A PHENOMENLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS AS THEY CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM FOR THEIR CHILD WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

by

Lorie Mick

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

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APPROVED BY:

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the experiences and challenges of parents as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD) at an elementary school. Parents of students with HFASD must grapple with this decision each year at their child's annual IEP review meeting. The theory guiding this study is Knowles' adult learning theory. Adult learning theory states that adults use both their personal experiences and intrinsic motivation to discover information that they need to make a decision. Ten parents of elementary-aged children diagnosed with HFASD were selected as participants in this study in an attempt to combine their shared experiences with this phenomenon. The data collected for this research included interviews, participant journals, and a focus group. Data analysis followed van Manen's hermeneutic circle. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus is on the researcher's interactions with the data. The themes found in this study were the prior experiences of parents, successful outcomes for students with HFASD, level of functioning, and personal factors. Ultimately, the findings of the study revealed that parents of students with HFASD feel like they are equal partners with the IEP team but have a varying degree of confidence in their role as decision-makers. The full experience of the parents including their thought processes, challenges, and opinions were extracted from the data collection process. These findings show a strong connection to the Knowles adult learning theory.

Keywords: high-functioning autism, classroom placement, parent experiences

Copyright Page

Dedication

I dedicate this work to my students—past, present, and future—who teach me exponentially more than I could ever teach them. For those who see the world through the beautiful lens of autism, thank you for sharing your perspective and teaching me to see the world in a different way.

To my family and friends, thank you for your never-ending support and believing in me throughout this journey.

To my best companion, Quinn, for never leaving my side through many long nights of writing.

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I would like to thank the parents who participated in this study for their time, effort, and candid responses. This research would not be possible without you. I hope it helps to make advocacy a little easier for you.

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List of Abbreviations

Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

High-Functioning Autism Spectrum Disorder (HFASD)

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (IDEA)

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences and challenges of parents as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD). Parents of students with HFASD must grapple with this decision each year at their child's annual individualized education plan (IEP) review meeting. The answer to this question is not easily found through the child's behaviors or skills, and there are no clear-cut answers in the literature and available research. Choosing an appropriate classroom setting for a child with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) can be complicated (Lindsay et al., 2013). This is especially true for students who are diagnosed with HFASD because their cognitive abilities are often on the same level as typically developing students. However, simultaneously, they typically have behaviors or social deficits that make it difficult for them to fully participate in the general curriculum. There are many factors that parents of students with HFASD must take into consideration when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child. This chapter introduces the background for choosing classroom placements for students with disabilities by explaining the historical, social, and theoretical context behind this phenomenon.

Parents must decide, oftentimes without formal training, which classroom setting or program will best fit the needs of their child. The process of identifying an appropriate classroom is a complex decision for parents in which there is not one straightforward answer. There are many factors that are included in the decision-making process for parents such as the social interactions their child may have in each classroom setting. The problem is that parents are often unsure of the classroom placement that will best fit all the unique learning and social needs of their child with HFASD. In addition to the background information for this study, this chapter contains a statement of the problem, the purpose of this study and its significance, research questions, and definitions.

Background

In this chapter, the background and relevant literature are discussed beginning with the historical context that relates directly to the parents of students with HFASD and their lived experiences with choosing an appropriate classroom setting. The social and theoretical contexts for this research are discussed.

Historical Context

ASD is a very broadly defined condition that affects development, communication skills, and social interactions. Individuals diagnosed with ASD may exhibit symptoms such as having limited and narrowed interests and repetitive behaviors (Chapman & Veit, 2020). ASD affects areas of the brain that create difficulties with communication and social interactions (Richardson et al., 2018). Individuals with ASD can present with a wide range of symptoms from being unable to communicate to lacking an understanding for the feelings of others.

The focus of this research is on elementary aged children who are diagnosed with HFASD at the upper end of the spectrum range. Individuals with this diagnosis have less difficulties with communication and social interactions than those more severely affected (Alvares et al., 2020). The most important aspect of high-functioning autism relevant to this research is that in many cases, HFASD does not have a cognitive impact on these individuals. They are in the average or even the above-average intellectual range.

In recent years, the trend in education is towards inclusion in a general education classroom for students with ASD. The prevalence of ASD in the school systems has created many programs and classroom options for students with ASD. Classroom options range from a self-contained classroom where students are in a small group setting with other students who are diagnosed with disabilities to complete inclusion in the general education setting with a variety of supports as needed by the student. According to special education law dating back to 1975, students need to be placed in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and provided with the most access to students who are typically developing. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (IDEA) mandates that students with disabilities need to be included with typical peers as much as is appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). In fact, some schools are doing away with having self-contained classrooms and are moving towards a full inclusion model. Inclusion is a model of education that is meant to promote integrating students with disabilities into classrooms with typically developing peers (Eaves & Ho, 2008). One of the most important factors that IDEA brings to this research is that parents must be involved in the decision-making processes as an integral part of the IEP team.

Historically, one of the main traits of an individual with ASD is deficits in communication and social situations. Since the 1960s, ASD has been studied through the lens of the social sciences and social psychology (Maynard, 2019). The study of social psychology explores the idea that each of us is different and displays different characteristics that affect our performance in social situations and learning environments. These characteristics may include our personality traits, emotions, and motivations (Shaver, 2015). Due to the deficits that individuals with ASD experience in these areas, how well students with ASD perform can vary across different social settings and classroom environments. This research aimed to highlight how parents of students with HFASD choose a classroom setting that their child will feel the most comfortable in and maximize their progress.

Social Context

What makes a classroom a “good fit” for students with HFASD? Parents must weigh the compatibility of their child’s social skills with the type of interactions they will receive in a prospective classroom setting. It is essential to keep in mind that students with ASD often have difficulty communicating and frequently do poorly in social situations (Bauminger-Zviely & Agam-Ben-Artzi, 2014). Social communication skills are believed to be developed automatically in most typically developing individuals (Zwart et al., 2018). However, this does not seem to be the case for individuals with ASD. Social dysfunction and social reciprocity are two of the core characteristics of ASD (Babenko, 2017). The social deficits in students with ASD are not related to their cognitive or language abilities and do not seem to improve through development. In fact, the social skills, social stress, and anxiety experienced by these students may increase as they grow into adolescents (Plavnick & Dueñas, 2018). This may be due to social settings and interactions becoming more complex in nature and students becoming more aware of their disability.

It is important for all students to maintain a high level of self-perceived social competence (Bauminger et al., 2008). It is especially true for students with HFASD if they are to be successful in integrating into the general education setting. Positive self-perceptions can help increase self-esteem and allow students to cope with difficult and stressful situations that they may encounter in life. However, social deficits and communication difficulties are a key component of individuals with ASD. Historically, measuring the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of humans in social situations dates to the early 1900s when scientists began conducting experiments on how people behave in groups (Bar-Haim, 2014).

Parents need to take into consideration the special nature of social skills that their child with HFASD may have. For example, students with HFASD can exhibit a variety of behaviors that manifest into social difficulties including anything from completely avoiding any social interactions to taking over conversations with topics that are not of interest to anyone else. The social impairments can vary greatly from the conventions of casual conversations and personal interactions to difficulty understanding nonverbal language and nonliteral language such as idioms (Briot et al., 2020).

Inclusion is generally viewed as the best educational choice for individuals with disabilities. However, according to Grossman et al. (2019), individuals with ASD actively seek out the company of others who share their diagnosis. Students need to feel like they fit in to maintain a high level of self-esteem, which can promote their social and academic success. Even though full inclusion is often considered the best option, there are other levels of support that are available to students with disabilities including a self-contained setting, a resource setting, and a co-taught setting. If parents of students with HFASD choose a classroom placement or level of inclusive support that is not a correct fit for the student, it may cause the student to experience negative self-perceptions. This is a major factor for parents to consider when making the appropriate classroom choice for their child.

Theoretical Context

For this study, the experiences of parents were explored as they went through the annual process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD through the lens of the adult learning theory. The adult learning theory, first developed by Knowles in 1970, is a philosophy which contends that adults take into consideration their past experiences when making decisions (Knowles et al., 2015). This means that truth, from an individual’s point of view, is based on a person’s experiences and understandings of those experiences (Ryan, 2018).

For example, every parent of a child with ASD will have their own perspective and experiences with providing support for their child. This perspective comes from their interactions with educational professionals, therapists, and other parents. Most importantly, parents take into consideration the past experiences and knowledge of their child as a major factor over what any regulations deem the most appropriate choice.

Adult learning theory is a theory that was posed by Malcolm Knowles in the1970s. Knowles (1970) believed that there is a distinct difference between how adults learn compared to children. More importantly, Knowles contended that adults use their own concept of self and past experiences when learning new concepts or facing new experiences. When adult learners understand why they are learning a certain topic, they can become self-directed and more motivated (Knowles, 1990). This is especially relevant as it applies to parents who are learning the necessary information to make an informed decision for their child with special needs. The adult learning theory was an appropriate framework for this study because the central purpose is to understand and analyze the motivations behind parents' choices as they choose a classroom setting that best fits the needs of their child with HFASD.

Problem Statement

The problem is that many parents of students with HFASD face challenges when choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child. The challenges that parents may face can range from not knowing the process, not being aware of the choices for classroom placement, or not taking into consideration the many characteristics of their child with HFASD. Even though the trend in education is towards inclusion of students with disabilities into general education classrooms, this may not always be the best fit due to the social anxiety or other characteristics that are common with students with HFASD (Dudley-Marling & Burns, 2014).

Students with HFASD often have difficulty communicating and do poorly in social situations (Rodríguez-Medina et al., 2018). Parents of these students are faced with the difficult choice of choosing an appropriate classroom setting that best fits the needs of their child.

This study explored what factors parents take into consideration as they go through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child diagnosed with HFASD. This research focused specifically on the context of the various classroom placement settings that are options for students with HFASD including a general education classroom versus a self-contained special education classroom. There is a deficit in our knowledge about how parents experience this process and what challenges they face. Ultimately, this research helps to illuminate the lived experiences of parents of students with HFASD as they navigate the process of weighing the various dimensions that come into play when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this hermeneutic qualitative phenomenological study was to explore the experiences of parents of students with HFASD at an elementary school as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. The central phenomenon that was studied was the experiences of parents as they grapple with this decision. Choosing a classroom placement is generally defined as the experience of using prior knowledge about a child with HFASD, taking into consideration their individual characteristics, academic functioning level, social skills, behavior needs, and the recommendations of the school team based on the foundation of special education regulations to find a classroom placement option that best fits their needs. The motivation for this research came from a desire to learn more about how parents of students with HFASD experience this decision, what factors they consider, and what challenges they face when deciding what classroom placement is the best fit for their child. By interviewing, collecting journal entries, and holding a focus group of parents of students with HFASD, I described the phenomenon of the experiences these parents face when planning for their child with HFASD.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study for future research is for all key stakeholders within the field of special education to understand the experiences that parents of students with disabilities have as they go through the process of selecting an appropriate classroom placement option. Parents are equal members of the IEP team, and their opinions are taken into consideration when this decision is made. The motivations and challenges that they use to make this decision have a practical significance for informing future special education practices and procedures (Knowles et al., 2015). This study contributes to the knowledge base of special education practice and has an impact from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective.

