleship emphasizes social interaction and the impact of individual experiences.

Discipleship through Relationships

Students ranked parental and peer relationships as the most influential aspect impacting them (Barna, 1999) and the top three factors in spiritual transformation (Marrah & Hall, 2010/2011). Through relationships, the vision for discipleship begins to align with the purpose of the Great Commission (Mullett, 2015/2016). As various relationships impact students, the literature focuses on the ever-changing physical and spiritual development of students. This spiritual maturity casts the vision for individuals to be disciples that make new disciples through interactions with others (Beagles, 2012; Nelson & Appel, 2000; Matt. 28:18-20; Mark 16:15-18; Luke 24:47). The process seems to multiply through relationships and aligns with the commission for Christians to be followers of Christ who influence others to be followers of Jesus.

The process of spiritual discipleship is first focused on the individual's decision to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ through life transformation (Adams, 2017; Barna Group, 2015; Bradfield, 2014; Espinoza & Johnson-Miller, 2013; Pazmino, 2008). Likewise, individual students must be willing to follow and be an active part of following Christ daily and investing in the discipleship process and incorporating disciplines to maximize spiritual growth (Simmons, 2012). Otherwise, spiritual maturity may take more time to progress. Students thrive through their community (Beagles, 2012; Marrah & Hall, 2010/2011). This process of spiritual maturity is continuous when the individuals involved continue to grow and be transformed through development and relationships (Benson, 2001; Hendricks, 1987; Kaiser, 2015). It makes sense that relationships play such an essential part of making disciples. We know that Jesus modeled that so well for us. God is relational in His very nature, and because we are made in His image, we are created to connect with Him and others through relationships (Hall, 2012).

Like Jesus' development explained in Luke 2:52, growth includes wisdom, stature, and favor with both God and men. This transformational process involves meaningful interactions involving the whole person, including intellectual, physical, spiritual, social, and emotional growth that depends heavily on communication and relationships with others by meeting one another where they are (Hendricks, 1987; Nason, 2019; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). In the postmodern society, where social media and technology have impacted interactions, children are searching for authentic relationships where people can be real and accepted for who they are (Allotta, 2018). An individual's influence upon another person is both receptive and expressive. There is a great need for the one being a disciple to be known for who they are as an individual to develop a connection (Harley, 2011; Myers, 2010) and increase transparency.

For Christians, spiritual transformation starts with the gospel and understanding of unconditional love that focuses on individual growth (Brock, 2014; Keeley, 2008). Understanding that spiritual growth is a process means understanding that the development will vary from person to person. This is important to understand as the discipleship process continues. Though the seasons change, the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus (Bonhoeffer, 2001; B. Hull, 2006; Moore, 2014; Pazmino, 2008; Wilkins, 2010) and the importance of obedience to the unchanging Word of God become the common ground for development (Bonhoeffer, 2001) that is integrated into all areas of life (Simmons, 2012/2013). It is the personal relationship with Jesus that starts the sanctification process as we become more like him.

His love for us is unconditional, and we know that he loves us right where we are, and his Truth enables us to have peace and hope. Through discipleship with others, this unconditional love is only possible through his power (Adams, 2017; Bonhoeffer, 2001). It is understood that

educators in a Christian school must be followers of Christ and grow in their faith to disciple others (Allotta, 2013; Blount, 2018; Chandler, 2015).

Discipleship through Individual Uniqueness

With the definition of discipleship linked to individual gifts, talents, and abilities, it would be wise for schools to intentionally focus on individuals and ways to encourage individual growth and opportunities to make a difference with unique giftedness (Chandler, 2015; Kinnaman, 2011). Literature links biblical knowledge, spiritual disciplines, a Christian worldview, and general discipleship as universal principles of Christian education (Blount, 2018; Nason, 2019). Discipleship involves guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities in fulfillment of Christ's mission (Earley & Dempsey, 2013). This is important as we understand that students will eventually leave the school and impact the world through individual gifts, talents, and abilities (Vanhoozer, 2015). New opportunities will emerge, and the possibility for impacting the world for Christ becomes more of a reality.

Discipleship begins with individual student lives being transformed and continues with the multiplication of new disciples with an eternal Kingdom impact. Discipleship is the answer to students' understanding of how their faith can impact the broader context of life (Barke, 2014; Gibson, 2015; Whitney, 1991). With the goal of disciples making disciples as a lifelong process, discipleship requires spiritual growth and application of individual uniqueness and influence. Though God uses many circumstances to move in people's lives, He most often uses personal relationships (Myers, 2010). Authentic relationships are formed through transparency and understanding the uniqueness of all individuals, and these relationships begin at birth. When a person's talents and individual personality are understood, the relationship is more likely to

foster strengths so that God-given uniqueness can impact the community. Vulnerability, transparency, and openness build authentic relationships guided by trustworthiness that increases influence and spiritual growth (B. Hull, 2006). Such relationships and interactions diversify experience as people learn from one another (Estep, 2002; Francis, 2019; Keinath, 2001). Modeling the way that God relates through unconditional love and an understanding of unique characteristics, people will have an opportunity to be drawn to Jesus with a focus on restoration through a personal relationship with Him (Russ, 2013; Schultz, 2002). Developing individual uniqueness (Bartel, 2014; Beagles, 2012; Bunge, 2008) is an investment that has the potential to make a significant impact on the world for the Kingdom's sake (Schultz, 2002).

Because not all students and families are the same, churches and schools need to seek to meet each person's individual needs while also meeting the needs of a group of people. This can present a challenge for schools and classrooms. Students will benefit from an individualized approach to discipleship (Allotta, 2018; Collins, 2013; Gibson, 2015; Johannessen, 2015; Van Brummelen, 2009). Individual experiences (Chandler, 2015) may vary from peer to peer, even when they are in the same place at the same time. It is essential to realize that despite the various experiences, intentionality with the same mission and purpose (Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994) will likely result in the most growth. Discipleship involves a spiritual formation process (Estep, 2002; Hiebert, 1992; Keely, 2000), so the primary emphasis is on the foundational experiences (Lawson, 2010; Marrah & Hall, 2010/2011) provided by Christian elementary school. It can be challenging to quantify discipleship experiences (Marrah, 2012/2013), which is why this study focuses on fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived experiences.

Discipleship through Christian Education

Research of discipleship in elementary schools revealed literature linked with Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI), a Protestant accrediting agency whose goal is to advance excellence in Christian education (Marrah & Hall, 2010/2011). Advancing excellence includes a look at the discipleship process of schools (Allotta, 2013; Pazmino, 2008; Wringe, 2009). There is a connection between the Great Commission and the mission of Christian schools as well as spiritual disciplines (Bonhoeffer, 2001; Earley & Dempsey, 2013). Discipleship involves teaching all that Jesus has commanded, which has a direct correlation between both teaching and learning (Alleman, Glanzer, & Guthrie, 2016; Moroney, 2014). Various studies emphasize teacher responsibility for modeling spiritual qualities, interacting to build rapport, and engaging students in development (Arnold, 2012; Linton, 2015; MacArthur, 1989; Schultz, 2002).

The meaning of the word discipleship seems to vary in current literature, making the term somewhat ambiguous. Christian educators may read about discipleship in scholarly literature, popular books, and, most often, the Bible. A review of the literature supports this idea that the term discipleship is ambiguous, and that Dempsey (Earley & Dempsey, 2013) informed this framework's definition of discipleship. For this study, discipleship is defined as "the process of guiding individual disciples to grow in spiritual maturity and discover the use of their gifts, talents, and abilities in fulfillment of Christ's mission" (Earley & Dempsey, 2013, p. 8). This definition, combined with the meaning conveyed in Scripture, means discipleship is rooted heavily in relationships. This takes a process of continual transformation as individuals become disciples who are more like Jesus as they develop spiritually and, over time, lead others to

continue the process of disciple-making (Adams, 2017; Burggraff, 2015; Gangel & Wilhoit, 1994; Willard, 2009).

The word discipleship is used 230 times by Jesus and writers of the gospel. Being a disciple and making disciples is the way that Jesus modeled his mission through spiritual growth and growth of the church (Allotta, 2018; Cox & Peck, 2018; B. Hull, 2006). Through the partnership with the church and families, Christian education seeks to change thinking and behaviors through transformation, developing a biblical worldview, character, and ultimately a surrendered life of obedience to Christ supported by intentional relationships (McDowell & Bellis, 2006; Summit Ministries, 2008). Simply put, it takes learning more about Jesus to increase learning through Christian education, which occurs through the church, home, and school. This places a high need for Jesus to be the center of all that is done in Christian schools, the home, and the church.

Discipleship through the Church

The Great Commission emphasizes the importance of making disciples and guides making disciples through various institutions, such as the home, church, and school, and gives purpose to discipleship (Kaiser, 2015; Pazmino, 2008; Russ, 2013; Van Brummelen, 2009). Current literature prominently focuses on discipleship in the church as a leader in spiritual development (Beagles, 2012; Cox & Peck, 2018; Smith & Denton, 2005). Just as the Great Commission can be taught and modeled through various relationships in various settings, the importance of a partnership between all institutions is revealed. The church is an integral part of the process (Allotta, 2013; Beagles, 2012). Most Christian schools acknowledge the importance of unanimous support and partnership between the home, school, and church concerning student discipleship (Barna Group, 2015). Because the family is the most prominent decision-maker

concerning both church and school selection, parents have the primary responsibility of ensuring alignment and partnership between the home, church, and school (Bunnell, 2016; Steenburg, 2011).

With church forming one of the triangular institutions to support discipleship, worship plays a vital role in the discipleship process. For this reason, many Christian schools expect regular church attendance to promote spiritual growth. In addition, most Christian schools provide opportunities for students to experience worship (Jolliffe, 2014) while on campus. Worship requires unity (Glassford, 2016; Keeley, 2008; Whitney, 1991) and demonstrates individual love for the Lord. Ephesians 4:4–6 approaches unity as "one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all" (NIV). This unity supports the connections required for worship (Allotta, 2013; Jolliffe, 2014). Though worship experiences may be provided and encouraged, authentic worship does not look the same for all students (Adams, 2017; Allotta, 2013). It is essential to discover the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students concerning the unity of worship. These discoveries have the potential to impact Christian elementary schools concerning discipleship and worship.

It is essential to understand that the church is the body of believers and is not merely defined as a building (Nelson & Appel, 2000; Shirley, 2008). Discipleship takes daily dedication and understanding of the process concerning personal spiritual growth (Barna, 2001) through church members. Discipleship and Christianity are embedded within one another and require the transfer of biblical Truth through application into everyday life (Shirley, 2008) through modeling, which keeps relationships at the forefront of the discipleship process. This idea also

supports the thought that the church leaves the building and goes into various areas of the world to spread the gospel truth of making disciples as instructed in the Great Commission.

Understanding that discipleship occurs daily leads to an understanding that this process occurs within the church as a group of believers who influence people and culture (Kinnaman, 2011). Even the very act of baptism requires a relationship with others. Baptism and teaching obedience to all Jesus has commanded are essential ingredients of disciple-making (Campolongo, 2009; Dreyer & Hermans, 2014; Earley & Dempsey, 2013; Klima & Repetti, 2008; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). It will help Christians better understand the lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students to gain a better understanding of the influence on people and culture.

In the church setting, discipleship primarily occurs in group settings such as a worship service (Keeley, 2008) and small group classes (Jankiewicz, 2011). Typically, the message is delivered with little opportunity for private sharing of application and reflection. There is little opportunity in the church setting for individuals to share the gospel and encourage spiritual growth through direct mentorship involving an intentional disciple-focused relationship (J. E. Hull, 2003; Marshall & Payne, 2009; Pazmino, 2008). It is when individuals leave the church building that most mentorship takes place (Bonhoeffer, 2001; Russ, 2013). For families, this happens first in the home (Bunge, 2008; Bunnell, 2016; Ham & Beemer, 2009). Mentorship most often takes place with individual relationships at the workplace for those who work outside the home (Dempsey, 2008). Some relationships may initially form due to a connection of commonalities (Collinson, 2005). Still, it takes an intentional awareness of individual differences to form bonds of connection (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Relationships focused on an understanding of distinct individuals are an essential part of the discipleship process (Bartel,

2014; Bunge, 2008), no matter where the relationship occurs (Beagles, 2012). This differentiation (Bunge, 2008; Chandler, 2015) can become a springboard for encouraging spiritual growth.

Individualizing experiences, depending on the individual's spiritual growth, are necessary to differentiate the experience. God may be emphasized at the beginning and the end of the experience, but it is the middle that needs attention (J. E. Hull, 2003). What happens in the middle? This requires an understanding of everyone and meeting them where they are (Jolliffe, 2014) through intentional individualized discipleship (Mullett, 2015/2016). Connections and relationships are instrumental in advancing the Kingdom.

Discipleship through Christian Schools

When seeking to understand discipleship better, many resources are available concerning churches, yet little is available that relates directly to Christian elementary schools. Christian education leaders, along with church leaders, noted that a difference could be made when discipleship of students continues in Christian schools, as is emphasized in churches (Schultz, 2002). It will be helpful for parents, churches, and schools to better understand the impact that discipleship has on students leaving elementary school before they move on to middle school and later high school (Kaiser, 2015). A thorough review of the research was conducted to identify the studies that explore the discipleship phenomenon in Christian education. The following research focuses on the specific impact of relationships on discipleship, with emphasis on upper elementary age students.

Christian schools are driven by a mission and vision that focuses on spiritually developing students to impact the world through unique gifts and abilities (Allotta, 2013; Blount, 2018; Cox, 2011; Frye, 2019; Smith, 2009). Intentional relationship development and the

importance of modeling faith are an integral part of spiritual growth and discipleship (Boerema, 2011; Bunnell, 2016). This includes intentionality so that students may understand the practice of daily life rather than view discipleship as an independent department that does not transfer (Burggraff, 2015; Chandler, 2015; Cox, 2011). There is no doubt that discipleship opportunities are strengthened through partnership with families (Bunnell, 2016) and the local church (Dooley, 2012; B. Hull, 2006) so that students will have multiple opportunities to learn and implement spiritual discipleship aspects.

Social interaction (Beagles, 2012; Estep, 2002) and development (Blount, 2018; Estep, 2002) guide the process of discipleship and leads to lifelong learning. Upper elementary students, fourth and fifth graders, are the most likely to have experienced discipleship relationships (Blount, 2018; Fowler, 1995) focused on intentionality and collaboration in the elementary school setting, before transitioning to the next school division. There is little literature supporting how discipleship experiences have influenced the students' spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools. More research is needed to understand the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools. This information may help make connections between discipleship opportunities (Mullett, 2015/2016) and a possible connection to why nearly three out of five teenagers leave the church after high school (Barna Group, 2011). Christian elementary schools have a unique calling and the potential to positively impact this trend by targeting specific gaps or needs specific to fourth- and fifth-grade students.

The literature emphasizes the importance of relationships (Beagles, 2012; Estep, 2002) on individual discipleship. Sharing biblical knowledge is an essential aspect of Christian education (Allotta, 2018; Arnold, 2012; Benson, 2001; Blount, 2018; Eckel, 2003). However,

when the emphasis is on discipleship, there is no separation between knowing Jesus through a personal relationship and knowing about Jesus (Blount, 2018). With an earlier emphasis on the Great Commission, making disciples is often a mission of Christian schools, and school curriculum should be impacted by the Great Commission (Van Brummelen, 2009). Finding out more about the lived experiences of upper elementary students may help to shine a light on the students' understanding of knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus and the impact this has on the high commission.

The Great Commission creates a cycle of being a disciple that makes disciples that perpetuates new believers. Is it possible for a student to make a follower of Christ without being a follower? Disciple-making is Christianity and taking Christ out of Christianity is impossible (Allotta, 2018; Van Dyk, 2000). Redemption of Christ for all people is essential to discipleship (Pue, 2021). Intentional sharing of the gospel through sharing Scripture is an integral part of sharing Truth. Being able to articulate the gospel is foundational, yet most Christians are intimidated by this (Barna Group, 2017; Reid, 2017). What does sharing of the gospel look like for fourth- and fifth-grade students in elementary schools?

