

FAITH DEVELOPMENT IN EIGHTH-GRADE CHRISTIAN STUDENTS STUDYING
CREATION-THEORY-BASED SCIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

by

Stephen Matthew Lowe

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived faith development experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a creation-theory-based curriculum at a Northern Michigan Christian school. The 12 male and female students who participated were aged 13–14 years and self-identified as Christian. The study setting was a small Christian middle school in Northern Michigan. Researchers have thoroughly investigated many aspects of faith development but had not addressed the faith development of eighth-grade Christian students following a creation-theory-based curriculum. The theoretical framework underlying the study was Fowler's faith development theory. Data were triangulated from semistructured interviews, focus groups, and journal blogging to enhance the validity of the findings and promote in-depth investigation of faith development. Collected data were coded for emerging themes and then analyzed using the phenomenological analysis methods of horizontalization and writing textural and structural descriptions of meanings. Three themes emerged: faith contributors, faith defined by God, and development of faith by creationism. Studying creationism positively informed student faith development in various ways. The findings supported the viability of Fowler's faith development theory as a theoretical lens with which to explore youth faith development. The findings also indicated that participants' views of God and faith grew as a result of studying creationism. Studying creationism also helped to define participant faith.

Keywords: faith development, spirituality, religiosity, Fowler, creation-theory-based curricula, Christian students

Copyright Page

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my faithful family. My wife and three beautiful children sacrificed much throughout my doctoral journey. Throughout this journey, they supported me with their unwavering love, support, and patience. They were my strength and purpose, which carried me beyond my own means during times of doubt and weariness. They waited patiently and endured a great deal of time away from me throughout this journey. My appreciation, love, and gratitude extend to all of them. My deepest gratitude is owed to them. Thank you, Elizabeth, Ryan, Aaron, and my angel baby Ainsley. Special thanks also to Norman, my 16-lb chihuahua.

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List of Abbreviations

Creation-theory-based curriculum (CTBC)

Faith development (FD)

Faith development theory (FDT)

Institutional review board (IRB)

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

Student–Athlete Christian Faith Interview Guide (SACFIG)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived faith development (FD) experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a creation-theory-based curriculum (CTBC) at a Northern Michigan Christian school. It was important to examine the FD of students, because young people's faith suffers in various ways when their FD goes unnourished (Earls, 2019). Although many researchers have written about FD, they have not explored the FD of eighth-grade Christian school students following a CTBC (Alters & Nelson, 2002). The theoretical framework for this study was Fowler's (1981) FD theory (FDT). This chapter discusses the background of FD and CTBCs and states my situation relative to the study, the purpose of the study, the problem under consideration, the significance of the study, the research questions, and definitions of key terms. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Background

The phenomenon of individual faith has driven prominent researchers and has been the subject of much debate (L. L. Newman, 1998). Some theologians have described faith as something internal that drives the hope of an individual, but others have described it as an action that an individual may practice through lived experiences (Fowler, 1981). The definition of faith as an action generally takes place in the context of FD (Fowler, 1981). Fowler defined faith as something more than an internal hope and developed a model of FD by extending the structural–developmental traditions of researchers such as Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1975, 1981; Epting, 2012).

Historical Context

It is important to understand the genesis of the concept of faith because of its impact on human civilization (Howard-Snyder, 2016). Faith has received many definitions throughout history; however, the Christian Bible provides the most profound definition of faith (Howard-Snyder, 2016). In his epistle to the Hebrews, the apostle Paul wrote:

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For by it the people of old received their commendation. By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible. (*New International Version*, 1978, Heb. 11:1–3)

According to this passage, faith evinces the spiritual world without any physical evidence for affirmation of that faith. Compilation of the biblical cannon has led countless theologians, religious scholars, and others to discover the boundless meaning of faith, not only interpretively but also in practice (Howard-Snyder, 2016). Although many theologians and philosophers have contributed to the understanding and discovery of faith, certain individuals, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, made foundational contributions to modern understanding of faith (McGrath, 1994).

Luther, a 16th-century German theologian, was the catalyst of the Protestant Reformation that reformulated the basic tenets of Christian belief, such as faith (McGrath, 1994). Luther challenged contemporary conceptions of faith in 1517 with his *Ninety-Five Theses* in a sincere effort to subvert the Roman Catholic Church and Pope Leo X's interpretation of the Bible and faith (McGrath, 1994). Luther challenged the church's conceived means of human salvation by marshaling human will to please God by doing works. Luther dramatically broke from this tradition by asserting that humans contribute nothing to their salvation except by their faith,

which impacted understanding of faith in its entirety (McGrath, 1994). Calvin also contributed to modern knowledge and views of faith. Like Luther, Calvin dramatically broke from the church's interpretation of faith by popularizing the belief in God's sovereignty in all areas of life (Canlis, 2010). Calvin offered a dramatic new view of faith and interpretation of Christianity in his 1536 publication *Institutes of the Christian Religion*; however, Calvin's statement of faith contrasted starkly with Luther's. Unlike Luther, who viewed faith as vital for an individual's salvation, Calvin viewed faith as firm and specific knowledge of God in which God is completely sovereign in redemption (Canlis, 2010). Although Luther and Calvin offered different views of faith, they both presented new understandings of faith. As two profound contributors to the Protestant Reformation, Luther and Calvin not only introduced new ways to view faith but also made the practice of faith accessible to individuals who were not members of the Roman Catholic Church (Gordon, 2017).

Although common understanding of faith generally gives the word "faith" the same meaning as the word "hope," many scholars have maintained that faith is far more than an emotion or hope (Begum, 2011). Many theologians and scholars have viewed faith not as an emotion but as a lifelong development of an individual (L. L. Newman, 1998). However, many scholars—such as Piaget (1965), Kohlberg (1975, 1981), and Erickson (1963)—have viewed faith as a cognitive and moral development that all individuals experience independently of spiritual or theological foundations (Parks, 2000). Piaget's work is particularly relevant to the proposed study because Piaget developed the theory of cognitive development in 1936 by researching the cognitive development of children, and he offered that faith is part of that development (Oogarah-Pratap et al., 2020). Piaget argued that intelligence is not a fixed trait but rather an interaction between an individual's environment and logical thinking, which includes

faith (Oogarah-Pratap et al., 2020). According to Piaget, a child begins to develop the cognitive requirements of faith during Stage 3, the concrete operational phase, which extends from age 7 years to age 10 years (Oogarah-Pratap et al., 2020). Although Piaget referenced faith within his developmental model, he did not research FD exclusively. In his 1928 publication, *Two Types of Religious Attitude: Immanence and Transcendence*, Piaget struggled with the concept of a transcendent God and argued in favor of divine immanence (Wadsworth, 1979). Fowler (1981) extended Piaget's (1965) work and conducted groundbreaking research into individuals' FD. Fowler developed stages of FD and offered a new understanding of faith viewed through the lens of psychosocial and cognitive development.

Researchers have used early studies of FD, such as Fowler's (1981), as a theoretical lens through which to research faith and FD, which is the purpose of the proposed study. Many researchers have examined the faith of children and young people. Debnam et al. (2016) stated that 30% of Americans aged 12–17 years attended 25 or more church services per year, with 73.3% of these respondents describing that faith as very important. Researchers examining religious and spiritual development in youth have primarily focused on who is religious rather than how religious beliefs develop (Regnerus et al., 2004).

Social Context

Social scientists have historically revealed that religion and faith play a significant and substantial role in young people's lives (Regnerus et al., 2004). A Pew Research poll conducted in 2020 revealed that 80% of those aged 13–17 years believed in God, 60% of whom viewed religion as an essential aspect of their lives (Sciupac, 2020). Scripture states that faith "is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (*New International Version*, 1978, Heb. 11:1). Consequently, because faith is an unviewable phenomenon, it is

immeasurable; therefore, qualitative research is the appropriate research method for exploring the phenomenon of faith (Madge et al., 2014). The differences between the scientific methods highlight why researchers have conducted far more quantitative research than qualitative when exploring the faith of young people.

Faith-based programs and curricula have become a mainstay of religious youth academic communities in the United States (Pinckney et al., 2020). Researchers have discovered that the spirituality of young people develops within the social context of their lives, including their home lives and academic lives (Natsis, 2017). Religious education supports students' faith when educators use lessons that provide students with a principal source of information relating to their faith (Madge et al., 2014). Although faithful students excel in happiness and academic success, their secular counterparts have varied outcomes with respect to happiness and academic success (Madge et al., 2014). Faithful students exhibit not only academic success but also greater resistance to negative social pressures than other students (Madge et al., 2014). Researchers have attributed this to faithful students' religious worldviews (Madge et al., 2014).

Given the positive outcomes for young people who possess a religious worldview, such as their faithfulness, it is important to understand the negative characteristics associated with religiously unaffiliated young people. In 2020, 14.45% of those who committed suicide in the United States were aged 15–24 years, and suicide among this age group increased by nearly 60% from 2007 to 2018 (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, 2020). Religiously unaffiliated young people had significantly more lifetime suicide attempts and relatives who had committed suicide than young people who practiced religious faith (Talbot, 2007). Religiously unaffiliated young people perceived fewer reasons for living, had fewer moral objections to suicide, and exhibited reckless impulsivity, aggression, and substance abuse (Talbot, 2007). In

contrast to religiously unaffiliated young people, religiously affiliated young people displayed far less suicidal behavior, depression, aggression, and anxiety (Talbot, 2007). The available data relating to the consequences of young people being religiously unaffiliated indicate a profound need for further research into the FD of young people, which was the purpose of this study. For these reasons, research was needed to discover the essence of meaning described by students following a CTBC and how it relates to the students' lived experience of FD.

Theoretical Context

Fowler's (1981) FDT allows for the intricate and in-depth psychosocial analysis required to explore FD in young people. Researchers have provided abundant information about faith in the general context; however, they have provided little information specific to FD, especially FD in young students (Epting, 2012; Fowler, 1981; L. L. Newman, 1998; Parks, 2000; Streib, 2001). Many researchers have focused on the FD of college-aged students, who generally fall within Stage 4 of Fowler's FDT. However, as Fowler showed, the age difference between middle school students and college students dramatically affects their FD experiences. The vast majority of researchers investigating students' faith have focused on numerical or quantitative study designs; few have studied the contribution and influence of FD in young students from a qualitative perspective.

Understanding FD theoretically requires a review of the literature relevant to FD. Fowler (1981) defined FDT and viewed faith differently in a developmental context than in a general context:

A developmental sequence of faith epistemologies, correlated with what we know of physical, psychosocial, and development in childhood and adulthood, will likely

exhibit—in any culture—a series of equilibrated styles separated by transitional—
constructive periods that parallel, in terms of elaboration of structural operations. (p. 298)

This quote highlights the applicability of FDT to the study of the psychosocial and structural constructs of faith in young people. Fowler's research approach offered a new perspective on faith through consideration of structural and sequential FD and has enabled researchers to study FD in a new way. Many researchers have since studied FD, and some have even expanded on Fowler's idea of FD. Parks (2000) extended Fowler's original concept of FD by offering a new concept of FD that emphasizes truth and trust as major components of understanding faith. Different life events—such as challenges, accomplishments, and crises—all present opportunities for meaning making and individual FD (Parks, 2000). Although researchers such as Fowler and Parks have helped define the scope and knowledge of faith and FD, many researchers have used their theoretical frameworks to study different aspects of the FD experience.

Students of various ages experience FD in different ways and from different life interactions (L. L. Newman, 1998). Fowler (1981) divided FD into understandable and usable brackets by age and psychosocial elements through which qualitative researchers can effectively investigate FD. This study involved pursuit of the essence of student FD derived from following a CTBC. I hope to use the students' descriptions of their FD experiences to enhance the FD experiences of future students following CTBCs and help educators better facilitate application of CTBCs to strengthen students' FD experiences.

Situation to Self

I have endured many trials and tribulations that easily could have detoured me from the path that God designed for me to follow. These trials and tribulations, which led me to conduct

this study, began when I lost my family structure at an early age. My parents divorced and abandoned my sister and me, leaving us to fend for ourselves in many ways. However, my parents did plant seeds within me before this familial collapse. I attended a Christian school throughout my elementary and middle school years.

During my time attending the Christian school, I discovered God and who God is. I learned about God through my textbooks and from my teachers. After my school years, I set out on a journey of discovery, trial, and error. I endured a life of utter hardship and discovery, lost many people close to me, and failed in many ways, and these trials and tribulations led the seeds of faith planted within me in school to blossom. In the dark and lonely place where I found myself, I reflected on my youth and began to ask God for divine intervention. I remembered the teachings and Bible lessons of my school years. The lessons that I had learned so long before resulted in a fiery faith journey, which has led me to the proposed study, which is therefore deeply personal to me. My objective in conducting the study was to discover and describe the seeds of faith planted in students not from Bible studies but from following a CTBC. With this study, I aimed to explore the innermost emotional, spiritual, and psychological essences of meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018) that students develop when following a CTBC. The transcendental phenomenological approach enabled me to explore the FD phenomenon in students.

At the time of writing, I have been a youth pastor for 5 years working exclusively with Christian young people aged 12–18 years. Through my experiences as a youth pastor, I have developed my philosophical assumptions relating to the study. My faith journey experiences have led me to assume that a CTBC has a supportive and positive influence on a student's lived FD experience. My epistemological assumptions focus on participants' knowledge that the

Bible's Genesis story informs and supports their faith and belief in God (Creswell & Poth, 2018). As a Christian and a youth pastor, I assumed that the findings of the study would further inform my own knowledge and belief that the Genesis story and faith in God are interrelated and contribute substantially to FD. Ontologically, I assumed that the Genesis account of creation would be constructed as real within the minds of the participants and would affirm and support their faith in God. Axiologically, I admitted the value-laden nature of discovering the impact of following a CTBC on the FD of young people. The study produced insightful and meaningful data that will contribute to FD and growth in young people and help educators to better facilitate CTBCs. The paradigm that guided me through the study was constructivism (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The aim of the study was to develop subjective and complex meanings from students who follow a CTBC, which relied on participants' views of their FD in relation to following such a curriculum. Throughout the study, the participants' responses to the interview questions and journal prompts helped to produce knowledge relating to their FD and understanding of a CTBC (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My aim was to enable and encourage participants to construct the essence of meaning developed while following a CTBC within the lived experience of their FD.

Problem Statement

Although researchers have extensively investigated the religiosity of young Americans, the main focus of these researchers has been quantitative, demographical, and which young people are religiously active (Regnerus et al., 2004). Far fewer researchers have focused on how young people develop their religious views (Regnerus et al., 2004). One of the reasons for the popularity of quantitative research in connection with the faith of young people is that quantitative researchers measure existing recorded data rather than richly exploring the phenomenon of faith (Regnerus et al., 2004). There are significant differences between the data

collection and data analysis methods of quantitative and qualitative research (Lutz & Knox, 2014). Quantitative researchers explore measurable data, whereas qualitative researchers explore data from the lived experiences of participants in relation to a specific phenomenon (Lutz & Knox, 2014). It is simply easier to research that which is measurable, so such research occurs more frequently (Lutz & Knox, 2014).

The problem that motivated this study was that Christian students begin to question and lose their faith when it does not receive appropriate supportive affirmation through instruction, especially in the sciences (Regnerus & Uecker, 2006). Earls (2019) reported that 66% of young Americans who attended a Protestant church regularly throughout childhood dropped out of church for at least 1 year when they turned 18 years old (Earls, 2019). These statistics are important because religiously unaffiliated young people have a much higher risk than religiously affiliated young people of suicidal behavior, anxiety, depression, and having a grim view of the future (Talbot, 2007). Religious affiliations that promote faith in young people contribute to strong religious development, healthy worldview, and healthy general lifestyle (Talbot, 2007). External social influences, such as academic programs, also supplement the faith of young people (Strommen & Hardel, 2008). Faith and religion are highly positive contributors to a child's upbringing, life outcomes, academic performance, and learning outcomes (King & Furrow, 2008).

The curricula followed by children and young people substantially impact their worldview, understanding, and religion (Valenzuela, 2016) and are prominent influences of the academic programs that contribute to their faith. In contrast to public schools, Christian schools teach from a CTBC. CTBCs are the predominant means of teaching creation throughout American Christian schools, with the vast majority of Christian schools following young-Earth

creation curricula (Laats & Siegel, 2016). Creationism textbooks focus on divine action by a creator and generally denounce other origin theories, such as cosmic panspermia and chemical evolution (Baptista et al., 2016). Most modern CTBCs for Christian eighth-grade students are based on creation models constructed by scholars whose views overlap in some respects while retaining their own distinctive features (Ham et al., 2017). Belief in creationism is foundational to youth FD because it supports and affirms Biblical tenets including those of salvation (Ham et al., 2017).

Faith in young people supports the health of their worldviews and their learning outcomes (King & Furrow, 2008; Strommen & Hardel, 2008; Talbott, 2007). However, Christian school curricula have not received the same consideration as public school curricula with regard to effects of the curricula on student outcomes or FD enhancement (King & Furrow, 2008). With the study, I aimed to discover positive impacts of CTBCs on student FD. By exploring the FD experiences of students following a CTBC, I could provide useful data supporting CTBC enhancement of FD and improved educator facilitation of such curricula to enhance students' FD experiences and thus also enhance their worldviews and learning outcomes.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a CTBC at a Northern Michigan Christian school. In this study, I treated FD generally as an interpersonal development (Fowler, 1981). According to Fowler (1981), interpersonal development begins in Stage 2 and continues throughout the various stages of an individual's FD journey. During interpersonal development, an individual's formal operational thinking can conceive ideal features of people, personalities,

communities, and concepts of faith (Fowler, 1981). Fowler's FDT guided the study because it provided a theoretical lens that enabled me to develop the essence of meaning in relation to students' FD.

Significance of the Study

I aimed to produce a rich textural and structural descriptive summary of the FD experiences of middle-grade students studying a CTBC (Moustakas, 1994). The results of this study were significant in various ways. The data could potentially help school administrators and educational leaders deliver CTBCs in the most effective manner possible and ultimately enhance students' FD. Researchers have identified various factors contributing to FD, but they have not yet addressed how following a CTBC affects student FD.

Empirical

Many researchers studying faith and moral development have investigated the concept of FD (Streib, 2001). Empirical FD researchers have mostly examined various factors that contribute to the FD experience. For example, L. L. Newman (1998) and Epting (2012) examined school-oriented factors and their impact on student FD. Fernando and Ferrari (2009), however, examined how experiencing wartime tragedy impacted FD in children. Fernando and Ferrari used a mixed methods approach and found that children cared for in religious orphanages were more dependent on their faith than children cared for in nonreligious orphanages. Although some researchers have conducted quantitative studies of FD, most empirical researchers have used qualitative methods to study FD. The reason for this is the internal and deeply hidden nature of individual faith (Fowler, 1981).

The phenomenological approach of the study closely aligned with the approaches taken by L. L. Newman (1998), Epting (2012), and Holcomb and Nonneman (2004), who explored

how different factors contribute to FD. These findings of these three phenomenological studies indicate positive effects of school programs on student FD. L. L. Newman explored the FD of 1st-year students attending a Baptist institution and discovered that attending a religious institution positively reinforced the students' FD. The spiritual support from school staff combined with the campus's religious culture provided students with a supplemental atmosphere in which students could openly engage in FD (L. L. Newman, 1998). Holcomb and Nonneman explored the FD of undergraduate liberal arts students and found that sociology courses positively influenced their FD. Epting studied the FD of student athletes and found that participating in a school's football program impacted participants' FD in various ways. The stress of participating in the school's football program strengthened the FD of student athletes by pushing them toward greater reliance on their faith to succeed within the football program (Epting, 2012). This study shared features with the studies of L. L. Newman and Epting. I could find no empirical research exploring the FD of middle school students following a CTBC. The significance of the study derived from the opportunity it presented to discover data to enhance the application of CTBCs to promotion of student FD.