Theoretical

Theoretically, this study applied the adult learning theory to the process that parents experienced while making a classroom placement decision for their elementary-aged child with HFASD. Using the framework of Knowles et al.'s (2015) theory, parents used their prior knowledge and experience, were motivated to learn the process because of the importance for their child, and developed a sense of confidence in their decision. One of the main principles of Knowles' theory is that adults are most interested in learning when the subject is relevant to their personal lives. Experiences such as child-rearing can create changes in the way that adults handle problem-solving (Knowles, 1990). Parents of students with disabilities have a strong desire to do what is best for the children in terms of decision-making and problem-solving. When stakeholders within the educational system have a better understanding of the experiences of parents as they go through this process, they are able to create a better system for bridging the knowledge gap for parents.

Empirical

The experiences of parents of students with disabilities is a subject that is useful for many different areas within the field of special education. Educators, administrators, key stakeholders, and support specialists may benefit from the knowledge of these parents' experiences. According to Fenning et al. (2011), parents of students with disabilities want the same things for their child as typical families. They want to be included and feel like a part of the community, and most importantly, they want their child to meet their full potential. This phenomenological study will help inform future procedures on how to better inform parents, and how to create better classroom placement options for students with disabilities.

It is estimated that one in 54 elementary-aged children are diagnosed with ASD (Maenner et al., 2020). With the number of elementary-aged students requiring special education services under the category of autism rising, it is essential that the field of education increase their understanding of the experiences of parents because they are a critical part of the specialized team that services these students and provides them with an educational plan that best suits their needs.

Practical

The practical significance of the study relates to the current law on providing students with disabilities access to their typical peers as much as appropriate. This is known as the LRE. Parents must choose a classroom that best fits the needs of their child with HFASD while taking into consideration special education law on providing students with disabilities to be served in the LRE. However, the LRE for students with HFASD may not always be the general education environment due to their social and communication deficits. There are approaches to education that include fostering a respect for the culture of autism and accepting that individual differences should be celebrated by allowing individuals with ASD to create a community of like individuals. This is in direct contrast to the current educational theories that students with autism need to be indistinguishable from typically developing peers and included in the mainstream as much as possible (Delmolino & Harris, 2012). This study explored how parents take this information into consideration when choosing a classroom setting for their child with HFASD.

Research Questions

The essential question to discovering how best to meet the needs of students with HFASD was discovering what factors parents used to develop their rationale for choosing one classroom model over another. The research questions were developed using Knowles et al.'s (2015) theory on how adults learn. Adult learners bring their prior experience into any new learning situation. In addition, adult learners must be motivated by what they are trying to learn. Finally, self-concept plays a large part in the learning of an adult. Adults need to feel confident in themselves for them to have true success with the task ahead. If including students with HFASD into typical peer groups is unsuccessful, the effects could be detrimental to the academic and social development of both the students with HFASD and the typically developing peers in that group (Rubin et al., 2009). According to Grossman et al. (2019), individuals with ASD actively seek out the company of others who share their diagnosis. Parents understand that students with HFASD may feel more comfortable and socially competent around peers with their same diagnosis.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of parents of children with HFASD as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child?

Sub-Question One

What prior experience do parents bring to the decision of choosing an appropriate classroom for their child with HFASD?

Sub-Question Two

What are the motivating factors that parents take into consideration when making a decision regarding the classroom placement for their child with HFASD?

Sub-Question Three

What degree of confidence do parents have that their decision regarding the classroom placement for their child with HFASD is the best one?

Definitions

1. *Autism Spectrum Disorder* – a neurological disorder characterized by deficits in communication and social skills (Leaf, 2017).
2. *Self-Perceptions* – how individuals feel about themselves (Wilson, 2015).
3. *Social Skills* – functioning in a social environment with peers (Hartmann, 2018).

Summary

As humans, we are all social creatures to some extent, so it is fundamentally important that all students be able to function and even thrive in normal social situations. Considering the research on students with HFASD, it is safe to assume that choosing an appropriate classroom placement for them is no easy task, yet parents take on this challenge every year at their child's annual IEP review. There are many factors that parents must take into consideration that go over and above the child’s academic skills including their performance socially. Specifically, students with HFASD may feel more secure about their social status when they are grouped with similar peers. This is significant for educational decision-making because the current law under IDEA states that students with disabilities need to be grouped and integrated with typically developing peers as much as possible (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). Parents often have a different view of their child’s success and consider different factors that the law does not take into consideration.

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of parents of students with HFASD as they navigated the process of choosing a classroom that best fits the needs of their child. This study allowed the researcher to enter the experience of the decision-making process as parents worked through their decision through exploring, describing, and finally analyzing the experiences they have throughout weighing the different classroom options for their child. The goal of many parents and professionals is to assist students with HFASD to participate in all types of classroom settings in a way that is acceptable and the norm for all those involved.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

This chapter presents the foundation of this research and the literature related to the experiences of parents of students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD). This study is based on the theoretical framework of the adult learning theory. Adult learning theory states that adult learning originates from their need to know the information, their personal experiences, and their motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2015). To understand the participants' experiences as parents of students with HFASD in choosing an appropriate classroom setting, I reviewed the literature from several different areas which make up the foundation of this process for parents. There are three main topics that emerged from a review of the literature: (a) Current trends in education for students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 (IDEA) and the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), (b) characteristics of students who are diagnosed with HFASD, and (c) the perspective of parents of students with disabilities towards the special education services process. These three bodies of research intersect to create the most salient findings about parents of students with HFASD as they go through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child.

Theoretical Framework

The theory behind this research comes from the theoretical framework of Knowles et al.'s (2015) adult learning theory. The adult learning theory states that adult learning is directly related to their motivation to learn, their prior experiences, and their self-concept (Knowles et al., 2015). The adult learning theory directly relates to the main purpose of this research which is to understand and analyze the experiences that parents go through when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. Parents must learn the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting without the benefit of formal training. Parents are often fueled by their motivation to make the best decision possible for their child with HFASD. Adult learning theory is based on the process of andragogy, or the practice of teaching adult learners. Malcolm Knowles et al. (2015) developed this theory in the 1970s, which outlines distinct differences between how adults learn versus children. Knowles (1970) discovered in his early work with adult learners that adults learn best when they are connected to the information they are learning, are comfortable with the learning environment, and the learning schedule is on a flexible basis. From his early work with adult learners, Knowles (1990) went on to develop several assumptions including that adult learners have a concept of self that is different from children in that they are responsible for their own decisions and are capable of being self-directed. Adult learners use their prior experiences to help shape the way they learn new information, and they often have a strong motivation for learning that allows them to be more responsive to new information (Knowles et al., 2015). This study examined how parents of students with HFASD use their concept of self, prior experiences, and motivations to come to a decision on classroom placement options for their child.

Related Literature

The related literature includes information from three topics that emerged from a review of the literature. The first topic includes information on current educational trends for students with disabilities as defined under IDEA and ESSA. The literature outlines federal regulations and best practices in education that are designed to protect and educate students with disabilities in the more appropriate classroom setting. The second topic is a synthesis of the literature on characteristics of students with HFASD. The complexity of HFASD can lead to confusion in making classroom placement decisions because students with HFASD have high cognitive abilities but their social and communication skills can vary. This makes it difficult to choose which classroom placement fits the least restrictive environment requirements as outlined under the IDEA. Finally, the literature is reviewed on the perceptions of parents of students with HFASD, including their attitudes toward the process of choosing a classroom placement, their challenges, and their motivations.

Current Trends in Education for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities were afforded the right to receive a free and appropriate education by the passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975. In fact, prior to 1975, millions of students with disabilities were completely excluded from school. Some states even had bans on children with disabilities from enrolling in public school (Wright & Darr Wright, 2006).One of the main components of the IDEA (1975) is a requirement that students with disabilities are educated and provided services within the least restrictive environment (LRE). Commonly, this practice is referred to as inclusion. LRE mandates that students with disabilities are educated in the general education classroom to the maximum extent that is appropriate for the individual child.

The school district is to provide the supplementary aides and services that make this possible for students to be educated alongside their typically developing peers in the classroom they would attend if they were not diagnosed with a disability (Hehir, 2002). More recently, special education continues to change with the growing number of students who are being diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) and requiring special education services (Kurth, 2015). New legislation was passed that ensured students with disabilities are educated using standards-based reforms (Jones et al., 2019); the ESSA (2015) mandates that students with disabilities are educated according to what they should know and be able to do at their current grade level standards. Upon this reform, many self-contained classrooms became standards-based and are no longer using an alternate assessment for evaluation (U.S. Department of Education, 2017a). As more students receive an autism diagnosis, parents and educators must decide the appropriate placement for the child (Kurth, 2015).

According to De Brey et al. (2021), 64% of students with disabilities are spending 80% or more of their time inside a general education classroom. However, only 40% of students who are diagnosed with ASD spend 80% or more of their time in a general education classroom (De Brey et al., 2021). The reason for this could be that the nature of ASD can vary in severity from individual to individual. Educational decisions for a child with ASD include the realization that every individual with the diagnosis of ASD presents very different educational needs (Delmolino & Harris, 2012). Eaves and Ho (2008) found that students with ASD who present with more severe symptoms were most likely to be placed in self-contained classroom settings, whereas students with ASD who exhibited less severe symptoms were placed in general education classrooms. For some students with disabilities, the general education setting is not appropriate because they may have behaviors that will cause disruptions in learning for themselves or other students in the classroom (McCloskey, 2016).

The main issue involving the LRE is the wording used in IDEA: “to the maximum extent appropriate.” There are many different subjective opinions surrounding the word “appropriate.” Often, parents and school personnel can differ in their ideas of what meets the criteria for LRE (McCloskey, 2016). In fact, a school district even argued that the general education classroom was too isolating for a student because he was so different from his nondisabled peers (Underwood, 2018). Although there have been several revisions made to IDEA with attempts to clarify LRE such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (2004), the way it is interpreted continues to be a main source of confusion for school districts and local education agencies (Shuran & Roblyer, 2012). The implementation of the ESSA (2015) promoted IDEA's mandate that requires schools to educate students with disabilities in general education classrooms to whatever extent is appropriate for the individual student. This is accomplished by requiring that no more than 1% of the school's population may be eligible for an alternate educational assessment. As stated previously, this means that the majority of students, regardless of their level of disability, must be held accountable to the individual state's standards-based assessment. However, ESSA (2015) does not make any more clarification to the term "least restrictive environment."

Given the different ways that LRE can be interpreted by the school systems, courts, and individualized education plan (IEP) teams, it is essential that parents educate themselves to the options their children are afforded under IDEA so that they can make the best possible decision for their child. According to Bolourian et al. (2020), there has been an increase in parents pursuing advocacy over issues of classroom placement and LRE. For students with HFASD, there are several classroom placement options which can be considered and have a range of supports for these students. Under IDEA, it is mandated that school districts provide a continuum of placements available that meet the diverse learning needs of all students with disabilities. These placements range from the hospital or homebound setting, which is the most restrictive, to the general education classroom setting, which is the least restrictive (Bolourian et al., 2020). It is common for young children with autism to begin their educational paths in a segregated setting (Corcoran et al., 2015). This typically occurs during the preschool years as children with disabilities are afforded services under IDEA beginning at age 3. Then, these students begin the process of transitioning to a general education setting after they have acquired developmental skills (Martin et al., 2019). This process is unique and different for every student based on their individual needs, skills, and level of support they require to be successful. Transitioning between classroom placements is a complex process that involves the student, their parents, the teachers, and the support staff (Martin et al., 2019). This process is discussed annually at the student's IEP review meeting. Keane et al. (2012) discovered that transitioning students with autism gradually into a general education was the best way to ensure their success as opposed to going directly from a segregated setting into a classroom with nondisabled peers. Under IDEA, school systems should offer this transitional support through classroom placements that offer a variety of levels of services along the continuum. These include classrooms that offer pull-out services for students who struggle academically or behaviorally, often called resource classrooms. In addition, there are classrooms that contain paraprofessional support or are co-taught by a general education teacher and a special education teacher. It is up to the IEP team, with parents as an integral member of this team, to make the decision as to what classroom placement option would best fit the needs for their child.