Sharing the gospel and nurturing discipleship is rooted in relationships (Gibson, 2015), and God calls and equips Christians to lead others to a closer relationship with Him (Van Brummelen, 2009). Relationships, where one pours into the life of another, render an emotional connection between the two as feelings will impact the message given and received (Kessler, 2002; Wringe, 2009). For students in elementary, their lived experiences are most often connected between themselves and the MKO. The MKO may be the teacher or a more spiritually mature peer.

Discipleship through Partnership

Spiritual growth encouraged by most Christian schools' mission (Giller, 2012; Graustein & Schultz, 1995) is a driving difference when parents make a school selection for their child(ren). It is through communication and partnership that parents maximize spiritual development in children through various relationships that foster relationships and increase dependence on God (Adams, 2017; Barna, 2001; Beagles, 2012; Collinson, 2005; Dollahite & Thatcher, 2008; Jankiewicz, 2011; Sandage, 2006; Shirley, 2008). Though Scripture is clear that parents are the primary influencers of discipleship for their child (Bunnell, 2016; Jankiewicz, 2011; Shirley, 2008), parents are unable to lead children past their spiritual development stage (Barna, 2001; Jankiewicz, 2011; Shirley, 2008; Smith & Denton, 2005; Willard, 2014). The same is true for teachers and peers who may be in a discipleship relationship with the student. Spiritual growth in Christian elementary schools is linked with the impact and experiences of various peers and teachers to enhance spiritual maturity, which models redemption past relational brokenness of the individual (Barna Group, 2009; Blount, 2018; Finn, Swezey, & Warren, 2010; Knight, 2006; Ng, 2012; Pazmino, 2008).

Families who have chosen Christian education for their children often expect that the school is fulfilling their mission (Christensen, Horn, & Johnson, 2011; Klima & Repetti, 2008; Wood & Mayo-Wilson, 2012). This opportunity for discipleship rides on relationships and partnerships that are focused on spiritual growth. The key elements taken from the Great Commission include a personal relationship with Jesus, obedience through baptism, and ongoing teaching students to observe commandments found in Scripture (Pue, 2021). This study may increase the impact of discipleship as related to elementary Christian education and positively impact the partnership between the home, school, and family.

Spiritual Growth

Individual spiritual growth is foundational to the discipleship phenomenon. The literature emphasized the impact of spiritual growth through experiences, spiritual disciplines including prayer, spiritual gifts, service, social interaction, and opportunities for growth and transfer. Understanding that everyone's spiritual formation varies, Christian schools seek to assess spiritual growth of students.

Education is focused on growth. Christian education is concerned explicitly with spiritual formation and shaping through a focus on the process with a vision for transfer and potential impact on others, which carries over into adulthood (Keeley, 2008; Shepson, 2012; Smith, 2009). Scriptural knowledge impacts the application of Truth in discipleship (Kinnaman, 2011; Willard, 2014; Zacharias, 2007). Bible verse memorization is an example. However, unless the meaning is understood and applicable (Mohler, 2016), the verse may soon be forgotten instead of being implemented to glorify Jesus. Christian schools that provide opportunities for students to apply God's Word, in addition to knowledge alone, will help students to live out their faith (Cobb, 2014) and potentially develop additional disciples. This leads me to wonder about the intentionality of leadership training. For students to impact their world and for the process of disciples making disciples to continue, is there an emphasis on multiplication through leading others to Him?

Bible class is a regular part of the schedule in Christian schools, which focuses on Bible stories and most often has a life application truth or connection to aid in a better understanding of God's character and nature (Allotta, 2018; Jankiewicz, 2011). Parents and churches are also avenues for frequent sharing of God's Word through storytelling and application (Bunnell, 2016). The Bible may be read, understood, and applied as individuals read (Giller, 2012). Still, biblical

illiteracy has been noted as an issue (Mohler, 2016). I cannot help but wonder if awareness of the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students at Christian schools will lead to a greater understanding of the potential impact of teachers and peers on the understanding and application of Scripture (Cobb, 2014) into beliefs and behaviors.

        Spiritual growth through individual spiritual disciplines. Disciplines are an essential part of the discipleship process as Jesus himself modeled as a lifelong process of development (Bonhoeffer, 2001; Smith, 2009; Wesley, 1991; Whitney, 1991). This process includes being a follower as well as a learner through disciplines that impact spiritual transformation (Blount, 2018; Dooley, 2012; Vanhoozer, 2015). In and of themselves, practicing spiritual disciplines is not considered discipleship (Bartel, 2014; Willard, 2009). Reading the Bible, prayer, and worship are essential primary disciplines, yet there is more to discipleship than practices (Blount, 2018; Bonhoeffer, 2001). The relational aspect of education is fundamental.

        Most often, there is a partnership for spiritual growth built upon trust between the school, parents, and students that continues to point to the importance of spiritual disciplines in the discipleship process. In the classroom, students spend the most time with the teacher and their peers. The teacher's character and nature, specifically the spiritual growth of the teacher, is an integral part of the discipleship process (Alarid, 2015; Allotta, 2018). Spiritual growth and accountability for the teacher and the student are the most effective way to fulfill Christian education's mission through discipleship. This places a heavy emphasis on the Word of God through study and application: "Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth" (2 Timothy 2:15, NASB).

Spiritual growth through interacting with Scripture. Understanding that cultural interpretation may cause an error in sharing the intended message of Scripture (Frame, 2010), reading and understanding the contextual meaning of the Bible in its entirety are essential. This includes an intentional focus on the Author's intended message in collaboration with the reader's application from an individual frame of reference (Duvall & Hays, 2012). This frame of reference is connected to the spiritual growth of the individuals involved. Knowing the Truths found in the Bible develops discernment and impacts worldview (Bunge, 2008; Cobb, 2014; Mohler, 2016). Relationships with the MKOs can build a greater understanding of the Scripture in context with Truth that will guide the discipleship relationship to promote growth through obedience to Christ. Interaction with the text cannot be neglected (Barna Group, 2017; Blount, 2018; Burggraff, 2015; Chandler, 2015).

Spiritual growth through prayer. In addition to reading the Bible to glean spiritual truths, prayer is a spiritual discipline most often emphasized in homes and churches. Many people understand how Scripture can be used to disciple students; many do not know how to teach prayer (Whitney, 1991). It will be helpful to find out about the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students concerning prayer. Prayer is a relational experience with God. It is increasingly important to focus on the importance of relationships, rather than teaching faith as intellectual, to develop hearts through faith in Jesus (Hall, 2012; McDowell & Bellis, 2006; Smith, 2009).

Spiritual growth through implementation of spiritual gifts. Considering the relational process, discipleship in upper elementary grades provides another opportunity to impact and transform the home, church, and school (Grenz, 2001). The idea of making disciples who then share Truth with others and begin to disciple others emphasizes the relational nature of

discipleship and emphasizes the importance of individual gifts and abilities. By providing

avenues for students to identify their spiritual gifts first, Christian schools will be able to equip

individual students better to serve and impact their world for Jesus (Moore, 2014; Pazmino,

2008; Wolterstorff, 2002). Scripture and an understanding of voluntary transfer give purpose to

focus on spiritual gifts (Moore, 2014; Pazmino, 2008). Ephesians 2:10 states, "For we are his

workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared ahead of time for us

to do" (CSB). Teaching others to use their gifts to glorify God is an essential aspect of

discipleship, demonstrating formation rather than acquired knowledge (Smith, 2009). It is

critical that experiences are provided for children to discover their unique gifts and abilities at an

early age (Bradfield, 2014; Lawson, 2010; Pazmino, 2008) and the importance of modeling and

providing opportunities for living out obedience to Jesus (Blount, 2018; Willard, 2010).

Guidance in discovering and refining God-given talents and passions can help students to invest

in their individual life calling (Chandler, 2015).

      Spiritual growth through service. The understanding of individual spiritual gifts

(Chandler, 2014; Murray, Plante, Cox, & Owen, 2015; Smith, 2009) is important for Christians

of all ages. The potential to further deepen the roots of individual ministry can be strengthened

with an emphasis on spiritual gifts at an early age by serving others (Murray et al., 2015).

Serving others is a very relational endeavor that becomes another avenue for faith and spiritual

growth to mature (Barna, 2001; B. Hull, 2006). Christians modeling service and focusing on His

example will provide an opportunity to combat the current self-focused culture of today and have

the potential to positively impact the home, school, church, and workplace (Burggraff, 2015;

Garber, 2014; B. Hull, 2006; Veas & Veas, 2018). When service to others through relationships

and intentional discipleship begins in the elementary years, the intention is to increase the

likelihood of lifelong service (Bradfield, 2014; Pazmino, 2008; Willard, 2009).

Developmentally, this desire to interact with peers through collaborative service increases in

upper elementary ages (Frye, 2019; Gibson, 2015). Focusing on the service opportunities and

lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students may impact the students' discipleship

growth.

       Spiritual growth through social interaction. Through relationships, students grow and

impact spiritual growth in others through relationships and social interactions (Hall, 2010).

Development appears first on the social level and later on the individual levels (Kozulin, 2007).

The literature gap reveals a need to understand better the relational impact of discipleship on the

spiritual growth of upper elementary students. The examination of peers and teachers impacting

discipleship in Christian elementary schools gives a better understanding of how social

interaction impacts spiritual maturity and development.

       The concept of discipleship-focused relationships seeks to bring about a new way of

thinking from the MKO and has the potential to involve indoctrination in a negative light

(Wringe, 2009). Therefore, the MKO must have consistent spiritual growth and foundation in

God's Word to transfer to the student (Beagles, 2012; Pazmino, 2008). Unlike other content

areas, it is difficult to formally assess transfer with intentionality into the student's actual spiritual

growth (Marrah, 2012/2013). It is accessible through checklist tasks (Steibel, 2010; Willard,

2014) such as reading the Bible consistently, praying, and church attendance, but the increase in

faith, obedience, and dependence on God is not easily measured. Often, self-assessment (Allotta,

2013; Blount, 2018) of spiritual growth is the most accurate picture. Still, it is difficult to

determine if the assessment is feelings-based or determined by comparing personal life with

Truth (Blount, 2018). Is the student becoming more like Jesus (Allotta, 2013; Blount, 2018;

Burggraff, 2015; Chandler, 2014; Cox & Peck, 2018)? Is it possible that social interactions can demonstrate spiritual growth? "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35, NIV). It is through loving Christ first that students can know how to love unconditionally. This is a process that does not happen overnight. There may be times when the student lapses back into old patterns, making spiritual growth a fluid situation (Adams, 2017), which can make social interactions an inconsistent way to assess spiritual growth. Observation alone can make this challenging (Cox & Peck, 2018; Marrah, 2012/2013) since spiritual growth occurs inside a person, and we can only observe outward actions and words. Still, it is common for spiritual growth to be emulated through imitation (Nason, 2019; Reid, 2017; Russ, 2013; Schultz, 2002). Imitation can often be viewed as a positive result of accepting and desiring to imitate the most likable attributes (Schultz, 2002; Shirley, 2008; Simmons, 2012; Steibel, 2010). The purpose of discipleship is to develop followers of Christ (Allotta, 2013; Bonhoeffer, 2001; Bowland, 1999; Coleman, 1993), not followers of people. Too much focus on social interactions has the potential to displace the priority of purpose concerning discipleship (Allotta, 2018; Beagles, 2012).

Spiritual growth through opportunities for transfer. Elementary schools approach students' spiritual growth in a variety of ways (Burggraff, 2015; Hilgeman, 2010). Often, Bible class, devotionals, prayer, opportunities for missions, and chapel are the most frequent opportunities to encourage the spiritual growth of elementary students (Allotta, 2018; Gibson, 2015). With research pointing to the importance of small groups on discipleship, it will be beneficial to learn about the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade student experiences within small and large group settings. In such settings, and as students continue to mature into individuals that impact the world, the biblical worldview (Glanzer & Alleman, 2018) will impact

how individuals view circumstances and situations in the world. This is most impacted by the view of the Bible as being the authoritative Truth and the lens by which all things are viewed and all questions are asked (Wood, 2008). Lifelong learners are developed through asking questions and seeking Truth. Students can then use their faith and knowledge to continue to be sanctified and to impact others through discipleship.

Spiritual growth and multiplication are designed to move beyond the home, church, and school. Sports, music, and other extracurricular opportunities can be redeemed for discipleship (Allotta, 2018; B. Hull, 2006; Willard, 2009). Students have opportunities to be disciples that make disciples through extracurricular events as well as curriculum and relationships (Allotta, 2013; Cox, 2011). Peers often impact one another through investing in one another through discipleship opportunities (Allotta, 2018; Loewen, 2016; Pazmino, 2008). Peer leadership is a natural outcome of discipleship and ensures multiplication (Barna, 2001). It will be beneficial to learn more about fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived experiences concerning peer interactions. After reviewing the literature, a gap in the literature reveals a need for more qualitative research related to the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools. This study addresses the problem of discovering the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students at Christian schools.

Spiritual Growth Assessed

Self-assessment or assessment to determine individuals' spiritual development would be helpful to guide discipleship needs and focus on differentiation. Educators typically seek ways to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning through assessments or surveys. Evaluating spiritual growth and discipleship is needed. However, the evaluation of discipleship through spiritual formation can be challenging to measure (Horsfall, 2014). Avoiding evaluation

due to the challenge can undermine the integrity of discipleship and the schools' mission alignment (Eckel, 2009; McGee, 2012; Stonehouse, 1998). There is a gap in the availability of spiritual assessment tools that can be effectively implemented to gauge spiritual formation and discipleship impact in schools (Eckel, 2009; Mohler, 2016). Understanding through information gleaned from foundational questions in this study may provide insight for intentionality to meet individual needs and differentiate discipleship experiences.

Though formal assessments for discipleship are not familiar, the spiritual formation of individuals is most often evidenced by the fruit of individual lives, as indicators of worldview change and spiritual growth (Chandler, 2014; Sire, 2015; Smith, 2009) and the healthiness of their relationships with others (Mohler, 2016). Focusing on the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools requires intentional questioning related to relationships and individual development. Understanding how peers and teachers have impacted discipleship for upper elementary students is an essential guiding question.

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

Research supports discipleship as an essential factor in individual spiritual growth. However, this research provides additional information regarding lived experiences of discipleship in Christian elementary schools, which has the potential to impact home, church, and school due to the ambiguity of the term *discipleship*. The purpose of the present study was to describe the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in a Christian elementary school. I used a lived experience approach to understand the phenomenon of discipleship. The research presented in this study is only a sample and does not reflect every Christian elementary school. It is also important to note that this study focused on fourth- and

fifth-grade students' lived experiences as communicated through interviews, focus groups, and projective techniques.

Grounded in Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD, this study focused on the impact of relationships with others at an influential time in the lives of upper elementary (Devries, 2000; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007). Students may practice spiritual growth independently from others. However, the literature reveals that relationships with others have the potential to impact intentional discipleship (Murray et al., 2015). In studying the lived experiences of fourth and fifth graders concerning social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD, parents and educators will develop a greater understanding concerning spiritual growth and discipleship.

Students who are receiving common emphasis on discipleship at school, church, and home are more likely to continue the journey when they leave the stability of those environments (Adams, 2017; Allotta, 2018; Kinnaman, 2011). When spiritual disciplines and the process of discipleship are emphasized in just one institution, the students' experiences may negatively impact their spiritual development and future faith development in the local church (Kinnaman, 2011). Unless authentic in following Christ (Carson, 2014; Graham, 2009), institutions could create a stumbling block for spiritual development (Linton, 2015; Pazmino, 20089). Independent Bible reading, prayer, and other indicators impact spiritual growth, yet peer collaboration and social interactions contribute to increased spiritual development (Danielowich, 2012). Mostly, church and school are extensions of the home, with parents as the primary influencers. The impact of a triangular influence on fourth- and fifth-grade students has the potential to impact decisions made by families, churches, and schools, specifically as it pertains to the phenomenon of discipleship.