Theoretical

The study provided an opportunity to discover how following a CTBC impact student faith and FD, using Fowler's (1981) FDT as its theoretical lens. Despite exhaustive research, I found no existing work applying Fowler's theory to exploration of the FD of eighth-grade students following a CTBC. Exploring the FD of eighth-grade students following a CTBC supported the viability of Fowler's FDT while also highlighting the versatile application of the theory. Furthermore, Fowler's FDT can be utilized as the theoretical lens to explore other areas of FD including combatting hopelessness and several other contributing factors to FD.

Practical

The majority of U.S. Christian schools are private organizations that do not receive public funding (Poyntz & Walford, 1994). The lack of public funding for private schools affects every facet of their organization, including staff and curricula (Poyntz & Walford, 1994). The main contrast between the curricula of Christian schools and public schools occurs in relation to science (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2020). Because Christian schools educate from a biblical worldview, they teach science courses following CTBCs, whereas public school science courses follow evolution-based curricula (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2020). There has also been a dramatic difference in the availability of curricula because countless publishers produce evolution-based curricula but there are only four leading publishers of CTBCs (Parker-Jenkins et al., 2020).

The results of this study highlighted the need for CTBC enhancement and promote pedagogical steps useful in teaching the unique abstractions of faith in Christian schools. Furthermore, the FD of young people directly impacts their academic and individual success (Strommen & Hardel, 2008). The study revealed the effect of following a CTBC on student FD, which was a significant contribution to promoting the success of students. Now that the connection between FD and CTBCs is discovered, administrators and educators can manufacture teaching methods to facilitate the application of CTBCs to enhance student FD.

Research Questions

A central question and three subquestions guided the study. I designed the open-ended questions to promote deep-rooted thoughts, conversation, and rich data, which are needed to discover meaning through the qualitative phenomenological method (Moustakas, 1994).

Central Question

The central research question was as follows: How does following a CTBC impact the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students? Although researchers have explored the FD of students, none have described the FD experiences of students who follow a CTBC (Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998).

Subquestions

The three subquestions were as follows:

1. How does following a CTBC impact students' definitions of faith? Fowler (1981) defined faith as a multilayered human meaning-making pattern. Faith is a person's way of making sense of, and committing to, transcendent values (Fowler, 1981).
2. How do the descriptions of FD by students following a CTBC align with Fowler's (1981) stages of FD? Fowler defined stages of FD that provide a sequential road map to locate where an individual lies on the faith spectrum. Discovering an individual's stage of faith provides valuable insight into their psychological comprehension of faith, which contributes to understanding the individual's personal definition of faith.
3. How does following a CTBC inform students' views of God? Personal thoughts of God can determine an individual's concept of faith (Fowler, 1981). The concept of faith is important to young people. King and Furrow (2008) discovered that religion positively influences young people, who rely heavily on their faith in their education. The discovery of what faith means to young people is essential to promoting positive FD, which is foundational to students' academic lives (King & Furrow, 2008). Furthermore, students' views of God affect their belief in the Bible and the tenets of salvation (King & Furrow, 2008).

Definitions

1. *Belief*—The response of a person to God, through which a person has confidence in the existence of God without tangible or objective proof (Anthony, 2001).
2. *Christianity* or *Christian*—Characterization of an individual's belief in biblical inerrancy and spiritual salvation through faith in Jesus Christ (Montgomery, 2011).
3. *Creation-theory-based curricula*—A CTBC is any creation-based origin-of-life curriculum as described by Ham et al. (2017).
4. *Development*—The process of someone growing and maturing or furthering themselves within a particular area (Anthony, 2001).
5. *Faith*—A strong belief in God and adherence to the gospel accounts of Christianity (Montgomery, 2011).
6. *Interpersonal perspective*—Construction by a young person of hypothetical scenarios in which they envision how others may view them (Fowler, 1981).
7. *Religious belief*—"The holding of certain ideas" (Fowler, 1981, p. 11).
8. *Self-consciousness*—A young person believing that everyone is looking at them and judging them (Fowler, 1981).
9. *Sphere of influence*—A young person's circle of friends and family (Fowler, 1981).
10. *Spirituality*—The attitudes, actions, and beliefs associated with a person's search for knowledge and experience of God through a somewhat subjective, internal approach (Anthony, 2001).
11. *Synthetic-conventional faith*—Stage 3 of FD (Fowler, 1981).

Summary

The FD experience of a young person is unique, and researchers had not investigated this phenomenon prior to this study (Epting, 2012). However, the faith of young people supports their success both as students and as individuals (King & Furrow, 2008). Knowing that the faith of young people plays a supportive role in their development into adulthood, this faith must receive supplementation and support, not just from family members but also within the academic atmosphere surrounding young people. With the study, I aimed to discover how following a CTBC affects the FD of young people. Although public school curricula regularly undergo scrutiny to improve student outcomes (Westbury, 2016), researchers and curricula developers have generally ignored Christian school curricula (Pinckney et al., 2020). I found no research exploring the FD impact of young people following CTBCs. The study was necessary to investigate this phenomenon and provides useful insights for Christian educators and Christian curricula publishers regarding enhancement of CTBC development and application.

This chapter introduced this study of the FD experiences of 12 eighth-grade students following a CTBC. Fowler's (1981) FDT formed the theoretical lens of the study and permitted an intricate examination of participants' beliefs, statements, and faith. Through this study, I aimed to add to the body of empirical literature relating to FD and provide insights into the FD of young people following CTBCs that Christian educators and curricula publishers can apply practically.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a CTBC at a Northern Michigan Christian school. Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion of the theoretical framework for the study and an in-depth review of the literature relating to student faith and FD. The theoretical framework for this study was FDT, developed by Fowler (1981). Fowler viewed faith as a universal human experience that all individuals navigate throughout their lives. Fowler's FDT includes seven stages of FD defined by age, perspective, and suggestive understanding. The review of related literature provides a historical perspective of students' FD experiences and the creation theories taught in American schools. The review defines stages of FD throughout existing literature and intricately examines how they relate to the FD experiences of students' following CTBCs. The review concludes with a focus on the alignment between Fowler's work and the FD of young people and students. Chapter 2 ends with a summary that presents the justification for the study.

Theoretical Framework

According to Glaser and Strauss (2017), a theory is an original thought of a researcher conceived from existing literature as an explanation of what the researcher expects to find as a result of researching their original idea. Collins and Stockton (2018) defined a theory as a large idea that structures various other ideas with an advanced explanatory ability. Every qualitative study rests on a theoretical framework, which is the lens through which a researcher creates and conducts the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework drives the study's vision, and every aspect of the study emphasizes the framework, including the research questions

and the conceptualization of the literature review (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). A theoretical framework is a theory used to conduct a study that conveys the richest values of a researcher while providing a refined lens that enables the researcher to process new information (Collins & Stockton, 2018). Collins and Stockton further defined a theoretical framework as the intersection of existing knowledge and previously formed assumptions regarding a complex phenomenon, a researcher's philosophical dispositions, and a lens and analytical approach.

Given the nature of this study, the appropriate theoretical framework was Fowler's (1981) FDT. The scope of Fowler's research enabled the specification of various stages of FD based on age and how a person learns to make sense of life. Fowler's FDT has contributed significantly to research in spirituality, religiosity, and FD. Before conducting his research in the 1970s, Fowler studied the works of Piaget (1965) and Kohlberg (1975, 1981). He was especially interested in Piaget's career because he considered Piaget to be the source of what has become known as the structural–developmental tradition of psychology (Roehlkepartain, 2006). The influences of Piaget and Kohlberg led Fowler to develop stages of psychological function and development that were similar to those developed by Piaget and Kohlberg (Roehlkepartain, 2006). Fowler differed from Piaget and Kohlberg in his broader view of the role of self-engagement in structuring an individual's faith. He supported his theory by charting the reintegration and differentiation of seven aspects of cognitive development: (a) perspective taking, (b) form of moral judgment, (c) form of logic, (d) bounds of social awareness, (e) locus of authority, (f) symbolic function, and (g) form of world coherence (Fowler, 1981).

Faith According to Fowler

Fowler (1981) defined faith as a quality of human living that, at its best, takes the form of serenity, courage, loyalty, and service. Faith is quiet confidence, and an internal “utopia,” that

enables an individual to feel secure and find meaning for their life that is profound, ultimate, and stable (Fowler, 1981, p. 29). Faith is the reference point that an individual comprehends and relies on in great times of need, sorrow, joy, and acknowledgment (Fowler, 1981). There is no word in English that is a verb form of the word “faith” (Fowler, 1981). Fowler described faith in verb form in both Greek and Latin. Examples of faith in verb form produce a particular understanding and relatable comprehension in a reader that give life to the word. Examples of the word “faith” in verb form include “I trust,” “I pledge allegiance,” “I commit myself,” and “I rest my heart upon” (Fowler, 1981, p. 16). Fowler came to understand faith as an individual’s struggle to affirm the meaning of their life and internal development of structured psychological hope (Fowler, 1981, p. 16). The developmental actions of a faith coincide with and affirm Fowler’s view of faith in verb form. This assumption of faith drove Fowler to explore his theory that faith is a procedural action that individuals experience through developmental stages.

FDT

Fowler (1981) developed FDT by conducting extensive research involving 359 interviews of men, women, and children aged 3.5–84 years. The scope of his research was very expansive. As a result of this 10-year study, Fowler produced a refined developmental model for faith growth that has seven different faith stages.

Stage 0: Undifferentiated Faith—Ages 0–2 Years

Stage 0, the prestage of FD, occurs during infancy (Fowler, 1981). The foundation of faith begins to develop during this stage. Subliminal and unconscious occurrences of FD occur within this stage. A child creates these “foundational blocks” of faith through the relationship and trust forged between them and their mother. The primary care given by a mother to her child is the beginning stage of faith outside the womb (Fowler, 1981). This stage reflects Erikson’s

“trust versus mistrust” stage because it is the genesis of an individual’s conscious development and subliminal trust (Fowler, 1981). In this stage, an infant takes in outer environment experiences, such as being comforted, experiencing consistent love from their parent, and living in a stable environment. These experiences develop a sense of trust and assurance in their life and create harmony with the divine (Fowler, 1981). Personal experiences of parental neglect or abuse can similarly cause development of mistrust and fear of the divine.

Stage 1: Intuitive–Projective Faith—Ages 2–7 Years

Stage 1, the intuitive–projective stage, is the stage of initial novelty discovery for a child (Fowler, 1981). The vast array of new informative discoveries overwhelm a child in this stage, and the child’s central processing ability resides only in the imagination. In this stage, the child does not possess a stable operation of knowing and relies heavily on their creative processes. This stage produces long-lasting images and feelings within the child that they can sort out rationally and analytically in later stages. During this stage, children cannot develop formal views of religion or religious beliefs; however, their experiences significantly impact their faith. The unconscious influences of encounters with different images, others’ influences, and stories affect a child’s psyche. During this stage, children develop a more intuitive sense of how to distinguish right from wrong, including inner perceptions of how God controls the universe.

Stage 2: Mythic–Literal Faith—Ages 7–12 Years

Stage 2, the mythic–literal stage, is the stage at which an individual first begins to process and interpret information literally (Fowler, 1981). Children translate perceptions of beliefs, morals, attitudes, and symbols literally at this stage. This newly developed capacity and strength results in the emergence of stories, dramas, and myths. At this stage, children begin to develop understanding of, and belief in, justice and fairness from a biblical perspective as discussed in

scripture and taught by teachers. In this stage, a child develops an anthropomorphic image of God, such as God being a mysterious man who lives in the clouds with a long white beard. Children in Stage 2 of FD often interpret scripture and religious metaphors literally. This literal interpretation of scripture can lead children to misunderstand biblical teachings and perhaps become disappointed in God when scriptural promises do not manifest in the moment. Stage 2 ushers an individual into Stage 3 through contradiction and reflection on meaning as the individual analyzes the literal interpretations developed within Stage 2.

Stage 3: Synthetic–Conventional Faith—Age 12 Years and Older

Stage 3 is the first stage at which an individual begins to experience faith beyond the confines of their immediate family (Fowler, 1981). Within this stage of faith, the individual experiences new information and responsibilities such as school, work, and external stresses. Generally, Stage 3 begins and ends within the span of an individual's adolescence. However, it is not uncommon for Stage 3 to become a permanent stage of faith throughout the remainder of a person's life. Given the new external influences on an individual's life, it is at Stage 3 that the individual develops a coherent faith filter to process the world's unique stresses and burdens. For these reasons, Stage 3 applies to both young people and adults. An individual at Stage 3 begins to develop their religious belief system and spiritual identity through self-interpretation of biblical teachings and correspondence between the teachings and the individual's own lived experiences. Individuals typically ignore conflicts that challenge their faith at this stage because such conflicts represent a threat to their faith identity.

Stage 4: Individuate Reflective Faith—Age 21 Years and Older

Transitioning from Stage 3 of faith to Stage 4 is a monumental event of late adolescence or early adulthood (Fowler, 1981). Remarkable changes occur to individuals at Stage 4. An

individual begins to develop a new identity in which literal interpretations of meanings, symbols, and faith build into conceptual meanings. The individual's inner voice begins to challenge past notions and understandings at Stage 4. At this stage, the individual begins to battle for their faith internally. The individual develops a multifaceted faith approach to life and truth at Stage 4. Stage 4 of FD is characterized by the individual's angst and internal struggle as the individual begins to take personal responsibility for their religious beliefs and inner convictions.

Stage 5: Conjunctive Faith—Age 35 Years and Older

Entering Stage 5 of faith, an individual is more aware of many life issues, such as hardship, tragedy, and deceit (Fowler, 1981). The individual's understanding has developed a faith filter or lens that can decipher life meanings, symbols, and disputes within their family and social circles. The individual's faith remains divided at Stage 5 because of the conflict between an untransformed world and transforming vision and loyalties.

Stage 6: Universalizing Faith—Age 45 and Older

At Stage 6, an individual begins to acknowledge mysteries related to transcendent values (Fowler, 1981). In many scenarios, a call of radical self-actualization lends itself to the individual's faith, pushing them forward into Stage 6. Many individuals never reach Stage 6 of faith because it depends on how they confound their individual growth at Stage 6. Individuals at Stage 6 challenge the very norms of faith that ordinary people may be familiar with by exceeding flatlined or regular faith practices and understandings. Stage 6 is very rare and occurs when an individual becomes an incarnation or actualization of an inclusive human community's spirituality. At Stage 6, an individual eliminates the majority of what defines self and lives exclusively for their faith or community.

Discussion

In relation to the purpose of this study, Stage 3 (synthetic–conventional faith) of Fowler’s (1981) FDT was appropriate to focus on because it applies to those aged 12 years and older. Stage 3 of FDT tends to fluctuate broadly within an individual throughout their adolescent years, but Stage 3 can also become a permanent equilibrium stage within adults. At Stage 3, individuals begin to truly experience the world outside their family for the first time. Given the developmental phase of Stage 3, adolescents find themselves in a vast new world of experiences, influences, and involvement. They use their faith to synthesize their existing values while processing an abundance of further information.

Counted (2016) contended that a middle-school-aged young person forms their faith because they seek to fill emotional voids with a relationship with the divine as they enter a new and fragile phase of life full of desire, questions, information, and impressions. In Fowler’s Stage 3, adolescents use their faith to synthesize this new phase of life, which creates a unique period for research in youth FD (Fowler, 1981). Given young people’s new experiences and impressionable nature during this transitional and developmental phase of their lives, the study was necessary to explore students’ lived FD experiences while following a CTBC.

Related Literature

A reliable research study is firmly rooted in its subject’s existing literature (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). Reliable empirical studies must be closely aligned with related existing literature and aim to fill a gap in the existing literature for a justifiable and needed reason (Ullman, 2015). The literature review of every study is foundational and necessary to ensure the quality and integrity of the results of the study (Galvan & Galvan, 2017). Because I aimed with this study to explore the FD of students, it was essential to review the existing literature relating to FD. This

section discusses literature related to the study regarding (a) the history of creationism and the theory of evolution, (b) faith, (c) FD of students, (d) Christian schooling in America, and (e) Christian middle school students and curricula.

History of Creationism and the Theory of Evolution

The purpose of this study was to discover how following a CTBC affected the FD of young people; it is therefore essential to examine the history of creationism and its contrasting theory, the theory of evolution, because academic curricula impact the worldviews of students (Zgheib et al., 2020). As with faith, creationism is rooted within the Christian Bible. Genesis presented the first historical account of the creation of life and Earth (Deloria, 2002). The author of the book of Genesis stated that God created the heavens and the earth:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light. God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness. God called the light “day,” and the darkness he called “night.” And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day. (*New International Version*, 1978, Gen. 1:1–5)

The author of Genesis further described God’s creation of humankind:

Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.

(*New International Version*, 1978, Gen. 1:26–27)

The Genesis narrative of creation illuminated an epistemological understanding of creation, asserting that a supernatural deity created all living creatures, human life, the world, and the universe (Deloria, 2002). Beginning in the 18th century, multiple differing views emerged from biblical theologians, scholars, and researchers seeking to reconcile the Genesis creation narrative with geology, biology, and other sciences (Deloria, 2002). These efforts of reconciliation have produced several differing theological views of creation. In the 20th century, four main concepts of creationism emerged from such research and theological efforts: (a) young-Earth creationism, (b) old-Earth creationism, (c) intelligent design, and (d) evolutionary creationism (Deloria, 2002). The fundamental concept uniting all creationism theories is that a supernatural occurrence by a divine creator resulted in the creation of life. Although supported by tangible evidence throughout the historical record, this concept cannot not truly exist without the faith of humankind (Carlin, 2019). In contemporary America, creationism has been taught primarily in Christian schools (Carlin, 2019). Legal decisions, local regulations, and federal educational reforms have effectively removed it from public school curricula (Carlin, 2019). The landmark case of *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987) effectively banned public schools from teaching creation science by ruling the practice unconstitutional. Over the years, public school curricula have favored evolution-theory-based curricula for the above reasons. The theory of evolution has historically contrasted starkly with creationism and has become known throughout the literature as anticreationism (Carlin, 2019).

The theory of evolution by natural selection was the result of research conducted by Darwin and Wallace in the 19th century. As a result of their research, Darwin published his foundational theological work *On the Origin of Species* in 1859 (Gould, 2002). Darwin asserted that all life on Earth shares a universal common ancestor (Gould, 2002). The historical

development of the theory of evolution was similar to that of creationism in that several theologians, scholars, and scientists have offered competing ideas of evolution throughout the 20th century (Gould, 2002). From among the competing ideas of evolution, four main concepts developed: (a) convergent evolution, (b) divergent evolution, (c) parallel evolution, and (d) coevolution (Gould, 2002). These concepts rely on a godless and faithless occurrence that was the result of chance and accidental biological mishap (Sober, 1993). At the very least, Christian scholars and theologians have assumed the theory of evolution to promote a hopeless worldview to those who believe in its foundational faithless concept of origin (Sober, 1993). Throughout the American public school system, the theory of evolution forms the foundation of biology curricula (Sober, 1993).