Currently, the trend in education is towards inclusion in a general education classroom for students with ASD. IDEA (1975) mandates that students with disabilities be educated with typical peers as much as is appropriate and possible for the student. Inclusion is generally viewed as the best educational choice for individuals with disabilities. However, according to Grossman et al. (2019), individuals with ASD actively seek out the company of others who share their diagnosis. The Grossman et al. posed the question of whether individuals with ASD form more positive first impressions of autistic peers versus neurotypical peers. Students need to feel like they fit in to maintain a high level of self-esteem, which can promote their social and academic success. If students with ASD are being integrated with typically developing peers, previous research seems to indicate that it may cause them to experience more negative self-perceptions than if they were in a classroom of other students with ASD (Grossman et al., 2019).

Recently, there has been a recognition that inclusion for students with autism needs to not only promote access to a general education classroom, but it needs to facilitate a sense of belonging for these students (Merry, 2020). Placement decisions for students with disabilities need to be based on the student's unique learning needs and not the school district's policies or presumptions (Agran et al., 2020). According to Feldman et al. (2013), the standard for equality for students with autism has centered around providing them with equal treatment as if they are not different and do not require a different type of educational program. This type of thinking can be very unfair to students with autism because their differences are not being acknowledged and they are being forced into a norm which does not fit their personal characteristics or learning or social needs. It is important to note that simply placing students with disabilities into general education classrooms does not guarantee inclusion (Lynch & Irvine, 2009). There are several factors to consider that can either facilitate or be a barrier to a successful transition into a general education classroom. Factors that can facilitate a successful transition include teachers who support having students with disabilities integrated into their classrooms and are provided with the proper training (Cassady, 2011).

Merry (2020) contended that we need to view inclusion as something that has value for the student. Students who are included in any classroom need to feel like they identify with the other students and have similar goals. In order to feel valued, students with autism should be given the choice of whether or not they would like to be included in a particular classroom or activity. For this reason, some schools are creating a variety of classroom options that better fit the needs of a diverse group of learners (Brock, 2018). Some school districts create a variety of classroom options in addition to the regular supports that are mandated for students with disabilities under IDEA. IDEA and ESSA emphasize having a preference for placing students with disabilities in general education classrooms because it provides them access to the general education curriculum and a higher expectation for learning (Taub et al., 2017). However, advocates who are opposed to inclusion for all students state that grouping students with similar abilities in a self-contained classroom can allow them to receive more focused instruction with teachers who are trained to differentiate instruction (Brock, 2018). Classrooms that have been departmentalized into specific eligibilities have helped to create a more specialized environment for students with disabilities. For example, some school districts have classrooms that are only for students who are diagnosed with autism and some classrooms only for students who have emotional and behavioral disorders. The purpose of these classrooms is to act as a transition from a segregated classroom into a more inclusive classroom setting (Martin et al., 2019).

In accordance with ESSA (2015), the classrooms do not use a modified curriculum and are based on the learning standards equivalent to what is being taught in a general education environment. Students in these specialized classrooms are held accountable to the same grading and testing assessments as students in a general education classroom. This can be a real benefit to students with HFASD because they have the learning potential to meet the general education standards, but they have characteristics, either communication-based, social, or behavioral, which prevent them from being successful in the general education classroom (Kurth, 2015). According to Kauffman et al. (2016), it is the quality of the instruction that matters the most, not the placement. Interestingly, Morningstar et al. (2017) contended that there needs to be more research in the area of classroom placement along with the quality of instruction because classroom placement in itself is a vital part of the instruction.

There is no doubt that inclusive classroom placements have shown increased growth in several areas for students with disabilities. However, the issue of classroom placement continues to be a complicated decision with conflicting information and assumptions about special education classrooms (Kurth, 2015). When comparing self-contained classrooms to inclusive classrooms, Kleinert et al. (2015) found that students with disabilities had increased access to the curriculum content, better instructional materials, and increased peer support. In addition, it has been found that self-contained classrooms often failed to provide services that would indicate the removal from general education beneficial to students with disabilities. According to Kurth (2015), the lack of supports in self-contained classrooms included providing specialized instruction, behavior supports, and an environment free of distractions. Even with this in mind, inclusion is not always the best option for students with autism. It is clear that there is no direct answer to the question of classroom placement. With this in mind, it may be more advantageous for school districts to look at the needs of the individual child rather than relying on creating a specific protocol or policy that applies to all students with disabilities (Agran et al., 2020).

Characteristics of Students Diagnosed with HFASD

Students with HFASD often have difficulty communicating and frequently do poorly in social situations (Rubin et al., 2009). Due to this, it can be difficult for these students to fully participate in the general education environment. In fact, research has shown that students with autism are 20 times more likely to be excluded from social situations and three times more likely to be the victim of bullying (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Parents of these students are faced with the difficult decision of choosing a classroom setting that best fits the needs of their child with

HFASD. Social communication skills are believed to be developed automatically in most typically developing individuals (Zwart et al., 2018). However, this does not seem to be the case for individuals with HFASD. Social dysfunction and social reciprocity are two of the core characteristics of ASD (Babenko, 2017). Briot et al. (2020) found that students with ASD can exhibit a variety of behaviors that vary greatly from the conventions of casual conversations and personal interactions. These can include anything that manifests itself in social difficulties from completely avoiding any social interactions, taking over conversations with topics that are not of interest to anyone else, to difficulty understanding nonverbal language and nonliteral language such as idioms. The social deficits in students with HFASD are not related to their cognitive or language abilities and do not seem to improve through development (Mazza et al., 2017). In fact, the social skills, social stress, and anxiety experienced by these students may increase as they grow into adolescents (Plavnick & Dueñas, 2018).

Another important factor to consider when determining classroom placement for a child with HFASD is the socioemotional component. Socioemotional concepts of students with ASD were frequently found in the research literature. It is important to include a discussion of the socioemotional components regarding these students because it serves to define the larger context of choosing an appropriate classroom for a child with HFASD. Taking into consideration the recent literature on how students need to feel connected to the classroom they are in through similar goals and peer relationships (Merry, 2020), it is important to have an overview of how students with ASD function in social environments and perceive friendships. Socioemotional development is a combination of how young children develop through social relationships and self-development. Socioemotional development is examined closely in this section to gain a perspective of the weight of the classroom placement decision that parents of students with HFASD must face.

According to Hobson (1990), our sense of self is the relationship between ourselves and the world around us. The relationship between friendships and the development of self is reciprocal in that children are able to gain information about themselves through their friendships with other children and, in turn, use that information to create deeper friendships (Bauminger et al., 2004). Children with ASD, however, often have difficulty with both developing a solid concept of self and developing friendships. In fact, according to Frye (2018), throughout the history of autism one of the core symptoms has been a deficit in social interactions.

Fuller and Kaiser (2019) confirmed that social-communication differences are apparent in children diagnosed with HFASD. Other research revealed that the field of autism research operates under the assumption that children with ASD respond differently to their environment (Donati et al., 2020; Vanmarcke & Wagemans, 2017), and may be less responsive to social stimuli (Rogers & Dawson, 2010). Typically, individuals seek out these social interactions because they feel a sense of pleasure in them and will work to maintain social bonds (Schertz et al., 2017). Young children with ASD have deficiencies in social motivation which prevent them from recognizing socially relevant information from the environment (Donati et al., 2020). Research has tested this idea by assessing individuals with ASD at an early age and seeing how they orient to social stimuli (Flanagan et al., 2015; Vanmarcke & Wagemans, 2017). This assessment is completed by showing individuals two sets of stimuli, one social in nature such as a human face or body and one nonsocial in nature such as an artifact or object. A study by Flanagan et al. (2015) showed that young children with ASD prefer to look at the nonsocial artifact while most typically developing children orient themselves toward to the social stimuli.

These characteristics which are typical in many students who are diagnosed with HFASD have important implications for how parents and educators decide on the best options to provide support and classroom placement for children with ASD. Dawson et al. (2005) found that the social deficits of children with ASD have the first impact on the relationships with their parents. Due to the lack of development in social interactions with their parents, children with ASD continue to have difficulties as they progress to more complex social situations and require the need for more sophisticated language. Interestingly, a study by Zwaigenbaum et al. (2015) contended that even though there is no doubt that these social deficits exist, the origins of the problem remains unknown. Yet another study found that the cause of these social deficits may be due to the negative sensory experiences that children with ASD often have (Kojovic et al., 2019). With these research studies in mind, it is clear why students with ASD often struggle in social situations such as those frequently encountered within the school setting.

The Role of Friendship

An important piece of being successful in a social situation is the ability to form lasting and meaningful friendships (Bauminger & Kasari, 2000). One of the most important aspects of human development is friendships. Friendship provides not only social growth, but emotional and moral growth as well (Huang et al., 2017).The relationship between the self-perception of a child with autism is directly correlated with their perceptions of friendships. Bauminger et al. (2004) found that children with autism who have a higher concept of their self-perceptions also had a higher concept of their view of friendships in terms of companionship and closeness. This study found that children with autism were able to identify friendship but frequently were unable to identify the qualities of friendships such as closeness and intimacy that make these relationships significant when compared to typically developing peers. On the other hand, a later study found that children with autism who have a higher concept of themselves and friendships also reported feeling less lonely than those that scored lower on the self-perception and friendship scales (Mazurek & Kanne, 2010).

To a provide a context for this research, it is important to examine how typically developing children view friendships and what role these friendships take on in the development of their concept of self. Although it is still up for debate as to what turns peer interactions into friendships, Jones et al. (2017) seemed to agree that there were some core qualities that can be described as true friendships. The core elements in friendship include having stability over time and being reciprocal between individuals (Rossetti & Keenan, 2018). There are also functions of peer interactions that serve to meet the needs of both individuals involved, including emotional support, affection, and experiencing mutual companionship (Webster & Carter, 2007). For the purposes of this research, companionship is defined as children's ability to cooperate with each other while spending time together (Bauminger et al., 2008).

Parker and Gottman (1989) developed an early model of the role of friendships for children and how it changes as children age. In early childhood (3 to 7 years old), children seek out friends for the purpose of stimulation and adding excitement to their play. The role of friendship at this early stage teaches young children about emotions, both how to gauge the emotions of others and how to regulate their own emotions around others. In a study by Rubin et al. (2009), they found that friendship at this stage provides young children with a sense of companionship. As children grow into middle childhood (8 to 12 years old), Parker and Gottman (1989) discovered the role of friendship changes to teaching children about the norms of society. One of the most important elements that children learn at this age is how to be rational in social situations as opposed to emotional. An example of this is how a child acts when they lose a competitive game. Younger children (3 to 7 years old) will often have emotional displays of disappointment whereas older children (8 to 12 years old) will behave more rationally and keep their emotions in check so as not to embarrass themselves in front of their peers.