Literature regarding discipleship in high schools and through churches is readily available. However, current research does not provide a clear description of the discipleship phenomenon in elementary schools, particularly for students at the end of their elementary journeys. This study will provide useful knowledge concerning the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools with hopes of making positive changes to the discipleship process. The information gleaned has the potential to impact the triangular partnership between the home, church, and school institutions and impact continuous spiritual growth that consistently extends beyond the high school years. This study aimed not to predict outcomes but to interpret the various lived experiences involved with discipleship of students toward spiritual growth. This study address this gap in the literature concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. Discovering the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools may improve the educational and spiritual opportunities while also impacting the home, church, and community.

This chapter explains the methods that were used to complete this transcendental phenomenological study. These methods include why the research design was the best fit for the intended study, the procedures this study followed, how the data were collected, and how the data were analyzed. Finally, trustworthiness and ethical considerations are outlined.

Design

This study used a phenomenological design through qualitative research. This research required a thorough investigation into the varying discipleship experiences of a small population of upper elementary students regarding discipleship, which makes qualitative research the most appropriate. Multiple participants at various Christian elementary schools were used to encourage the holistic exploration of the discipleship phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Rather than focusing on the development of an individual over a determined period, this study sought to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of multiple participants. This research required a thorough investigation into the varying discipleship experiences. The varying impact of relationships upon discipleship experiences was explored. It is understood that the students' experiences were subjective in nature and were gleaned from narrative data, which links this particularly to qualitative measures as opposed to a quantitative approach (Stake, 1995). Patterns

were discovered from the various information gleaned from student interviews, projective techniques, and focus groups and were used to analyze the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013) and discover how discipleship is experienced (Van Manen, 1990). The phenomenon that was examined in this study is the lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools. Through using transcendental phenomenology, I had an opportunity to reach beyond my personal experiences to investigate what it means to be discipled as a fourth- or fifth-grade student in a Christian elementary school. A transcendental phenomenological approach means that this study may influence practice in the field of Christian education.

This specific type of design is appropriate and was selected because of the importance of the process that led to a better understanding of the lived experiences of discipleship concerning the individuals who were involved in this qualitative study. This phenomenological design focused on identifying the essence of discipleship based on available information viewed by individual students (Moustakas, 1994). The students' perceptions were exposed through an intentional focus on their lived experiences (Creswell, 2013; Langdridge, 2007). I gathered information regarding the discipleship experiences of upper elementary students. The transcendental phenomenology of discipleship has been described from the perspectives and reflections of the students who have experienced it, which emerged and led to the crux of encounters (Moustakas, 1994). Transcendental, descriptive phenomenology is a psychological phenomenology where "everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34). This phenomenology was selected because the goal of this study was to examine fourth- and fifth-grade students' lived discipleship experiences. Through this transcendental phenomenological approach, the discipleship phenomenology received focus from descriptions of emerging themes that surfaced from questioning (Moustakas, 1994). The commonly

perceived experiences became generalized descriptions to describe the essence of discipleship in the upper elementary setting. This study may influence Christian elementary school discipleship practices.

Research Questions

CRQ: How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

SQ1: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by peers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

SQ2: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by teachers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

SQ3: How have fourth- and fifth-grade student discipleship experiences influenced spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools?

Setting

Three Christian elementary schools in Kentucky were selected for the study. Multiple schools provided a broader representation for the study. Fourth- and fifth-grade participants were involved in this phenomenological study, which sought to give an in-depth examination of the lived discipleship experiences in Christian elementary schools. The three schools that were selected for this study met the following criteria: (a) Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) member school, (b) offering grades K–5. Schools were required to be accredited by ACSI to keep the comparisons similar as the association is linked to Protestant faith. All three schools were discipleship-based rather than evangelistic in admittance of families to connect the triangular relationship of the home, church, and school. The schools selected

partnered with Christian families, which was based on their published mission statement and enrollment policies.

The selection process for the sites began with a search of the Kentucky ACSI member listing on their website, with a focus on the Louisville area for convenience. During the 2020 school year, there were 47 top private schools in Kentucky belonging to ACSI, serving 11,801 students. There were six ACSI accredited, Christian elementary schools in the Louisville area and three others within a 50-mile radius of Louisville. I served as the principal of one of the schools, which gave a potential for eight ACSI-accredited schools within 50 miles. I made the initial contacts via a phone call and Zoom meeting with a follow-up email to secure the schools agreeing to participate in the study. I obtained consent from the administrators of the site schools (see Appendix D).

Participants

The population for this study consisted of 10 fourth- or fifth-grade students who have experienced discipleship in the selected Christian school settings through criterion sampling. Phenomenologists suggest a sample size of 10–15 participants (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Patton, 2002). Multiple students from multiple schools led to a broader representation. Participants met the three established criteria. First, the students were enrolled in fourth or fifth grade at one of the selected Christian schools. The next requirement was that the student must have experienced discipleship in the elementary school, which according to the definition of discipleship for the purpose of this study includes profession of faith through a personal relationship with Jesus. Finally, there is evidence in the classroom setting of spiritual growth of the student. The administrator at each school gained insight from the classroom teacher to recommend participants who met these three criteria. This purposeful sampling approach made

certain that the participants had experience in the discipleship phenomenon (Patton, 2002). I used a lived experience approach to understand the phenomenon of discipleship. All participants were given pseudonyms throughout the study. My desire was to reveal the students' lived experience and develop a greater understanding of the discipleship phenomenon. Demographic information was gathered to demonstrate maximum variation of the sample. Both male and female fourth- and fifth-grade students with possible variance in years at the school increased transferability.

Procedures

As the interviewer and data collector for this study, I sought approval from Liberty University's Institutional Review Board (see Appendix A). Once approved, elementary Christian school administrators were approached for permission to conduct the study (see Appendix B). After permission was granted (see Appendix D), the administrators were given the participant criterion and made recommendations for participants. School principals collaborated with classroom teachers to submit student recommendations via a password protected Google Form (see Appendix C). Parents were notified of the study expectations and permission to participate was given by parents. I provided them with details including the purpose of my study, ethical principles of research (Moustakas, 1994), explanation of my role as the primary researcher, and participant responsibilities. Once participants were identified, permission to participate and informed consent agreement (see Appendix F) were obtained and data were collected through face-to-face interviews. An acceptance email was sent to the participants' parents (see Appendix E). Interviews were scheduled with identified and approved students. The school calendar and individual student availability were considered when scheduling the interviews. Interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes. Interviews were audiotaped and

transcribed verbatim. A pseudonym was assigned to participants to ensure confidentiality.

Interview questions were asked in the order prescribed (see Appendix G). However, I occasionally asked additional questions as prompted by the conversations. Interviews were held during the school within a 2-week period in an area with minimal distractions as determined by the administrator. The entire interview, including questions and answers, were recorded and later transcribed. The interview transcripts were shared with the students interviewed to ensure that the answers were correctly stated and to ensure trustworthiness. Participants were also given an opportunity to make changes if they wished to share the essence of discipleship experiences with more clarity (Moustakas, 1994). Data were also collected through intentional focus groups (see Appendix H) and a projective technique of word associations (see Appendix I). The interview and focus groups led to recurring themes being identified, which were used to influence the projective techniques that were utilized with the students. Triangulation of the data led to data saturation.

The Researcher's Role

As researcher, my role in this design was inductive. Information obtained through this study was linked to my role as a researcher as I sought to develop rapport with the participants. The lived experiences of participants were revealed through an ongoing narrative process, which relied on my ability to interview in a way that would best capture the participants' articulation of their individual discipleship experiences and enable them to speak openly. As the primary researcher, it is important to note that I serve as an elementary Christian school principal and a pastor's wife. My interest in discipleship stems from my own personal investment in the lives of children. However, I did not collect data in the school where I have an established authority.

The students involved in this study did not know me personally, which allowed for sincere responses as I took the role of "human instrument" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34).

I used critical thinking to synthesize information by organizing the themes and connecting them in meaningful ways. I listened for the collective voice of the students' experiences as I sought to bracket out my personal feelings. However, my worldview did influence the interpretations of this inductive process as I analyzed the information with transparency. As a human instrument in this study, I hoped to approach the students without bias as I sought to begin the interview with information about the purpose of this study. My goal was to speak through my participants' lived experiences to identify images, thoughts, feelings, and struggles associated with lived discipleship experiences of the students (Moustakas, 1994).

Data Collection

Approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was obtained before research in the field began. Christian elementary administrator permission was obtained to participate in the district. Criterion for participants was provided and administrators were asked for teacher input to identify student recommendations. Once participants were identified, parental approval was requested. Data were collected via participant interviews, focus groups, and projective techniques.

Interviews

Face-to face interviews were scheduled as the starting point for data collection with fourth- and fifth-grade students who have experienced discipleship in a Christian school setting. Semi-structured interviews took place in the area determined by the administrator, which varied dependent on the needs of the participants. Open-ended questions were asked to understand discipleship experiences of the students. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed

verbatim. Open-ended interviews made the research replicable; questions were asked to better understand how participants experience the phenomenon as follow-up questions are permissible in qualitative research (Patton, 2002). The recorded interviews were the main method of data collection with semi-structured questions and prompts, which were transcribed verbatim (Creswell, 2013). Questions were purposefully linked to the phenomenon of lived discipleship experiences and each participant was presented with the same set of open-ended questions. The data trends found through the digitally recorded and transcribed interviews guided the other data source input, including focus groups and finally, word associations.

Interview questions guided the participants to share their experiences with the intent of better understanding discipleship at the elementary school level. The central research question (CRQ) guiding the study asked, How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about how long you have been at this school.

3. What grade are you in?

4. What is the name of the church you attend?

5. Tell me about your spiritual gifts, talents, or abilities.

6. What are some ways that you can use those to fulfill God's purpose in your school life?

7. What do you think the word discipleship means?

8. How would you say your school has spiritually guided you?

9. How important is discipleship to you at school?

10. Tell me about the discipleship experiences you have had at school.

11. How have those experiences impacted your life?

12. How have your classmates influenced your discipleship experiences at school?

13. How have your teachers influenced your discipleship experiences at school?

14. How have your discipleship experiences at school influenced your spiritual growth?

15. Tell me some of the ways that you practice growing spiritually through discipleship at school.

16. Tell me how the Bible relates to discipleship at school.

17. What is the purpose of discipleship at school?

18. What advice would you give to your classmates about making disciples at school?

19. Tell me how your parents have contributed to your discipleship experiences at school.

20. Tell me more about your relationship with Jesus.

21. Compare your discipleship experiences at school with discipleship experiences at your church.

22. What has been the most meaningful discipleship experience for you at school?

23. How does a person grow in spiritual maturity as they go from elementary to middle school?

24. What, if anything, do you wish was included in your discipleship experiences at school?

25. Finally, please share anything that we have not discussed that you would like me to know about your experiences in discipleship at school.

The purpose of the first three questions was to reveal individual information about the student and develop rapport (Patton, 2002). Question 4 helped me to find variance in church locations of participants, as church is one of the triangular supports gleaned from the literature. Prompt 5 and Question 6 provided an opportunity for students to express personal gifts, talents,

or abilities and allowed for connection of individual uniqueness linked to God's purpose at school. Question 7 helped me see the students' understanding of discipleship. Questions 8 and 9, Prompt 10; and Question 11 revealed the students' spiritual maturity development in the faith continuum (Fowler, 1995) and the impact of the school on their personal growth. Question 12 relates to the relational impact of discipleship. This question led to discovery of how peer relationships vary and impact discipleship through social interaction with peers (Allotta, 2018). Questions 13 attempted to discover the impact that teachers, as those with a better understanding, have on discipleship in elementary specifically as it relates to a student's ability to act independently concerning discipleship (Vygotsky, 1978). Question 14 and Prompt 15 relate to spiritual growth and revealed the students' experience with spiritual growth (Simmons, 2012) and the process of spiritual transformation (B. Hull, 2006). The application of the Bible and the purpose of discipleship were addressed in Prompt 16 and Question 17. Understanding of influence upon others (Myers, 2010; Mullett, 2015/2016) can be seen through students' answer to Question 18. Parents are the primary influencers upon children (Allotta, 2018; Arnold, 2012). Prompt 19 sought to find the students' experiences with their parents' influence on discipleship. The student's relationship with Jesus, which is foundational to discipleship (Ferguson, 2012), was discussed through Prompt 20. Prompt 21 revealed the similarities between discipleship experiences at church and school (Allotta, 2018; Arnold, 2012). Spiritual disciplines involve being both a follower and a learner (Bonhoeffer, 2001). Questions 22 and 23 allowed the student to share experiences and spiritual disciplines associated with discipleship and its impact on the world (Pazmino, 2008). The final two questions allowed the participants to provide any additional information related to discipleship experiences along with experiences expressed through anecdotal information.

Focus Groups

Once the interviews were complete, a focus group was conducted with five participants. Participating students were asked open-ended questions as they were encouraged to share their experiences in a group setting. To deepen the understanding of the phenomenon, participants met to answer questions in a group setting. The group was organized after participants had time to reflect upon the interview, which provided an additional opportunity for students to share additional discipleship experiences that surfaced. Groups allow students to come together and discuss in a collaborative manner (Creswell, 2013). Focus groups were used to assist in identification of phenomenological themes and provide additional data for data triangulation.

The focus group questions were inserted onto Google Slides and the screen was shared with the participants at the focus group meeting. The focus group provided a more collaborative source for data collection, which prompted additional reflections and experiences related to discipleship. Trends found in the individual interview helped guide the prompts associated with the focus group meetings. Like the interviews, focus groups were transcribed from an audio recording to provide additional data for analysis.

Focus Group Open-Ended Questions

1. Please introduce yourself by telling us what grade you are in and how long you have been at this school.

2. What discipleship experience at school has helped you the most?

   Probe: Explain a discipleship experience that helped you while you were at school.

3. Who do you typically go to for help being discipled?

    Probe: Tell us who you seek out for discipleship experiences.

4. How do you feel when you are being discipled?

Probe: Explain how you knew you were being discipled.

5. How have your classmates added value to your spiritual growth?

   Probe: Describe how your life has been affected or not affected by your classmates concerning discipleship.

6. How have your teachers added value to your spiritual growth?

   Probe: Describe how your life has been influenced by your teachers concerning discipleship.

7. In your opinion, how important is discipleship in elementary school?

   Probe: Tell us how important discipleship has been for you in school.

8. What lessons have you learned through discipleship?

   Probe: Discuss lessons that you have learned through discipleship.

9. What are some examples of things you have done at school to be discipled or make disciples?

   Probe: Explain some of the various ways that your school helps you to become a disciple.

10. How would you explain the difference between spiritual growth in a large group versus a small group?

    Probe: Explain how a chapel experience is different from a small group discipleship experience?

11. What is the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus?

    Probe: Explain the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus.

12. How is the word multiplication related to discipleship?

    Probe: Tell how the word multiplication is similar to discipleship.

13. What are some ways that a person could use their personal gifts and abilities to disciple others?

    Probe: Explain how a person could use their personal gifts and abilities in discipling others.

14. How is spiritual growth impacted by relationships?

    Probe: Tell me about how relationships influence discipleship and spiritual growth.