The emergence of the theory of evolution presented a theological and scientific conflict with the Genesis narrative and subsequent creation theories (Sober, 1993). Researchers investigating this conflictual relationship have shown that it may impact the faith of public school students as well as their belief in God (Berkman et al., 2008). The public debate about evolution versus creationism began with the publication of Darwin's book *On the Origin of Species* (Scott, 2006). Before Darwin's book, creationism had received no public challenge. The first significant challenge to creationism occurred as a result of the Scopes Monkey Trial in 1925 (Scott, 2006). Throughout America in the early 20th century, it was common to find state and local laws banning the teaching of evolution in public schools (Scott, 2006). The trial marked the first intentional attempt to challenge such laws and change curricula relating to the teaching of the theory of evolution in public schools. Although Tennessee schoolteacher John Scopes failed in his attempted self-implication by illegally teaching the theory of evolution in his classroom, other states and individuals followed his framework for challenging creationism in

public school curricula (Scott, 2006). After the trial, various legal decisions and landmark cases slowly eroded the teaching of creationism in public schools, replacing it with the scientific theory of evolution (Nelkin, 2000). The 2005 landmark case of *Kitzmiller v. Dover* was the final nail in the coffin for the teaching of creationism in public schools by ruling in favor of evolution as science and labeling creationism as religion (Nelkin, 2000). As a result of this decision, CTBCs have since been primarily isolated within Christian schools.

The foundational concepts that separate creationism and the theory of evolution are faith and science (Fail, 2003). Proponents of the theory of evolution argue that nothing in the biological world makes sense except in the light of evolution (Fail, 2003). In contrast, proponents of creationism maintain that nothing in this world makes sense except in the light of faith (Fail, 2003).

Faith and Its Verb Interpretation

Considering “faith” as a verb allows for an alternative understanding and comprehension of what faith is. Faith is more than a simple belief; it is everything that makes up every hope, dream, and promise that an individual possesses (Schleiermacher et al., 2016). An individual’s faith can be the foundation from which they obtain happiness and overcome trials (Schleiermacher et al., 2016).

Various theologians and scholars have viewed faith apart from religion (Hick, 1988). Hick (1988), a religious philosopher, viewed faith not as an exclusive religious practice but as an interpretive element within a person’s religious experience. According to Hick, faith is impossible without actions or occurrences from God that prove his existence. Faith is therefore not an individual’s belief in God, but an interpretation of the individual’s own experience of actions caused by God (Hick, 1988). Tillich (2009), another prominent philosopher and

theologian, viewed faith in an entirely different light that does not depend on religion. Tillich referred to faith as an individual's ultimate concern. According to Tillich, the foremost concern of an individual is loving something with all of their mind, body, and spirit. Tillich's view of faith is devoid of any specific deity. Examples of an individual's ultimate concern include money, success, achievement, patriotism, God, and career (Tillich, 2009). The ultimate concern is that which demands an individual to faithfully accept that they are part of the infinite yet not the owner of their infinity (Tillich, 2009). Philosophers such as Hick and Tillich have viewed and presented faith as cognitive awareness and individual desire independent of any one specific religious doctrine or deity. Faith can be understood separately from religion in many ways, such as cognitive awareness, hope, or ultimate concern.

Parks (2000) also viewed faith apart separately from religion, stating that faith is the most comprehensive form of meaning making, a practice with which all humans create and dwell within true, real, and dependable convictions. Humans compose a sense of ultimate character, and they are either aware or unaware of this unconscious or self-conscious, resulting in a faith that they may stake their lives on (Parks, 2000). Parks is among the researchers who have studied faith in students. She produced four stages of FD, or "forms of knowing," different from those in Fowler's (1981) FDT: (a) adolescent/conventional, (b) young adult, (c) tested adult, and (d) mature adult (Parks, 2000). As presented by Parks, the stages of FD highlight the different stages of knowledge of faith that individuals experience in different phases of their lives. According to Parks, as individuals age, they pass through phases of interpretation to know life through faith. Furthermore, Parks emphasized poignant relationships within students' academic lives, spirituality, and campus involvement. Parks promoted relationships between religious educators and their students after discovering that religious educators contribute richly and

deeply to their students' faith by helping them understand the differences between faithful reflection and faithful commitment.

Christian Faith

Christian faith differs from faith in general because it is specifically rooted in the Christian gospel and depends entirely on an individual's faith in the Christian gospel (Lamont, 2016). Christian faith depends on accepting the Christian gospel as entirely true as a divinely inspired message (Lamont, 2016). Lamont (2016) defined Christian faith as consisting of four necessary components: (a) faith in Jesus Christ, (b) belief that the Christian gospel is true as written, (c) belief in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and (d) belief that God inspired the Gospels. Christian faith does not consist solely of an attitude, hope, or mental state. Christian faith encompasses all of the components of general faith; however, Christian faith rests on specific doctrine and ideology (Lamont, 2016). The Christian gospel, which firmly roots Christian faith, provides Christians with a supernatural God and messiah who defeated death by escaping the grip of eternal damnation (Ward, 2017). The apostle John wrote, "For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*New International Version*, 1978, John 3:16). The belief that God sacrificed his son and resurrected him to defeat death's permanency is a foundational belief within Christianity.

Different individuals have approached interpretation and understanding of the Christian gospel differently. The Evangelical Theological Society added the doctrine of inerrancy, also known as the doctrine of trinity, in 1990 as an essential doctrine of Christian faith (Garrett, 2013). The doctrine solidifies the evangelical belief in biblical inerrancy, a fundamental aspect of Christian faith. Biblical inerrancy is the doctrine that evangelicalism either continues to stand with or eventually falls without. The doctrine holds that the Bible is without error and is perfect

and true. The Christian belief system, which includes faith, is consequently situated within what the Bible teaches, which does not change. Christians must directly correlate between believing in the accuracy of scripture and reading scripture accurately. Inerrancy then, is a matter of reading scripture faithfully and regularly while also believing in the scripture's accuracy, which is the written source of Christian faith. For these reasons, inerrancy is regarded as the essence of Christian faith.

Christian scholars and authors use the terms "biblical literalism" and "biblicism" to refer to particular kinds of biblical interpretation (Jelen et al., 1990). Like biblical inerrancy, biblical literalism requires a Christian to interpret the Bible by adhering to scripture's exact literal meaning. Biblicism is a hermeneutic technique of reading scripture that not only promotes the literal interpretation of scripture but also strives to uncover the meaning of the text by considering syntactical aspects surrounding the text. To fully understand the text's literal meaning, biblicism requires taking both the historical and cultural contexts surrounding the text into account. Through literal interpretation of scripture, Christians can form their faith and inform the faith of others (Bartkowski, 1996). Biblical inerrancy and biblicism present similar versions of biblical authority in practice of Christian faith. Comparisons of the two versions of biblical authority have shown no real differences (Jelen, 1989). One version of biblical authority connotes a sense of literalism, and the other implies an inerrant, but not necessarily literal, view of the Bible's authority. Regardless of discernable differences, both views are essential to Christian faith and belief in the Christian gospels. For a person's Christian faith to be whole with scripture, they must believe the Bible to be entirely true and must also interpret the Bible in its literal context.

Although Christianity rests on belief of God's word, including the Gospel accounts, another paramount tenet of Christian faith is the belief that Christ is God's son. Christian faith rests on the belief that Jesus Christ was crucified on the cross and rose from the grave, granting eternal salvation to all who believe in him (Forte, 2003). The account of the resurrection occurs in all four Gospels (Forte, 2003). For example:

When the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, so that they might go and anoint him. And very early on the first day of the week, when the sun had risen, they went to the tomb. And they were saying to one another, "Who will roll away the stone for us from the entrance of the tomb?" And looking up, they saw that the stone had been rolled back—it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man sitting on the right side, dressed in a white robe, and they were alarmed. And he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen; he is not here. See the place where they laid him. (*New International Version*, 1978, Mark 16:1–7)

Christ's resurrection is foundational to Christian belief of salvation through sanctification (Forte, 2003). The sanctification process, or sanctifying grace, begins with an individual's acceptance of Christ as their savior, belief in the resurrection of Christ, and willful repentance of sin (F. W. Newman, 2013). Within Christian faith, a believer convicted of the presence of sin within their life prays the consecration prayer, in which they recognize Jesus Christ as their lord and repent for their sins (F. W. Newman, 2013). This prayer receives support from the believer's inerrant belief in scripture, which outlines the salvation process and also the purpose of Christ's coming. The apostle John wrote:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. (*New International Version*, 1978, John 3:16–18)

Christians not only commit their eternal souls to their messiah Jesus Christ in both faith and belief but also commit their lives to follow the very footsteps, parables, and wise lessons of Christ (Ward, 2017). Committing their life to Christian faith is committing their very mind and heart to the calling of Christ (Ward, 2017). Christianity differs from all other religions in various ways. Christianity is the only religion that teaches its believers that God came to them, contrasting with other religions that require followers to work toward specific deities (Rist & Camiller, 2019). Furthermore, only the Christian religion teaches its followers to follow the permanent practice of growing their relationships with God; other religions require appeasement of their deities (Rist & Camiller, 2019). Scripture teaches believers to abide by Christ's ways and example: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (*New International Version*, 1978, John 15:5).

There are many different denominations of Christianity and six separate branches following either eastern or western theology: (a) Catholicism, (b) Protestantism, (c) Eastern Orthodoxy, (d) Anglicanism, (e) Oriental Orthodoxy, and (f) Assyrians (Rhodes, 2015). The predominant branches of Christianity in the United States are Catholicism and Protestantism, which includes several separate denominations. The major Protestant denominations are (a)

Adventists, (b) Baptists, (c) Congregationalists, (d) Lutherans, (e) Methodists, (f) Pentecostals, and (g) Presbyterians (Rhodes, 2015). Each of the branches and denominations of Christianity follow different theologies determined by local church councils and governing bodies (Rhodes, 2015). Despite the variety of theological viewpoints among Christian churches, they generally share the predominant tenets of salvation and the inerrancy of Christian faith. Many secular scholars and theologians have maintained that the various branches and denominations of Christian faith reflect major discrepancies within the foundation and interpretation of that faith (Agadjanian, 2013). However, it is the inerrant and literal interpretations of scripture that Christian theologians and scholars point to when justifying the many different branches and denominations of the church (Agadjanian, 2013). Christian faith is a universal body of faith regardless of the many theological views (Kołodziejska, 2012). The core tenets of the faith and the biblical justification supporting the church's various denominations are found within scripture:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. (*New International Version*, 1978, 1 Cor. 12:12–31)

The word “Christian” is emblematic of the Christian faith, yet occurs only three times within scripture (Agadjanian, 2013). The term itself is loaded with significance and corresponds

in the literal text to “Christ-ones” or followers of Christ. This means that anyone identifying as a Christian proclaims their exclusive belief in Christian faith apart from all other religion-based faiths. The unique requirement of Christians that they pursue ever-growing relationships with God sets Christianity apart from all other faiths (Rist & Camiller, 2019). Christian faith is unique because it changes the general construct of faith from a mental state or hope to a heartfelt reliance and otherworldly system of belief. The apostle Paul wrote, “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. Now I commend you because you remember me in everything and maintain the traditions even as I delivered them to you” (*New International Version*, 1978, 1 Cor. 11:1–2). Christians possess not only the mental state of faith that comprises general faith but also a faith that crafts the lens through which they live their lives and view the world (Rist & Camiller, 2019).

FD of Students

As with any Christian’s FD, Christian students depend on their faith throughout their academic journeys (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). Burton and Nwosu (2003) conducted a qualitative case study of students’ perceptions of integrating faith, learning, and practice within an elementary teaching methods course. The researchers explored data from three sections of the course to discover the role of student faith in faith-integrated learning (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). The researchers aimed to discover (a) how students in this class defined the integration of faith and learning, (b) whether there was a consensus among students regarding the occurrence of faith–learning integration in the class, and (c) specific examples of faith–learning integration identified by students from the class (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). The study results are significant and relevant to the proposed study because they provide much useful information relating to Christian faith in the classroom. Participants repeatedly referred to active participation and

interaction with other students of faith as key elements of their faith–learning integration (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). Participants also identified small group sessions and whole-class discussions as vital activities that helped grow their faith within the classroom and bond them together in their faith (Burton & Nwosu, 2003). Among the principles of Christian faith discovered were biblical inerrancy, prayer, and fellowship (Burton & Nwosu, 2003).

Parks (2000) conducted similar research and discovered that Christian students relied immensely on their faith, which remained an open and active dialogue of hope. According to scripture, Christians navigate their way through life on Earth through faith and hope in God’s promises and word. For example: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (*New International Version*, 1978, Rom. 15:13).

Researchers investigating student FD have offered valuable insights and identified common themes (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). Students’ faith plays a vital and supportive role in their successes, both academically and spiritually (Richert et al., 2016). Many students have cited their faith as the very foundation upon which their future is built, but researchers have discovered little about why (Richert et al., 2016). However, I discovered many common themes among the results of existing qualitative studies of students’ FD experiences.

Powell et al. (2012) conducted a qualitative study of FD in Christian college seniors who graduated, and the researchers discovered that several areas of the student’s education had influenced their FD experiences: (a) discovering self and an authentic connection with self, (b) discovering others and an authentic connection with others, and (c) discovering God and an

authentic connection with God. Furthermore, Powell et al. discovered relational and deep faith growth within the students' FD that attending a Christian institution had accelerated.

L. L. Newman (1998) conducted a similar study of FD of 1st-year students at a Baptist college. L. L. Newman intended not to examine alignment between students' FD and Fowler's (1981) FDT but to explore the FD experiences of the students. He discovered that living on a Christian campus provided students with opportunities to grow their faith because the Christian-campus atmosphere positively reinforced their FD experience (L. L. Newman, 1998). Students also experienced remarkable FD when they participated in classes and programs that supported their biblical worldview (L. L. Newman, 1998). Among the themes described were (a) discovery of faith, (b) discovery of faith reliance, and (c) discovery of peer faith support (L. L. Newman, 1998). Both Powell et al. (2012) and L. L. Newman concluded that the supportive nature of a Christian atmosphere positively impacted students' FD. Based on these results, it is reasonable to conclude that attending a Christian institution and dwelling within a support system of Christian peers impacts student FD (L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012).

Programs and environments that support and foster faith growth dramatically impact student FD; however, faith is something that an individual develops in a supportive atmosphere and in times of transition and uncertainty (Dinani, 2018). Dinani (2018) examined the FD of 25 students in a study-abroad program in 13 countries on five continents and discovered that uncertainty impacted student FD. The most common themes that emerged were that (a) the students' faith deepened while in their host countries, and (b) the host countries' approaches to faith impacted the students' faith differently than their home churches did. Many of the themes focused on demographic differences between the practice of faith in the host countries and the

United States. The students almost unanimously identified the host countries' church communities as supplemental, interconnected, and having a positive effect on their FD.

L. L. Newman (1998), Powell et al. (2012), and Dinani (2018) obtained rich data relating to the FD of Christian students attending Christian institutions but did not explore the effects of any specific program on student FD. Few researchers have made such explorations, but Epting (2012) studied the FD of student athletes in a school program. Epting focused on the FD of student athletes participating in the school's National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division 1 football program. The purpose was to "examine how participating in an NCAA Division I-A college football program impacts the Christian faith development of student-athletes" (Epting, 2012, p. 14). After interviewing 10 student athletes at a Christian college, Epting identified four themes present in every interview that helped guide meaning within participants' FD: (a) Christian faith experience, (b) relationships, (c) football environmental characteristics, and (d) Christian faith changes and beliefs. Epting's findings support the claim that school programs at non-Christian institutions affect student FD.

Although researchers have obtained rich data related to FD, my review of existing literature highlighted a gap relating to how following a CTBC affects Christian students' FD. Various factors impact, supplement, and support student FD (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). The research discussed in this section indicates a need to explore the FD of students following CTBCs. Academic programs directly affect students' faith (Epting, 2012; Richert et al., 2016).

Christian Schooling in America

Christian schools have existed in America since the first pilgrimage to America (Carper & Layman, 1995). The origin of Christian schools in America traces to the 1630s. Considering

the religious liberty sought by the Puritans and pilgrims at that time, it is not surprising that Christian academia began with their arrival in North America. The original concept of a church-linked school has become the standard template for modern Christian schools as the Protestant Christian school movement has developed over the last 40 years in the United States (Worsley, 2012). This relationship between school and church depends on the biblical education mandate (*New International Version*, 1978, Deut. 6:4–9; Worsley, 2012). This mandate requires Christian educators to teach students that the truth of God’s word must be integrated into all life (Worsley, 2012). Christian education’s academic aspect rests on scripture, as do the characteristics of Christian teachers. According to scripture, Christian teachers must be endowed with biblical wisdom and must possess the gift of teaching (Worsley, 2012). Christian schools have many purposes; however, the most important purpose of a Christian school is to teach from a worldview of biblical inerrancy (Peshkin, 1988). In modern America, Christian schools are necessary to grant Christian students the opportunity to meet their biblical commitments.

Jeynes (2009) discussed the differences between Christian schools and public schools throughout American history. The contrast between the secular teaching of public schools and the biblical teaching of Christian schools leads to vastly different impacts on student learning outcomes. Jeynes studied the Bible literacy of 160 students who attended Christian schools and public schools from Grades 7–12 and found a correlation between Bible literacy and grade point average. Furthermore, Jeynes found that Christian school students had better academic performance outcomes than their public school counterparts. The Christian school students also behaved better in school than their public school counterparts (Jeynes, 2009). Eakle (2007) found that the academic environments of Christian schools supplemented students’ academic success, faith, and behavior. Eakle also found noncurricular differences between Christian

schools and public schools with regard to their day-to-day practices, including group prayer and teacher interaction. The objective of a Christian school is to embolden and supplement students' FD through biblical teachings, prayer, and supportive Christian mentorship. The results obtained by Jeynes and Eakle are important for the proposed study because they highlight the direct impact of Christian schools' biblical teaching on students' academic performance and behavioral obedience.

Christian schools' teaching approaches and missions vary; however, leaders of Christian schools generally strive to create a learning atmosphere with a holistic emphasis on developing students' faith and biblical worldviews (Baniszewski, 2016). As discussed above, students of faith tend to perform better, academically and behaviorally, than their secular counterparts (Jeynes, 2009). Several researchers have investigated how the faith-fostering environment and teachings of Christian schools relate to the FD of students. Baniszewski (2016) found that Christian schools effectively developed students' faith and biblical worldviews. The researcher used quantitative analysis and discovered that students with significant Christian school backgrounds had stronger propositional biblical worldviews than students with minimal Christian school backgrounds (Baniszewski, 2016).

Ma (2003) explored the impact of Christian college experience on student spirituality among 953 students at 18 U.S. Christian universities. The researcher conducted this exploratory study by collecting data via surveys completed by the students. The survey asked general questions about students' spiritual formation and other factors associated with their spirituality. Spiritual formation corresponded to students' growth toward spiritual maturity as reflected by their relationships with God, themselves, and others. Ma reported valuable insights and trends relating to the students' perceptions of their faith and spirituality and the influence of attending a

Christian college. The students attributed positive faith growth to (a) Christian courses, (b) Christian peer support, and (c) prayer gatherings. These findings demonstrate the positive impact of Christian academics and Christian learning environments on student FD.

Providing further insight into the FD of students, Sharma and Guest (2013) conducted a qualitative study of the FD of students attending a non-Christian school in England. The researchers explored how the academics and environments of secular universities impacted students' Christian faith. Sharma and Guest administered a survey to 4,500 participants from 13 universities (Sharma & Guest, 2013). They found that attending a secular university had a negative impact on the faith and FD of all participants: (a) Non-Christian curricula caused students to question their faith; (b) social pressures of non-Christian peers negatively impacted student faith growth; (c) students experienced intimidation, which suppressed their faith growth; and (d) students attributed faith growth to nonschool religious gatherings (Sharma & Guest, 2013).