Rubin et al. (2009) concluded that children ages 8 to 12 tend to view friendships in a deeper sense that involves closeness, trust, and intimacy. Bauminger et al. (2008) defined the meaning of these qualities that fit into the purpose of this research. Closeness reflects the strength of the bond that children experience with each other. It is that quality that allows children to feel a sense of specialness related to their friends (Bauminger et al., 2008). Intimacy is defined as openly sharing thoughts and feelings with another person. It is also related to having a sense of stability that the other person will be there to provide support. Another important element that children develop at this stage is not only what constitutes friendships but also what does not, and who they can consider a friend and who they would not, based on the qualities of their interactions (Buhrmester, 1990).

One of the main aspects of the concept of friendship is that it is reciprocal with the other individual (Rodríguez-Medina et al., 2018). Having positive and reciprocal friendships is an important element to the social well-being of children. In fact, learning how to relate to other children may be the most important element of a child’s social development (Rubin et al., 2009). Quality friendships are associated with having an increased sense of happiness and self-worth (Holder & Coleman, 2009). In addition to the positive personal feelings that children experience through friendships, they also gain the important skills of empathy and caring about others (Bauminger et al., 2008). For elementary-aged children, the setting for the development of these friendships largely takes place within the schools. Children are creating and maintaining these friendships during social activities that occur during the school day including on the playground, during lunch time, in the classrooms, and even in the hallways (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020). It is important to mention that at this age (8 to 12 years old), children are forming these friendships mainly away from adult proximity and adults are less likely to be involved in supervising these interactions (Rubin et al., 2009).

Since, according to Rodríguez-Medina et al. (2018), the concept of reciprocity plays such a large factor in the concept of friendships, it is important to examine the ways in which typical students without disabilities view their friendships with peers who have significant communication needs. The perception of friendship by typical peers could have an impact on how successful students with autism are at integrating into a classroom with nondisabled peers. Biggs and Snodgrass (2020) investigated the nature of how elementary-aged children without disabilities described the experience of friendship and the dynamics of friendship development with their friends. This study included both friends with and without complex communication needs such as children with ASD. The authors found that typical children described their friendships with children with disabilities much the same as they described their friendships with other children without disabilities. All the participants described having an affinity and closeness with both their typical friends and their friends with disabilities.

However, there were significant differences in the way typical children described the depth of their friendships with children with complex communication needs. Biggs and Snodgrass (2020) revealed that the differences may be due to how children interact with disabled peers versus nondisabled peers and how much time they have to engage with one another. According to Daughrity (2019), friendship with nondisabled peers is one of the factors found to have an impact on parents of students with autism. How well their child may be perceived and accepted in social situations by typically developing peers affects their choice for classroom placement. Even though the recent study by Biggs and Snodgrass (2020) found that typical children value their friendships with children who have complex communication needs in much the same way as they value their friendships with peers who do not have communication needs, there are studies in the literature that present a different view (Briot et al., 2020; Rotenberg et al., 2004).

In contrast to the Biggs and Snodgrass (2020) study, Briot et al. (2020) suggested that typical children often have negative experiences with peers with ASD, leading them to create negative images in their minds that block them from forming close friendships with these individuals. Typical children often believe that they cannot be friends with peers who have disabilities, and they often avoid them in social situations (Briot et al., 2020). Rotenberg et al. (2004) reported that negative attitudes regarding peers with disabilities is one of the major barriers to these students being accepted among their peers.

The attitudes of typically developing peers play a large factor in the success of social interactions among children with disabilities (Briot et al., 2020). Studies have shown that girls are more accepting of peers with disabilities than boys are (Chen et al., 2017; Laws & Kelly, 2005). In addition, there are different levels of disability types that typically developing peers tend to be less tolerant of including peers that have behavior problems such as is common in children with ASD (de Boer & Pijl, 2016). Unfortunately, the literature shows many reasons for typically developing peers to have negative attitudes towards children with ASD, and correcting this problem is beyond the scope of this current study (Briot et al., 2020; Chen et al., 2017).

Social Deficits of Children with ASD

Many children with ASD will often grow older without developing the skills learned from early relationships with other children including how to act in social situations and how to become close enough to trust another individual (de Boer & Pijl, 2016). They tend to miss the social cues that neurotypical children pick up so easily, leaving them vulnerable in social situations (Dovgan & Mazurek, 2019). One of the main points that Parker and Gottman (1989) made within their friendship model theory is that as children develop friendships, they are also developing their concept of self. Through these friendships, children are learning the rules for maintaining close relationships while they learn about themselves, making these social interactions critical for a child's social and emotional development.

Students with ASD can suffer from direct and indirect consequences that are related to their social deficits such as peer rejection and feelings of not being accepted (Cooper et al., 2017). Even though Symes and Humphrey (2010) reported that students with ASD generally scored low on peer acceptance scales and high on peer rejection scales, students with ASD often report a strong desire for more social interactions with their peers. Bauminger and Kasari (2000) compared the friendships of adolescents with ASD to the friendships of their neurotypical peers. Their study found three criteria for friendship including companionship, intimacy, and affective closeness. The results of this study showed that adolescents with ASD were less likely to include the affective closeness criteria in their view of friendship. The affective closeness criteria included statements that indicated that the participants were aware that their friends cared about them. In addition, they found that adolescents with ASD were also likely to leave out any indication of companionship or viewing their friends as someone with whom they can engage in play. Since the results of this study showed that children with ASD tend to view their friendships in limited ways compared to typical peers, it provides support for Parker and Gottman's (1989) earlier friendship model theory that children with ASD who are not forming these critical ideas of friendships are also missing a large part of their development of concepts of self.

Difficulties with socialization can affect all areas of life, including learning in the classroom. Keifer et al. (2020) reported that learning in the classroom is a social event. The social skills that are considered necessary to be a successful learner in the classroom include listening skills, ignoring distractions, asking for help, staying calm, following directions, and the ability to take turns. These skills can be very difficult for a student with ASD to achieve without support. According to Vine Foggo et al. (2020), the inability for students with autism to be successful with these skills may make it seem as if they do not want to integrate into a classroom with typically developing peers. However, most students with ASD want to interact and acquire skills that make them socially successful.

In fact, according to Losh and Capps (2006), despite early studies that reported that individuals with autism had no capacity for socialization, more recent findings show that individuals with ASD have a deep desire to be social with others (Biggs & Snodgrass, 2020; Briot et al., 2020). Students with ASD experience frustration that they do not have the tools or skillset required to interact successfully. This results in them having an outburst or expressing themselves inappropriately in social situations (Keifer et al., 2020). In contrast to this, some students with ASD are unable to recognize that they are struggling in a social situation and in turn may communicate in ways which are offensive or make those around them feel uncomfortable without them even knowing (Murphy et al., 2017). In a social situation with peers, this could make the student with ASD appear oblivious to the conversation, they may monopolize the conversation with topics that only interest them, and they may shut out any participation attempts from other peers. This could lead to students with ASD feeling anxious about engaging with typical peers and could affect their performance in an inclusive classroom setting.

These characteristics of social deficits that are common in students with ASD can lead to them experiencing social anxiety and negative social interactions (Briot et al., 2020). Research finds that the percentage of students with HFASD who experience social anxiety is significantly higher than in typically developing students (Kuusikko et al., 2008). In fact, a study by Bellini (2004) found that percentage to be as high a 49%. Social skills deficits can also impact their academic performance, making it difficult for them to fully integrate into the general education classroom setting. When students with ASD demonstrate poor social skills in a setting of typical peers, it can lead to social anxiety. For example, if a student with ASD is having a difficult time recognizing the facial expressions of their peers (i.e., frustration), that student with ASD will not know the proper way to respond to that peer, which could ultimately lead to peer rejection (Bauminger et al., 2004).

The increase in social stress and anxiety experienced by adolescents with ASD may be due to social interactions and settings becoming more complex in nature (Plavnick & Dueñas, 2018). In addition, as students grow and mature, they become increasingly more aware of their disability, which can lead to them feeling anxious about fitting in with typically developing peers. Students with ASD are more likely to experience social anxiety, which can develop into an intense fear of social situations (Briot et al., 2020). Social anxiety can cause a decline in social skills that students may have previously mastered because they shy away from social interactions. According to Briot et al. (2020), there is significant evidence that young children and adolescents with ASD have an increased risk of developing an anxiety disorder. High-functioning students with ASD have a higher level of social anxiety than typically developing adolescents. Unfortunately, once students with ASD develop social anxiety, it can lead to even poorer social skills and reduced social motivation (Schroeder et al., 2014). A core characteristic of students with ASD is stereotyped and repetitive behaviors, movements or conversations that may lead to stigmatization and may increase a student's susceptibility to bullying, adversity, and victimization (Schroeder et al., 2014). This can contribute to a student with ASD's social withdrawal and segregation from peers. In their study of parents of children with ASD, Kuzminskaite et al. (2020) reported that if the child scored high on the stereotypical behavior scale, they also scored significantly higher on the total anxiety scale.

The effects of the difficulties in socialization for students with ASD can lead to serious negative mental states such as depression and even aggression (Barnhill, 2007). As noted in the Bauminger et al. (2004) study, children with ASD may experience more feelings of loneliness than typically developing peers. This is the case even for students with ASD who have very few obvious deficits in their social competencies. High functioning students with ASD often have such minor deficits with social skills that it can go almost completely unnoticed in social conversations. Students with HFASD often develop coping methods or can gain new social skills which allow them to fit in better with typical peers (Essex & Melham, 2019).

Social skills deficits are so common among students with ASD, which can have a large impact on their ability to socialize in the school setting. Difficulty in social situations can be traced back to the root of some of the basic characteristics of a student with ASD (Bottema-Beutel et al., 2017). Learning how far away to stand from another person or how to make casual small talk are skills that typically developing people take for granted. Students with ASD are often not able to understand the nonverbal social cues that are going on around them (So et al., 2018). The majority of students with ASD have some form of speech or communication delay which makes it difficult for them to acquire new communication skills that typical students use without thinking. Oftentimes, the repetitive movements, obsessive behaviors, and sensory needs that are common in students with ASD can make it hard for them to fit in with peers (Paul et al., 2018).

It is also important to discuss the literature related to the nature of these social processes that make up the quality of these interactions. Callenmark et al. (2014) explained that there are two major processes responsible for social interactions. Explicit social cognition is the conscious and controlled decisions that take place such as acquiring and remembering how to act in social situations, whereas implicit social cognition is the mostly unconscious and spontaneous processes such as integrating information about social situations. According to de Boo and Prins (2007), both types of social cognition play a major factor in how a child develops their social competence.

In regard to the population of children with ASD, research has shown that it is important for these children to develop and attain skills in both types of cognition (explicit and implicit) in order to achieve social behavior that allows them to be competent in social situations (Guivarch et al., 2017; Koenig et al., 2009). It is important to note that these processes happen independently of one another and yet both have been linked as a possible cause for the social deficits that occur so frequently in children with ASD (Callenmark et al., 2014). For example, explicit social cognition includes how well individuals recognize and interpret the emotions of others based on their facial expressions. Research has linked autism with having poor skills in recognizing and responding to the facial emotions of others (Lozier et al., 2014; So et al., 2018). Along the same lines, implicit social cognition has to do with how fast an individual can process and engage in the recognition of facial emotions regardless of whether or not they have processed the emotion accurately. A study by Kang et al. (2018) found that individuals with ASD also showed delays when processing faces and facial emotions. This is further evidence of the scientific reasons that students with autism struggle in social situations, which could lead to an unsuccessful integration into a general education classroom setting.