15. Of all the things we have discussed, what is the most important to you?

Focus group questions were grounded in the literature. The first question was introductory and allowed the group to make connections. Participant spiritual growth connection was revealed through Question 2 (Beagles, 2012). The impact of relationships upon discipleship was rooted in Questions 2 and 3 (B. Hull, 2006). Discipleship is often modeled through student relationships (Estep, 2002), which was connected to Questions 4 and 5. Discipleship involves both teaching and learning. Questions 6, 7, and 8 provided an opportunity for the participants to share experiences of discipleship in elementary school (Blount, 2018). Discipleship most often occurs in small group interactions (Jankiewicz, 2011). Question 9 was focused on the differences in experiences of small and whole group discipleship opportunities. A personal relationship with Jesus is foundational for discipleship (Adams, 2017; Ferguson, 2012). Question 10 exposed the students' understanding of knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus (Blount, 2018). Question 11 revealed the nature of multiplication through the gospel in the discipleship process (Barna Group, 2017). Question 12 focused on using personal gifts to glorify God and the essential nature of the discipleship process (Bradfield, 2014). The last two questions were relative to authentic relationships to develop trust (B. Hull, 2006).

Projective Technique: Free Word Association

Free word association as a projective technique was also used as a method of data collection. Free word associations were used to address the projective technique and to provide additional data to support the lived experiences of the upper elementary students involved in the study. This indirect method enabled students to project their views (Creswell, 2013). A list of words related to discipleship were read and visually shown one at a time, and each student was asked to respond with the first word(s) that came to his/her mind (see Appendices K–L). The words chosen were reflective of the definition of discipleship as it applies to this study. The stimulus words were also grounded in the literature as common words associated with discipleship.

Free Word Association Stimulus Words

Reading Scripture

Memory Verse

Teacher

Mentoring

Prayer

Church

Discipleship

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual Gifts

Christlike

Great Commission

Modeling

Sanctification

Spiritual transformation

Spiritual discipline

Influence

Obedience

Talent

Ability

Redemption

Christ's mission

Christian

Maturity

Fruit of the Spirit

Servant

Data Analysis

Once the data were collected, I followed Moustakas' approach to data analysis. To avoid presuppositions and judgements, bracketing or epoche was the first step in data analysis. This qualitative case study used multiple methods of data collection through interviews, a focus group, and word association. Participants' lived experiences emerged from the transcriptions (Moustakas, 1994). Participant input increased reliability and transferability as descriptions were combined to capture the lived discipleship experiences of the participants (Creswell, 2013).

The data analysis process began with transcription of the data through textual descriptions (Moustakas, 1994) and led to categorical aggregation as themes emerged from individual participant experiences (Creswell, 2013). Generalizations linked to the phenomenon

surfaced from the data as structural description analysis uncovered the essence of the

discipleship experience through an analysis of individual textual structures (Moustakas, 1994).

Likewise, unnecessary data were exposed (Wolcott, 1994) and synthesis of individual textual

analysis impacted the essence of the collective voice of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Moustakas (1994) described the process of data analysis through six steps involving

horizontalizing, meaning units, clustering, textural descriptions, structural descriptions, and

essence of the phenomenon. The interviews provided data for horizonalizing themes as

statements appeared and made way for new statements (Moustakas, 1994). Transcripts were

reviewed and determined as significant as meaning was constructed (Moustakas, 1994). Clusters

of themes and meanings (Moustakas, 1994) were organized to reveal themes common to all

participants through textural descriptions.

I wrote memos from the interview and focus group transcripts to help keep track of the

ideas as I analyzed the data. Generalizations of the phenomenon involved reading, highlighting

significant data, and noting themes from participant experiences (Moustakas, 1994). To identify

the significant meanings, I segregated non-repetitive and non-overlapping statements

(Moustakas, 1994). An exhaustive description of experiences was constructed from the analysis.

As I read and synthesized the data, the thematic content of the experiences was revealed

(Moustakas, 1994; Stake, 1995). The individual structures were compiled to reveal the more

collective voice of the textual descriptions. The structural description of discipleship uncovered

the meaning and essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

As I analyzed and coded the data, bracketing decreased my personal judgements of the

lived discipleship experiences in Christian elementary schools. I kept a log to bracket out my

personal opinions (Moustakas, 1994) as the textural and structural descriptions were combined to communicate the essence of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential piece of this study as credibility was established. Validity of trustworthiness was supported through building credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Synthesis of the research impacted the trustworthiness of the study (Moustakas, 1994).

Credibility

Triangulation of data provided more data to explore the phenomenon and confirm emerging themes and allowed for the theme to be seen in at least three data sources (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). This study used data from three different data sources to understand fourth- and fifth-grade student experiences of discipleship using triangulation. Interviews, a focus group, and a word association activity ensured credibility for generalizations. I also used member-checking, providing an opportunity for participants to examine my preliminary analysis of the interview and focus group transcription to verify that they were transcribed correctly (Creswell, 2013). Thick descriptions to support understanding of the narrative (Creswell, 2013) and member checks increased reliability of the study.

Focusing on the emerging themes of participants' lived experiences (see Appendix J), this study sought to describe discipleship experiences of students. The gleaned information from the study was shared descriptively using data and all identifying data were removed for privacy purposes. Participants had the option to withdraw at any time during the research.

Dependability and Confirmability

Participants had the opportunity to examine my preliminary analysis of interview and focus group transcription through member checking. Triangulation ensured objectivity of the data. In addition to data collection from participants, I also kept a personal journal documenting my data research experiences. Data collections were stored with password protection. The consistency of each aspect with each participant influenced dependability and confirmability of the data.

Transferability

Transferability of the descriptive data increased the likelihood of replication. "Narrative developed about the context so that judgments about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere" (Lincoln & Guba, 1986).

Ethical Considerations

I was guided by ethical principles as I researched lived experiences with human participants (Moustakas, 1994). Ethically, the approval of the IRB was key as the first step to ensuring my participants were secured through rights and confidentiality principles. I also sought the consent from administrators and guardians with communication of a clear description of the study before working with student participants. Assent from participants was also secured before I began the study.

Confidentiality was also imperative. This study focused exclusively on elementary students. I approached the research aware that fourth- and fifth-grade students may struggle to communicate abstract concepts. I ensured that participants were aware that their answers were not associated with right or wrong and participant names would not be revealed. I also used pseudonyms on the student assent forms and consistently used the pseudonym to associate all

data for the duration of the study. Participants had the freedom to discontinue study participation at any time (Moustakas, 1994).

Approval from the school administration was also clarified before the study took place. Collected data and confidential information was password protected on my computer. Written and audio recorded data from the interviews, a focus groups, and projective techniques will remain private and protected through storage in a locked filing area for protection for up to 3 years after the study is complete. Documents and data will be deleted and/or shredded at the end of 3 years (Creswell, 2013).

Summary

This chapter focused on the methods and processes that were involved with this transcendental phenomenological study to investigate the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian elementary schools (see Appendix M). This voice has not been heard in the literature and this study allows for this focus. Data saturation was achieved in the data analysis state using common themes. The research took place in three different ACSI-affiliated Christian schools with a focus on discipleship.

My role as researcher allowed for further understanding of my personal experiences with the discipleship phenomenon. Data collected through three forms of data were analyzed using Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological data analysis approach. Trustworthiness and ethical considerations kept participants well informed and ensured security of the research materials.

This study sought to fill the gap concerning discipleship in Christian school research. There was a need to research the perceptions of students regarding discipleship in the elementary school setting. This study adds to the research and helps readers better understand the impact of discipleship on elementary students.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. This chapter includes participant descriptions, the findings of the study, and a chapter summary.

My research began as I became aware that most of the research associated with discipleship in Christian schools focused more on upper school and was typically linked to the schools' perspective. I started to wonder if upper elementary students had similar discipleship experiences in Christian schools. Moustakas' (1994) phenomenological analysis along with Creswell's (2013) data analysis approach paved the way for data organization and analysis. Interviews, a focus group, and a word association technique provided the triangulation of data. The analysis process began with bracketing out personal experiences. Horizonalization, theme identification, textual and structural description, and description of the essence of discipleship experiences for participants paved the way for this study. The participants' experiences were discussed in relation to three major themes that emerged from the data in relation to the research questions guiding the study. The three themes include (a) social interactions, (b) individual experiences, and (c) investing in others. The essence of the experience answered the CRQ: How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools? Considering the themes, the following three sub-questions were answered:

1. How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by peers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

2. How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by teachers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

3. How have fourth- and fifth-grade student discipleship experiences influenced spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools?

Participants

The participants in this study included 10 fourth- and fifth-grade students from three different ACSI-affiliated Christian elementary schools in Kentucky. The participants were invited to participate in the study through criterion sampling. A total of 14 students were recommended by their teachers and invited to participate. Two declined and two did not respond.

Of the 10 who submitted parental consent and student assent, nine competed all three stages of data collection for this study. One student was absent on the day of the word association activity and did not participate. Each participant was recommended by their teacher as meeting the following criterion: fourth- or fifth-grade students who have experienced discipleship in the elementary school, which includes a profession of faith through a personal relationship with Jesus and evidence in the classroom setting of spiritual growth. A brief description of each participant is presented in Table 1. In addition, a deeper description of each participant is included in this section. Participants were randomly assigned a pseudonym which is used in the description and throughout the findings of the study. The pseudonyms protect participant confidentiality and the identity of the Christian schools.

Table 1

Student Participant Overview

Student	Grade	Gender	Ethnicity	Grade student began attending current school
Christa	5	Female	Caucasian	Preschool
Christopher	5	Male	Caucasian	Preschool
Travis	5	Male	Caucasian	Kindergarten
Autumn	4	Female	Caucasian	Kindergarten
Lucy	4	Female	Caucasian	Fourth Grade
Brian	5	Male	Caucasian	Kindergarten
Aaron	4	Male	Caucasian	Preschool
Bobby	4	Male	Caucasian	Preschool
Tucker	4	Male	Caucasian	Second Grade
Paisley	4	Female	Caucasian	Kindergarten

Christa

Christa was a fourth-grade student at the school where she had been enrolled in preschool. She is the oldest child in her family. Three of her siblings are adopted internationally, and these adoptions have had an impact on her understanding of others' needs. Though it comes with challenges, Christa shared that her family dynamics have helped her to develop compassion. When asked to describe herself, she expressed that her parents describe her as a quiet person and often outgoing. She discussed her family's involvement in a Christmas Shoebox ministry, serving in animal shelters, and participating in service projects including Samaritan's Purse and World Vision. She recalls that her number one gift is serving, which she mentioned also impacts her relationship with her classmates. "I like to help students when they struggle," she said. Christa shared that her understanding of Truth has been impacted by her experiences at school, including a recent slide show that discussed going through the valley. Her class often watches various pastors teaching about different topics. Those experiences along

with discussion and Bible reading have helped her to grow. She was baptized at her church in third grade. Christa benefits from visuals, she notices needs around her, and she places emphasis on getting involved.

Christopher

Christopher was a fifth-grade student at the school where he started in preschool. Christopher has an older sister in his family. He mentioned that his parents have taught him biblical truths for as long as he can recall, yet in the past year his faith has become his own. He was baptized at his church last year. He enjoys playing sports, with baseball being his favorite. Christopher links his work ethic with his desire to persevere. His experiences on a team have helped guide him to develop relationships and learn from his mistakes as well as the mistakes of others. Christopher expressed gratitude for the guidance and influence that his teachers have had on his spiritual growth, particularly this year as they have read *Case for Christ* by Lee Strobel. He benefits from paying attention and places emphasis on understanding that God is who He is and people should never give up.

Travis

Travis was a fifth-grade student at the school where he has been since kindergarten. Travis was self-reflective and conversational. Having four siblings and parents whom he described as "amazing and they disciple me so well." He enjoys playing a variety of sports and being a part of teams. Travis said that many of his classmates play with him and that their experiences together have helped them to bond and encourage one another. He describes his family and classmates as close-knit who experience life together. Travis also explained the impact that his growing faith has had in his life including his baptism in third grade. He noted the strong connection between his home, church, and school. His family reads devotions and

Scripture together. He finds that often the more he knows, the more he wants to know and understand. Playing sports has been an important avenue for living out his faith, including prayer and seeking to act in a way that will lead others to Jesus. He benefits from time to process information and living out his faith even when he does not have all the answers.

Autumn

Autumn was a fourth-grade student at the school where she has been since kindergarten. As the oldest of three children, Autumn has experienced both the joys and challenges of having younger siblings. She enjoys playing a variety of sports and riding bikes with her friends. Playing sports has provided opportunities for her to get to know people who do not attend church and may not know about Jesus. She also enjoys singing with one of her closest friends, but she had not felt comfortable singing in front of others. She enjoys singing along at church and at school in chapel. Her teachers have helped her to better understand music as worship. She also discussed the impact that her teachers have had on her deepening understanding of Truth. Autumn has noticed that people are not always kind, but she strives to love others like Jesus does…even on bad days. Her parents remind her that her identity comes from Christ and they encourage her to find friends who encourage. Her dad had the honor of baptizing her. She realizes that there are people in her life who need to know they are loved by God and that He offers forgiveness when they turn to him.

Lucy

Lucy is a fourth-grade student. This is her first year at her Christian school. She enjoys swimming, reading, and playing outside. She is intuitive to the needs of others. Lucy understands that her responses impact others. Showing joy and happiness is important to her, especially if she notices someone who needs to be cheered up. Lucy connects that with the way

that God responds to her when she is down. She explained that her school experiences have helped her to understand that she is a sinner and that her relationship with God has helped her to put her own mistakes in perspective. Relationships and being present with others have strengthened her faith.

Brian

Brian is a fifth-grade student at the school where he has been since kindergarten. He enjoys playing sports, particularly basketball. He also likes to read and play the piano. His appreciation for music extends into worship as he is reminded of Truth and his focus is on his Savior. He has a younger sister, and he worships with his family at their local church. They also read devotions each day as a family and his parents encourage him to read his Bible to continue growing in God's Word. His friends joined him at his church when he was baptized in fourth grade. As his faith has grown, he has developed a desire to help people and share about Jesus. Brian has discovered that playing sports has given him a platform to play for God's glory. He wants others to see his reflection of Christ so that they will want to know more. One of his fears has been that a nonbeliever would see a bad attitude or bad response and they would not want to be like that. He is aware that as a Christian he has an opportunity to lead others to Christ by his own words and actions. He attributes his understanding of connecting the Bible to all aspects of life with his experiences at school. Brian shared that his teachers consistently find ways to link every topic back to Jesus. He said that he likes to listen to others so he can know more. Brian shared that his mom has impacted his understanding that a person becomes a disciple when they themselves disciple someone else.

Aaron

Aaron started at his current school when he was in preschool. He was a fourth-grade

student at the time of this study. Aaron has siblings, but they do not live with him. He is being raised by his grandparents. Aaron mentioned that his home was destroyed in a tornado when he was an infant. His family had to rebuild. Navigating through some difficult circumstances, Aaron shared that God is helping him to see the good. He has learned that bad things may still happen, but God is in control. He has shared who God is and what He can do with other people. Aaron was baptized when he was 7 years old, and he continues to grow in his faith. He wants his friends to go to heaven one day, rather than suffer eternal separation from God. With some unanswered questions and situations that are beyond his control, Aaron appreciates his grandparents, friends, and teachers who help him to keep his faith on God instead of problems. He emphasized the importance of having someone to share his thoughts and feelings with others. Aaron also expressed gratitude that God has provided for his needs for him to be able to attend a private Christian school where he can learn more about God and teach others about Him.

Bobby

Bobby was in fourth grade at the time of the study. He has been enrolled at the school since preschool. Bobby has an older sister. He and his family enjoy playing sports. Bobby mentioned that talking is one of his gifts. He enjoys getting to know people and having fun with others. His experiences playing basketball have provided avenues for him to develop character and try to lead non-believers to understand their need for Christ. Bobby's dad has served as his pastor in the past, and his parents have encouraged him to share Truth with others so that they may come to put their trust in Jesus. Bobby admits that he still has more to learn about God and being at a Christian school helps him to keep his focus, especially when it comes to developing appropriate responses and character. Focusing on Truth without adding or taking away is important to Bobby as he learns and shares with others.