These findings reveal a stark contrast between Christian education and non-Christian education with regard to student FD. In the United States, Christian schools impact student FD by offering faith-supporting curricula and learning environments. Although attending Christian school positively impacts a student's faith, researchers have not specifically investigated the impact on student FD of CTBCs, which are integral to all Christian school curricula. This lack of research has left a gap in knowledge regarding a possibly valuable contributor to the FD of Christian young people.

Middle School Curricula

Eighth-grade students are generally impressionable, confused, and emotionally fragile (Jenkins et al., 2014). Middle school students experience various stresses, including bullying

and new social burdens associated with internal and external influences (Jenkins et al., 2014). One of the fundamental influences in a middle school student's academic life is the curriculum they follow (Pinkard et al., 2017). The curriculum's influence upon the student is a necessarily informative source during an impressionable developmental phase of the student's life (Pinkard et al., 2017). Given the influence of curricula on middle school students experiencing dramatic transitions that may cause difficulties, it is important to examine how these students deal with these stressful changes. King and Furrow (2008) discovered that religion positively influenced young people and that they relied heavily upon their faith in their educational courses. Benson (2019) found that various factors contribute to an individual's cognitive development during adolescence, including prejudices, stereotyping, and other personal beliefs such as faith.

Few researchers have obtained empirical data relating to young people following Christian curricula; however, empirical data relating to young people following secular curricula are relevant to this study's purpose. Pajares and Britner (2001) examined the influence and efficacy of standardized science curricula in relation to middle school students. The researchers used a mixed methods approach to examine how a standardized science curriculum affected 75 students' understanding and performance in a middle school science course (Pajares & Britner, 2001). The researchers obtained data using a science self-efficacy questionnaire and found stark contrasts in student performance based on their demographics (Pajares & Britner, 2001). Compared to male participants, female participants reported weaker approach-performance goals but reported stronger science self-efficacy and self-efficacy for self-regulation and received higher science grades (Pajares & Britner, 2001). Black participants reported stronger task-oriented goals than White participants, and White participants reported stronger self-efficacy and achievement than Black participants (Pajares & Britner, 2001). These results are relevant to the

study because they highlight how a student's understanding of science informs the student's worldview.

Alters and Nelson (2002) reviewed existing literature to explore how an evolution-based science curriculum affected college students' worldviews. The researchers found that students following the evolution-based curriculum viewed it as quite informative regarding life's origins and tended to be nonreligious due to the information taught (Alters & Nelson, 2002). Alters and Nelson also found that college students who identified themselves as religious compartmentalized their evolutionary understanding away from their belief in God by placing them in different academic and religious contexts. Given the evidence of a direct relationship between students' worldviews and the curricula they follow, it is important to review CTBCs to discover their foundations.

Christian curricula differ from standardized curricula; Christian curricula must derive from biblical concepts and support biblical teachings (Cox et al., 2007). Christian educators have used biblically founded curricula throughout Christian elementary, middle, and high schools (Cox et al., 2007). Historically, the aim of Christian education has been to teach every academic subject in the light of biblical inerrancy (Roels, 2009). Christian teachers teach all academic subjects from curricula that affirm biblical teachings and create building blocks of faith for students' futures (Roels, 2009). Christian curricula not only affirm biblical teachings through an academic lens but also instill biblical values and morals in students (Roels, 2009). A Christian curriculum integrates the teachings of Christ into every academic subject, communicating Christ's love, grace, and acceptance with every topic and word taught (Roels, 2009). Although the mission statements and teachings of Christian schools and their curricula vary, a good Christian school provides students with a high-level education that helps them

develop a Christ-centered moral compass (Kunkle, 1993). The biblical foundation of a Christian curriculum contributes positively to the lives of students who learn from that curriculum (Olayiwola, 2018). Christian educators further enhance students' lives when they teach the students to spend significant time studying God's word outside the curriculum followed (Olayiwola, 2018). Educators enhance students' lives the most when they effectively integrate biblical teachings with curricular study (Olayiwola, 2018). For maximum effect on students' lives and faith affirmation, all subjects taught from Christian curricula must receive support from a well-developed system made up educator, environment, and biblical inerrancy (Olayiwola, 2018).

Unlike many standardized curricula, Christian curricula and their implementations undergo strong development by educators (Kim, 2019). Kim (2019) examined roles of teachers in Christian curriculum design. Kim defined teachers' major roles in designing curricula and curricula plans. The researcher concluded that teachers should (a) know objectives of the curricula and Christian education in their schools so that they can evaluate whether curricula fulfill those objectives, (b) define the scope and content of curricula, (c) know learners and learning methods, and (d) recognize that teachers themselves are the most important curricular resources and try to develop themselves continually. A Christian educator's unique role in curriculum development sets Christian curricula apart from secular curricula with respect to customization and implementation.

Teaching Creationism

The most fundamental subject in any Christian curriculum is science (Baptista et al., 2016). Christian educators generally teach students from textbooks that defend creationism by focusing on the divine action of a creator and denounce other origin theories, such as cosmic

panspermia and chemical evolution (Baptista et al., 2016). Christian educators teach creationism to their students by portraying creation as an occurrence recorded historically in the Old Testament of the Bible and later affirmed within the New Testament (Ham et al., 2011). As a result of the Biblical record of creation, various scholars have constructed models and theories related to creationism (Ham et al., 2011). Most modern CTBCs for Christian eighth-grade students rest on creation models constructed by scholars whose views overlap in some respects while retaining their own distinctive features (Ham et al., 2017). Moreover, although creationism is the prominent origin theory taught throughout Christian education, few researchers have explored its impact on the FD of those receiving such teaching (Ham et al., 2017). The lack of research exploring creationism's impact on an individual's FD again emphasized the need for this study.

Creationism is the rejection of evolution and promotion of supernatural design (Caudill, 2017). People hold a variety of views regarding the creation of life and the genesis and timespan of creation, but creationism requires literal interpretation of the Bible as a true guide of the history of life and the universe (Caudill, 2017). Ham (1987), one of the foremost scientists to promote CTBCs, argued that acceptance of creationism is paramount to Christians' belief in the Bible's inerrancy. Ham argued that if the book of Genesis were false, the entire Bible's inerrancy would be compromised (Ham et al., 2011). According to Ham, Christian educators must teach creationism to students to combat the lie of evolution (Ham et al., 2011). Ham has not only been a prominent proponent of the teaching of creationism in schools but has also asserted the existence of a spiritual battle to corrupt the true delivery of the Genesis account to students in an effort to dilute their faith in God (Ham et al., 2013). Furthermore, Ham et al.

(2013) highlighted the need to further explore creationism and its relation to individual faith and FD. This study explored this suggestion.

Creationism encompasses several different theological viewpoints. Young-Earth creationists have accepted Ussher's 17th-century Biblical interpretation that creation occurred approximately 6,000 years ago (Caudill, 2017). In contrast, Old-Earth creationism places creation far beyond a few thousand years in the past. Another point of contention among creationists has been the meaning of "day" in the biblical context. Many creationists have argued that a day in the creation context refers to a literal 24-hour time span, while others have argued that the timeline is arguable. Regardless of theological differences, creationism ultimately rests upon the inerrancy of the Genesis creation story, which explains how God created the universe, the struggle of good and evil, and Adam's fall (Fulljames et al., 1991).

Although Christian schools have predominantly followed CTBCs, few researchers have studied the application of these curricula. However, Henderson et al. (2003) explored the impact of teaching young-Earth creationism to college-aged students. The researchers gathered data using the Creation Worldview Test, which yielded a total scale score and three subscale scores for theology, science, and age. Preintervention test scores indicated weaknesses in the students' views of young-Earth creationism, indicating departure from the model in their Christian upbringing. After the young-Earth creationism course, participants showed a significant shift toward belief in young-Earth creationism. Although Henderson et al. investigated college-aged students, their results are relevant to the proposed study: The direct positive impact of studying young-Earth creationism on students' views of creationism suggests that it would also impact students' FD. I found no similar studies of CTBCs or FD for middle school students.

Groves (1991) considered the manner with which educators applied CTBCs. Groves explored how two Christian educators and three public school educators applied science curricula, seeking to discover differences in teaching methods between those applying CTBCs and those applying evolution-based curricula. The researcher found that the two Christian educators believed that creation-based lessons must be taught from a curriculum supported by a literal interpretation of the Bible. In contrast, the public school teachers believed that biology should be taught from a fixed evolution-based curriculum. Although the teachers viewed the nature of science differently, they all presented their science curricula as fixed bodies of knowledge. Despite this similarity, the Christian school teachers demonstrated that their belief in the Bible acted as an interpretive filter in their teaching methods. In contrast, the public school teachers appeared to teach strictly from their textbooks. The public school teachers' adherence to textbook teachings highlighted the absence of a higher authority supporting the textbook.

Moore and Cotner (2009) researched the views of 1st-year college students regarding creationism and evolution and compared those majoring in biology to those with other majors. The researchers aimed to discover how students accepted creationism instead of evolution as a biological explanation for creation. They found that a high percentage of participants accepted creationism as just as true as, or truer than, the theory of evolution as an explanation for the origin of human life and the universe. This is relevant to the study because it indicates that college-aged biology students accept creationism as a credible explanation for the origin of life.

Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed existing literature related to FD and CTBCs while providing an explicit rationale for the study. Chapter 2 highlighted relevant literature relying on Fowler's

(1981) FDT as a theoretical lens. Most researchers studying the faith of students have used quantitative methods (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012; Richert et al., 2016). They have tended to focus on how many students possess faith beliefs rather than how students develop faith beliefs. However, some researchers have conducted qualitative studies exploring the FD of students and have established intricate models of this phenomenon (Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). These researchers have discovered that both internal and external influences—including school programs, teaching, school culture, and family practices—impact student FD (Bailey, 2012; Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). Students' FD is foundational to their academic, spiritual, and active lives (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). Curricula have unique influences on middle school students. However, prior to this study, researchers had not investigated the impact of following CTBCs on the FD of students, including eighth-grade students (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012). These researchers recommended further research into student FD and viewed student FD as a foundational aspect of students' academic and personal lives (Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012).

The literature review highlighted the need for research into the FD of students following CTBCs. With this transcendental phenomenological study, I explored the FD phenomenon of Christian middle school students through their lived experiences of learning from a CTBC in science. This study can provide administrators and middle school educators with a better understanding of the FD of students taught from and exposed to a CTBC from a biblical Christian worldview.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a CTBC at a Northern Michigan Christian school. The study provided eighth-grade Christian students with an opportunity to describe their “conscious experience of things” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 94) relating to their FD and the influence of following a CTBC on their FD. This chapter discusses the study’s research design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, data collection, and data analysis as well as my role as the researcher, the trustworthiness of the study, and ethical considerations.

Design

This study relied on qualitative methods and a transcendental phenomenological approach. Qualitative research includes several varying approaches, such as case study, phenomenology, and grounded theory. These research approaches are appropriate when a researcher needs to investigate what “takes place in the natural world” by analyzing the different experiences of individuals (Marshall & Rossman, 2016, p. 2).

Research Method—Qualitative

Educational, medical, and social science researchers often use qualitative research methods. The multiple approaches to qualitative research all relate to studying experiences of individuals or groups (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Qualitative research, regardless of the approach, requires analyzing experiences, communications, documents, and observed practices to discover the meaning of social phenomena and occurrences. For the study, qualitative research methods enabled intricate exploration of students’ lived FD experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research involves data collection within the natural setting of a

phenomenon, data analysis to establish patterns and themes, a final written report that reproduces the voices of the participants, researcher reflexivity, elaborate description of the problem, and recommendations for further research relating to the problem or phenomenon.

The faith experience of young people consists of various complex emotions, nuances, and aspirations (Argue et al., 1999). The exploratory aspect of qualitative data collection and data analysis were necessary to navigate students' experiences of their FD and how following a CTBC influences their FD. The qualitative design's final written report allowed for the understanding of FD through complex descriptions and interpretations of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Research Approach—Phenomenology

Phenomenology was the most appropriate of the various qualitative research approaches for the study. The phenomenological research approach derives from philosophical tradition and is characterized by two distinct qualities: induction and description (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of this research approach is investigation of the lived experiences of phenomena by individuals. Phenomenology is the study of consciousness as experienced from the point of view of individuals (Moran & Embree, 2004). Husserl, the father of phenomenology, believed “that a sharp contrast exists between facts and essences, between the real and non-real” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 27). Researchers aim to explore the area between the real and the nonreal when they use the phenomenological research approach (Moustakas, 1994).

The nature of the phenomenological approach made it appropriate for exploration of the FD of students following a CTBC because it allowed the reduction of individual experiences into a thick description of the essence of the phenomenon explored (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using a phenomenological approach allowed student participants to describe their experiences of their

FD, effects of following a CTBC on their FD, and learning from Christian teachers in a Christian academic atmosphere.

Specific Research Design—Transcendental

The study had a transcendental phenomenological design. Transcendental phenomenology “is a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). A researcher using a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in proactive efforts to mitigate and set aside personal bias relating to the phenomenon investigated so that they can examine the phenomenon as if freshly perceiving it for the first time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process, epoché, involves bracketing out individual biases to gain a fresh perspective on the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). After epoché, the researcher follows a process of reduction to arrive at a description of the phenomenon in rich textural language while maintaining separation between self and the phenomenon. After phenomenological reduction, imaginative variation and synthesis of meanings and essences of experiences occur so that others can view and understand the phenomenon investigated.

The transcendental phenomenological approach enabled me to examine students’ FD while ensuring that I was free of initial thoughts and judgments relating to FD. Fowler’s (1981) FDT presents a fluid process of individual FD that spans a lifetime. Fowler described FD as personal to every individual and ultimately a way of creating meaning through various trials and tribulations. The unique pubescent phase of middle school students can cause them to withdraw emotionally and tightly guard internal feelings that may contribute to their faith growth and reliance on faith (Richert et al., 2016). The transcendental approach enabled me to explore the dynamic and guarded understandings of middle school students. Understanding FD in eighth-

grade students following a CTBC would be impossible without using both a transcendental phenomenological research approach and a human as the instrument of data collection (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenology allowed for the collection of students' organic lived experiences of FD through the deep, thick, and textured illuminative language of phenomenological meaning (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given the inherent nature of FD described by Fowler, the transcendental phenomenological approach allowed me to discover the essence of meaning relating to students' FD experiences while following a CTBC.

Research Questions

A central research question and three subquestions guided the study.

Central Question

The central research question is as follows: How does following a CTBC affect the lived FD experience of eighth-grade Christian students?

Subquestions

1. How does following a CTBC affect how students define faith?
2. How do the descriptions of FD by students following a CTBC align with Fowler's (1981) stages of FD?
3. How does following a CTBC inform students' views of God?

Setting

For a researcher to appropriately explore a phenomenon, the researcher should choose a natural study setting where the phenomenon occurs (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The purpose of selecting a natural study setting is to ensure that participants are comfortable during the research and to provide sensitive information that aids in exploring the phenomenon (Given, 2008). The researcher should also choose a readily accessible study setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

site selected for this study was Spartan Christian School (a pseudonym) in Spartan City, Michigan. Established in 1974 as an independent school, it had no association with an overseeing church body. I chose Spartan Christian School as my setting due to it being in a rural setting which set the participants apart from excessive urban social influences. The rural setting presented an intimate student and teacher setting in which the teachers and curriculum were the main social influences of the participants. Spartan Christian School is a small Christian school with 365 enrolled students (47% female and 53% male), enough to yield the number of participants required for this study. Only 3% of the students are non-White, which is below the state average. The ratio of students to teachers is 14:1. Classes are small, ranging from 15 to 25 students. All science courses follow a CTBC. School regulations require every student and at least one parent of every student to attend a Christ-centered church and show a sustained commitment to growing their Christian faith. The school also required faculty, students, and parents to honor the school's statement of faith and spiritual requirements. Spartan Christian School's curriculum depended on biblical inerrancy and how the chosen curriculum affirms scripture (Mathews, 2016). The school used three different Christian publishers for its curriculum: ABecka, Bob Jones Press, and Positive Action. Because of this dependency on biblical inerrancy, the CTBC used with students directly corresponded to the Genesis creation story. I focused on the eighth-grade science course because the curriculum for that course was a CTBC.

Participants

To properly explore a phenomenon, a researcher must collect data from the individuals who have lived experiences of that phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To explore FD, I studied 12 eighth-grade Christian students. The number of participants chosen reflected the

sample size used by Epting (2012), who obtained detailed and deep textural descriptions of FD from 10 participants. I recruited 12 participant students to saturate the data collected and analyzed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data saturation occurs when a researcher finds as many “incidents, events, or activities as possible to provide support for the categories” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 318).

Qualitative researchers use purposeful sampling to select participants who can address the phenomenon studied (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Use of the maximum variation strategy is common in qualitative research because it permits a researcher to determine the participant criteria and study setting in advance (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants in this study were male and female eighth-grade students aged 13–14 years who self-identified as Christian. I selected participants purposefully based on their current instruction and understanding of the Abeka textbook *Science: Earth and Space* (Suri, 2011). To ensure that the participants possessed a general understanding of the aforementioned textbook, they were required to be currently enrolled in the setting’s eighth-grade science class. Participants were also required to have completed the seventh-grade science class at the study setting to ensure their previous instruction in, and comprehension of, creationism as taught by the Abeka science textbook, *Order and Design* (Martin et al., 2010).

Among the primary considerations throughout the purposeful selection procedure was the requirement for students to fall within the age range of 13–14 years, corresponding to Stage 3 (synthetic-conventional faith) of Fowler’s (1981) FDT. Given that Fowler provided an age range for each stage of FD, participant restrictions in addition to age and religion are unnecessary. To ensure that participants self-identified as Christian, I asked them to complete a demographic survey based on the instrument Epting (2012) used to identify Christian student athletes.

Procedures

Qualitative research involves studying human experiences and therefore requires the utmost care with respect to ethics and procedures (Vagle, 2016). Ethical and procedural considerations for qualitative research include institutional review board (IRB) approval, interview preparation, and recording procedures (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The human nature of the phenomenon explored in the study demanded IRB approval. I invited minors to take part in interviews, focus groups, and journal blogging. I obtained permission to conduct the study from the principal and administrative staff of Spartan Christian School (Appendix A). Upon successfully defending my proposal, I submitted and produced all required forms to the IRB for approval in accordance with IRB guidelines and policies. Forms required for the study included the Christian faith student interview guide (Appendix B), the parental consent waiver (Appendix C), the educator and administrator contact form (including a demographic survey for review), the study information packet (covering confidentiality, voluntary participation, and researcher contact details), the letter approving use of Epting's (2012) Student–Athlete Christian Faith Interview Guide (SACFIG; Appendix E), and the letter approving conduct of the study at the study site (Appendix A). Upon receiving approval from Liberty University's IRB (Appendix D), I sought parental consent and student assent from potential participants and their parents by submitting the IRB-approved forms to them.

Once I received all written consent forms, I submitted the demographic survey to the students approved to participate in the study. After assessing the survey, I worked in conjunction with school administrators, parents, and participants to coordinate times and dates to conduct onsite semistructured interviews. Before conducting the study, I conducted a pilot study with nonparticipating students to ensure that the interview questions are workable and understandable.