Regardless of the actual quality of the social interactions that children engage in, one of the most important elements of succeeding in social situations is the perception of themselves and their confidence in engaging with others. In an early study by Capps et al. (1995) comparing children with HFASD with typically developing peers, it was found that children with ASD have significantly lower perceptions of their social competence when compared with typically developing children. They were also found to have much lower levels of self-esteem (Capps et al., 1995). It is important to note that this study included children with ASD who do not have co-morbidities such as an intellectual disability. The children with ASD in this study were high functioning in the area of cognition and did not report feeling that they had less cognitive competence than typically developing peers (Capps et al., 1995). This is important because there is a common misconception that individuals with ASD also have some sort of cognitive deficits, and that is not always the case. This study focused on students with HFASD similar to the children in this early study.

There are some characteristics of ASD that impact the self-awareness and self-perceptions of individuals with a diagnosis of ASD. Many of these characteristics have a direct impact on social interactions, including having difficulty judging the preferences of others in relation to their own preferences (Perrykkad & Hohwy, 2019). For example, in a study by Jameel et al. (2014), it was found that individuals with ASD will often steer conversations toward their preferences and may not be aware that the other individuals involved in the conversation have no interest in the topic at hand. This relates to the other characteristics of ASD that have a direct impact on social interactions, specifically the difficulty in understanding the thoughts and feelings of others (Elmose, 2016). As humans, we are all social creatures to some extent, so it is fundamentally important that all students be able to function and even thrive in normal social situations.

Considering the research on social skills in students with ASD (Bauminger et al., 2004; Bellini, 2004), it seems safe to assume that the self-perceptions of students with ASD differ substantially regarding their social skills in different settings. Specifically, research shows that students with ASD feel more secure about their social status when they are with their same-group peers (Grossman et al., 2019). Research has shown that students with ASD are in fact at more risk for loneliness, social isolation, and social rejection when they are integrated with typically developing peers (Cooper et al., 2017). With this information in mind, it is important to explore the experiences of the parents of these students as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. This is significant for educational decision-making because the current law under the IDEA (1975) states that students with disabilities need to be grouped and integrated with typical peers as much as possible. Research in this area may show that grouping students with ASD together in classrooms may not be as detrimental to their well-being as originally thought. It may provide them with an environment in which they can feel secure, included, and have an increased perception of who they are as individuals living with a social disability.

Perspectives of Parents of Students with HFASD

As I reviewed the literature on the perceptions of parents, I found that nearly all parents want their child with HFASD to succeed socially in the classroom and beyond and to feel secure about their relationships with friends. According to Fenning et al. (2011), parents of students with disabilities want the same things for their child as typical families. They want to be included and feel like a part of the community, and most importantly, they want their child to meet their full potential. Corcoran et al. (2015) conducted a meta-analysis of previous research on the experiences of parents of children diagnosed with autism. None of the studies they reviewed directly addressed the problem of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for the child within the school system. The study revealed that parents are often aware of the problems regarding their child's development before it was noticed by professionals in the medical field (Corcoran et al., 2015). In fact, an earlier study found that parents expressed concerns about their child's development years before they actually receive a diagnosis of autism from a medical professional. The average age that parents begin to recognize these differences are between eighteen and twenty-four months (Baghdadli et al., 2003).

There are many studies that provide a foundation for the quality of social interactions that a child experiences with their parents and caregivers who have had a substantial effect on their future social development (Baghdadli et al., 2003; Beurkens et al., 2013; Landry et al., 2006). However, a study conducted by Wan et al. (2012) found that these parents begin to compensate for these social deficits by providing more directives and more verbal support for their child. Despite the fact that children with ASD have social deficits that relate to the quality of early interactions with their parents, it was found that these deficits did not affect parents' views of the quality of their relationship with their child (Baghdadli et al., 2003). In fact, it was found to be very similar to the quality of relationships reported by parents of typically developing children (Beurkens et al., 2013). This is solid evidence that parents of students with ASD have a quality connection to their children that makes them integral members of the decision-making team because they know their children on a more intimate level than any school professional.

As major stakeholders, it is essential that the parents' views and opinions be taken into consideration when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child (Bashir &

Muhaidat, 2014). There are many factors that parents must take into consideration when choosing the appropriate classroom setting such as their child's characteristics, social abilities, and communication skills. Even though many professionals feel that inclusion is the best option for students with HFASD, parents may not want their child subjected to the possibility of bullying or feeling different that occurs when students are integrated (Starr & Foy, 2012). Parents have legitimate concerns of whether or not the full inclusion model can meet the social needs of their child with HFASD (Leyser & Kirk, 2006). There is no doubt that if inclusion is going to be successful for students with HFASD, their parents must support the idea and view it as a positive transition for their child (Fisher et al., 2000).

A review of the literature revealed that parents are divided in their attitudes towards the inclusion of their children in the general education setting (de Boer et al., 2010). Parents have various concerns when considering inclusion for their child with ASD. These concerns include the level of support that students with disabilities may receive in the general education setting as well as if they will have access to the instruction that meets their individual needs (de Boer et al., 2010).

One of the main factors that parents identify as a potential concern is the social and emotional aspect of education in the general education setting. The majority of the literature in the field that relates to parents' attitudes towards inclusion presents a positive attitude (Bashir & Muhaidat, 2014; Francis et al., 2016). Many parents of students with ASD identify the social integration of their child as a positive; however, there are many parents who have concerns that relate to social integration (de Boer et al., 2010). These concerns range from the possibility of social isolation for their child from their peers, the negative attitudes of teachers towards their child with a disability, and the level of quality education that they may receive (Leyser & Kirk, 2006). It is important to note that the literature focuses on the parents of students with more severe disabilities. There is a gap in the literature relating to the direct experiences of parents of students with HFASD. There have been many studies that have shown that parents of students with more severe disabilities remain divided in their attitudes towards inclusion (de Boer et al., 2010; Palmer et al., 2003). However, Gallagher et al. (2000) found that parents of students with more severe disabilities have been very satisfied with the social benefits for their child that inclusion provides.

It is clear that parents of students with ASD have strong desires to do what is best for their children in order to see them reach their full potential (Corcoran et al., 2015). However, there are several barriers to communication among parents of these students and the educational professionals who serve them. These barriers include limited input from parents, communication and language differences, and lack of special education knowledge among school professionals (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). According to Goldman and Burke (2019), parental involvement is an essential part of education for all students. This is seen firsthand during the student’s annual IEP meeting. It is at this meeting where parents and educational professionals confer to make decisions regarding the educational plan for a student with disabilities, including classroom placement options. As stated previously, special education policy requires that parents play an integral role in the decision-making process (Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 2004). However, according to Blackwell and Rossetti (2014), parents often have a less involved role and take a backseat in the decision-making process over teachers and other administrators.

According to Scanlon et al. (2018), many parents feel guilty, intimidated, or even alienated from the educational process. This could be due to a fear that the IEP meeting is going to be a rundown of all their child’s failures; therefore, parents feel embarrassed about speaking up about their children and are less likely to contribute their opinions during IEP meetings (Fish, 2006). Many parents do not feel well-equipped to act as an equal partner in their child’s educational needs. Parents have reported not being able to understand the terminology and special education jargon that is used in the documents and during the IEP meetings. Parents feel disadvantaged because they lack the professional backgrounds and expertise of the educational professionals (Scanlon et al., 2018). These parents are then easily influenced by education professionals into making the decisions that they feel best suits the needs of the child. In fact, a study by Park (2008) revealed that school personnel do not always view parents are equal partners in the educational planning process of their children.

While some parents limit their participation due to feeling ill-equipped, some parents have reported feeling that the educators deter them from being an equal voice in the IEP decision-making process (Kurth et al., 2019). Some factors that have been reported as being a barrier to effective communication include having limited opportunities to communicate, differences in opinions, and lack of teacher knowledge of special education procedures (Fish, 2006). Tucker and Schwartz (2013) found that school personnel often lack knowledge specific to students with ASD. Even though IDEA calls for family-centered educational planning, educators and education professionals still predominantly make the decisions (Scanlon et al., 2018). Parents of students with disabilities have reported that schools in general do not ask for parent input prior to IEP meetings. In addition, schools are often resistant or nonresponsive in taking parental opinions into consideration for IEP plans and services (Elbaum et al., 2016). Parents have reported feeling that the educators do not understand the importance of parental participation (Kurth et al., 2019). Research has shown that effective communication from all members of the IEP team, including parents, is the most important factor for promoting the best possible services and programs for students with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2020).

According to Kurth et al. (2020), determining classroom placement may be the most contentious area that an IEP team has to decide due to the fact that parents and school personnel often have different perspectives on the benefits of classroom placement. Tucker and Schwartz (2013) found that the majority of times that parents disagreed with the IEP team was centered around the classroom placement decision. Leyser and Kirk (2006) reported that parents are often undecided or conflicted when it comes to classroom placement options. This could be due to the fact that parents want to take into consideration factors that school systems do not, such as class size and teacher preparation (Hess et al., 2006). In yet another study by Tissot (2011), it was found that parents of students with autism find the process of deciding classroom placement both more stressful and time-consuming than it needed to be. Despite the research that indicated parents find the process of selecting a classroom placement for their child tedious, there is evidence to support parent opinions of both sides of the inclusion debate (Kasari et al., 1999; Tucker & Schwartz, 2013).

Early research found that parents of students with autism were in favor of an inclusive classroom placement for their child due to the fact that it promoted social justice (Kasari et al., 1999) and increased social development (Whitaker, 2007). However, more recent findings show that parents have concerns about whether or not an inclusive classroom placement can provide the appropriate supports and services that would be available in a self-contained setting (Tucker & Schwartz, 2013). Some of the factors that parents are considering when determining classroom placement are whether or not staff members in the general education setting are knowledgeable about autism and if they are qualified to handle behaviors that are common to students with ASD

(Whitaker, 2007). In another study, it was found that parents have questions about the individual supports that can be provided for their child with ASD in the general education setting and if they will receive the same collaboration from general education teachers as they do from special education teachers (Brewin et al., 2008).

In accordance with adult learning theory (Knowles et al., 2015), it is clear that parents will need to use their prior experiences and motivations in order to make the best classroom placement decision for their child with HFASD. Special education policy under IDEA places a great deal of responsibility on parents to learn and understand the rights afforded to their children as students with disabilities (Turnbull, 2005). Understanding how the classroom placement decision is made is vitally important for parents as once a placement decision is made, a student is rarely transferred to a different type of setting (White et al., 2007). The literature presents views on both sides of the experiences that parents may encounter when going through this decision-making process. These experiences have included negative treatment from educators and feeling frustrated by limited knowledge of the process (Fish, 2006; Starr & Foy, 2012) to feeling empowered to advocate for their child and feeling respected by educational professionals (Fish, 2006; Hess et al., 2006). Parent participation in the decision-making has even been hindered by school personnel despite the legislation that requires them to be active participants in the process. According to Ruppar and Gaffney (2011), parents reported that the classroom placement decision was already made by school personnel prior to the IEP meeting, and they just wanted parents to sign the necessary paperwork and automatically agree with their predetermined decision.

Despite the potential for a negative experience, parents want to be more involved in the decision-making process for their child so that they may have the best educational experience that meets their unique learning needs and allows them to live up to their full potential (Fish, 2006). Even though there has been progress made in this area, controversy still exists around where and how to provide the best educational services for students with disabilities (Kurth et al., 2019). The focus of this study provided answers to fill in the research gaps pertaining to the experiences of parents of students with HFASD.