Tucker

Tucker was a fourth grader. He enrolled at his school when he was in second grade. As the oldest child with twin toddler siblings, he mentioned the important role that his family has played in preparing for memory verse assessments and worshiping together at church. It was obvious that Tucker has very nice manners. He enjoys playing sports and helping other people. He seems to notice when his classmates struggle, and he tries to help when he can. He acknowledges that his peers have helped him through hard times, and he knows the value of someone who will listen when a person needs someone to talk with. He understands that his school emphasizes the importance of knowing Jesus and telling others about him. Bible class and chapel have been important parts of his faith development, and he believes that his teachers have been able to answer his questions. In his experience, church and school have complemented one another as he learns to go deeper into Scripture. Tucker has not been baptized yet, and he desires to grow closer to the Lord. He wants to pray more as he seeks to love his neighbor as he loves himself.

Paisley

Paisley was a fourth-grade student. She started attending her Christian school when she was in kindergarten. She is the youngest of three children. She admitted to being shy and that timidness was evident in the interview as her answers were vague and at times caused her to respond with "I'm not sure." Paisley enjoys animals, sports, being outside, and nature. She mentioned that she desires to do things to show her worship of God. Paisley recognized that her school has helped her to grow spiritually through faith and fellowship. She spoke of the importance of being kind and friendly. She recalled how her parents read Bible stories to her

when she was younger. She has not been baptized yet, but she prays and wants to continue to learn more about the Bible.

Results

This study focused on the shared similarities and experiences among fourth- and fifth-grade students enrolled in Christian schools. The foundation of the study was found in the research question: What are the discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools? Three research questions related to the discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools guided this study. The impact of peers, impact of teachers, and other discipleship experiences were gleaned by individual student input. To examine the experience from multiple angles and perspectives (Moustakas, 1994), students shared their experiences through individual interviews, a word association activity, and five students participated in a focus group. The data were collected from interviews, a focus group, and a word association activity and used in the analysis. The data were coded through horizonalization as themes were identified, textural and structural descriptions were developed to describe the essence of the discipleship experience (Moustakas, 1994). Relationship and social interactions, individual experiences, and investing in others with a Kingdom impact are the three themes that emerged from the data (see Figure 1).

Theme Development

Horizontalization led to three themes developed by grouping similar codes from the interviews, focus group, and word association (see Appendices K–L). Figure 1 displays the three themes that emerged from significant statements. In Figure 1, the primary influencers of the students' discipleship experiences are represented by the first circle. The triangular influence of the home, church, and school have been instrumental in student discipleship experiences.

However, the foundation of those influences represented by the circle on the left is dependent on

the individual students' relationship with Christ. The three primary themes that emerged from

the data include social interactions, individual experiences, and impact on advancing the

Kingdom.
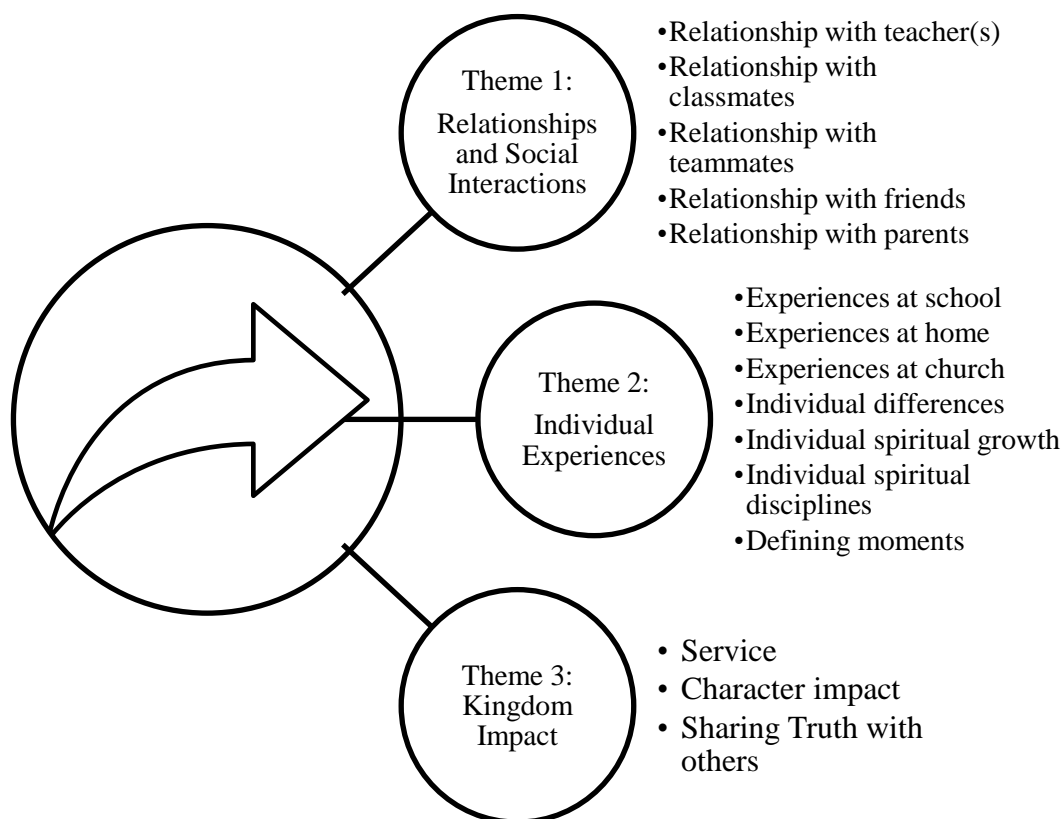
Figure 1. Theme development.

       Theme 1: Relationships and social interactions. The first theme describes participants'

social interactions including relationships at school and home. All 10 participants mentioned the

importance of relationships and social interactions. Parenting relationships, teachers, classmates

and chosen friends were discussed by all participants (see Table 2).

Table 2

Subthemes and Codes in Theme 1: Social Interactions

Theme 1: Social Interactions	
Subtheme	Codes
Relationship with teacher(s)	Help me dig deeper
	Hold accountable: explanation
	Hold accountable: application
	Guidance
	Shares knowledge
	Trust them
	Encourages transparency
	Listens
	Shows kindness
	Shares wisdom
Relationship with classmates	Negative impact
	Relationships
	Encouragement
	Joyfulness
	Build relationships
Relationship with teammates	Imitate
	Fellowship
	Serve others
	Share thoughts
	Ask questions
	Help
	Look at actions
Relationship with friends	Celebrate
	Actions
	Encouragement
	Lead by example
	Influence others
Relationship with parents	Trust
	Transparent/share
	Happy for them
	Forgiveness
	Guidance
	Trust
	Transparency
	Foundation
	Ask questions
	Teach

When discussing her teacher during the interview, Lucy said, "They've influenced me by like if I don't understand they are the first ones who really helped me, and they encourage me to do what's right." Interactions with classmates have also increased knowledge. During the focus group, Travis mentioned:

> Or some people just like they think if they are at a Christian school, then they are Christians. But the people who actually try to gain in their faith are the ones that you wanna be able to talk to and have conversations with.

> Eight participants discussed social interactions with teammates through sports and the impact on their spiritual growth. Student comments focused on the benefits of social interactions upon their individual growth. Even in challenging situations, students focused on the impact that those relationships have had on them personally. Bobby shared in his interview:

> I was playing a basketball game and we learned something in Bible to like . . . to help us not like be bragging or something. And this kid he was like saying bad stuff on a different team and I guess I did not say anything to him. I told him you shouldn't probably say that, and he kept saying it, and I just ignored him. My teacher told me a lot of things about Christ and like not to do bad things, not to lash out in anger and it works a lot, but sometimes it doesn't.

Autumn shared her understanding of how to treat others by saying during her interview:

> Uh, well, sometimes people tell me that I'm not that good at some things, but I just move on because. I know that Jesus thinks I'm good at it and that's all that really matters to me. Be kind to those who aren't kind to you. And to love others, even whenever they don't like you as much.

She has also wrestled with the negative impact of social interactions. Autumn shared:

A lot of the friends that I have, they get in trouble a lot. And I've had this cross my mind many times to stop being my friend because of how much they get in trouble. But I remember that I shouldn't because. I know that Jesus wouldn't because I know that nobody is perfect and that I can make those decisions, too. But I would still not want my best friend to not be my best friend anymore.

In those examples, participant experiences focused on their response to others. From the data, students have noticed that Christians should respond differently than those who do not have a personal relationship with Christ. Travis shared his views:

You can't just like say you are a Christian and then act like people on your team who don't know about God. Just like if that's how Christians act, then I don't really want to be a part of that. But then, if you encourage them and be a light and lead by example then they will ask more questions and then you can show them.

Still, every participant mentioned the impact that their personal family has on their discipleship experiences. Christopher said during his interview, "Every time my mom takes me to school, we always read devotion on the way to school, and she always encourages us." Brian was transparent about his parents' influence and his authentic response. He stated:

We talk a lot about Jesus at home. We read devotions every morning and every night, we pray a lot. They influence me to read my Bible every day and just grow in God's Word. Challenging sometimes. Sometimes you just don't want to, but I try to a lot.

Concerning his dependence and appreciation for his parents, Travis said during the focus group, "That's who we trust the most. You know that they'll give you the right information."

Theme 2: Individual experiences. The second theme that emerged involved individual experiences. Participant responses described their individual experiences which included

references to relationships and experiences that again revealed the triangular impact of the home, church, and school. Five different subthemes emerged though the students' discipleship experiences.

The first subtheme listed in Table 3 was specific to student experiences at school. Students referenced specific experiences that related to both input and output. The school's curriculum, specific book studies, and devotionals were explained to have an impact on spiritual development. It became clear that though all students may have been involved in the same event or study, the student experiences varied from person to person. There are other variables that influence individual experiences.

Relationships and spiritual growth opportunities in the home had a direct impact on the various experiences that students had in their homes. The various dynamics of each home played a part in individual experiences. Still, the discipleship experiences for every participant in the study had strong foundation in their experiences at home.

All 10 participants expressed their personal experiences with worship and individual growth through their local church. Though three students associate the word church with a place, four students associated church as relational (see Appendices K–L). It was noted that their experiences were also framed around relationships and particular events that they have participated in. Primarily, the students expressed church attendance as a family opportunity. The impact of COVID-19 on church attendance was mentioned by students.

Individual spiritual growth was described through more independent growth that focused on a personal relationship with Jesus. Jesus was mentioned in association with discipleship terms 21 times in the word analysis activity. Twenty codes were associated with the subtheme of

individual spiritual growth. Participants all shared in the common understanding that spiritual

growth is a process.

Related to, but also focused more on individual commitment to spiritual growth, the

fourth subtheme focused on individual spiritual disciplines. Overall, most of the participants

described their spiritual growth through personal actions that have increased their faith. Praying,

reading the Bible, memorizing scripture, and learning to apply Truth were common themes

related to individual spiritual growth of participants.

The fifth subtheme that emerged from participant experiences was directly related to

defining moments or life experiences that have had an impact on their lives. Students mentioned

experiences from the past such as trauma, relationships, and other events that have caused them

to question. These defining moments have helped students to grapple with purpose and

understanding Truths of who God is.

Table 3

Subthemes and Codes in Theme 2: Individual Experiences

Theme 2: Individual Experiences	
Subtheme	Codes
Experiences at School	Curriculum
	Case for Christ book
	Devotions
	Foundation
	Memory verses
	Sermons
	Case for Creator book
	Chapel
	Worship music
	Truths
	Fellowship
	Discipleship
	Transformed
	Express thoughts/feelings
Experiences at Home	Dad
	Mom
	Grandparents
	Guide
	Trust
	Devotions
	Family: nonbeliever, unchurched
	Siblings
Experiences at Church	Attendance
	Worship
	Baptized
	Fellowship
	God's house
	Singing
	Teacher
	A place where Christians get together
	Kid's church
	Sunday School teacher
Individual Differences	Spiritual gifts
	Talents
	Interests
	Community
	Sports
	Team
	Follow God's plan
	Growing up
	Give God glory
	Express feelings and thoughts
	Desires change

Theme 2: Individual Experiences	
Subtheme	Codes
Individual Spiritual Growth	Acknowledge sin
	Relationship with Jesus
	Multiply
	Know His purpose
	Savior/Cross
	Eternal life (John 3:16)
	Learning
	Faith became my own
	Process questions
	Focus to God
	Maturing
	Growing in faith
	Focus on Truth
	Grow in knowledge
	Follow God
	Follow Jesus
	Worship Him
	Obey (responsive)
	Trust in Jesus
	Trust God
Individual Spiritual Disciplines	Praying
	Express individual thoughts and feelings
	Communicating with God
	Grow in relationship with God
	Bible reading
	Explain and apply Truth
	Memory verses
	Biblical knowledge
	Journal
Defining Moments	Trauma
	God is in control
	Focus on Truth
	He will never leave you
	Peace
	Jesus loves you
	Positive memories
	COVID opportunities
	COVID challenges
	Questions
	Strength
	Apologetics (defend faith)

Participants indicated that though there are some activities and expectations at school, home, and church that are similar, each individual experiences them differently. Four students have been at their current school since preschool. Four students have been at their school since

kindergarten, one since second grade, and one student was new this year. When discussing the impact of the school on their spiritual growth, Travis shared during his interview:

> I think I would never be where I am. We have been learning verse by verse every week and I get to the blessing that it is to be able to. I apply that to my life every single week at school. And learning all the meanings of the verses and just coming to understand that also grows my faith also.

The curriculum and other experiences in the school setting were identified by all 10 participants. During his interview, Christopher shared,

> They help me 'cause this year we like started reading a book called *Case for Christ* and my faith grew during that book like it wasn't as strong as it was as it is now 'cause it grew during that book. After I read it, I started understanding and seeing how there is no way God isn't real. We just finished *Case for Faith* and we've read *Case for the Creator*.

Lucy stated in her interview:

> Like someone may be just feeling like sitting alone or something. I can go sit beside them and talk to them. Whenever someone like is talking a lot, the teacher doesn't just like yell and say that we're horrible. They say can you please be quiet and in a nice voice and are very kind. We get put by our friends so we can maybe like know more about each other so we can become friends easier.

Seven different churches were represented by participants. Though their experiences vary from one another, they all expressed that school, home, and church have impacted their discipleship experiences. Aaron shared during his interview, "It's helped me learn a lot about God because even though I go to church, I feel like I learn more here [school] than I do at church."

Eight students shared that they are interested in sports. Bobby stated, "I can pray before I have basketball games and I can play for the Lord and be nice to the other players." Interests, talents, and gifts varied from student to student. Each one of the topics that students shared as an interest, talent, or gift required action and had the potential to impact others. Helping others also surfaced with eight different participants, and all 10 acknowledged the importance of influencing others in their circle.

With participants attending seven different churches, the integration of celebrating life events together provided an opportunity for connect with peers in various places. Brian shared, "A lot of them [classmates] are Christians like me. I love when I was baptized and a lot of them came and watched me."

Likewise, some participants recognize that there are some tough circumstances that have helped their relationships and faith to be strengthened. Bobby shared the importance of focusing on Truth in trying times. He said, "If anything bad happens, just know God is in control." Aaron shared during his interview:

> They've helped me a lot, like grow spiritually. They've helped tell me more about God and I and I told them more about God. And they've helped me through some stuff. So. like hard times . . . like when my mom . . . I mean when my grandfather broke his leg, he still recovering from that. It's like, I think he said like six times he's done it, so they've helped me through that.

With each student sharing his or her own individual talents and interests, the idea that those interests and talents can be used to lead others to Christ surfaced. Brian understands that the way he acts has the potential to impact others:

Yeah, well when I'm playing sports, I can play it for God, so others know how Christians act and that they want to be like us (like a Christian). I don't want people to think, "He's a bad person . . . I don't want to be a Christian."

Still, the impact of home life and the influence of parents surfaced in each interview. Bobby discussed the impact of his dad by saying, "Well, my dad was a pastor and he told me a lot of stuff and I kind of carried that on to my friends and classmates." Brian shared what his mom has taught him about being a disciple: "My mom told me that you become a disciple when a person who are discipling . . . disciples somebody else."