After the pilot study, I began the interview process. I asked the open-ended interview questions; however, topic relevant conversation within the interviews yielded additional information from participants. Open-ended questions allow a researcher to extract as much information as possible from participants and enable participants to thoroughly respond to each question (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I recorded the audio of each individual interview as it took place for data collection. After conducting the interviews, I transcribed the participants' answers and gave the transcripts to the participants for member checking. Member checking is a process in which a researcher submits transcribed statements to participants for validation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After the interviews, I coordinated with participants and their parents to conduct two focus groups at the study setting, each with the same number of participants. The focus groups met at the study setting in a conference room in which the participants appeared visibly comfortable in the presence of the other participants and unconstrained by the school administrator's oversight. Each focus group session lasted approximately 35 min, and I recorded the audio of each session. After conducting the focus groups, I used transcription software to transcribe all participant responses and gave the transcripts to the participants for member checking.

As part of the data collection process, participants accessed an open journaling forum available in the Google Docs system. Participants used this forum anonymously for open discussions. I assigned pseudonyms to participants for the journal blog prompt responses. Every 2 days, I submitted a new prompt post relating to CTBC and FD. To encourage the participants to respond to the prompt questions in a timely manner, I incentivized them with \$5 Dairy Queen gift cards for their completed responses. I preserved all data collected from the open forum verbatim for data analysis.

The Researcher's Role

The role of a qualitative researcher is to be an instrument of data collection and analysis (Goodell et al., 2016). Unlike quantitative research, which depends on data collection instruments such as questionnaires and inventories, qualitative research relies only on data collected and refined by the researcher. To ensure that I set my biases aside as far as possible during data analysis, I practiced bracketing to understand the experiences of the participants and preserve the integrity of the data collected (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is essential to any study's integrity that the researcher disclose any personal characteristics relevant to the study, including biases, judgments, and preconceptions (Goodell et al., 2016).

As the human instrument for the study, I had no personal connections to the potential participants. I had no authority over the participants and could not affect their status or grades in class or in any other capacity. I have been a youth pastor for 5 years and possess a robust biblical worldview and loving relationship with Jesus Christ. I therefore view the world through the lens of the absolutes of God. My biblical worldview and relationship with Christ have led me to conduct this study. I believe that FD of young people is essential to their spiritual and worldly success. As all humans do, I carry personal biases. My personal bias relating to the study is that I believe the theory of evolution to be entirely false, and I also believe biblical accounts of creation to be entirely accurate. As an ethical researcher, I practiced *epoché* throughout the research by disclosing my own experiences and biases (Moustakas, 1994). My belief derives from my personal assumption that biblically rooted creation teachings positively supplement the FD of young people, in contrast to the theory of evolution, which has no biblical foundation. I used bracketing to mitigate deleterious effects of preconceived thoughts relating to the FD of eighth-grade students following a CTBC (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data Collection

Qualitative research has historically relied on data collected via interviews and observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study relied on both historical and modern methods of data collection. I used data triangulation by employing three methods of data collection, which supported data validity and saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because the study had a transcendental phenomenological design, I used the phenomenological interview method defined by Moustakas (1994). I also used an adapted version of Epting's (2012) SACFIG. A phenomenological interview is an informal interactive process that uses open-ended questions and comments (Moustakas, 1994). The study also involved focus groups and journal blogging as data sources, both of which are reliable data collection methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Interviews

I followed the phenomenological interviewing method described by Moustakas (1994). The interview site was the media center at the study setting. I conducted onsite face-to-face interviews. Each interview began with a social conversation to alleviate tension or anxiety before questioning began. The purpose of this preliminary social discussion was to make the participant comfortable and form a trusting atmosphere (Moustakas, 1994). I interviewed participants in a semistructured format with open-ended questions crafted to extract rich information revealing themes and meaning clusters related to FD. Fowler (1981) stated that each interview participant should be comfortable and understand that there are no right or wrong answers. The interview guide was adapted from Epting's (2012) SACFIG and consisted of four sections designed to explore students' unique FD experiences: life review (Questions 1–3), present values and commitments (Questions 4–7), religion (Questions 8–11), and CTBCs (Questions 12–14; see also Appendix B):

1. Please tell me information about yourself.
2. What are some major turning points in your life?
3. What challenges have you faced in school?
4. What beliefs and values are most important in guiding your life?
5. Why are some approaches to life more valid than others?
6. What things in your life support and contribute to your beliefs the most?
7. When life seems most discouraging or hopeless, what gives you hope?
8. What meaningful religious experiences have you had?
9. What feelings do you get when you think of God?
10. What do you feel is occurring when you pray?
11. When you think about life, what gives it meaning?
12. What are your thoughts on creation?
13. Why does your science textbook help your understanding of life's meaning?
14. How has your Christian faith changed since studying your science textbook?

Section 1 questions are general knowledge and understanding questions (Patton, 1990). I designed Questions 1–3 to make participants feel comfortable, create a social conversation, and break through any uncomfortable feelings present leading into the interview (Fowler, 1981; Moustakas, 1994). These questions are straightforward everyday conversational questions that do not require any in-depth thought from participants (Moustakas, 1994). Furthermore, the purpose of these questions relates to Research Subquestions 1 and 2 by exploring the participants' self-identification and self-understanding. This was important information to discover because it could directly affect the participants' views of faith and also aid in determining how they aligned with Fowler's (1981) FDT. The questions gently ease a

participant into inward self-reflection and help create a comfortable interview climate (Fowler, 1981; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) suggested following general knowledge or basic rapport questions with questions that engage the participant in deep thought about experiences, significant moments, and awareness. The questions in Section 1 are substantial because the world of a middle school student generally consists of only family and school (Benson, 2019). These questions build a bridge to the Section 2 questions.

The purpose of the questions in Section 2 is to obtain information relating to the participants' current values and commitments. Similar to the Section 1 questions, these questions are intended to probe how the participants' view themselves internally. Unlike the Section 1 questions, these questions are also designed to explore the faith of the participants. These explore Research Subquestion 1 while indirectly gathering information for Research Subquestion 3. These questions present participants with problem-posing and thought-provoking reflection about their faith but not their religion (Fowler, 1981; Moustakas, 1994). Questions 4–6 invite participants to justify faith without God internally, yet the questions are subliminally suggestive of God and explore questions of FD (Fowler, 1981). Faith does not necessarily depend on belief in God, so it is essential to separate the two when seeking to explore FD (Fowler, 1981). Question 7 is suggestive of God or the cross without mentioning either. The faith of young people is generally a deeply hidden and guarded mess of uncontrollable doubt, fear, joy, and hope; it is thus important to explore the faith of young people indirectly with delicate and subtle questions (Richert et al., 2016). The purpose of the questions in Section 2 is to encourage participants to confront faith without a direct linkage to God (Fowler, 1981). These questions build on the thoughts provoked by the questions in Section 1, but the questions in

Section 2 require participants to expand their thinking more deeply (Fowler, 1981; Moustakas, 1994).

The questions in Section 3 are the first questions that delve explicitly into participants' faith. Having reflected on faith without God in Section 2, participants receive prompts for more profound reflection about faith with God in Section 3 (Fowler, 1981; Moustakas, 1994). The responses gathered from these questions directly related to Research Subquestion 3. These questions enabled me to hear participants' thoughts and feelings, which all faith must address (Fowler, 1981). Young people of religious faith tend to lean heavily on their faith and the deity they believe in during times of stress and of joy (Fernando & Ferrari, 2009). Given this deep reliance on God, the open-ended questions in Section 3 are directed at God and religious practices with the aim of obtaining profoundly personal information. The purpose of Questions 8–12 is to obtain specific religious information about God through the lens of faith. These are rich and thought-provoking questions that will enable me to discover how faith applies to participants' lives and provide a view of the participants' FD experiences (Fowler, 1981). Discovering the FD of an individual is a process requiring intricate practice (Fowler, 1981).

The questions in Section 4 are specific to CTBCs. The questions in Sections 1–3 develop understanding of participants' FD experiences (Moustakas, 1994). The responses from these questions informed all of the research subquestions. In Section 4 it is appropriate to ask participants about CTBCs and explore the essence of their meaning as it relates to their FD experiences (Epting, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of Questions 12–13 is to directly identify the FD phenomenon explored in the proposed study. Question 14 seeks any other information available with the goal of achieving data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Epting, 2012). At this point in the interview, I collected enough data to have a general understanding of

which stage of FD the participant is at (Fowler, 1981). This knowledge is important because participants should theoretically be at Stages 2 or 3 of Fowler's (1981) FDT. In theory, a participant's stage of FD should have depended on their engagement with the CTBC.

Focus Groups

Creswell and Poth (2018) said that focus groups are a data collection method conducted in phenomenological research in person, virtually, or via email. Focus groups can sometimes produce more sensitive themes, including personal disclosures, than interviews can (Guest et al., 2017). Many researchers have investigated the rationale for using focus groups as a data collection method (Gaber & Gaber, 2019). Focus groups are a valuable way to collect data because they provide rich and detailed data about perceptions, thoughts, and feelings from participants in their own words (Gaber & Gaber, 2019). Guest et al. (2017) found that participants in offsite focus groups were more comfortable in a neutral atmosphere. Although one-on-one interviews and focus groups share features, a notable benefit of the focus group setting is that researchers are moderators rather than interviewers, which leads to rich data (Gaber & Gaber, 2019). The moderator role benefits researchers because it places them in the periphery rather than center stage, which allows them to observe new information discussed by participants (Gaber & Gaber, 2019).

I conducted two focus groups after the semistructured interviews. Each focus group had the same number of participants and took place in a private conference room at the setting to remove participants from any mental constraints of their normal school setting. Each focus group lasted approximately 35 min. An adapted version of Epting's (2012) SACFIG guided the focus groups (Appendix F).

Focus group questions differ from semistructured interview questions. The purpose of the few topical questions guiding a focus group is to encourage open discussion among participants rather than obtain specific responses to individual questions, as in a semistructured interview (Gaber & Gaber, 2019). For this study, four topic questions guided the focus group:

1. What does creation have to do with God?
2. Please discuss your belief in God and the creation of human life.
3. What has God done for you in your life?
4. How accurate is your creation-based textbook?

The purpose of these focus group questions is to begin an engaging discussion relating to creationism and faith among the participants (Gaber & Gaber, 2019). I designed them to help obtain the essence of meaning relating to participants' FD and the effect of the CTBC on their FD (Moustakas, 1994). Responses to these questions helped answer Research Subquestions 1 and 3 directly, and a compilation of the responses to these questions enabled me to determine how participants aligned with Fowler's (1981) FDT. Question 1 explored participants' general views of creation and God and the essence of their understanding of faith and creation (Fowler, 1981). Question 2 built on Question 1 and further explored participants' experience of faith and creation (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of Question 3 was to provoke insightful discussion relating to participants' profoundly hidden faith (Fowler, 1981). Question 4, an exploratory question, sought understanding of participants' views of the CTBC they follow (Gaber & Gaber, 2019).

Open-Forum Journaling

Journaling as a method of data collection can obtain valuable insights into the phenomenon studied (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Journaling offers participants anonymity,

which interviews and focus groups do not (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). The data obtained via journaling reflect a sense of comfort and confidence on the part of participants to divulge otherwise hidden information (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). Journaling, as noted by Creswell and Poth (2018), is a reliable data collection method used in phenomenological research that can produce rich dialogue and data. In the study, participants responded to journal prompts posted throughout the study; the prompts derived from questions from Fowler's (1981) FD interview guide (Appendix G). The journal forum relied on access via a secure Google Docs site and school administrators. Participants answered prompts anonymously by posting to the journal using their assigned pseudonyms. Given participant anonymity available with this method of data collection, the prompt questions were intentionally personal (Wilson et al., 2015).

I reviewed journal submissions each week to ensure participants were taking part. I also made available an open blog forum for discussion among participants for the purposes of unguided data collection, however; no participant responses were collected. Unguided journaling can produce a unique view of participants' true thoughts, unconstrained by prompt questions (Moser & Korstjens, 2017). At the end of the 2-week journaling process, I collected journal and unguided forum data for analysis. In the 1st week of journaling, I asked the following prompt questions:

1. What has contributed to your faith walk?
2. Where do you feel that you are changing within your faith walk?

In the 2nd week, I asked these questions:

1. How has your creation textbook contributed to your faith?
2. How has your creation textbook helped grow your relationship with God?

Fowler (1981) said that the FD of young people must be viewed not only in the context of their responses to single questions but also in the context of their responses to a multitude of questions aimed at revealing their faith as a whole. I designed the journal prompt questions to explore the very heart of participants' FD experiences while following a CTBC. I asked these questions via journal blogging so that participants could take their time when responding and remain comfortable knowing that their responses are anonymous from the point of view of their peers (Wilson et al., 2015). The anonymity of journal blogging enhances the likelihood of obtaining the deeply guarded essence of faith possessed by young people (Moser & Korstjens, 2017).

Data Analysis

Moustakas (1994) described epoché as a process through which a researcher removes as much personal bias and prejudgment as possible relating to a studied phenomenon. I applied epoché to control my biases as I conducted this study, especially during data analysis.

Moustakas described four steps of phenomenological data analysis: (a) using the phenomenological approach to obtain a full description of the researcher's own experience of the phenomenon, (b) recording all relevant statements verbatim from transcripts while considering multiple variables pertinent to the study, (c) repeating the first and second steps for any assistant analysts, and (d) constructing a composite textural–structural description of the meanings and essences of the experiences. Textural descriptions are synthesized textural compilations of analyzed segments and themes identified during data analysis (Moustakas, 1994). The researcher then examines these textural descriptions from different perspectives through imaginative variation and eventually arrives at structural descriptions. A textural description is the “what” of synthesized data, and a structural description is the “how.” The textural–structural description that emerges from this process represents the meaning and experience of the explored

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Additional data analysis procedures include organizing the data, memoing emerging ideas, grouping codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Bracketing and Phenomenological Reduction

Phenomenological reduction and bracketing work in unison to remove a researcher's preconceived thoughts, judgments, and biases before analysis of a phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). For the study, I bracketed myself from all experiences I possessed as a youth pastor by using a reflexive journal to record my biases and judgments relating to FD (Moustakas, 1994). This step is pivotal to discovering the true essence of the meaning of FD.

Transcription

Before transcribing the data, I created a spreadsheet to organize the interview questions and responses using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. I transcribed all participant responses to the interview questions into text format. I proofread the textual transcripts to ensure they were identical to the audio responses from the participants. After transcribing the data, I organized it using searchable and identifiable common themes. Creswell and Poth (2018) noted that transcription is one the first steps for a researcher beginning data analysis. I submitted the transcribed data to the participants for member checking. After member checking, I studied the data to discover common themes and used NVivo (Version 12) to analyze and categorize the transcripts while identifying significant statements.

Once the transcribed data were confirmed through member checking, I coded the data using open coding. Open coding is an analytical process that allowed me to segment the transcribed data into identifiable categories of information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Using NVivo (Version 12), I took an inductive approach to attaching codes to units of data as I

analyzed the data. The codes and transcribed data responses were compared and analyzed throughout this process to identify significant statements and themes. Once open coding was complete, the data were further categorized using axial coding. Axial coding is used to identify the central phenomenon of a study and to relate categories of information to the study's central phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Horizontalization

Moustakas (1994) highlighted the importance of horizontalization—giving equal weight to all relevant data throughout data analysis. The rationale for horizontalization is that “each horizon as it comes into our conscious experience is the grounding or condition of the phenomenon that gives it a distinctive character” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 95). Each horizon found within statements, sentences, or quotes must therefore receive appropriate consideration as potentially contributory to the phenomenon studied. Using horizontalization all statements made by the participants were regarded as potentially relevant to students' FD, despite the variety of data sources. Once the material was horizontalized, I categorized the statements, sentences, and quotes into units of meaning.

Identifying Meaning Clusters

Organizing meaning clusters is the third major step of phenomenological analysis method of Moustakas (1994). I organized identified significant statements into meaning units and combined those into meaning clusters to condense the data. I then grouped the meaning clusters into themes. This process eliminated overlapping and repetitive statements. From the meaning clusters, I developed textural descriptions of FD experiences. I then developed structural descriptions and integrated the textures and structures into the meanings and essences of the FD

phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Following the development of meaning clusters, I coded the data into categories of information.

Textural–Structural Description and Synthesis

To create the textural–structural description, I used the descriptions of the segments and themes revealed by the participants to compile a collective textural description. I then composed a structural description to understand how following a CTBC has affected participants' FD experiences. Once I formed the textural and structural descriptions, I combined them to draft a composite description that conveyed an understandable synthesis of the essences and meanings of the FD phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). My goal was to develop a composite description that could provide others with an improved understanding of how following a CTBC affected the FD of middle-grade students.

Trustworthiness

The trustworthiness of a study contributes directly to the study's integrity and validity (Williams & Morrow, 2014). Whether a study is serious or reliable depends on the study's credibility, dependability, and transferability. To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I applied reliable methods, undertook member checking of all relevant statements, took an interview training module, triangulated data, and submitted my work to peer review.

Credibility

To achieve credibility, I triangulated during data collection to obtain a wider array of perspectives. Researchers apply triangulation by taking into account multiple corroborating sources, methods, and investigators to improve accuracy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I collected data from three sources: semistructured interviews, focus group interviews, and journal blogging. I also undertook member checking by having participants review their interview transcripts to

ensure that transcribed data accurately represented the participants' original intent. To further ensure credibility, I prepared for the interview process by taking an interview training module (Epting, 2012).

I also spent a long time with the participants throughout the study because prolonged engagement in the field lends credibility to research (Lietz et al., 2006). And I asked peers to review my research process. Peer review maintains the scientific method's validity and integrity (Rombey et al., 2019). I submitted the study design to a peer reviewer with research experience who held a doctoral degree.

Dependability and Confirmability

I designed the study to enable in-depth investigation, which allowed me to uncover the phenomenon of FD of students following a CTBC. While conducting the study, I maintained a reflexive journal to preserve untranscribed notes and information relating to the study (Lietz et al., 2006). I further strengthened the dependability and confirmability of the study by using member checking (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Given that qualitative research does not permit true objectivity—because of the use of a human research instrument—I used triangulation and horizontalization to preserve dependability and confirmability. Fowler's (1981) FDT assigns age ranges to the stages of FD. Participants should have theoretically aligned with Stage 3 of FD. To ensure that participants were Christians, I asked them to complete a demographic survey that assessed their Christian self-identify.

Transferability

A researcher can enhance the transferability of qualitative research by effectively describing the research context and assumptions central to the research (Korstjens & Moser, 2017). For the study, I produced, through data analysis, thick descriptions of participant views,

thoughts, and revelations regarding the essence of meaning related to FD. Qualitative research, by nature, does not permit true transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018), but the study was limited only by the curricula, setting, and participants. Partial re-creation of the study will therefore be possible outside the stated limitations.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are of the highest priority when researching human subjects (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the study, I used participants' real names only for my own purposes throughout data collection and analysis. I used pseudonyms for participants and settings after that. Other ethical considerations for this study include obtaining IRB approval, school board approval, parental consent, and minor participant assent and securely storing data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I considered and addressed all ethical issues for the study.

Summary

This chapter discussed the methods and procedures proposed for the study. I applied the methods and procedures using a transcendental phenomenological approach to discover the essence of meaning for the FD experiences of students' following a CTBC. This approach was appropriate because it allowed me to richly explore the interpersonal thoughts, experiences, and nuances within participants that affect their FD. To facilitate triangulation, participants provided data in three different ways: semistructured interviews, focus groups, and journal blogging. In the study, I followed the procedures and methods defined by Moustakas (1994) and Creswell and Poth (2018).

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a CTBC at a Northern Michigan Christian school. The collected data highlighted overall common themes related to the research questions. Data were collected from 12 eighth-grade Christian school students (seven male and five female) aged 13–14 years who self-identified as Christian. Chapter 4 describes the participants and discusses the themes that emerged.

Participants

Table 1 summarizes the demographics of the participants, identified using pseudonyms.