Summary

This phenomenological study explored the experiences and perceptions of parents of students with HFASD as they chose the classroom setting which best fits the needs of their child. This research was done through the lens of the adult learning theory that explores the motivations, self-perceptions, and prior experiences that adult learners use as they process and learn new information. Parents of students with HFASD must learn the process for choosing a classroom placement option while taking into consideration their prior experiences as integral members of their child's IEP team, the motivation of doing what is best for their child, and how confident they feel in presenting that information to the IEP team. The goal of many parents and professionals is to assist students with HFASD to participate in the classroom setting in a way that is acceptable and the norm for all those involved. The literature outlined the many characteristics of students with HFASD that may affect the way they function within the classroom. These characteristics include taking into consideration how students with HFASD not only function in social settings but how they perceive themselves within these social settings. Parents of students with HFASD and educational professionals need to ensure that the classroom placement option decision will be the best fit both academically and socially for the child. All students deserve to be in an educational environment that allows them to succeed socially as well as grow academically in order to reach their full learning potential.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was an inquiry into the experiences of parents of children with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD) as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. This chapter explores the qualitative, hermeneutic design that was used for this study. Creswell and Poth (2018) outlined that following the methodological traditions of qualitative research through inquiry provides a complex and holistic picture of this problem. Participants were selected from schools in a northern suburb of Atlanta, Georgia, by using purposive sampling. This chapter includes an explanation for the research methods design and rationale for the foundation of the study's design based on the work of van Manen (1997). The participant selection process and data collection procedures, including interviews, participant journals, and a focus group are described. The research questions are restated to provide a connection between the methods design chosen and the focus of the study. Finally, the process and procedures are discussed in detail to create a study that can be easily replicated.

Research Design

This was a qualitative research study with a phenomenological research design. The study was qualitative because it involved collecting and analyzing data that is non-numerical (Hammersley, 2013). A qualitative approach provides more information about what parents experience as they make a classroom placement decision for their child. The data collected for this research included interviews, journal prompts, and a focus group. I began with interviews because they were able to provide a deeper understanding into the actual lived experiences of parents of students with HFASD (Groenewald, 2004). With qualitative feedback from the interviews, the participants reported their thoughts and concerns using richer language than would be presented on a numerical scale.

In addition, this study followed Creswell and Poth's (2018) idea that qualitative research is an inquiry process for understanding and exploring human social problems. The data collected helped to identify the experiences that the participants had as they were going through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child. I chose the phenomenological method because it allowed me to focus on the descriptions and meanings of the lived experiences of these parents.

This phenomenological study followed the philosophy of Max van Manen (1997), who proposed a hermeneutic view of phenomenology. He based his work on the traditions in phenomenology that began with earlier philosophers such as Husserl and Heidegger. In van Manen's work, he stated that we make sense of the world by being in it and that as we understand our world in parts, we gain new understandings from each new experience. By looking at each experience, we can come to a new understanding that can be added to our understanding of the whole. Phenomenology as a whole is interpretive and allows the researcher to have an open and flexible understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied (Vagle, 2018). According to van Manen, this process of understanding is reflective, in which the researcher comes to understand the phenomenon as it is being lived by the participants. Each step in the process of van Manen's approach was explained in terms of researching the lived experiences of the participants. The steps involved in this process that led to an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants included (a) having the researcher take on the philosophy of phenomenology and approach the research study from that perspective; (b) analyzing the data in terms of looking at the information as a whole; (c) discovering units of meaning that may emerge from the information presented in the data; (d) transforming those meanings into themes that represent the lived experiences; and finally, (e) synthesizing those themes into a general working knowledge of the experience as a whole.

The phenomenological approach to research is a unique way of discovering more about a certain phenomenon through the individuals who are experiencing it. This means that the researcher needs to collect deep and rich information through interviews, journals, and a focus group with the participants. The phenomenon that was examined in this study was the experiences of parents of students with HFASD as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child.

The most important aspect regarding phenomenology is that its purpose is to gather information about the experience from the perspective of the participants involved in the study (van Manen, 1997). The first-person approach that is required of the researcher allowed me to gain a better perspective of the phenomenon being studied through the lens of the participants. This makes phenomenology special because it is a powerful way to understand the human experience and gain insight into the perceptions of others. According to Qutoshi (2018), phenomenological research methods are very effective at discovering the experiences and perceptions of individuals from their own perspectives without making assumptions. When these experiences are analyzed and interpreted by the researcher, the phenomenological approach can be used to inform, support, or even challenge current policies. This study could influence practices and policies in the field of special education and special education law. By highlighting the specific issues and the experiences of parents, this phenomenological research could also help inform future changes to the law that pertains to individuals with special needs and the least restrictive environment (LRE).

Research Questions

The following research questions were developed based on the literature review and the theoretical framework for my study to best unveil the experiences that parents go through when making the decision on classroom placement options for their child with HFASD.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of parents of children with HFASD as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child?

Sub-Question One

What prior experience do parents bring to the decision of choosing an appropriate classroom for their child with HFASD?

Sub-Question Two

What are the motivating factors that parents take into consideration when making a decision regarding classroom placement for their child with HFASD?

Sub-Question Three

What degree of confidence do parents have that their decision regarding the classroom placement for their child with HFASD is the best one?

Setting and Participants

The following section describes the site for this study including a rationale for why this setting was chosen. The participants and the selection process are explained.

Setting

The setting for this study was elementary schools in a suburban area of Atlanta, Georgia. The Peach State school district (pseudonym) is a high-performing public school system in the metro Atlanta area. The structure of the school district consists of 40 total schools, 4,800 employees, and over 42,000 students. The school district has a large population of elementary-aged students with a total of 23 elementary schools within the district. The district is well-known throughout the state of Georgia for having a strong program for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD).

Students diagnosed with HFASD have several options for classroom settings throughout this school district. The options range from total inclusion in the general education setting to a self-contained setting with little interaction with typical peers. The decision of placement is an individual education plan (IEP) team decision with parents being an integral part of that team. Students with HFASD that require a self-contained setting for most of their academic day are enrolled in the autism program called “REACH.” The goal of the REACH program is to act as a bridge for students with HFASD who require most of their academic day in a self-contained classroom setting while preparing them to transition into a lesser restrictive environment. The rationale for choosing this setting was that the school district has a variety of programs and options, including the REACH program, for students who are diagnosed with HFASD.

Participants

The phenomenon of the experiences of parents as they choose an appropriate classroom setting decided the method for this study, including the selection of participants (Hycner, 1985). The sampling method for this study was purposive because it involved selecting individuals who are knowledgeable or have experience with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2011).

Participants in this research were identified by having an elementary-aged child who is diagnosed with HFASD within the chosen school district. The participant’s child must be eligible for special education services under the category of ASD. Parents of these students were selected as participants because they fit the criteria for the research study in that they are part of the decision-making team that determines which classroom setting is most appropriate for their child. These parents were selected because they have the experiences that relate to the phenomenon that was being researched (Kruger, 1988). The parents were asked for their permission to participate in a study that sought to understand their experiences in selecting an appropriate classroom setting. Characteristics of the participants were added when they were selected and provided full permission to participate.

Researcher Positionality

I am a special education teacher, currently serving as a self-contained teacher for students who are diagnosed with HFASD. My classroom is set up to be a transitional classroom for students who have the potential to succeed in a general education environment but are not yet ready for a variety of reasons to fully integrate. I see my students struggle daily with their social skills and personal feelings of acceptance as they transition and integrate into the general education setting. The motivation for conducting this study came from my belief that looking at this phenomenon from the perspective and perceptions of the parent will help me to gain knowledge on how to benefit parents of children with HFASD as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child in the future.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework, or research paradigm, used for this study was social constructivism. Paradigms are the philosophical foundation and set of beliefs that guides the actions of the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Social constructivism is grounded in understanding that knowledge is constructed through social interactions. Human knowledge is a subjective collection of our shared realities. This paradigm was chosen because the goal of this research was to understand the phenomenon of how adults learn to make the best choice for their child with HFASD. Social constructivism has a great impact on how people learn. Adult learners add to and change their reality of knowledge through social collaborations, and they build new understandings as they actively participate in the learning experience (Perez, 2019).

Philosophical Assumptions

There are three philosophical assumptions that were addressed throughout this research: ontological, epistemological, and axiological. Philosophical assumptions center on the beliefs systems and values of the researcher and assist the reader in understanding the lens through which the researcher sees the world.

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumption can be defined as the study of being and involves the kind of world that is being investigated (Höijer, 2008). This study used an ontological assumption that knowledge or meaning comes from the social world. I, as the researcher, assumed that the social construct of this world consists of individuals who have their own thoughts and interpretations of the world around them. I used research methods such as interviews to investigate and interpret the inner thoughts and feelings of the participants.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption addresses what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, what the relationship is between what is being researched and the researcher. For this assumption, as the researcher, I tried to get as close as possible to the participants by conducting the study in a field where I both live and work. This allowed me to understand what the participants were saying through firsthand knowledge and minimized the distance between myself and those that I was researching (Lauterbach, 2018). It is important to note that none of the participants were parents of my current students to eliminate the possibility of any bias.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption describes the extent to which researcher values are known and brought into a study. For this research, it is important to note that I have held the role of determining classroom placement for a child. As a foster parent, I have had the unique opportunity of looking at this problem from the lens of an educator as well as through the lens of a parent. This makes my research value-laden on my prior experiences and biases do exist. However, I reported my values and biases through a researcher's reflexive journal (Appendix I) and feel that they added a unique perspective to my research that did not interfere with the results.

Researcher's Role

In hermeneutic phenomenology, there is a difference between understanding something intellectually and understanding it as an insider (van Manen, 1997). As the human instrument in this study, it was my goal to enter the world of the participants and understand the meaning of their decisions from their own perspectives. This is important because situations, meanings, and problems are defined by their interactions with others (Greig et al., 2007). As I collected data, I applied the hermeneutic circle by looking at each piece of the experiences and applying them to an understanding of the whole picture (Davidson & Vallee, 2016).

In a hermeneutic phenomenological research study, it was essential for me to discuss assumptions that I may have had regarding the topic of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for a child with HFASD. In this study, it was understood that assumptions cannot be overlooked and should be included in the study so that they can be revised as new information regarding the phenomenon emerges (Heidegger, 1988). As the human instrument for this study, I used the process of *epoché* to recognize my personal biases. *Epoché* is the process of acknowledging your personal biases as the researcher and setting them aside so that a phenomenon can be explored with a fresh view (Moustakas, 1994). I recorded these biases and experiences in a reflexive journal (see Appendix I). For this study, I had the assumption that parents of children with HFASD experience several challenges when choosing a classroom setting for their child and that there are many factors that go into that process.

Procedures

This research highlighted important elements of the phenomenon of the experiences of parents of students with HFASD as they selected the most appropriate classroom setting that best fit the needs of their child. It focused on how the process was experienced and lived through the lens of the participants. Focusing on how something is experienced can help inform the human perspective on this phenomenon. Describing the experiences in detail is essential to avoid inaccurate reporting (Giorgi, 2009).

Permissions

Initially, the school district granted permission to conduct research. Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained prior to the collection of any data (see Appendix A). Once IRB approval was obtained, I conducted a pilot study with two participants outside of the school district in which I conducted research. The pilot study served to test and refine the interview process, making any necessary adjustments to the interview questions or data collection tools. After I completed the pilot study, I began the recruitment process.