The triangular impact of school, church, and home makes its way back to the family. As Aaron shared, "I've started to tell others about God and like, probably, maybe more than they did know and some like just telling them completely about God. Mostly my family."

Theme 3: Investing in others: Kingdom impact. The third theme describes participants' experiences related to advancing the Kingdom of God. Subthemes emerged from the collection of data as students shared personal experiences. Service opportunities, impact on personal character development, and evangelism surfaced as students shared their experiences. All students who were interviewed understood that there is much more to Christian education that academic learning. Focus on the character, nature, and provisions of God was associated with discipleship terms 43 times in the word associations (see Appendices K–L). Through experiences and developed understanding, participants were aware that there is a greater purpose and that God provides opportunities for them to impact the Kingdom of God.

Table 4

Subthemes and Codes in Theme 3: Kingdom Impact

Theme 3: Kingdom Impact	
Subtheme	Codes
Service	Help others
	Compassion
	Mission projects
	Service
	Build relationships
Character impact	Kindness
	Love others
	Be like Jesus
	Consistent actions
	Character traits
	Cheer others/encourage
	Show joy
	Show Jesus in words and actions
	Be a good example
	Fruit of the Spirit
	Imitate
	Lead by example
	Work hard
Sharing Truth with others	Share Scripture
	Share the Gospel
	Develop relationships
	Disciple
	Give God the glory
	Share God's love

This theme uncovered that all 10 participants desire to expand the Kingdom by their personal impact. Two participants specifically mentioned serving others through ministries. Two students mentioned that they look for opportunities to help people who are struggling. Lucy seeks out opportunities to help her classmates. During her interview, she shared:

I am always trying to look if someone is feeling sad or if they're just sitting alone. I try to go and talk to them, even if I don't really want to. I just make myself do it and I try and like I think I actually make them feel better and it makes me happy.

Eight participants also acknowledged how their individual character as well as the character and

responses of others can have a positive or negative influence.

Through service and relationships, the desire to share the gospel with others surfaced in detail with seven of the participants. During his interview, Bobby expressed:

Well, I'm really good at talking, so I'll probably be using talking as a gift to tell others about Jesus. I feel like it's very important because of the kids that go here. It's obviously a Christian school, but some people still don't understand Christ in their teaching of God there helps the kids that don't really know Jesus help to know Jesus. It just really helps them and then they might go to other people and tell them about God.

When asked if there was anything that he would like for his school to do to help him grow as a disciple, Bobby stated:

I feel like I have trouble with like telling people that like believe in Allah, a religion, and they are denying that Christians are doing the right thing. I feel like I could get taught to like know how to respond to that.

Because the participants attended a Christian school, some wondered about the salvation of peers. When Christa was interviewed about her purpose, she stated:

To help other people and follow God and teach people about God, I've always wanted to teach people about God, but I'm at a Christian school and the only other place I really go to is church, so I don't know a lot of non-Christians. I think most of them are Christians.

During his interview, Brian shared the following about his classmates:

Even if they know about God, I tried to like, grow their faith, and help them. Help them and tell them more about Jesus that I already know about. Like in Bible classes and stuff that I know, so others can have knowledge of Him.

All participants shared in a desire to continue growing in faith. During his interview, Tucker

said, "I have wanted to grow closer to him. And I want to pray more. Read my Bible more and just be closer to Him." Bobby emphasized the importance of knowing scripture. He said, "Try not to take something out or put words in the Bible."

All participants mentioned that part of their faith journey has included questions. Travis shared his experience with questions by stating: "It strengthens our faith to have doubts and ask questions. It fills gaps in what we don't know in our faith." During the focus group discussion, Travis added,

> The more you know, the more you can tell others and then the more that you can tell them, the more that they can just keep multiplying by Christians and then they can just keep spreading it. That's why you have to ask questions and gain more knowledge because you have to have enough knowledge to answer whatever questions that they have.

Research Question Responses

The CRQ for this study asked, How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools? Participants described the essence of their experiences primarily in relationship with Jesus and others. Though they are beginning to understand the importance of individual spiritual growth, most of their described experiences are in correlation with relationships, events, and input from those around them. Three common themes emerged which answer the CRQ. Fourth- and fifth-grade students who are attending Christian elementary schools revealed that their experiences are largely related to relationships. These relationships extend beyond the school and reach into their home, church, and often extracurricular arenas. Based on the participant responses, upper elementary students realize that there are individual experiences that may not have occurred at school, yet they play

an important role in their discipleship experiences that carry over into their Christian school. With a realization that discipleship is based on making a Kingdom impact, students shared their desire to serve others, have a positive impact on fellowship, and multiply by telling others about Jesus.

SQ1. The first sub-question asked, How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by peers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools? As indicated by Theme 1, students have been impacted by peers, which from the data includes classmates, teammates, and friends. Participants mainly focused on the encouragement that they receive from classmates. During her interview Lucy shared, "They have been really kind to me, and they can sometimes tell if I'm sad they ask me what's wrong, and then I tell them and then they're like, 'Oh, I'm sorry' and that makes me feel better." Some students also mentioned how classmates help to deepen their understanding and knowledge. Travis stated during his interview: "All the group work we do with just reading passages of Scripture and books about Scripture. Just talking through that just, well, hopefully gives a good perspective on a lot of things and how to handle them." The understanding that we are imperfect people, and there are both negative and positive impacts of interactions with peers surfaced in an interview with Christopher:

> Like when they do something like wrong or that's not good that encourages me to like be better than that and not be like them and be closer and good to God. When I make a mistake, I ask God to forgive me and then I try to learn from them and the next time that situation happens, I try to not do what I did and make that mistake again.

Similarly, Autumn said during her interview:

As I said, a lot of my friends . . . they aren't usually kind to me, but I know that I sin, and

I can hurt somebody else's feelings. A lot of my friends in my class right now . . . they're

really nice to me. So, whenever I like sin a lot about stuff, and like, I say something bad

about them. I learn that it's not going to hurt them because they know that Jesus loves

them and that nobody can take that away from them.

SQ2. The second sub-question asked, How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been

impacted by teachers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools? Addressed in

Theme 1, teachers have guided spiritual growth and impacted knowledge by encouraging

students to dig deeper into biblical Truth. During her interview, Autumn shared the impact of

her teacher on her spiritual growth:

I've never really had a teacher that was as much of a Christian as my teacher right now.

She is really nice, and she always gets into the Bible. She like gives examples and stuff.

She's my favorite teacher ever that I've ever really had . . . mostly because of that. We go

to Chapel every Tuesday, and I always love the lessons and stuff. Before we always like

danced to like fun music. I never really once got into like what the song was saying.

Like "This Little Light of Mine," we sometimes sing it, and I never really ever really

thought about it before this year. The light is Jesus that I'm not supposed to cover up.

Uh, well we've sang it a lot more. And my teacher told me that sometimes that we like

just to focus on like what the movements that we're supposed to do, and we don't usually

focus on what the song is supposed to be and stuff.

Travis shared the following during his interview:

Just always wanting to get deeper and deeper into the Word and always expecting more

out of us and spending so much time in the Word and giving us important long verses for

us so that we can know the meaning and just not just know it, but to put it into action and to know it really truly to just hide in your heart.

During his interview, Christopher acknowledged that last year his faith became his own, yet his teacher played an important role in helping him to grow:

They've like guided me to a lot of the right path towards God into being a better Christian, like they influenced me getting baptized. Like last year, the only reason I believed in God was cause my parents told me like that's what you should believe. But uh, last year and this year my faith has become my own.

SQ3. The third sub-question asked, How have fourth- and fifth-grade students' discipleship experiences influenced spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools? Addressed in Themes 2 and 3, individual experiences have influenced spiritual maturity in fourth- and fifth-grade participants. In addition to individual student growth, participants revealed an understanding that Kingdom impact is evidence of spiritual maturity. Travis shared what he believes to be the purpose of his discipleship experience during his interview:

So that when we get older, we will always know the truth and will be able to tell others the truth and will be able to know right from wrong on our own. They try to plant seeds in our heart and so that we can always know the Truth, tell the Truth, and keep on following Jesus our whole life.

The Truths that are shared in the school setting have changed the way that participants see things. Lucy stated during her interview, "Whenever we talked about omnipresent and omnipotent and omniscience . . . it showed me that He's all powerful, He's all knowing and there's nothing I can hide from Him."

Summary

This chapter presents the results of the study as well as answering the guiding research questions. The 10 participants were introduced with detailed descriptions and the phenomenological reduction process is included in the chapter. Research questions were answered through the emergence of three themes including relationships and social interactions, individual experiences, and investing in others with Kingdom impact. The three themes represented through textural and structural descriptions are linked to participants' detailed experiences collected from the data. The essence of discipleship experiences emerged, which answered the central research question. Sub-questions were answered through the themes that emerged. Based on this research, the essence of discipleship is following Jesus.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore how fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools. This chapter contains a summary of the findings, a discussion of how the findings are situated within the literature and theoretical framework, the implications of the study, the delimitations and limitations of the study, and finally, the recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

Three themes emerged from the process of phenomenological reduction. Participants' experiences regarding the discipleship phenomenon are captured in the themes. The first theme is related to social interactions. In addition to teachers, students identified relationships with classmates, teammates, friends, and parents. During the focus group discussion, Travis captured the importance of relationships by stating:

> I have to have a relationship with them before I start discipling them. Because then once you have a relationship, then they can trust you and trust you to ask questions. But if you just go right into like telling about Jesus about the Bible. Then they might not believe you or they just might be overwhelmed with information.

Realizing that they each have different experiences that impact discipleship, Theme 2 focused on individual experiences and the ability for students to express those experiences. Travis articulated this well when he said during the focus group discussion:

> I think the big thing is to try to grow in being able to express your feelings with people that you trust, being able to ask them questions, and knowing that it's not a bad thing to be able to just ask them questions. But that your faith can grow when you get the answer

from it. And just to be able to express your thoughts is a big part of having a stronger

faith. 'Cause if you can't express your thoughts then you'll just have questions your

whole life. But if you can express your thoughts then you'll get answers, and you have

the right information.

The experiences at school, home, and church vary from individual to individual. Participant

experiences with individual spiritual growth, spiritual disciplines, and defining moments also

impact their discipleship experiences. Finally, Theme 3 emerged with a focus on student impact

on the Kingdom through service, character, and sharing Truth.

The essence of the discipleship phenomenon was uncovered through textural and

structural descriptions from the data. The essences of student discipleship experiences answer

the CRQ: How do fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in

Christian elementary schools? As upper elementary students, participants recognize that their

discipleship experiences are connected to social interactions and individual experiences that

related to their impact on the Kingdom. The three sub-questions were also answered through the

results of the study.

SQ1: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by peers concerning

discipleship in Christian elementary schools? The participants shared the impact of social

interactions both in and out of school. They shared that those interactions and relationships with

classmates, teammates, and friends carried over into their discipleship experiences. Some of

these relationships are intentional and selective. Other relationships and interactions happen due

to time and place. Participants realized that there are both positive and negative interactions that

can occur through relationships.

SQ2: How have fourth- and fifth-grade students been impacted by teachers concerning discipleship in Christian elementary schools? Participants shared the impact that teachers have on their understanding through Bible study as they help students dig deeper. Guidance from teachers also surfaced in student experiences. Bobby stated, "They've taught me a lot about Christ that I didn't know." Brian shared this about his teachers:

> All the teachers just bring the Bible into everything. Everything that we talk about somehow comes back to God. Bible classes are first thing in the morning so we can start our day off. We read the Bible every day.

SQ3: How have fourth- and fifth-grade student discipleship experiences influenced spiritual maturity in Christian elementary schools? The students who participated in this study linked individual experiences, spiritual growth, and defining moments to service, character development, and sharing Truth with others. All participants associated growth, maturing, and growing closer to Christ as key words associated with spiritual growth (see Appendices K–L). When interviewed about his discipleship experiences at school, Bobby said:

> It's taught me to not do things that will upset Christ or other people. It just will help me to speak to not be embarrassed to talk about the Word to other people. And if they make fun of me, to somehow try to get them to know Christ and put their trust in him. It means to teach about Christ and help someone put their trust in Him and lead them on the right path, not their own path, but God's path.

Three of the participants specifically addressed sin. Lucy explained during her interview, "The school has spiritually guided me by showing me that. I'm a Sinner and that I need God." During the word association activity, the students connected redemption to forgiveness of sin and being made new (see Appendices K–L). Christopher shared, "You're telling others about God and how

Jesus saved them from their sins that there still time and if they repent, God will forgive them."
During her interview, Paisley shared, "It's taught me more about God and like it's helped me to
grow more in my spiritual faith." Participants commonly shared their understanding that
discipleship has had an impact on their lives both then and in the future. Christa shared:

> So that when you get older you can help other people who don't know 'cause you will be
> involved in work and probably meet a lot of non-Christians that haven't even heard of
> God or heard of God but don't believe in him. I know that we have to teach everyone in
> the world and at least let them hear about God before we can all go to heaven.

Four of the participants specifically associated Jesus as the foundation of discipleship, while all
linked following and leading others to Him as key aspects of discipleship. During the focus
group discussion, Travis proclaimed the foundational nature of discipleship in his school by
saying:

> What we do in elementary is what is going to lead up all the way until we get to high
> school and college. What we do right now is going to help us have a foundation to be
> able to grow off of.

When asked to associate words related to being a Christian, four of the students connected the
term Christian to following Jesus/Christ/God (see Appendices K–L).

Discussion

The purpose of this section was to discuss the study findings in relationship to the
empirical and theoretical literature reviewed in Chapter Two. The empirical discussion
examines the results of the present study related to previous research. The theoretical discussion
examines the results of the study connected to Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the more

knowledgeable other (MKO), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as it relates to the described lived discipleship experiences of the participants.

Empirical Discussion

The present study extends the literature of discipleship by exploring discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools. Discipleship is defined as the process of guiding individual disciples to grow (B. Hull, 2006) in spiritual maturity while guiding to discover and use their gifts, talents, and abilities to fulfill Christ's mission and impact others for the Kingdom (Dempsey, 2008). The results of this study indicate that relationships play a prominent role in discipleship experiences. Relationships at school as well as relationships outside of school impact student discipleship experiences, which aligns with previous research (Cox & Peck, 2018; Estep, 2002). In addition to peers, student discipleship experiences are rooted in relationships with their parents and teachers. Learning from both teachers and peers upholds the nature of discipleship (Allotta, 2013). As Bobby stated in his interview:

> I don't think that a lot of people here [Christian school] like don't know God. But if they
>
> don't, then the Bible says to not be embarrassed to talk about Christ and if they're like
>
> shy or something then you should go over to talk to them.

Modeling and sharing of knowledge agree with literature that claims discipleship involves training and transfer of knowledge through simple modeling (Adams, 2017; B. Hull, 2006; Willard, 2009). In addition to a personal relationship with Jesus, all 10 students acknowledged that their families, church staff, and faculty have been an integral part of their discipleship experiences. Students' descriptions of their discipleship experiences further support Vygotsky's theory through interactions with someone more knowledgeable (Crain, 2005). This

focus on how relationships with others have impacted spiritual growth is a testament to the importance of discipleship through teaching and mentoring. This is a process of spiritual formation through the discipleship process, and it occurs through support (Adams, 2017; Fowler, 1995; Howard, 2008). It is understood from the data that influences can be both positive and negative which is determined by the interactions through relationships in the home, church, and school.

In addition to relationships with individuals, student discipleship experiences also point to the importance of the triangular support of experiences provided by home, church, and school. Partnerships between the home and church influence individuals and impact discipleship in the Christian school (Graustein & Schultz, 1995; Kaiser, 2015; Mohler, 2016). The impact of these three entities speaks into students' lives and impacts spiritual development as well as discipleship experiences (Allotta, 2018; Arnold, 2012; Dreyer & Hermans, 2014; Ferguson, 2012). During his interview, Travis shared his personal experience:

> All about what I read at home and what I study at church. All that is what we talk about at school. So, it just connects so I can even learn it even more. A lot of times we learn something at church, then come back and we talk about and just what it means. And I've come to school, and we might be even doing the same lesson. Just go even deeper into that.