Table 1

Demographics of Participants

Pseudonym	Gender	Age in years
Aaron	Male	13
George	Male	14
Anne	Female	13
Beatrice	Female	13
Roberto	Male	13
Dave	Male	14
Rick	Female	13
Ron	Male	13
Lenora	Female	13
Scott	Male	13
Jenny	Female	13
Cameron	Male	13

Note. Every participant identified as Christian. All participants were in Grade 8.

Aaron

Aaron was a 13-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Aaron was a very happy participant and appeared excited to participate in the study. When I asked him to tell me about himself, he stated that he enjoyed playing on the basketball team with his academic peers (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 1:28). He added that he enjoyed playing games on his computer during his free time (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 1:49). When asked what some major turning points of his life were, he responded, “My brother got saved. ... I went and asked my parents what it means for me to be saved. And that’s when I really found out and started turning to Christ” (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 2:45). He then confirmed that he was saved. Aaron stated that he attended church regularly and that his father was a pastor (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 3:12, 3:15). He also stated that attending church camp “really helped me” (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 3:53) with his faith. Aaron continued to state that his faith and reliance on God were very important to him throughout the interview.

George

George was a 14-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. At the time of the interview, George appeared soft-spoken and excited to participate in the study. When asked to provide general information about himself, he stated that he attended church and Christian school. George also stated, “My dad is a pastor” (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 15:32), and said that he had three siblings. George said that he was a member of the church choir. When asked about major turning points in his life, he said that “going to Camp Kobiak” (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 2:21) helped him open up to his parents. When asked about his academic status, George said that he had been a student at the study setting for 4

years and had many friends at the school. I asked what beliefs and values were most guiding to his life; George listed “the Bible” and “going to church (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:22, 5:27). George also stated, “When you’re not spending enough time in God’s word, you can like get lost” (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:27), and he said that he turned to the Bible for answers.

Anne

Anne was a 13-year-old female student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Anne appeared happy and outgoing at the time of the interview. When I asked her to tell me about herself, Anne stated that she had a sister, four cats, and six chickens. She said that she liked to “hang out with my sister” (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021, 1:25). When asked what some major turning points of her life had been, she said that moving to a new house was significant to her. Anne also said that she had a lot of friends at the study setting. When I asked Anne what beliefs and values were most guiding in her life, she stated, “Just believing that God has a plan” (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021, 4:16). Furthermore, when asked why some approaches to life were more valid than others, Anne stated, “Because, whenever we’re struggling in life, we can pray” (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:13). She also said that she felt that we humans are not alone. Anne stated that her faith was very important to her daily life and that she relied on her relationship with Christ to get her through each day (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021). She added that her parents, school, and Bible app helped her faith (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021).

Beatrice

Beatrice was a 13-year-old female student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Beatrice was a very smart and happy person. She seemed extremely excited to participate in the

study. Beatrice stated that she had two siblings and had a good relationship with them. She also stated that the deaths of her grandmother and grandfather were major turning points in her life. Beatrice added that an ongoing falling-out with her cousin had also been a major turning point in her life: “She’s been drifting away from God and the church” (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021, 3:50). When asked what challenges she faced in school, she answered, “School this year has definitely been a lot harder,” and she continued, “I think it’s mostly because of the overload of homework” (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021, 4:59, 5:04). She also said that church was the most important thing guiding her beliefs and values. Beatrice credited “the Bible and what my parents have told me” (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021, 7:54) for guiding her beliefs and values. She continued, saying that “the Bible is true” and that “I know that we should pray and try to be closer to God” (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021, 8:06, 8:33).

Roberto

Roberto was a 13-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. He was very open, intelligent, well-spoken, and excited to participate in the study. When I asked him to tell me about himself, Roberto stated that he had three siblings. He added that his brother “was on Miracle Network” (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021, 1:13) because he had a 0% chance of being born. Roberto credited God for his brother’s birth: “And God made a miracle, and he was born” (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021, 1:22). Roberto also said that he participated in all the sports the school had to offer. When asked about the major turning points of his life, Roberto responded with a story about his sister running away: “We couldn’t find her for an entire day” (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021, 2:33). Furthermore, when asked about challenges in school, he answered, “To be honest, this is a great school” (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021, 3:34). He added that his grades were good at the time of the

interview. Roberto also said that he put God first in his daily life (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021).

Dave

Dave was a 14-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Dave appeared soft-spoken but confident. He was happy to participate in the study. When I asked him to tell me about himself, Dave stated that his mother died when he was a toddler, and his father left before he was born. He then said that he had been raised by his grandparents. Dave also said that he had been practicing martial arts for years. When asked about major turning points in his life, he stated, “When I learned about West Point” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53). Dave also said that his grandfather was in the military, and Dave viewed his grandfather as a role model. I then asked Dave about his academic life; he responded that he had good grades and friends in school. Furthermore, when asked what beliefs and values were most guiding in his life, Dave stated, “I would strive for Christian values” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 8:21). He also confirmed that he loved going to church and youth group as much as possible.

Rick

Rick was a 13-year-old female student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Rick appeared friendly and quite shy. She asked me if she could have the pseudonym Rick because it related to her favorite television show. Rick stated that she had six siblings and enjoyed spending time with friends. When asked about major turning points in her life, she said that her parents’ divorce had had a big impact on her (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021). With regard to her academic life, Rick stated that she had a hard time paying attention during class. She added that she was not good with math, but her grades were good. When asked what beliefs and

values were most guiding in her life, Rick responded, “I believe that like, God just has a purpose for us” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53). She further answered, “We just need to follow his word and that will lead us to the right place” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53). Furthermore, Rick said that going to church regularly and talking to her family contributed to her beliefs. Throughout her interview, she repeated statements that demonstrated her reliance on faith.

Ron

Ron was a 13-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Ron appeared pleasant and outspoken at the start of the interview. However, as the interview progressed, he became more soft-spoken. Beginning the interview, Ron said that he had two siblings and enjoyed playing videos. He also said that breaking his leg was a major turning point of his life. He told the story of how he broke his leg while running; he required surgery to heal the injury. During the surgery, the doctors discovered and removed a noncancerous tumor. Ron questioned whether God had something to do with the discovery of the tumor. When asked about his academic life, he stated, “Last year, I had really bad grades” (Ron, Interview, November 16, 2021, 5:35). However, he said that he had all As at the time of the interview. Ron also said that he had a good group of friends at school. When asked why some approaches to life are more valid than others, he responded, “Because you could like tell more people about Christ” (Ron, Interview, November 16, 2021, 9:02). He also said that going to church every Sunday and being a member of a youth group contributed to his Christian beliefs. Ron also said that being around people of faith helped grow his faith.

Lenora

Lenora was a 13-year-old female student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Lenora appeared pleasant and happy. Lenora's mother was a teacher at the study setting, and Lenora's father was a pastor. When I asked her to tell me about herself, Lenora stated that she had two siblings, played volleyball, and had a group of friends at the study setting. She added that she considered going to church camp as a major turning point in her life. Lenora continued, "Okay, at home when we started doing devotions and stuff to get a better life with Christ" (Lenora, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:55). When asked about her academic life, she said that she did not like science, but her grades were good. She said that she enjoyed spending time with her school and church peers. Lenora added that she attended church youth group weekly. When asked what values and beliefs were most important in guiding her life, she responded, "My parents have taught me and stuff from like the Bible" (Lenora, Interview, November 16, 2021, 6:40). She stated that she read the Bible before bed and Christian values guided her life.

Scott

Scott was a 13-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Scott appeared quite shy but was excited to participate in the study. When I asked him to tell me about himself, Scott stated that he had three siblings and enjoyed participating in school theater. He also said that he went to church regularly and was a member of the church youth group. Scott continued said that he enjoyed going to both summer and winter church camps. When asked what some major turning points of his life were, Scott answered, "Probably when I got saved" (Scott, Interview, December 14, 2021, 2:16). He added, "Because that's when I knew that I was going to go to heaven to be with God forever" (Scott, Interview, December 14, 2021, 2:22). When asked about his academic life, Scott responded that he was in good academic standing and

had a good group of friends at school. When I asked what beliefs and values guided his life the most, he stated, “God has everything in control and he will take care of you no matter what” (Scott, Interview, December 14, 2021, 3:38). Scott also said that the Christian approach to life was more valid than other approaches because of God’s purpose for creation. He added that the thought of going to heaven was more comforting than the thought of not going to heaven.

Cameron

Cameron was a 13-year-old male student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Cameron appeared excited and confident. He said that he enjoyed playing a variety of sports and participating in school theater. He also said that he had two siblings, attended church, and enjoyed participating in church youth group. When asked about his academic life, Cameron responded that his grades were good and that he had a lot of friends at school. He added, “We talk about Jesus a lot and the Bible” (Cameron, Interview, December 14, 2021, 2:41). When asked what beliefs and values were most guiding to his life, he answered, “Being in a good Christian home and having a strong faith in God” (Cameron, Interview, December 14, 2021, 3:22). He said that he relied on his faith a lot and prayed to God daily. Asked why some approaches to life are more valid than others, Cameron answered, “Christian, Christian belief would be like creation point of view” (Cameron, Interview, December 14, 2021, 4:26). He added that following the teachings of Jesus is more valid than other approaches to life “because it’s God’s word, it’s like the truth” (Cameron, Interview, December 14, 2021, 5:09).

Jenny

Jenny was a 13-year-old female student in the eighth-grade class of the study setting. Jenny appeared happy, energetic, and excited to participate in the interview. Jenny described herself as having grown up in a Christian family with two siblings. She also stated that she

attended church regularly, participated in youth group, and had gone to regular church summer camps. Jenny added that she played volleyball and soccer for the study setting. When asked about major turning points of her life, she said that the deaths of her grandparents “brought her more towards Christ” (Jenny, Interview, December 14, 2021, 1:55). With regard to her academic life, Jenny said that she had a great group of friends and good grades. I asked Jenny what beliefs and values were most important in guiding her life. She responded that she viewed the world and others through the lens of Christ’s teachings. I then asked why some approaches to life were more valid than others; Jenny responded that the morality practiced throughout a Christian life was a necessary lens with which to navigate this life. She added, “It’s kind of like our job as a Christian is to bring the non-Christian people to have a Christian life” (Jenny, Interview, December 14, 2021, 4:57). When asked what things contributed to her beliefs the most, Jenny answered, “My, family has, like they’re all Christians” (Jenny, Interview, December 14, 2021, 5:36). She added, “Going to a church that like my dad grew up in” (Jenny, Interview, December 14, 2021, 5:36). Jenny also said that God and praying to God gave her hope.

Results

The data collected through one-on-one interviews, focus group interviews, and journal blogging were analyzed for common themes. Data were organized and categorized using open coding and axial coding. These coding methods were used to identify significant statements and similar thoughts shared by participants. Common themes were then determined from the coded data. The same process was applied to the focus group and journal blog data. The majority of participants felt that studying creationism positively impacted and contributed to their FD. The participants felt that their creationism textbook affirmed and supported their biblical beliefs and faith in God. The participants also described what they felt were faith contributors within their

personal lives and what defined faith to them individually. Table 2 lists the themes that emerged from the data and the codes that supported each theme.

Table 2

Themes

Theme and code	Number of open-code appearances across data sets
Faith contributors	
Family	24
Peer support	26
Academic	6
Foundations of faith	31
Faith defined by God	
Christian worldview	33
Feelings of God	30
God is with me	20
Reliance on God	52
Biblical truth	10
Development of faith by creationism	
Creationism grows my faith	44
Creationism supports the Bible	33
God created the Earth	38
God created us with purpose	41

Theme 1: Faith Contributors

The faith contributors theme was the first to emerge from the data. When describing their faith, the participants felt that external contributors—such as school, peers, and family—helped their knowledge of faith. Participants also said that studying the Bible and practicing tenets of Christianity, such as salvation, contributed to their faith. A student's success, both academically and personally, receives positive reinforcement when the student is among like-minded peers

(Longman, 2018). Studying the Bible and believing in the gospel accounts enhances positive student growth (Longman, 2018). Participants responses during data collection revealed a sphere of positive faith contributors, aligning them with Stage 3 of Fowler's (1981) FDT. Included within the sphere of faith contributors were salvation, Bible, family, school, and peers.

A majority of participants said the act of salvation was a major religious experience within their life. Many participants credited the act of salvation as the beginning of their relationship with Christ and the foremost contributor to their faith walk. When asked about major religious experiences within their lives, Lenora stated, "Well I got saved when I was young" (Interview, November 16, 2021, 10:59). When describing salvation, she stated:

And for a while when I was like, when I was like, 4 and then if, until this is up to about 10 I kept like thinking, what if I forgot something? So, I keep getting saved over and over again. And then I realized that I know I was a Christian. And so actually just start with my walk with God and just stop with stuff. (Lenora, Interview, November 16, 2021, 10:59)

In relation to other faith contributors, such as family, Lenora said going to church, attending a Christian school, and friends all contributed to her faith. Scott described salvation as "when I knew that I was going to go to heaven to be with God forever" (Interview, December 14, 2021, 2:22). Scott also credited being raised in a Christian household and the Bible as the greatest contributors to his beliefs. Scott stated:

My parents have always supported my walk with Christ. They take me to church every Sunday and Wednesday. They have encouraged me to do my devotions, pray, and read my Bible. My teachers have also supported my walk. They give us great, Christ-centered lessons. (Journal Blog Prompts, 1:9)

Furthermore, Cameron said that following the teachings of the Bible made life more valid than other approaches to life. Cameron stated, “It’s God word, it’s the truth” (Interview, December 14, 2021, 5:09). He added that spending time with Christian friends from school also contributed to his faith: “We like talk about Jesus a lot and the Bible. ... It’s like a devotion kind of thing” (Cameron, Interview, December 14, 2021, 2:41; 3:00).

During the focus group interviews, the majority of participants further highlighted positive faith contributors in their responses. During Focus Group 1, George said that his church youth camp was a significant faith contributor. George said church camp “helped me get more open to my dad and more open with God” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 10:46). Roberto credited family member testimonies of miracles that God had performed for them as contributors to his faith: “Every single person in my family has an incredible story” (Roberto, Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 11:55). Dave felt that salvation was a major faith contributor. He explained that he knew he was not a perfect kid, in the sense of being Christlike, but acknowledged that the act of salvation was a significant contribution to his Christian faith. Dave stated, “But once your saved, it feels you’re getting even closer” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 12:51). Jenny responded to the focus group question about what God had done for her in her life: “He’s blessed me a whole lot with like having a good family, friends, and being able to come to a Christian school” (Focus Group 2, January 7, 2022, 4:50). Ron responded to the same question by stating that “salvation” contributed to his faith in God (Focus Group 2, January 7, 2022, 5:49). Moreover, participants provided written responses to a journal blog prompt that asked what had contributed to their faith walks. Roberto wrote, “My, family, friends, media, and school” (Journal Blog Prompts, 1:1). Jenny wrote:

Having a wonderful family and having strong Christian parents to teach me the ways of Christ. Also going to a Christian school has also contributed to my faith walk. To be able to talk about Christ daily is also helpful. (Journal Blog Prompts, 1:4)

Beatrice wrote, “Bible class and science” (Journal Blog Prompts, 1:13). Beatrice also felt that the act of salvation was a significant faith contributor, and she recalled it vividly:

And then I remember, I remember this. I remember sitting at my bed at home. I still have, like, I remember specifically looking at the closet, once I opened my eyes after the prayer, and the little sign that that we have, and the pink balls and stuff, but I remember that. I’d said to Jesus, please come into my heart and a few other things. And then I opened my eyes and my dad said, you don’t have to do it twice. And for 2 years, I was so confused. Why did he say that? I didn’t do it twice. Until he told me that I gotten saved earlier. (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021, 18:05)

Other descriptions that addressed faith contributors included recurring words such as “parents,” “plan,” “church,” “teachers,” and “devotionals.”

Theme 2: Faith Defined by God

Christian faith is a way to understand how a source of eternal love can envelop the hardships and joys of existence (Bauerschmidt & Coakley, 2020). The love of an individual for Jesus Christ and the reliance of the individual on Jesus Christ through a personal relationship are the foundations of the practice of Christian faith (Bauerschmidt & Coakley, 2020). During the interviews, I asked participants what beliefs and values were most important in guiding their lives. Words such as “God,” “knowing,” “prayer,” “friend,” and “Christian” repeatedly emerged. Participant responses revealed that their faith developed as they relied on God more. Many participants felt that God provided for them and created them for a purpose. Participants

also described how they felt God answered their prayers. Participant responses revealed how perceived acts by God throughout their lives helped define their faith.

Aaron said “praying to God everyday” was important for guiding his faith (Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:32). He added that he placed God at “a 10, most important” within the values that guided his life (Aaron, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:56). Anne responded that beliefs important for guiding her faith were “just believing that God has a plan” and believing “that if something bad would happen, I would know that it’s just, it’s all in his plan” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 4:16; 4:34). She added, “Struggling in life, we can pray” (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:13). Anne also felt that God had provided for her family in a time of need:

He helped us, like with family, like, we used to live in not a good city. And so, we had to move, but we had nowhere to go. So, we stayed with our nanny and papa while looking for a home. And we found a house, but we were able to stay with them. (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 11:33)

When asked the same question, Rick stated, “I think like, God has a purpose for us” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53). She continued, “We just need to follow his word and that will lead us to the right place” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53).

I also asked participants what they felt occurred when they prayed. Rick responded, “I feel like God is listening to me. ... Yeah, he’ll answer my prayers” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 8:55; 9:04). Aaron said that prayer was like “God listening to my thoughts and hearing what I have to say” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 11:14). Ron responded, “Jesus is listening,” and he added, “I feel grateful that he answers my prayers” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 15:40; 16:00). Ron said that he felt that God was within him.

During the focus group interviews, participants shared further information that defined their perceptions of faith. Roberto described his reliance on God and expressed his gratitude for what God had done in his life:

Well, I guess he's, he's given us a lot of miracles in our life. Like about every single person in my family has an incredible story. It's just like, it's crazy. Yeah. But I guess he's provided for us our entire life. He's helped us with a home. He's helped with food. He's kind of just taking care of us for our whole lives. (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 11:55)

Roberto felt that God had always taken care of his family and would continue to do so. Beatrice felt that she could depend on God and expressed gratitude for his sacrifice on the cross (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022).

Participants also provided written responses to journal blog prompts that further highlighted their perceptions of faith. In response to the question asking how her creationism textbook had grown her relationship with God, Anne wrote, "Knowing that he will be there for me when I need him the most" (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:3). Responding to the same question, Beatrice wrote, "It helped me better understand him and what he's like so I can better walk with him" (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:12). Overall, participants described their faith in God similarly in terms of reliance, hope, and security. Participants also described God as a provider and friend who would help them in their times of need.

Theme 3: Development of Faith by Creationism

Fowler (1981) defined faith as an individual's evolved and evolving ways of experiencing self, others, and the surrounding world. Faith shapes an individual's life, meanings, trust, loyalties, and purpose in light of the character of being, value, and power (Fowler, 1981).

Creationism is the study of life and the Earth through the lens of the creation story as recorded in Genesis. When asked about how studying creationism impacted their FD, many participants used words and phrases such as “God created,” “true,” “purpose,” “supports the Bible,” and “helps my belief in God.” Participant responses revealed that their perceptions of God as a creator helped them view him as loving and developed their faith in him positively. Participants developed their faith by correlating God creating them with God’s purpose for their lives. This correlation helped participants feel loved and protected by God.