Recruitment Plan

The sample pool was the total population available from which to select participants for the study. In this case, that included all parents of elementary-aged students who are diagnosed with HFASD within the chosen school district. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommended a sample size of at least three to 10 participants for research in phenomenology with the maximum recommendation of 25 participants. The sample size for this research study was 10 parents who were involved in the decision-making process for their child during the time of data collection. Parents who met the criteria for the study were sent a recruitment letter asking if they would like to take part in the study by agreeing to be interviewed about their experiences with the classroom selection process. This letter included the purpose of the study and the tasks they would be asked to complete (see Appendix B). A link to a screening survey was included in the recruitment letter. Interested parents were asked to complete the screening survey designed to determine if an interested individual met the criteria to be a participant for this study (see Appendix C). Based on the responses of the screening survey, the parents were notified through email of their acceptance or rejection to participate in the study (see Appendix D). Selected participants were then sent a consent form through Adobe Sign for their signature (see Appendix E).

Data Collection Plan

A critical aspect of qualitative inquiry is rigorous and varied data collection techniques. The meaning of a lived experience can only be obtained through one-to-one interactions between the participants and the researcher. According to van Manen (1997), understanding begins with experience and can only be accomplished by “actively doing it” (p. 8). It is important to collect data that allow for a first-person account of the experience as it is understood by the participants. During this research study, interviews, participant journals, and a focus group were used for data collection. This involved active listening, interactions, and careful observations to obtain the experience of reality from the participant rather than any of my own preconceived notions

(Wojnar & Swanson, 2007). The interview questions and journal prompts were reviewed by my dissertation committee. Adjustments were made based on their feedback to ensure the questions and prompts were suitable to answering the research questions. As the researcher, I was the sole collector of the data.

Individual Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used to gain an understanding of the participant experiences in relationship to the phenomenon that was being studied (Moustakas, 1994). The interviews took place prior to the IEP meeting so that I, as the researcher, was able to gain a perspective on the participants' experiences before the classroom placement decision was made. The interviews were held virtually through Microsoft Teams. Since experiences are personal and subjective in nature, the best way to capture the experience is through the memories of those that went through it (Finlay, 2009). Therefore, data were recorded through video and audio recordings to allow for accurate transcriptions. This was easily accomplished through the Microsoft Teams application, which recorded the audio and video of each interview session. The interviews were approximately 60 minutes in length. Following the collection of this data, I scheduled follow-up interviews as necessary to gain more insight and clarity of responses where needed.

Individual Interview Questions (See Appendix F)

1. Tell me about yourself, as if we just met one another.
2. I understand that you have an elementary aged child who has been diagnosed with HFASD. How old was your child when he/she was diagnosed?
3. What types, if any, of interventions has he/she received prior to entering school?
4. What types of behaviors does your child have?

5. How would you describe your child’s verbal and communication skills?
6. Tell me about your experiences with choosing a classroom placement setting for your child? Central Research Question (CRQ)
7. Tell me about your knowledge of and prior experiences with the different classroom settings that are available for your child? Sub-Question (SQ) 1
8. What factors go into your decision when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for your child? SQ2
9. Tell me about how you decide which classroom setting would be the most appropriate for your child? SQ2
10. Are your experiences during an IEP meeting regarding the choosing a classroom setting for your child generally positive or negative? Please explain your answer. SQ3
11. How confident are you with making this decision for your child? SQ3
12. What do you do to prepare when it is time to select the classroom setting for your child? SQ1
13. What do you find the most stressful about the process? SQ3
14. What do you find the most beneficial? SQ3
15. What else would you like to share about the experience of selecting an appropriate classroom for your child that we did not already discuss?

Questions 1–5 are introduction questions that were used to establish a rapport with the participant and allowed them to feel comfortable during the interview. Question 6 was asked with the fundamental purpose of the research in mind. To prompt the participants to tell their experiences, the questions were simply and directly stated in a way that allowed the participant to feel comfortable. These questions were chosen in careful consideration of what the researcher was trying to understand from the participants (van Manen, 1997). The questions were also open-ended to provide the participant a wide range of possibilities to express themselves. Questions 7–12 were asked to clarify the phenomenon of the experiences that parents have when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child (Bevan, 2014). These questions are related to Knowles et al.'s (2015) adult learning theory in which an adults' prior experiences, motivating factors, and level of confidence factor into how they learn and obtain new information. Questions 13 and 14 were repeated regarding the fundamental aspect of the research but from the perspective of the factors that go into the decision-making process of the experience. These questions were asked to gain meaning through imaginative variation or asking the participant to imagine the phenomenon in a different way, in this case through the lens of what they found both stressful and beneficial about the classroom selection process (Bevan, 2014).

Once the participant reached a point in the interview where they had expressed all of their spontaneous statements, I then asked follow-up questions to clarify and narrow down information. For example, "You told me about stress, can you tell me more about that?" According to Giorgi (2009), it is important that these follow-up questions do not lead the participant into talking about a specific topic, it was merely to have the participant think about an earlier stated idea that may needed more clarification or further description. It is important to remember that data collected through interviews were considered self-reporting methods and are subject to inaccuracies in memory and errors in reporting (Giorgi, 2009). However, even though there is no such thing as a perfect description, it was still possible to discover rich meaning from the participants' experiences by analyzing interview transcriptions.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Before talking about the specifics of analyzing the interview data, I want to provide some general principles of data analysis that I used throughout the data analysis process in this study. The phenomenological approach was used to respect the meanings that were created by the participants through the data collection process. Looking at the data from the participants perspective involved analyzing the words that the participants used during the interviews (Carrington et al., 2003). Data analysis included taking certain words used by the participants and creating an understanding about the perceptions of choosing an appropriate classroom setting that the participants experienced. The words of each individual participant were used to provide an insight into the understanding of the experiences of the parents of students who are diagnosed with HFASD.

Data in this study was analyzed using a process of coding, identifying themes, and developing descriptions for the purpose of arriving at the essence of the experience for the participants (Moustakas, 1994). Prior to beginning the analysis of the interviews, I asked each participant to review his/her transcript to check it for accuracy as a form of member checking. Then, once I received the edited transcripts of the participants, I read the entire transcript of the interview and deleted only irrelevant information such as filler linguistics like "um, well, or you know" (Giorgi, 2009). Next, as I continued to review the transcripts multiple times, I created preliminary codes or meaning units. A meaning unit is a piece of data that reveals a trait of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). At this point, a list was developed of all the relevant terms used by all of the participants during their interviews as a whole. The next step was to examine the data and look for relevant terms that were repeated multiple times (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All of these terms were given codes that were developed into themes. Phenomenological themes are the structures of the experience that seek to define it (van Manen, 1997). According to van Manen (1997), there are three ways in which a researcher can uncover the thematic elements within a phenomenon. For the purposes of this research, I used the wholistic approach to isolating thematic elements. In the wholistic approach, the interview transcriptions were read as a whole while trying to capture certain phrases or statements that were repeated throughout the transcript and expressed the main significance of the participants' responses. In the wholistic analysis of the interview transcriptions, I developed thematic elements of the interviews that were used to complete a data synthesis across all of the data sets.

Journal Prompts

To collect rich data from the participants on their experiences leading up to making a classroom placement decision for their child with HFASD, the participants journaled their experiences for 2 weeks prior to the IEP meeting. Participant journaling took place following the interview and before the focus group so that their views could be captured prior to engaging in a group discussion. Participants received an electronic journal template through Microsoft Forms in which to record their experiences (see Appendix G). The journal template contained prompts to guide the participants with a note that they could expand on or add to any topic they wished to fully described their experiences. Participants were asked to journal their experiences as much as possible whenever they were considering classroom placement options.

The following journal prompts were provided:

1. Reflect on your child. What characteristics make them special?
2. Reflect on your child's upcoming IEP meeting. What are your thoughts on their current classroom placement?

3. What are the major motivating factors that you consider when making the classroom placement decision?
4. Reflect on your child around typical peers. What are these experiences like? What challenges, if any, do they face?
5. Describe your level of confidence regarding your decision for classroom placement. Does it differ from the IEP team's recommendation?
6. Reflect on your prior experiences with choosing a classroom placement. Are they positive? Did you feel heard as an equal member of the IEP team?

The purpose of these journal prompts was to follow along with the principles of Knowles et al.'s (2015) adult learning theory where adults use their prior knowledge, experiences, and motivations when learning or obtaining new information.

Journal Prompt Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from the journal prompts was analyzed in a similar way to the interview transcriptions. As I did when I analyzed the interview data, the data from the journal prompts were gathered and reviewed using a wholistic approach that required me to consider the main structure or theme that was emerging from the data. Prior to beginning the analysis of the journal prompts, I asked each participant to review his/her journals to check it for accuracy as a form of member checking. Then, once I received the participants' edited journal prompts, I read the entire journal prompt several times. Next, I created preliminary codes or meaning units. A meaning unit is a piece of data that reveals a trait of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). At this point, a list was developed of all the relevant terms used by all of the participants in their journal prompt responses. The next step was to examine the data and look for relevant terms that were repeated multiple times (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All of these terms were given codes that were developed into themes. To follow the hermeneutic process, each experience of the participants was compared to the other participants' experiences with the same phenomenon.

Focus Groups

Focus groups provided an opportunity for the researcher to interact with multiple participants at the same time while encouraging dialogue amongst participants about the area being researched. Two focus groups were scheduled and conducted to obtain a deep understanding of the phenomenon and to triangulate the responses of the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The focus groups took place virtually through Microsoft Teams online platform at a chosen time that was convenient for all participants. The online platform allowed for recording and provided a transcript of the meeting. The focus group questions were designed to get an even deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the participants.

Focus Group Questions

1. Introduce yourself and tell us about your child.
2. Share your experiences with the group about choosing a classroom placement for your child. CRQ
3. What prior experiences helped you the most with your decision process? SQ1
4. What information do you wish you had prior to making this decision for your child? SQ1
5. What factors go into your decision-making process? SQ2
6. Tell us about your greatest frustration with this process? SQ2
7. Tell us about what you find beneficial about the process? SQ2
8. What motivates you to learn more about the classroom placement options? SQ2
9. Is there anything else that you would like to share with the group?

Question 1 was designed to make the participants feel comfortable and to gain a rapport with them so that they felt open to sharing their experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Question 2 directly related to the core of the research by having participants respond to the central research question. Questions 3–8 were related to adult learning theory, the guiding framework for this study. Adult learning theory states that adults specifically use their personal experiences, prior knowledge, and motivating factors when obtaining new information (Knowles et al., 2015). The focus group questions were closely aligned with the interview questions to connect the data with adult learning theory. In addition, closely aligning the data collection questions assisted with triangulating the data.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

First, member checking occurred by each participant reviewing their part of the focus group to ensure that the transcript was an accurate record of what was said. Then, I watched the recording and read the entire transcript of the focus group meeting. In the same way as I analyzed the interview data, I read the entire transcript of the focus group and deleted only irrelevant information such as filler linguistics like “um, well, or you know” (Giorgi, 2009). Next, as I continued to review the transcripts multiple times, I created preliminary codes or meaning units. A meaning unit is a piece of data that reveals a trait of the phenomenon (Giorgi, 1985). At this point, a list was developed of all the relevant terms used by all of the participants during the focus groups. The next step was to examine the data and look for relevant terms that were repeated multiple times (Creswell & Poth, 2018). All of these terms were given codes that were developed into themes.