Christa shared, "They teach a lot of the same things, but I feel like school goes more in depth in teaching the Bible."

The data from this study agreed with the literature concerning the importance of spiritual growth through experiences, repetition, and modeling. Participants explained experiences related to the subthemes of spiritual disciplines, service, social interaction, and opportunities for

growth and transfer (Keeley, 2008; Shepson, 2012; Smith, 2009). As the participants

approached the completion of elementary school, their experiences aligned with the literature

focused on gradual release of support as students begin to develop. The discipleship experiences

of the participants focused on the impact and spiritual growth in their Christian school

environment. During his interview, Travis shared:

> Oh, it's top priority for every class, every teacher, every student. We've been reading in
>
> fifth grade this year and it's gotten more deep. We read *Case for Christ* and *Case for*
>
> *Creator* by Lee Strobel. We have conversations about it and talk about it, and I think it's
>
> growing everyone's faith in our class and other classes. It can get pretty deep. When we
>
> are reading through what Jesus actually went through . . . like before the cross and after
>
> the cross . . . and just what he had to do.

Student experiences related to book studies and discussions emerging throughout the day and in

various content areas confirm Cox and Peck's (2018) emphasis on transfer of knowledge that is

not compartmentalized. Travis shared his view on his personal development:

> I have been starting to grow in my knowledge just by reading more with my parents and
>
> by myself. Just these applications have really deepened my faith . . . just every week
>
> knowing more and how to apply it to myself and what I can do to do better based on that
>
> verse, like Proverbs gives so many. I guess I'm saying rules or commands to do in our
>
> daily life. To be able to walk, walk as Jesus walked.

Christopher said:

> When I first believed, it was just what my parents told me that I had to believe. But over
>
> the past few years, it's gotten stronger, and I feel like I can talk to Him at any time and go
>
> to Him with any of my worries.

When participants were asked to describe discipleship, the emergent theme was sharing the gospel and telling others about Jesus. One half of the participants focused on telling others about Him as the primary purpose of advancing the Kingdom through investing in others. Four students defined discipleship as following Christ and increasing in faith. One participant was not sure how to define discipleship, stating, "I'm not sure."

With a focus on the eternal impact of discipleship, four participants mentioned the Kingdom impact of the gospel. Aaron stated, "I know I want all my family to go to heaven. I want all my friends to go to heaven. I just want everyone around me to go to heaven and live eternal life and not eternal pain." This aligns with the Great Commission as the purpose of discipleship (Kaiser, 2015; Pazmino, 2008; Van Brummelen, 2009).

From the information gleaned by participants, there was little discussion about personal gifts. Though not all participants mentioned an understanding of individual spiritual gifts, one of the participants shared that she had taken the spiritual gift assessment and she seeks to further develop that gift by serving others. The literature emphasizes that serving others intentionally in the early years increases the likelihood of lifelong service (Bradfield, 2014; Pazmino, 2008; Willard, 2009). This study sheds new light on discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools. Regarding the definition of discipleship used for the purposes of this study, data obtained show minimal participant experiences or understanding of personal spiritual gifts. Though there seemed to be experiences related to talents and areas of interest, only one student was familiar with the discovery of their personal spiritual gifts to be used to serve and advance the Kingdom.

Theoretical Discussion

Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD (Devries, 2000; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007) drove this study to examine the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. This section describes the results of the study as they relate to Vygotsky's theories of social interaction, MKO, and ZPD.

According to the theory of social interaction, students benefit from development preceded by growth that occurs through social relationships (Kozulin, 2007) and scaffolding to encourage independence (Estep, 2002). The results of this study indicate that upper elementary students not only associate spiritual growth with relationships with others but also that they understand that they have opportunities to help others grow spiritually through additional relationships.

According to the theory of the MKO, students benefit from engaging with the MKO. The results of this study indicate that students have been impacted by relationships and experiences associated with teachers and peers at school, parents, and siblings at home, as well as teachers and pastors at church.

The proximal development zone discusses the gap between support and replication of discipleship. While the students in this study were at the final years of elementary school, they were still dependent upon support from others concerning discipleship experiences.

The results of this study also point toward the importance of small group interactions as the idea of trust and transparency emerged. Autumn mentioned in the focus group:

> I like a small group. But maybe some people, some people like being large group. But with me I feel like I can learn more and in small groups because there are more comfortable to tell more and like say the answers then I would in a large group. I feel more comfortable.

Similarly, Travis stated during the focus group discussion:

> Yeah, I think it's easier when you're like three to five than like seven to 10 'cause you can express your thoughts way more broadly and sometimes you don't get to do that in larger groups, but then when everyone is focused on what you're saying in the three five group, I think you just can develop more.

Christopher also chimed in during the focus group discussion, noting the importance of small group discipleship:

> Also, like with a large group, some people might be more hesitant to share like what they're struggling with, but with a small group they feel like they can share it with each other, 'cause there's not that many people and they may feel more comfortable.

Implications

The purpose of this section is to address the theoretical, empirical, and practical implications of the study. This study revealed that fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools vary in their personal discipleship experiences. The data gleaned from this study are from the students' lived discipleship experiences. Everyone's spiritual growth is difficult to determine apart from self-assessment; it is challenging to measure discipleship or spiritual growth (Horsfall, 2014). Focusing on the lived discipleship experiences of students requires intentional questioning and self-assessment opportunities. The implications and recommendations from this study may help Christian school leaders, parents, and churches as they seek to develop and disciple students.

The results of this study show student emphasis on individual interests and a desire to serve others. There were minimal experiences related to spiritual gifts being used to intentionally serve others. The first recommendation is for Christian elementary schools to focus

on individual spiritual gifts, interests, abilities, and talents to add value to student discipleship experiences. Teaching students to use their gifts to advance the Kingdom will demonstrate formation rather than simply knowledge acquired (Smith, 2009). The results of this study have empirical, theoretical, and practical implications.

Empirical Implications

Existing research indicates that students who receive support through modeling relationships tend to replicate and influence others spiritually (Estep, 2002; Francis, 2019). The present study demonstrated that fourth- and fifth-grade students depend on the influence of relationships for spiritual growth and discipleship. This could potentially contribute to an increase in relationship building and less emphasis on independent growth opportunities through spiritual disciplines. The foundation of sharing the gospel and leading students to a personal relationship with Jesus is of upmost importance. Because following Jesus is the essence of discipleship, the second recommendation is for Christian schools to ensure that discipleship opportunities include a focus on replication and individual spiritual growth through relationships and self-reflection.

Further, the lack of existing empirical research on the discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools speaks to the nature of the problem. There appears to be an empirical acknowledgement of the importance of spiritual growth and relationships upon discipleship in high school students; however, little empirical acknowledgement of the importance of discipleship experiences is evident in Christian elementary schools (Beagles, 2012; Nelson & Appel, 2000). It is important that Christian schools intentionally focus on discipleship experiences in the elementary school setting.

Theoretical Implications

The results of this study indicate that the discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools are rooted in relationships, which aligns with Vygotsky's theory of social interaction and the MKO. The students' individual experiences, spiritual growth, defining moments, and Kingdom impact are in alignment with Vygotsky's ZPD as used as a developmental theory approach to understanding lived discipleship experiences (Devries, 2000; Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Kozulin, 2007). The results of this study confirm that individuals develop spiritually at various times. As upper elementary students grow, students begin to develop independence through transfer. Travis' statement aligns with the transfer and application toward independence when he said, "I think just all the work we do in the Word and in study that just inspires me to do more and more by myself." It also aligns with research that formation occurs as students are supported as they grow in Christ (Howard, 2008). Developing students with a focus on individually following Christ is foundational for discipleship of students. Christian school leaders must understand the need for continual spiritual development and growth. The third recommendation is for Christian elementary schools to capture individual growth for following Christ with clear connections to the home and church.

Fourthly, it is recommended that school leaders support students by providing intentional opportunities for students, who profess to have a relationship with Jesus, to develop discipleship relationships with adults and peers in the school. Focusing on the individual student needs through modeling of following Christ has the potential to impact spiritual growth. The goal is to model following Christ. With intentionality, the focus should be on knowing who Jesus is, following Jesus, and making disciples of Jesus. The fifth recommendation includes providing self-reflection opportunities for elementary students to assess their own spiritual growth.

Practical Implications

This study revealed that upper elementary students' discipleship experiences are linked to relationships which have influenced spiritual growth at school, church, and home. The essence of discipleship is following Christ. Apart from following Jesus, discipleship is everchanging. Through the relational themes that emerged from this study, it is the foundational relationship with Jesus that is the essence of discipleship. As proclaimed in Matthew 4:19b, "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (NKJV). It is important to schools to provide intentional focus on individual growth and opportunities linked to individual growth through spiritual maturity for students to use their personal gifts, talents, and abilities to advance the Kingdom (Earley & Dempsey, 2013). Since prior literature and this current study agree that discipleship experiences are relational, schools should also focus on individual development of uniqueness to expand the Kingdom. Based on these implications, feedback from students can help inform educators of individual areas of interest and spiritual growth. Increasing the students' understanding of how their faith can potentially impact others is foundational (Barke, 2014; Gibson, 2015). Discipleship is a lifelong process, and it requires spiritual growth as well as application of individual influence for replication.

This information is useful for Christian influencers on upper elementary students. Intentional focus on relationships impacting individual spiritual growth is important. Intentional opportunities for students to focus on strengthening individual talents and abilities is recommended. However, without an intentional focus and guidance on following Christ, those abilities and talents become self-focused. Apart from Christ, the talents and abilities are temporary. Intentional opportunities for students to use individual talents and abilities to impact others is imperative for relationships to be strengthened. Once students begin to follow Christ,

spiritual gifts combined with individual talents and interests will have the potential to impact the Kingdom.

Delimitations and Limitations

This study was designed to explore the lived discipleship experiences of upper elementary students in Christian schools. To focus on the lived discipleship experiences of a particular group, delimitations were intentionally applied to this study. The design of the study also resulted in limitations that emerged through the study.

Delimitations

Participants in this study were delimited to fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools to capture the discipleship experiences of the students. The schools were specifically selected based on their affiliation with ACSI and the discipleship component of their mission statement. Students in other grades were excluded to focus on upper elementary discipleship experiences. Students who professed faith through a personal relationship with Jesus and who showed evidence of spiritual growth in the classroom setting were recommended by their teachers. This purposeful approach increased the likelihood that students had experienced the discipleship phenomenon. Thus, this is a delimitation of the study because no students in Christian schools without ACSI affiliation or evangelistic schools were included in this study.

Limitations

The study was also limited by the nature of data communicated by students who may have struggled to communicate ideas. In addition, only five students participated in the focus group interview, which further limited the study. The study could have been limited by the schools all being from the same school system where the study lacks generalizability of results (Creswell, 2013).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. The results of the study indicated that upper elementary students' discipleship experiences are directly related to various relationships and social interactions both in and out of the school setting. The study also places emphasis on individual experiences, individual differences, spiritual growth, spiritual disciplines, defining moments, and the potential to expand the Kingdom through service, character development, and sharing Truth with others. While the study made important discoveries, there are areas in need of further study. As this study was limited to one school system, broadening the area may be valuable in exploring similar discipleship experiences of other upper elementary students in Christian schools. Although not the focus of this study, some of the participants had been at their Christian schools since preschool while others started later in elementary school. Therefore, a study comparing the experiences of lifelong Christian school students with experiences of first-year students may also be valuable in adding to the literature of discipleship experiences in elementary. Future research should examine the impact of spiritual gift assessment on discipleship in elementary. It is possible that there are additional gaps between student understanding of individual gifts and discipleship that need to be uncovered. A multiple case study design could be utilized to examine spiritual gift assessments compared with schools that do not focus on spiritual gift assessments.

Future studies should also examine ways to assess individual student spiritual growth through intentional focus on intentional mentorship discipleship programs. This could potentially be completed through case studies which focus on discipleship programs in

elementary. This study could be completed with both elementary and middle school students to determine the most meaningful discipleship experiences for both populations.

Finally, a causal-comparative design could be conducted to examine the spiritual growth of students who are actively participating in intentional discipleship programs that extend beyond the elementary classroom to determine if there is a relationship between large group and small group discipleship.

Summary

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. Data were collected from 10 participants using three qualitative measures (interviews, a focus group, and a word association activity) and analyzed by coding, identifying themes, developing textural and structural descriptions, and ultimately arriving at the essence of the experience for the participants. Three themes emerged from the analysis of the study: relationships and social interactions, individual experiences, and Kingdom impact through investing in others. The essence of the discipleship experience was that these upper elementary students have been impacted by relationships and individual spiritual growth that varies from student to student. In comparison, personal relationship with God through Jesus was mentioned 43 times (see Appendices K–L). The essence of discipleship is following Jesus. Every aspect of discipleship originates and returns to an individual relationship of following Jesus.

While the findings from this study cannot be generalized, this study is an attempt to address the gap in elementary discipleship research. It is important for educators to realize the impact of individual spiritual gifts and the need to assess individual student spiritual growth as it applies to discipleship. A systemic plan for discovering and developing individuals for a lifetime

of service and Kingdom impact is an important factor in developing students. Intentional focus

on following Jesus and the unique design of each individual will increase relationships and

further expand community and Kingdom. My hope is that other educators will join me in

continuing to seek out the experiences and voice of elementary students concerning discipleship.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

November 20, 2020

Krystal Morrow
James Swezey

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY20-21-205 Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifth
Grade Students in Christian Schools

Dear Krystal Morrow, James Swezey:

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University
Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the date of
the IRB meeting at which the protocol was approved: November 20, 2020. If data collection
proceeds past one year, or if you make modifications in the methodology as it pertains to human
subjects, you must submit an appropriate update submission to the IRB.
These submissions can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

Your study falls under the expedited review category (45 CFR 46.110), which is applicable to
specific, minimal risk studies and minor changes to approved studies for the following reason(s):

7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to,
research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural
beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history,
focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

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.

Thank you for your cooperation with the IRB, and we wish you well with your research project.

Sincerely,

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

Appendix B: Administrator Letter

Dear Administrator:

As a doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as a part of the requirements for an Education Doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived discipleship experiences of fourth and fifth grade students in Christian schools. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

As the administrator of an ACSI member school in Kentucky, I am requesting your participation in this study. I will need your help in selecting students to participate in this study. Once students have been selected, permission will be obtained from the students' parents to participate in an interview, focus group and word association technique. Permission from parents will be shown to you before the research begins.

If you are willing to participate, please read through the consent document and electronically sign the consent document. Once I receive your consent document, I will contact you to set up a meeting time to discuss next steps.

Sincerely,

Krystal Morrow, Education Specialist
Doctoral Candidate. Liberty University

Appendix C: Research Information Request

Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifth Grade Students in Christian Schools

Research Information Statement

I, Krystal Morrow, am a doctoral student at Liberty University. I am conducting research on the lived discipleship experiences of fourth and fifth grade students.

Significance of the Research

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study is to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools. Vygotsky's theory of social interaction, the more knowledgeable other, and the zone of proximal development will be the lens through which discipleship will be studied. Practically, this study is vital to Christian school educators, stakeholders, and students. Discovering the lived experiences of fourth- and fifth-grade students in Christian schools can improve the educational and spiritual opportunities while also impacting the triangular partnership between the school, home and church.

Aims:

- o Discover how fourth- and fifth-grade students describe their experiences with discipleship.

- o Discover how fourth- and fifth-grade students have been impacted by peers concerning discipleship.

- o Discover how fourth- and fifth-grade students have been impacted by teachers concerning discipleship.

o   Discover how fourth- and fifth-grade student discipleship experiences have influenced individual spiritual maturity.