During the interviews, participants described how studying creationism helped grow their faith in God and the Bible. I asked the participants how studying their creationism textbook helped them understand life’s meaning. George responded, “It shows me the power of God and how everything is linked together” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 11:41). He added that his Christian faith had changed as a result of studying his textbook: “It makes me understand things and see how powerful God is and how intelligent and creative he has been” (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 12:52). Roberto responded, “It just gives me more knowledge that God is real, and it leads me into a better life of worship, because I know he’s there” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 11:27). Roberto rationalized his belief in creationism as follows:

But I believe that the Earth is it’s a new Earth. It’s not one of the old billion years or no, it’s like 4,000–6,000 years. I believe that. Obviously, we were created by God weren’t created by just evolution. Because I mean, if evolution was real, every single time we dug into the ground, there’ll be new organism popping up. So. (Interview, November 9, 2021, 10:07)

Rick stated, “It helps me to know we weren’t created by accident,” and he said, “I didn’t really understand it until we started talking about it” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 12:01).

Rick continued, stating that her textbook helped her understand the Bible more and that her faith had changed a lot since studying it. Scott said that studying his textbook had grown his faith and helped him see the contradictions of evolution theory (Interview, December 14, 2021, 11:14).

During the focus group interviews, recurring words from the participants included “God,” “belief,” “purpose,” “created,” “spoke,” and “life.” The participants responded to questions about their belief in God and the creation of human life. Scott said, “God didn’t create us just to be like other animals” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 5:10). He added that he believed God created human life so that humans could glorify him. Beatrice said she believed God created humans apart from animals in that he created humans with souls (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 5:10). Beatrice further described her views on creation:

If the earth were millions of years old, like he said, it would have been corroded, it would have been gone. And if it was, we wouldn’t still find the tissue, on bones from dinosaurs, it would have been gone right? And nothing, we wouldn’t have fossils, it would have taken too long. And it would have died out before, like it could evolve. It just doesn’t make any sense, evolution. But God created us with a purpose. We are made to glorify him. That was our sole purpose. But evolution says we were made by accident. (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 4:03)

Dave commented that “God created us in his image” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 6:19). Roberto said that studying creationism had shown him how much God loves humans and is a loving friend. Referring to his faith, he stated, “It changes it in a way that he’s not really this ruler, he’s a loving friend” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 9:02).

Participant responses to journal blog prompt questions provided further rich data regarding how studying creationism had informed the participants’ FD. Anne wrote that

creationism was “helping me learn more about Christ when I’m not at church” (Journal Blog Prompts, 3:3). Beatrice wrote, “It helps me understand why God does certain things and how to check my motives.” She added that creationism was “changing my outlook on life, my worldview” (Journal Blog Prompts, 3:12). Scott responded, “The lessons are Christ-centered,” and he added, “You can still be encouraged that they are based on the one great truth, God created the world” (Journal Blog Prompts, 3:9). The journal blog prompts also asked participants how their creation textbook had grown their relationship with God. Roberto answered, “It has helped me trust him more” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:1). Cameron commented, “It shows me how real and loving he [God] is” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:5). Ron wrote, “It has shown me proof that God does exist and that he is real and the Bible is true” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:10). Overall, participants felt that studying their creationism textbook had helped grow their belief in God. Participants also felt that their textbook strengthened their faith and helped to confirm the Biblical account of creation.

Responses in Relation to the Research Questions

This section explains how the information shared by the participant addressed the research questions.

Responses Related to the Central Research Question

The central research question asked how following a CTBC affects the lived FD experience of eighth-grade Christian students. The themes that addressed this question were faith contributors and development of faith by creationism. Every participant felt that studying their creationism textbook affected their faith positively. The participants described their science textbook as valuable in helping them understand the Genesis creation story more intricately. Participants stated that the information from their textbook helped grow their faith and belief in

both God and the Bible. When speaking of his creationism textbook, Cameron stated, “It assures me that God is a living God, and he is very real” (Journal Blog Prompts, 3:5). Ron stated, “I think it’s accurate for my beliefs and that I have faith in it. I have faith that it is” (Focus Group 2, January 7, 2022, 7:23). Aaron felt that his science textbook taught him more detailed stories of the Bible. He commented that it had “given me the most detailed storied of the Bible” (Journal Blog Prompts, 3:7). Roberto said that studying his science textbook had helped him trust in God more. He added that his textbook gave him more knowledge of God and helped lead him into a better life of worship (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021). Scott described a similar effect on his faith as a result of studying his science textbook. Scott stated that his faith had grown since studying his textbook and that he believed creationism to be true (Scott, Interview, December 14, 2021).

Several participants shared similar feelings regarding how studying creationism had affected their FD. The participants described several correlations between positive faith growth and studying their science textbook. For example, Ron said he felt that his faith had strengthened as a result of studying his textbook. He added that his textbook also helped him believe in God more (Ron, Interview, November 16, 2021). Ron wrote that his textbook had “shown me proof that God does exist and that he is real and the Bible is true” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:10). Lenora said she felt her textbook supported the Genesis creation story and supported her belief in the Bible. She also said that studying her textbook made her faith in God stronger (Lenora, Interview, November 16, 2021). Furthermore, Dave felt that his creationism textbook was a good balance with the Bible and helped him understand the Bible. Regarding his textbook, he said, “It has just specified exactly what I do believe” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 24:40).

Responses Related to Research Subquestion 1

The first research subquestion asked how following a CTBC affects the way students define faith. The theme that addressed this subquestion was faith defined by God. Analysis of participant responses provided a succinct answer to this question. Following a creationism textbook helped students define faith in several ways. Each participant described their faith in God using different words and phrases, such as “believing,” “praying,” “knowing,” “God is in control,” “God has a plan,” “purpose,” and “God provides.” Overall, participants described their faith in God similarly in terms of “reliance,” “hope,” and “security.” Participants also described God as a provider and friend who would help them in their times of need. Participants also discussed how they felt studying creationism affected the way they defined and understood their faith. George described his faith as praying to God and reading the Bible. George also stated that his faith “gives me something to fall back on” (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 6:47). Furthermore, George stated that his creationism textbook showed him how everything was linked together between God and creation, which helped him understand the Bible more (George, Interview, November 9, 2021).

Dave viewed faith as his belief in the Bible and in God. He stated, “I just believe that God’s word is the truth” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 9:32). Dave added that he was saved and felt that his true connection with God occurred at that time. He added, “He did all of this, he created the entire universe. He died for a few puny people on a rock in the middle of space” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 16:17). Dave also said that studying creationism had taught him that God not only created human life but also is active within the lives of humans. He said that his creationism textbook “has just specified, exactly what I do believe” (Dave, Interview, November 16, 2021, 24:18). Rick viewed faith as knowing that God had a

purpose for humans. She commented that her faith led her to believe that “we just need to follow his word and that will lead us to the right place” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 3:53). Rick felt that studying creationism helped grow her perception of faith. Speaking about her textbook, she stated, “It helps me know that we weren’t created by accident and that there is meaning to life” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 11:17).

Several participants described their faith as a direct relationship with Christ and said that they relied on prayer to get through day-to-day life. Scott commented that he felt God created everything and remained in control of humans’ lives and life outcomes. Regarding his faith, Scott said that he had a personal relationship with Christ and that Christ answered his prayers (Interview, December 14, 2021). When asked what gave life meaning, he stated, “Just knowing that God has everything planned out” (Scott, Interview, December 14, 2021, 9:10). When asked about his science textbook, Scott said, “It talks about how God created the earth and how he is still active in it” (Interview, December 14, 2021, 10:26). Scott’s comments indicated a direct correlation between his creationism textbook and his personal definition of faith. Anne viewed faith as a reliance on God and the knowledge that he would always take care of her. She also commented that the thought of God gave her hope and security (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021). Anne added that she had faith that God created humans for a purpose. She said her science textbook helped her understanding of faith by showing her that she was a part of God’s purpose (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021).

Responses Related to Research Subquestion 2

The second subquestion asked how descriptions of FD by students following a CTBC align with Fowler’s (1981) stages of FD. The themes that addressed this subquestion were faith defined by God and faith contributors. Participants provided responses that defined their views

of faith and described how they synthesized faith contributors within their faith. Participant responses revealed that all participants' faith aligned with Stage 3 of Fowler's FDT. Stage 3, synthetic-conventional faith, generally occurs during ages 13–18 years (Fowler, 1981). The participants were aged 13–14 years. For Stage 3, "faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (Fowler, 1981, p. 172).

Several participants provided responses relating to faith, self, understanding, and worldview that aligned with Stage 3 of FDT. When asked what beliefs and values were most important to guiding their lives, participants provided a great deal of insightful information. Beatrice said that Christian beliefs and the Bible guided her worldview and understanding of moral values (Interview, November 9, 2021). She also said that she believed the Bible to be true and that prayer brought her closer to God (Beatrice, Interview, November 9, 2021). Beatrice added, "He wants us to be holy, not happy" (Interview, November 9, 2021, 10:28). Roberto said that living a Christian life and reading the Bible resulted in a close relationship with God (Interview, November 9, 2021). He added, "You take stuff away from that, just being kind to others" (Roberto, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:51). Roberto continued, "There's a lot of stuff you can take away from the Bible that just helps with that. Just moral stuff" (Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:52). Both Beatrice's and Roberto's Christian worldviews of moral decision making aligned their faith with Fowler's (1981) synthetic-conventional faith.

George commented that going to church and the Bible helped guide his moral compass (Interview, November 9, 2021). George also stated that he relied on prayer to grow his relationship with God. George said his Christian worldview helped him answer moral questions such as "why did you hit your brother? You shouldn't have hit your brother" (George, Interview, November 9, 2021, 5:27). George's responses emphasized that his faith helped him

synthesize values and information aligning his faith with Stage 3 of Fowler's (1981) FDT. Cameron felt the purpose of life was to spread God's word to others (Interview, December 14, 2021). He also said that he trusted God and that God's word is the truth. Cameron went on to say that his strong faith in God was the most guiding thing in his life (Interview, December 14, 2021). Cameron's responses indicated that he viewed life through a Christian worldview, which aligned his faith with Stage 3 of Fowler's FDT. Ron stated that he viewed life through the lens of biblical teachings of right and wrong. Ron commented that his faith in God applied to all his moral decision making. Regarding a potential wrong decision that would get him into trouble, he said, "I would think about and see, like, well I know I would get into trouble if I were to do this, so I would say no" (Ron, Interview, November 16, 2021, 7:23). Ron went on to say that he felt God was in him and led his moral decision making through prayer and God's word. The majority of participants shared similar descriptions synthesizing faith, values, and information as defined in Stage 3 of Fowler's FDT.

Responses Related to Research Subquestion 3

The third research subquestion asked how following a CTBC informs students' views of God. The themes that addressed this subquestion were development of faith by creationism and faith contributors. Participant responses revealed that they felt their creationism textbook was a faith contributor that helped them view God as a creator, father, and loving friend. Several participants described how they viewed God and how studying a creationism textbook had informed their view of God. Relevant recurring words and phrases included "love," "friend," "God is real," "truth," and "creator." When asked what she thought of God, Anne said she believed that God was in control of her life and that he had a plan for her life (Interview, November 9, 2021). She stated that when she experienced hard times, she would pray to God,

and he helped her through those times. Anne continued, stating that God gave her hope, and she knew that God would always take care of her (Interview, November 9, 2021). When asked about creation, Anne said, “I know that God created everything for a purpose” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 10:55). She went on to say that studying creationism had helped her view God and the Bible as true (Anne, Interview, November 9, 2021). Dave felt grateful, overwhelmed, and loved when he thought of God (Interview, November 16, 2021). Dave also said, “He died for a few puny people on a rock in the middle of space” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 16:17). When asked about how studying creationism had affected his view of faith and God, Dave responded, “God is involved in what’s going on,” and he added, “It has just specified exactly what I do believe” (Interview, November 16, 2021, 23:32, 24:18). Dave’s and Anne’s responses indicated positive growth in their views of God as a result of studying their creationism textbook.

Aaron said he viewed God as a friend who was always there for him: “I feel that he’s always there for me, it’s awesome” (Interview, November 9, 2021, 10:37). Aaron also said his belief in God was the most important value in guiding his life (Interview, November 9, 2021). When asked how his creationism textbook helped grow his relationship with God, Aaron wrote that it had “helped me believe how much stronger God is” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:7). Studying creationism helped Aaron view God as stronger than he had previously thought. Rick said that she felt God was always in her corner and that he gave her hope (Interview, November 16, 2021). She further commented, “I feel God always has my back” (Rick, Interview, November 16, 2021, 8:40). When answering the journal blog prompt asking how studying creationism had affected her relationship with God, Rick wrote, “It has helped me to realize that God loves me and wants me to grow and be a good Christian in his image and created the world

with a purpose” (Journal Blog Prompts, 4:6). Studying her creationism textbook helped Rick view God as a father figure who loved and protected her.

During the focus groups, students were asked about their thoughts on God and creationism. Several students said that studying creationism had positively affected their view of God. Roberto said studying his textbook changed his view of God “in a way that he’s not just this ruler that doesn’t listen to anyone. He’s a loving friend” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 8:18). Anne shared Roberto’s view of God, based on her study of the textbook: “He’s more of a friend than a, like a ruler” (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022, 8:35). Beatrice commented that God created humans with a purpose above all animals. She added that God created humans in his image to glorify him (Focus Group 1, January 7, 2022). Participants’ responses indicated that studying creationism positively informed their views of God.

Summary

Chapter 4 presented a detailed description of each participant and the common themes that emerged as a result of the data collection and data analysis. The themes that emerged were faith contributors, faith defined by God, and development of faith by creationism. A majority of participants felt that studying a creationism textbook positively informed their FD. The participants described their faith as reliance on God, hope in God, and security from God. Participants also described a variety of contributors to their Christian faith, such as church, youth group, church camp, family, peers, and attending a Christian school.

Participants also described what they had learned from studying a creationism textbook. Participants described how studying creationism positively informed their FD in various ways. Participants’ responses revealed that studying creationism affirmed and enhanced their belief in the Bible and God. Relevant recurring words and phrases that emerged included “God loves,”

“God created,” “God is with me,” “purpose,” “provides,” “creation,” “belief,” and “truth.” All 12 participants viewed their science book as a helpful contributor to their FD.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to explore the lived FD experiences of eighth-grade Christian students following a CTBC at a Northern Michigan Christian school. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research findings, including answers to the central research question and all three research subquestions. The chapter also discusses the empirical, practical, and theoretical implications of the study. Moreover, Chapter 5 describes the delimitations and limitations of the study and discusses my recommendation for future research.

Summary of Findings

Participants in this study were male and female eighth-grade Christian school students (aged 13–14 years) studying creationism. The participants self-identified as Christian and believed the Genesis creation account to be true. Focus Group 1 had seven participants, and Focus Group 2 had five participants. Three themes emerged during analysis: faith contributors, faith defined by God, and development of faith by creationism.

This study had a central research question and three research subquestions. The central research question asked how following a CTBC affects the lived FD experience of eighth-grade Christian students. The themes that addressed this question were development of faith by creationism and faith contributors. Participants' responses revealed that following a creationism textbook positively affected their FD in various ways. Participants unanimously felt that their creationism textbook was a major faith contributor and that studying creationism as part of their academic curriculum had positively affected their faith in God and Christian worldviews.

The first research subquestion asked how following a CTBC affects the way students define faith. The theme that addressed this question was faith defined by God. Overall, all

participants described their faith in God in terms of reliance, hope, and security. Participants also described God as a provider and friend who would help them in times of need. Some participants considered faith to be a belief that God was always there for them. Others considered faith to be hope in God for the future. All the participants felt that studying creationism affected how they defined faith. Studying creationism positively affected the participants' understanding and definition of faith.

The second research subquestion asked how the descriptions of FD by students following a CTBC align with Fowler's (1981) stages of FD. The theme that addressed this question was faith defined by God. Participants' responses revealed that they viewed their faith as personal, independent, and a moral lens that aligned their faith with Stage 3 of Fowler's theory. In Stage 3, "faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (Fowler, 1981, p. 172). A person in Stage 3 begins to experience the world for the first time beyond their family and must learn to navigate their faith amid several new life influences, such as peers, school, media, and religion (Fowler, 1981). In this stage, "faith must provide a coherent orientation in the midst of that more complex and diverse range of involvements" (Fowler, 1981, p. 172).

The third research subquestion asked how following a CTBC informs students' views of God. The themes that addressed this question were development of faith by creationism and faith contributors. Participants' responses revealed that following a creationism textbook helped them view God as a creator, a friend, a father, and loving. Many of the participants said that studying creationism had shown them proof that God is real. Furthermore, many of the participants said that studying creationism had helped them understand God more and made

them feel closer to him. Adherence to a biblical explanation of the origin of man had positively affected all participants' views of God.

Discussion

The findings of this study correlated with the findings from existing theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in Chapter 2.

Empirical Literature

Literature reviewed in Chapter 2 related to the description and understanding of faith, stages of faith, student FD, creationism, evolution, middle school curricula, and Christian schooling in America (Carper & Layman, 1995; Epting, 2012; Fulljames et al., 1991; Pinkard et al., 2017). Scholars have written extensively about faith and FD; however, there was a gap in existing literature regarding the FD of middle school students studying creationism (Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998). The themes that emerged from data analysis in this study—faith contributors, faith defined by God, and development of faith by creationism—correlated with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. Participants described their faith in God and how studying creationism informed their faith. Researchers have shown that a student's faith is a foundational asset for navigation of their academic life. Epting (2012) found that when Christians attended a secular school, their faith was strained—students relied on their faith, but their faith received no nourishment from positive faith contributors. Burton and Nwosu (2003) found that Christian students depended on their faith throughout their academic journeys, and their faith grew when integration of faith and learning occurred. This study's findings supported the of Burton and Nwosu. Participants experienced positive FD as a result of following creation science in a learning environment.

Powell et al. (2012) discovered that several areas of students' education influenced their FD: (a) discovering self and an authentic connection with self, (b) discovering others and an authentic connection with others, and (c) discovering God and an authentic connection with God. Powell et al. also discovered that attending a Christian institution accelerated FD. The findings of this study agree with those of Powell et al. with regard to the theme of discovering God and an authentic connection with God. Several participants in this study felt that studying creationism grew their faith in God by enabling them to view God in a more intimate way.

L. L. Newman (1998) found that young Christians who attend Christian academic institutions experience deep faith growth when their faith received positive reinforcement through academic learning and surrounding Christian culture. An adolescent's faith grows when they participate in classes and programs with peers who support their biblical worldview (L. L. Newman, 1998). Dinani (2018) also found that a variety of settings and activities of faith deepened student faith. The participants in this study unanimously said that studying creationism positively informed their FD in a variety of ways. Other faith contributors also emerged from the analysis, such as being raised in a Christian household, the Bible, spending time with Christian friends, and church camp.

Forte (2003) found many factors that surround, define, and affect Christian faith. One such factor is God's word, including the gospel accounts. Another factor is the belief that Christ is God's son who was crucified and rose from the grave, granting eternal salvation to all who believe in him (Forte, 2003). The participants in this study demonstrated their adherence to and belief in Christian faith, and they supported the findings of Forte by describing their belief in the gospel accounts and Christ's resurrection. All the participants said they had been saved in

accordance with the gospel accounts; several also viewed this as an important turning point in their life and had vivid detailed memories of the occurrence.

Christians not only commit their eternal souls to Christ in both faith and belief but also commit to follow the examples, parables, and wise lessons of Christ; by doing so they commit their minds and hearts to the calling of Christ (Ward, 2017). The participants in this study described their Christian worldviews, which that aligned with Christ's examples and lessons, supporting the findings of Ward. Several participants explained that their Christian worldviews helped with moral decision making. Participants also said that studying creationism affected their faith in various ways.

Chapter 2 also included a review of the literature examining faith apart from religion (Tillich, 2009). Tillich (2009) argued for the interpretation of faith as an activity rather than a quality, one that does not depend on religion. Tillich referred to faith as the ultimate concern of an individual to love something with all their mind, body, and spirit. Examples of individuals' ultimate concerns include money, success, achievement, patriotism, God, and career (Tillich, 2009). Parks (2000) also viewed faith apart from religion, stating that faith is the most comprehensive form of meaning making—a practice with which all humans create and dwell within true, real, and dependable convictions. Several participants responded in ways that supported the findings of Tillich and Parks, describing the treatment of faith as an activity and describing meaning making derived from, for example, joining the army or participating in this study. Parks (2000) also promoted relationships between religious educators and their students after discovering that religious educators contribute richly and deeply to their students' faith by helping them understand the differences between faithful reflection and faithful commitment.

Several participants in this study attributed positive FD to their teachers and youth leaders, supporting this finding of Parks.

Presented in Chapter 2 is a discussion of Christian schooling in America, creationism, and middle school curricula (Baniszewski, 2016; Pajares & Britner, 2001). Christian schools' teaching methods vary; however, leaders of Christian schools generally strive to create a learning atmosphere with a holistic emphasis on developing students' faith and biblical worldviews (Baniszewski, 2016). Jeynes (2009) found a correlation between Bible literacy and grade point average and between Christian school enrollment and performance and behavior outcomes. Eakle (2007) found that the academic environments of Christian schools supplemented students' academic success, faith, and behavior. Several of participants provided data supporting the findings of Jeynes and Eakle. All participants reported good grades at the time of the study. Participants also reported valuing both Christian values and the teaching of the creationism curriculum. Participants' responses supported existing findings that attending a Christian school positively affects student learning, behavior, and faith (Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Parks, 2000).

Researchers have investigated creationism and evolution theory (Carlin, 2019; Deloria, 2002; Fail, 2003; Gould, 2002; Sober, 1993; Zgheib et al., 2020). Proponents of the theory of evolution have argued that nothing in the biological world makes sense without the theory of evolution, and proponents of creationism have maintained that nothing makes sense without the light of faith, rooted in the Christian Bible (Fail, 2003). Genesis presented the first historical account of the creation of life and earth and asserted that a deity supernaturally created all living creatures, human life, the world, and the universe (Deloria, 2002). Deloria (2002) described four types of creationism: (a) young-Earth creationism, (b) old-Earth creationism, (c) intelligent

design, and (d) evolutionary creationism. Participants' responses supported the young-Earth creationist explanation of the origin of life, as taught by their creationism textbook. The participants unanimously disputed the theory of evolution.

Chapter 2 also discussed middle school curricula (Cox et al., 2007; Pinkard et al., 2017; Jenkins et al., 2014; Pajares & Britner, 2001; Roels, 2009). One of the fundamental influences in a middle school student's academic life is the curriculum they follow (Pinkard et al., 2017). The biblical foundation of a Christian curriculum contributes positively to the lives of students who learn from that curriculum (Olayiwola, 2018). Therefore, the most fundamental subject in any Christian curriculum is science. Christian educators generally teach students from textbooks that defend creationism by focusing on the divine action of a creator and denounce other origin theories, such as cosmic panspermia and chemical evolution (Baptista et al., 2016). Participants responses to questions relating to their curriculum supported the conclusions of Pinkard et al. (2017) and Baptista et al. (2016). The participants in this study unanimously felt that their curriculum contributed positively to their lives and faith. All participants felt that studying creationism positively contributed to their FD. This discovery adds new information to the literature regarding student FD.

Theoretical Literature

The theoretical framework for this study was Fowler's (1981) FDT. Fowler developed FDT by conducting 359 interviews of men, women, and children aged 3.5–84 years. As a result of this 10-year study, Fowler produced a refined developmental model for faith growth that has seven different faith stages. Stage 3 of FDT applies to individuals aged 12 years or older. Participants in this study were aged 13–14 years and should thus have aligned with Stage 3. Fowler described Stage 3 as synthetic–conventional faith, in which an individual's experiences

begin to extend outside of their immediate family sphere for the first time. Individuals in Stage 3 begin to synthesize values and information by using their faith as a lens (Fowler, 1981). At this stage, an individual's faith must provide a basis for their worldview and identity (Fowler, 1981). Participants' responses relating to their faith and worldviews unanimously aligned them with Stage 3 of Fowler's FDT. Several participants described their faith as a self-identifying and moral lens through which they saw life. Many of the participants described similar feelings relating to their faith, which simplified identification of alignment between their worldviews and the elements of faith in Stage 3 of Fowler's FDT.

Implications

Although many researchers have described FD in students of college age (Dinani, 2018; Epting, 2012; L. L. Newman, 1998; Powell et al., 2012), middle school students have lacked a voice with which to share their lived FD experiences, especially those relating to studying creation science. This section discusses this study's theoretical, empirical, and practical implications with regard to how studying creationism informs FD in middle school students.

Theoretical Implications

Fowler (1981) developed faith development theory by conducting extensive research involving 359 interviews of men, women, and children aged 3.5-84 years. His faith research was conducted over the span of 10 years. Fowler's (1981) research produced a developmental model for faith that has seven different stages of faith. Fowler's (1981) stages of faith development enabled me to view participant faith through the lens of developmental understanding and belief. In Stage 3 of Fowler's (1981) faith development theory, "Faith must synthesize values and information; it must provide a basis for identity and outlook" (Fowler, p.172, 1981). Additionally, a person within Stage 3 begins to experience the world for the first time beyond

their family. In this stage of faith, an individual must learn to navigate their faith amid several new life influences such as peers, school, media, and religion (Fowler, 1981).

This study proved Fowler's (1981) faith development theory to be a viable theoretical framework to explore the faith development of students studying creationism. Many of the participants described their faith as a lens that they viewed their lives through. Participants described how they relied on their faith independently and throughout various aspects of their lives. Participants also described how studying their creationism textbook positively reinforced their faith and belief in God in various ways. Participants of this study described how their beliefs of creationism independently informed their faith and helped them synthesize the world around them, which aligned their faith with Stage 3 of Fowler (1981). Participant responses relating to their faith varied but were generally similar when describing how they viewed their faith and how studying creationism informed their faith.

Empirical Implications

The findings of this study provide valuable information from middle school students regarding how studying creationism informed their FD. The participants described their faith in God and how studying creationism grew their faith in God. Participants also shared their perceptions of Christian schooling, evolution, Christian faith, and faith contributors. The participants were primary stakeholders, and this study enabled them to share their lived faith experiences of studying creation science in a classroom setting.

This study fills a gap in existing literature by providing evidence that studying creationism positively reinforced and grew eighth-grade students' faith in various ways. When describing how studying creationism informed their FD, participants used words and phrases such as "God created," "showed me how much he loved me," "created with a purpose," "God

provides,” “God is real,” “Bible is true,” and “faith.” Some of the participants reported that studying creationism helped them trust in God and the Bible more. They described their creationism textbook as providing proof of the Bible and the Genesis creation story. Other participants reported that studying creationism helped them understand how much God loved them and that he created them with a purpose. They described their view of God as having changed after they learned how God created the universe and life. This previously unknown information provides valuable insight into the lived faith experiences of the participants, the most important stakeholders in a CTBC.

Practical Implications

Students are the most valuable stakeholders in creationism curricula. Supporting faith growth in students is important because the faith of young people supports the health of their worldviews and their learning outcomes (King & Furrow, 2008; Strommen & Hardel, 2008; Talbott, 2007). Earls (2019) reported that 66% of young Americans who attended a Protestant church regularly throughout childhood dropped out of church for at least 1 year when they turned 18 years old. Religiously unaffiliated young people have a much higher risk than religiously affiliated young people of suicidal behavior, anxiety, depression, and having a grim view of the future (Talbott, 2007). It is therefore important to support student FD. The findings of this study are useful because they positively correlate creationism and student FD.

The study findings have several practical implications relating to the FD of middle grade students who study creationism in a classroom setting. Educators can use the findings to enhance the facilitation of creationism curricula by optimizing positive reinforcement of student FD. For example, the participants unanimously described their textbook as a positive contributor to their faith; however, many of the participants suggested that their textbook would be better if

it provided more specific correlations between science and biblical accounts of creation. The findings also provide school administrators and educators with insightful information with which to optimize the curricula they choose to teach from and the manner in which they teach them.

The findings highlight the need for enhancement of creationism textbooks and promotion of pedagogical steps useful in the teaching of unique abstractions of faith in Christian schools. The findings suggest that following a CTBC has a positive effect on student FD, which is itself a significant contributor to the success of students. Now that the connection between FD and CTBCs is understood, administrators and educators can create teaching methods to facilitate the application of CTBCs to enhance student FD.

Delimitations and Limitations

One of the delimitations of the study was the choice of a transcendental phenomenological research method. I chose this method because it supports “a scientific study of the appearance of things, of phenomena just as we see them and as they appear to us in consciousness” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 49). A researcher using a transcendental phenomenological approach engages in proactive efforts to mitigate and set aside personal bias relating to the phenomenon investigated so that they can examine the phenomenon as if perceiving it for the first time (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transcendental phenomenology was most appropriate for the study because it allowed discovery of rich descriptions of the lived faith experiences of the participants. This research method yielded information from the participants to improve understanding of the phenomenon of youth FD as informed by the study of creationism.

Another delimitation of the study was the purposeful selection of participants. Participants were male and female 13–14-year-old eighth-grade students at a Christian school in Northern Michigan. I selected participants who self-identified as Christian, believed the Genesis

creation story to be true, and had previously graduated from seventh grade at the study setting. Because of the gap in existing literature regarding the FD of adolescent students, the decision to study adolescent students was critical. Discovering the shared lived faith experience of middle school students studying creation science gave a voice to the most vital stakeholders in a CTBC.

Limitations of this study related to the participant pool and the study setting. I chose to study eighth-grade students in part to limit the impact of classroom disruption at the study setting. The main factor behind the selection of participants was their age and grade. Eighth-grade students are generally aged 13–14 years. This meant that participants in the study were in their 2nd year of learning from their middle school creationism curriculum. If seventh-grade students had taken part, school administrators would have had more logistical burdens during data collection.

I conducted this study in a rural part of Northern Michigan at a small to medium-sized Christian school. The ratio of students to teachers was 14:1. Classes were small, ranging in size from 15 to 25 students. Geographic confinement of this study to a rural region was a limitation because it only permitted inclusion of students in a small and intimate school setting. Furthermore, the focus of this study was Stage 3 of Fowler's (1981) FDT. This was a limitation because it included an assumption that participants' faith would align with Stage 3, based on their age.

Recommendations for Future Research

Data collection and analysis provided insight into various areas of FD and creationism worthy of future research. This section presents my recommendations for such future research. The focus of this study was second-year middle school students studying creationism. Future research on the FD of students studying creationism could include a transcendental

phenomenological study of the FD of first-year middle school students studying creationism. The shared lived FD experiences of seventh-grade students studying creationism from a middle school curriculum for the first time could provide insight into the effect on student faith of studying creationism at an introductory level. Information collected from the study would further knowledge related to how studying creationism informs student FD. In addition, this study could provide useful information to further enhance the facilitation and development of creationism curricula and give a voice to the seventh-grade students who are stakeholders in creationism education.

This study relied on qualitative research methods. I recommend future research based on quantitative methods. Using a quantitative approach would permit the simultaneous study of a large sample of middle school students from a variety of levels. This quantitative study could make use of survey questionnaires with Likert scales to gather data relating to participants' faith, perceptions of creationism, and specific opinions on creationism. Participants could agree or disagree with certain parts of their curricula. These data would allow identification of parts of creationism curricula in need of enhancement. Using a quantitative approach would also allow for specificity regarding which part of participants' curricula contributed most to their FD. Such a study would add precise data to the literature on student FD.

The intimate setting of this study promoted close and personal relationships among students and staff members. I recommend future study of a large Christian school in an urban area. If the study design remained transcendental phenomenology, the researchers involved could understand the lived shared experiences of participants relating to the FD phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Conducting research at a large urban school could provide insight into the culture of the school, which would likely differ from that of the school in this study. I also

recommend future research outside Christian schools. The faith-based culture of Christian schools positively impacts student FD (Baniszewski, 2016). Using a transcendental phenomenological approach to research the FD of public school students would allow for discovery of significant contributors to the faith of students in non-Christian schools.

This study focused on male and female middle grade students' FD as informed by the study of creationism. I recommend future research exploring the FD of the genders separately. Such a study would aid discovery of faith contributors specific to each gender. Participants' descriptions of faith would also allow for discovery of how those of each gender view and define faith.

Summary

In this study, I explored the perceived FD of middle grade students as informed by the study of creation science in a classroom setting. Participants answered questions about their faith, God, and creationism. This study enabled the most essential stakeholders in creationism curricula to have a previously unheard voice. Data collection and analysis revealed how participants perceived their faith and how studying creationism informed their faith. Participants commonly described their creationism textbook as a positive faith contributor. When asked how studying creationism affected their faith, participants responded in a variety of ways. Several participants felt that creationism helped grow their faith in God by providing proof of his existence. Other participants felt that studying creationism reinforced their faith by teaching them that God created them with a purpose. Overall, students studying creationism in this rural school setting experienced key positive FD.

The themes that emerged from analysis were faith contributors, faith defined by God, and development of faith by creationism. The eighth-grade participants' faith aligned with Stage 3 of

Fowler's (1981) FDT, synthetic-conventional faith. Participants' responses indicated that they used their faith as a moral and guiding lens with which to navigate their lives. Participants also shared that their faith was personal and independent from their immediate family sphere. These descriptions of faith align with Stage 3. Other positive faith contributors also emerged from the participant responses: Christian school, church youth group, church camp, and the fundamental Christian act of salvation. Participants also described their creationism textbook as a positive faith contributor.

The study findings suggest that middle-grade students in rural areas who study creationism in a classroom setting experience positive faith growth. When describing how studying creationism informed their FD, participants used words and phrases such as "God created," "showed me how much he loved me," "created with a purpose," "God provides," "God is real," "Bible is true," and "faith." Participants also felt that their textbook supported the Genesis creation story, which grew their faith in God and showed them how much God loved them. These positive descriptions of creationism and student faith imply that it is important to improve understanding of facilitation methods and curricula for the teaching of creationism.

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APPENDICES
Appendix A: Study Setting Approval
Letter



September 29, 2021

Stephen Lowe
Ph.D. Candidate/Liberty University

Dear Stephen Lowe:

After careful review of your research proposal entitled Faith Development in Eighth-Grade Christian Students Studying Creation-Theory-Based Science: A Phenomenological Study, I have decided to grant you permission to conduct your study at Genesee Christian Middle School.

Check the following boxes, as applicable:

- ☒ I grant permission for Stephen Lowe to contact Genesee Christian Middle School eighth-grade students to invite them to participate in his research study (per administrative supervision).
- ☐ I will not provide potential participant information to Stephen Lowe, but we agree to send/provide his study information to on his behalf.
- ☒ I will be requesting a copy of the results upon study completion and/or publication.

Sincerely,

Robert [REDACTED]
High School Principal

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Section One: Life Review

1. Please tell me information about yourself.
2. What are some major turning points in your life?
3. What challenges have you faced in school?

Section Two: Present Values and Commitments

4. What beliefs and values are most important in guiding your life?
5. Why are some approaches to life more valid than others?
6. What things in your life support and contribute to your beliefs the most?
7. When life seems most discouraging or hopeless, what gives you hope?

Section Three: Religion

8. What meaningful religious experiences have you had?
9. What feelings do you get when you think of God?
10. What do you feel is occurring when you pray?
11. When you think about life, what gives it meaning?

Section Four: Creation-Theory-Based Curricula

12. What are your thoughts on creation?
13. Why does your science textbook help your understanding of life's meaning?
14. How has your Christian faith changed since studying your science textbook?

Parental Consent

Title of the Project: Faith Development in Eighth-Grade Christian Students Studying Creation-Theory-Based Science: A Phenomenological Study

Principal Investigator: Stephen M. Lowe, Ph.D. Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

Your child is invited to participate in a research study. Participants must be between the ages of 13-14 years old, self-identify as practicing Christians, believe in the Genesis creation account, and be currently enrolled as eighth-grade students at **Christian Middle School**. 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 discover how studying Creationism impacts an eighth-grade student's faith development. I will be researching how studying creation-theory-based curriculum supports a student's Christian faith.

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 them to do the following things:

1. First procedure: A 30-minute, audio-recorded, one-on-one interview.
2. Second procedure: A 45-minute, audio-recorded focus group.
3. Third procedure: 4 journal blog written responses, which will take approximately 10 minutes.

How could participants or others benefit from this study?

There are no direct benefits that participants should expect from this study.

Benefits to society include a broader understanding of student faith development and informative data for future creationism textbook development.

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.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential through the use of pseudonyms. Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer and may be used in future presentations. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.

- Interviews/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 of the group.

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

Participants will be compensated for participating in this study. The compensation that participants will receive from taking part in this study are a \$10 Visa gift card for their overall participation and a \$5 Dairy Queen gift card for their journal blog participation.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his or her current or future relations with Liberty University or [REDACTED]. If you decide to allow your child to participate, he or she 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 or your child chooses to withdraw, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw him or her or should your child choose to withdraw, data collected from your child, apart from focus group data, will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study. Focus group data will not be destroyed, but your child's contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw him or her or if your child chooses to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Stephen Lowe. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [REDACTED]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Susan Quindag, at [REDACTED].

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, [REDACTED].

Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University

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

Date: 8-3-2022

IRB #: IRB-FY21-22-102

Title: FAITH DEVELOPMENT IN EIGHTH-GRADE CHRISTIAN STUDENTS STUDYING
CREATION-THEORY-BASED SCIENCE: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

Creation Date: 8-2-2021

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Stephen Lowe


Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved
<hr/>					
Submission Type	Modification	Review Type	Expedited	Decision	Approved

Key Study Contacts

Member	Susan Quindag	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	
<hr/>					
Member	Stephen Lowe	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
<hr/>					
Member	Stephen Lowe	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	

Appendix E: SACFIG Approval Letter

[External] RE: Dissertation Questionnaire Adaptation - Faith Development

?

Lowe, Stephen
Thu 2/18/2021 3:21 PM

?
?
?
?
?

To:

• Bert [REDACTED].edu>

Thank you kindly! Thank you for your encouragement. I will persevere.

?

Reply
Forward

BE

Bert [REDACTED].edu>
Thu 2/18/2021 2:56 PM

?
?
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To:

• Lowe, Stephen

[EXTERNAL EMAIL: Do not click any links or open attachments unless you know the sender and trust the content.]

Stephen,

Good afternoon! I hope you are doing well and having a great week thus far. Absolutely – use and adapt as needed.

Thanks for checking in and wish you the best as you embark on the PhD dissertation journey – persevere and make it happen!

Have a great rest of the week and Go Trojans!

Bert

Bert [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] [edu](#)

"You shall love your neighbor as yourself." **Matthew 22:39 (ESV)**

Appendix F: Focus Group Questions

Topic Questions:

1. What does creation have to do with God?
2. Please discuss your belief in God and the creation of human life.
3. What has God done for you in your life?
4. How accurate is your creation-based textbook?

Appendix G: Journal Blogging Questions

Prompt Questions Week One:

1. What has contributed to your faith walk?
2. Where do you feel that you are changing within your faith walk?

Prompt Questions Week Two:

1. How has your creation textbook contributed to your faith?
2. How has your creation textbook helped grow your relationship with God?