Research Plan and Method

A phenomenological approach will be used for this study. School administrators will be asked to choose 5 fourth or fifth grade students. Permission will be obtained from the students' parents to participate in an interview, focus group and word association technique. The interview and focus groups will be audio recorded and transcribed to aid in analysis. The recordings will be stored in a locked case. The students will be assigned pseudonyms and all documents will be available for review for participants.

School Involvement:

If you are willing for your school to participate, please complete and return the attached school consent form. Once I have received consent, I will ask the administrator to:

- Select 5 students for the study with teacher input

- Submit Google Form indicating student name, parent name and email to seek parental consent

- Arrange a time for data collection

Thank you for your time.

Krystal Morrow

Liberty University, Doctoral Candidate

Appendix D: Administration Consent Form

Title of Study: Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifth Grade Students in Christian Schools

Researcher: Krystal Morrow

I _____, administrator of _____ school, understand:

- The study and what it required of students and parents of my school
- The privacy and confidentiality will be protected
- The right to allow or reject this research study
- The right to terminate this research study at any time
- Participant right to review all consent forms and documents at any time up to three years after completion of this study

  - o I grant permission to the researcher to conduct the above-named research in my school as described.
  - o I DO NOT grant permission to the researcher to conduct the above-named research in my school as described.

_____
Signature of Administrator

_____
Date

Appendix E: Acceptance and Rejection Emails to Potential Participants

Dear Participant,
Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study titled: The Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifths Grade Students in Christian Schools. You have been selected to participate in this study. Attached, please find the electronic consent form. Please return this form signed via email to kmorrow12@liberty.edu within seven days. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to me using the contact information listed below.

Sincerely,

Krystal Morrow, Education Specialist
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
kmorrow12@liberty.edu

Rejection Email

Dear Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study titled: The Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifth Grade Students in Christian Schools. At this time, you have not been selected to participate in this study. Thank you for being willing to contribute. If you have questions or concerns, please reach out to me using the contact information listed below.

Sincerely,

Krystal Morrow, Education Specialist
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University
kmorrow12@liberty.edu

Appendix F: Parental Consent

Title of the Project: Lived Discipleship Experiences of Fourth and Fifth Grade Students in Christian Schools
Principal Investigator: Krystal Morrow, doctoral student, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be in 4th or 5th grade. The next requirement is that the student must have experienced discipleship in the elementary school. According to the definition of discipleship, for the purpose of this study, includes profession of faith through a personal relationship with Jesus. Finally, there is evidence in the classroom setting of spiritual growth of the student. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to allow your child to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to explore and describe lived discipleship experiences of fourth and fifth grade students in Christian schools. Investigating what it means to be discipled as an upper elementary student in a Christian school has the potential to impact the triangular partnership between the school, home and church.

What will participants be asked to do in this study?

If you agree to allow your child to be in this study, I will ask [him or her] to do the following things:
1. Participate in an individual interview which will be audio recorded for transcription purposes. This interview should take approximately 40 minutes.
2. Participate in one focus group session. The focus group session should take approximately one hour and will be audio recorded.
3. Review the transcript of the individual interview and your contribution during the focus group to ensure their accuracy. This should take approximately 15 minutes.
4. Participate in a word association activity. This should take approximately 15 minutes.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, students may benefit from the collaborative conversation that occurs in the focus group session with other fourth and fifth grade students. Personal insight regarding point of view and to participate in a study related to life experiences with the opportunity to learn the results.

Benefits to society include potential to increase the educational and spiritual opportunities for elementary students because valuable information could be uncovered regarding the lived discipleship experiences of fourth and fifth grade students. Education provides a platform for

student growth and research in the educational field can help to improve the overall educational experience for students.

What risks might participants experience from being in this study?

The risks involved in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life. Please note that information disclosed to the researcher during the study that falls under the mandated reporting laws of the state will be reported to appropriate agencies. Such information includes, but is not limited to child abuse, child neglect, potential harm to self, and potential harm to others. These topics will not be asked about as a part of this study. Taking part in this study is completely voluntary.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report, we might publish, we 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 responses will be kept confidential using pseudonyms. I will conduct the interviews in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversations.
- Data will be stored on a password protected locked laptop and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside the group.

How will participants be compensated for being part of the study?

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study. I would like to give each participant a small incentive worth approximately $3.00 for participation following the focus group to say thanks for their time and input.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to allow your child to participate will not affect your or [his or her] current or future relations with Liberty University or School System. If you decide to allow your child to participate, [she or he] is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should be done if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw your child from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw her or him, data collected from your child, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in the study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your child's contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw him or her.

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Krystal Morrow. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ or kmorrow12@liberty.edu. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. James Swezey at jaswezey@liberty.edu.

Whom do you contact if you have questions about rights as a research participant?

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

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to allow your child to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to allow my child to participate in the study.

☐ The researcher has my permission to audio record my child as part of his/her participation in this study.

_____
Printed Child's/Student's Name

_____
Parent's Signature   Date

_____
Minor's Signature   Date

Appendix G: Interview Document

Date:

Time of Interview:

Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee #:

Opening Statement:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from this research study or conclude this interview at any time. The purpose of today's interview is to explore your discipleship experiences in the Christian school setting. For each question, please share as much detail as possible to illustrate your perspective and understanding of the research topic. The answers you share during today's interview will be confidential and anonymous throughout this research study. Today's interview will be audio recorded, and you will also receive a copy of the transcript at a later date.

Central Question:

How do fourth and fifth grade students describe their experiences with discipleship in Christian elementary schools?

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Tell me about yourself.

2. Tell me about how long you have been at this school.

3. What grade are you in?

4. What is the name of the church you attend?

5. Tell me about your spiritual gifts, talents, or abilities.

6. What are some ways that you can use those to fulfill God's purpose in your school life?

7. What do you think the word discipleship means?

8. How would you say your school has spiritually guided you?

9. How important is discipleship to you at school?

10. Tell me about the discipleship experiences you have had at school.

11. How have those experiences impacted your life?

12. How have your classmates influenced your discipleship experiences at school?

13. How have your teachers influenced your discipleship experiences at school?

14. How have your discipleship experiences at school influenced your spiritual growth?

15. Tell me some of the ways that you practice growing spiritually through discipleship at school.

16. Tell me how the Bible relates to discipleship at school.

17. What is the purpose of discipleship at school?

18. What advice would you give to your classmates about making disciples at school?

19. Tell me how your parents have contributed to your discipleship experiences at school.

20. Tell me more about your relationship with Jesus.

21. Compare your discipleship experiences at school with discipleship experiences at your church.

22. What has been the most meaningful discipleship experience for you at school?

23. How does a person grow in spiritual maturity as they go from elementary to middle school?

24. What, if anything, do you wish was included in your discipleship experiences at school?

25. Finally, please share anything that we have not discussed that you would like me to know about your experiences in discipleship at school.

Closing Statement: Thank you for taking the time to participate in this interview and research study. All the responses you shared will remain confidential and anonymous. You may be contacted for a brief follow-up interview, and a full transcript of your interview will be provided to you.

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Open-Ended Questions

1. Please introduce yourself by telling us what grade you are in and how long you have been at this school.

2. What discipleship experience at school has helped you the most?

   Probe: Explain a discipleship experience that helped you while you were at school.

3. Who do you typically go to for help being discipled?

   Probe: Tell us who you seek out for discipleship experiences.

4. How do you feel when you are being discipled?

   Probe: Explain how you knew you were being discipled.

5. How have your classmates added value to your spiritual growth?

   Probe: Describe how your life has been affected or not affected by your classmates concerning discipleship.

6. How have your teachers added value to your spiritual growth?

   Probe: Describe how your life has been influenced by your teachers concerning discipleship.

7. In your opinion, how important is discipleship in elementary school?

   Probe: Tell us how important discipleship has been for you in school.

8. What lessons have you learned through discipleship?

   Probe: Discuss lessons that you have learned through discipleship.

9. What are some examples of things you have done at school to be discipled or make disciples?

   Probe: Explain some of the various ways that your school helps you to become a disciple.

10. How would you explain the difference between spiritual growth in a large group versus a small group?

    Probe: Explain how a chapel experience is different from a small group discipleship experience?

11. What is the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus?

    Probe: Explain the difference between knowing Jesus and knowing about Jesus.

12. How is the word multiplication related to discipleship?

    Probe: Tell how the word multiplication is similar to discipleship.

13. What are some ways that a person could use their personal gifts and abilities to disciple others?

    Probe: Explain how a person could use their personal gifts and abilities in discipling others.

14. How is spiritual growth impacted by relationships?

    Probe: Tell me about how relationships influence discipleship and spiritual growth.

15. Of all the things we have discussed, what is the most important to you?

Appendix I: Free Word Association

The stimulus words related to discipleship will be read aloud and visually shown one at a time.

Each student will be asked to respond with the first word that comes to his/her mind

Free Word Association Stimulus Words

Reading Scripture

Memory Verse

Teacher

Mentoring

Prayer

Church

Discipleship

Spiritual Growth

Spiritual Gifts

Christlike

Great Commission

Modeling

Sanctification

Spiritual transformation

Spiritual discipline

Influence

Obedience

Talent

Ability

Redemption

Christ's mission

Christian

Maturity

Fruit of the Spirit

Servant

Appendix J: Significant Terms and Frequency

Significant Terms	# of Times Repeated
Actions	33
Application	12
Build Relationships	24
Baptized	8
Case for Christ book	7
Chapel	9
Church	13
Classmates	11
Devotions	4
Dig Deeper	11
Explanation	8
Family	14
Fellowship	5
Following Jesus	29
Foundation	4
Friends	13
Growing in Faith	37
Guidance	9
Influence others	37
Kindness	27
Lead by example	10
Listen	5
Love Others	14
Parents	21
Pray	26
Questions	19
Reading the Bible	33
School	18
Serve Others	45
Sinner	13
Teacher	19
Teaching others	24
Tell others about Jesus	36
Teammates	14
Transparency	8
Trauma	13
Trust	7
Trust God	19

Appendix K: Word Association Chart for Autumn, Lucy, Aaron, Tucker

Word Prompt	Participants			
	Autumn	**Lucy**	**Aaron**	**Tucker**
Spiritual Maturity	Mature and loving others	maturing	God	Good
Fruit of the Spirit	Love Peace	kindness	Kindness	Loving
Servant	Follower of God	Serving others	Good deeds	Helping others
Reading Scripture	Reading Words	Bible	Bible	Bible
Memory Verse	Remember	Memorize and John 3:16	John 3:16	Learning
Teacher	Helper to grow in God	Guider	Teaching others	Jesus
Mentoring	Help you grow closer to God	teaching		Helping
Prayer	Speaking to God	Talking to God	Talking to God	Talk to God
Church	Place go to sing	Family	God's house	Fellowship
Discipleship	Loving others as Jesus loves you	Jesus' Disciples: Paul, etc…	Telling others about God	Following
Spiritual Growth	Growing in love for Jesus	Growing in Love	Growing closer to God	Close to Him
Spiritual Gifts	God gives you that you are good at	Love Joy Kindness	Gifts from God	Eternal Life
Christlike	Kind to you	Jesus	Being like Christ	Servant
Great Commission	Go tell people about what you have done and gone through	Telling others about Jesus	Missionary	Missionary
Modeling	Being a good example to others	Showing people	designing	Acting
Sanctification	Being more like God	Sanctifying others	Becoming a saint	Saint
Spiritual Transformation	Changing in the way you love God	Turning into something new	?	Made New
Spiritual Discipline	Something that you do that does not honor God	Getting into trouble with sin	Knowing when to do things	Church
Influence	Someone that is an example	Being nice to others	Monkey see; monkey do	Telling
Obedience	You do something that is what someone would want you to do	Obeying mom, dad and God	Obey	Obey
Talent	Something you are good at	act	Spiritual gifts	Gift

Word Prompt	Participants			
	Autumn	**Lucy**	**Aaron**	**Tucker**
Ability	I can do something good	swimming	Able	Talent
Redemption	When someone forgives you and you feel better	forgiveness	Being rescued	Sacrifice
Christ's Mission	To save the earth from sin	To save us from our sins	To take people to Heaven	Tell the World
Christian	Someone who follows God	Following Jesus and God	me	Me

Appendix L: Word Association Chart for Travis, Brian, Christa, Christopher, Bobby

Word Prompt	Participants				
	Travis	**Brian**	**Christa**	**Christopher**	**Bobby**
Spiritual Maturity	Church	Knowing Christ well	Knowing God	Growth	Focus to God
Fruit of the Spirit	What Jesus displays	Actions from Jesus	The song: love, joy, peace, patience, etc.…	Kindness	Joy
Servant	Jesus	Helping	A person who serves someone	Compassion	Helping
Reading Scripture	Bible	Bible	Bible	Memory	Being Responsive
Memory Verse	Wisdom for me	Remembering God's Word	Bible	School/Bible	2 Samuel 12:25
Teacher	School	Tell	My present teacher	Nice/Loving	Telling
Mentoring	Jesus, parents	Teaching	Teacher	Teaching	Telling with them
Prayer	Growing closer to God/ expressing feelings, thoughts	Talk to God	Praying	Talking to God	Talking to God
Church	Cross	Family of Believers	My church: SE Kids	Love	A place where Christians get together
Discipleship	School, church, Jesus	Make Disciples	The Disciples	Fruits of the Spirit/Jesus	Teaching God
Spiritual Growth	Bible Studies	Growing in God	Growing Plants	Maturity	Getting Closer to God
Spiritual Gifts	Talents about Faith	Things God has given you to serve Him	The test I took	God given talents	Giving Spiritually
Christlike	WWJD: What would Jesus do?	Be like Jesus	Jesus	Jesus	Being like Christ
Great Commission	What we are called to do	Go everywhere and make disciples	Adventure	Mission	Good Missionary
Modeling	Good example to others	Structure	A medal	Showing feelings and thoughts	Setting a Good Example
Sanctification	God makes us pure everyday	Purified	Knowing Jesus	Purify	Being a Sacrifice
Spiritual Transformation	Sharing God's Word	Made new with Jesus	Being Transformed	Growing through Jesus	Turning away from sin

Word Prompt	Participants				
	Travis	**Brian**	**Christa**	**Christopher**	**Bobby**
Spiritual Discipline	Obey always	Read the Bible	Disciple teaching God	Disciplined in God	Not knowing God
Influence	God, Parents…me to others	Motive	Influencing: example	Encourage	Setting an example
Obedience	I should do	Doing what is right	Obeying	Listening	Being obedient
Talent	God gifted ability	Gifts from God	America's Got Talent	Performance	Doing great
Ability	What God gives us	Being able to	Being able to do something	Able	To be able
Redemption	Jesus redeems us	Made new	Baptizing	Redeem	Getting another chance
Christ's Mission	Turn all people to Him	To make Jesus known everywhere	Sharing God's Word	Make followers and show fellowship	Defeat Something
Christian	Who we are…and we make other people	Being like Christ	Follower of God	Believing there is one God	Follower of Christ (me)

Appendix M: Audit Trail

Date	Action:
11-20-20	**Full IRB approval obtained**
12-01-20	**Solicit recommendations for classroom teachers (Zoom with Principals)**
12/10/20-12/21/20	**Solicit recommendations for participants.** **(Email and Google Form to Teachers)**
1/11/21-2/19/21	**Solicit study participants (Email parents)**
1/12/21-2/19/21	**Send confirmation emails to participants (once permission is received)**
3/10/21-3/12/21	**Conduct individual interviews**
3/13/21-3/21/21	**Transcribe interviews**
3/22/21-3/25/21	**Students check transcripts and Conduct focus group**
3/26/21	**Students check transcripts and complete word association activity**
3/27/21-4/16/21	**Aggregate data, print all transcripts**
4/17/21-4/29/21	**Complete data analysis, begin drafting chapter four**
4/29/21-5/2/21	**Write chapter five**
5/2/21	**Submitted 1st Draft to chair for review**
6/15/21	**Submitted 2nd Draft to chair for review**
7/12/21	**Final Defense**