Data Synthesis

The purpose of data analysis in this research was to look at each part of the participants' experiences and apply it to the knowledge of their whole social experiences (Peoples, 2020). I applied van Manen's (1997) hermeneutic circle to the analysis of data. In hermeneutic phenomenology, the focus is on the researcher's interactions with the data. The whole dataset was analyzed as well as an understanding of the parts. As I analyzed the data, I used the information I found from each data collection method and began to synthesize the data as a whole. Then, I looked at the entire data set again to form a new understanding. As I analyzed the data in this hermeneutic circular process, the parts began to make sense as part of the whole and the whole made sense in terms of its parts (van Manen, 1997). To keep track of my use of the hermeneutic circle, I recorded the process of my experiences, interpretations, and assumptions throughout the process of collecting data by journaling in my reflexive journal (see Appendix I). Journaling in a reflexive journal is a method for researchers who are following hermeneutic phenomenology to concentrate on the data by replacing former assumptions with more current ones as the research progresses through reflection (Gadamer, 1975).

Meanings and words that showed up in the transcriptions were organized into categories. Meaningful codes were associated with the data so that I could begin looking for any patterns, categories, or theories that emerged (Wicks, 2017). The final step of the analysis was to generate a description based on the themes from each data collection method. The goal was to discuss the themes that show up in all or most of the participants' retelling of their experiences. I developed a list of the statements that were significant within this study and created a table to show how the themes from each data collection merged into subthemes. Coding and recoding these emerging themes was necessary to capture the essence of the phenomenon of the decision-making process that parents of students with HFASD go through as they choose an appropriate classroom placement for their child (Moustakas, 1994). The data collection process was important in this study because all of the data combined from the three data collection procedures were essential in presenting the themes that eventually created the essence of this phenomenon (van Manen, 1997).

Trustworthiness

Lincoln and Guba (1985) conceived of the foundational concepts and terms that establish the trustworthiness of a qualitative study. These concepts include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. There are procedures that the researcher took to ensure the trustworthiness of the research as outlined by Creswell and Poth (2018).

Credibility

Credibility is confidence in the *truth* of a study's findings or the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the prior experiences and assumptions of the researcher can pose a threat to the credibility of the research. To maintain credibility, I used prolonged engagements in the field by communicating over several months with the participants in their daily life as parents of students with HFASD to ensure that the findings accurately described reality. I used member checking as a credible means to establish the validity of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking occurred when I asked for participants to review the transcriptions of their interviews and the focus group discussion and double check them for accuracy to ensure they captured the actual lived experiences of the participants. In addition, triangulation procedures were used to find the themes across the multiple sources of data including the participant journals, interviews, and focus groups (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Transferability

Transferability is showing that the findings may have applicability in other contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Using rich descriptions and following the same data analysis protocols and procedures would likely produce similar results in another setting. In addition, an audit trail was documented to assist with creating a replicable study. The audit trail (see Appendix J) begins with the process of authorization to conduct research and transparently describes the process of completing the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It is important to acknowledge that I created the conditions for transferability, but I cannot assure transferability.

Dependability

Dependability is showing that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability in this study was demonstrated through an effective description of the procedures undertaken for the study. I provided a detailed account of the participants' experiences and put the themes of their experiences into the context of the phenomenon of the experiences of parents as they chose a classroom setting for their child with HFASD. Dependability was accomplished through an internal inquiry audit or peer review, which occurred with a thorough review of the process and the products of the research. To accomplish this, I asked an individual who is familiar with qualitative research methods to review the findings and my reflexive journal in order to provide me with feedback. I then compared that with my own findings to ensure that the final outcome was dependable.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the findings of a study are shaped by the respondents and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to ensure confirmability, I used a researcher's reflexive journal (see Appendix I) to describe my experiences and biases. This process is known as *epoché* or enlightening my biases so that I could come to a clear understanding of the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations for this study included working with parents of children who are diagnosed with HFASD. To begin, permission was obtained from the school district to conduct research on the premises. Ethical considerations for working with parents of children with special needs include conducting the research using ethical procedures outlined for working with this special population. Consent was obtained from the participants to participate in this study regarding their children with special needs. Participants were informed that their participation in this study was voluntary and that they could choose to discontinue their participation at any time. In addition, the consent form also explained how this study used safeguards in order to protect the confidentiality of the site and the participants (see Appendix E). The consent form explained to participants how both the physical and electronic data would be kept secure through password-protected programs and that data will be stored for 3 years and then destroyed. The consent form outlined to the participants that the risks of participating in the study were no more than they would find in everyday life.

Special consideration was given when planning this study that the participants have a child with a documented disability and therefore, sensitive language was used in terms to which the parents could relate to avoid any unethical research practices. These standards are in alignment with the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI). In considering studying a phenomenon on the behavior of others, it is thought that it may be the most authentic and produce the purest reactions if the participants are being studied without their knowledge of the research (Babbie, 2010). Even though this may allow the researcher to capture the phenomenon authentically, it does so without the consent of the participants. The hermeneutic phenomenological method used for this study allowed the lived experiences of the participants to be explored without the use of deception as the participants were fully informed and had consented to the study (Giorgi, 2009).

Summary

This study used a qualitative, hermeneutic phenomenological design that explored the essence of the shared experiences of the participants as they went through the process of selecting an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. The research design and rationale have been connected to be the best methods of research for this study. The phenomenological approach in the style of van Manen (1997) allowed me to gain the best understanding of the perspective of the participants from their point of the view. The participants were selected and asked to participate in three methods of data collection that included interviews, journaling, and a focus group. The procedures for data analysis allowed me to apply the methods of the hermeneutic circle in order to increase my understanding of the whole phenomenon of the experiences as it was understood in parts by the point of view of each participant. My use of the hermeneutic circle as a basis for connecting to the phenomenon allowed for a strong application of the research design to be connected to the purpose of the research. Specific measures were taken to ensure trustworthiness of the research process.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents of students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD) as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. This chapter provides the results that were collected from this study including a detailed description of the participants and the data analysis. The analysis process for this study began with *epoché* in order to highlight personal experiences and biases. The process of using the hermeneutic circle included looking at the data as a whole and then finding themes within the data to arrive at the essence of the experience. The themes that emerged are prior experiences of the participants, the level of functioning for their child with HFASD, successful outcomes for their child, and personal factors. The essence of the experience answered the critical research question: What are the lived experiences of parents as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD? Finally, using the themes as a guide, the sub-questions are answered as well:

1. What prior experience do parents bring to the decision of choosing an appropriate classroom for their child with HFASD?
2. What are the motivating factors that parents take into consideration when making a decision regarding classroom placement for their child with HFASD?
3. What degree of confidence do parents have that their decision regarding the classroom placement for their child with HFASD is the best one?

Participants

A total of 10 participants responded to the screening survey and completed all three phases of data collection for this study (individual interviews, journal prompts, and a focus group). A description of the participants is listed in Table 1 followed by a detailed description of each participant in this section.

Table 1

Participants

Participant	Age	Field of Work	Number of Children	Age of Child with Autism
Cathy	43	Real Estate	3	9
Christy	39	Automobile Sales	2	9
Dee	50	Healthcare	1	9
Jenny	47	Sales	2	11
Andy	48	Engineering	2	11
Katie	45	Healthcare	3	10
Val	40	Education	3	7
Grace	49	Stay at home mom	2	8
Barb	35	Stay at home mom	4	7
Rita	34	Healthcare	3	10

Cathy

Cathy is a 43-year-old married mother of three children. She and her husband were missionaries in France for 14 years. All three of her children were born overseas. Cathy has been back in the United States for the past 5 years. Cathy has two children who have been diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). In her interview, Cathy reported that experiences with her oldest son have been much different than her experiences with her youngest daughter. Cathy went on to explain that “in France, you’re just an idiot and they don’t tell you what’s going on.”

Cathy is happy the public school services available to her daughter have been much better in the United States.

Christy

Christy is a 39-year-old mother of two. Christy is recently remarried and works in the automotive industry. Christy relocated to the state of Georgia from Colorado where her son was diagnosed with ASD and attended a preschool for children with special needs. Christy went through the process of having her son assessed in the state of Georgia. In her interview, Christy expressed that she has been “so happy with the services he receives here.”

Dee

Dee is a 50-year-old mother of a 9-year-old son who is diagnosed with mild to moderate ASD and severe attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She and her husband were married for 12 years before having their son. Dee works in the healthcare industry and her husband works as an IT analyst. Dee reported in her interview that they “are a very busy family.” Dee described her son as “the best little dude in the world.”

Jenny

Jenny is a married mother of two. She has two sons, both of whom have special needs. Her older son is an adult, now 21 years old. Her youngest son is 11 and in fifth grade. Jenny reported in her interview that the educational experiences of the two boys have been very different, and there are a lot more opportunities now for her younger son than there were when her oldest attended elementary school. Jenny also reported in her interview that her son “loves YouTube and loves to study languages.”

Andy

Andy is a working father of two. He is married and reported in his interview that his son is a "fun little boy." He reported that his son was very premature but did not receive an official diagnosis of autism until age 7. He did receive early intervention services and speech therapy through a program called "Babies Can't Wait." Andy reported in his interview that he gives his son "as much structure in his day as possible."

Katie

Katie is a 45-year-old mother of three. Katie's youngest son has a diagnosis of ASD. Katie is a single mom who works in the healthcare industry. Katie discovered her son's diagnosis of autism through his preschool teacher who suggested he have an assessment done. Katie recognizes that her son did not really speak until around age 4 but did not realize the full effect of his differences until he entered preschool. In her interview, Katie mentioned she enjoys "working and taking care of my son."

Grace

Grace is a 49-year-old mother of two. Her oldest son is on the autism spectrum, and she also has a typically developing daughter. Grace is a stay-at-home mom who was considering homeschooling her son after realizing the struggle he was having with learning. In her interview, Grace explained she was happy when her son began receiving specialized services in a small group classroom and "he has blossomed ever since."

Val

Val is a 40-year-old mother of three. Val is a middle school special education teacher and that gives her a unique perspective on choosing classroom placement services for her 7-year-old son who has a diagnosis of ASD. She has been married for 12 years and her 7-year-old son with autism is the middle child. Val credits her experiences as a teacher for the reason she caught her son’s language differences so early and was able to get him early intervention services. Due to his early intervention services, Val reported during her interview that her son’s language “exploded.” She explained, “He began talking and never stopped.”

Barb

Barb is a 35-year-old mother of four. Her children range in age from 15 years old to 7 years old. Her youngest son has a diagnosis of ASD, and her oldest son has a diagnosis of learning disabilities and is hearing impaired. Barb has been a stay-at-home mom for the past 9 years. Prior to that, Barb was a preschool teacher. In her interview, Barb reported that she enjoys “spending time with her sons, playing video games and being artsy.”

Rita

Rita is a married mother of three. She has twin boys who are both on the autism spectrum. She has a daughter who is typically developing. Rita reported during her interview that her children “keep me very busy.” She is a part-time paramedic and enjoys doing “all the mom things and wife things.” Rita had her sons tested early and enrolled in the Babies Can’t Wait early intervention program because she realized at age 2 that they were not speaking.

Results

The results of the study are presented through the data analysis process developed by van Manen (1997). There were three data collection sources that were used in the analysis process including interviews, journal prompts responses, and focus groups. The data were coded, themes that emerged were identified, and by looking at the data as a whole, the essence of the experience was discovered (van Manen, 1997).

Theme Development

Table 2

Theme Development

Key Words/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Prior Experiences	
Early intervention, preschool services, speech therapy, occupational therapy	Support
Enrolling in early intervention, Babies Can't Wait, assessments, health insurance, eligibility, medical professionals, diagnosis	Process
Expressing concerns to teachers, voicing concerns to medical professionals, inquiring about available services and supports	Equal Partner
Major Theme 2: Level of Functioning	
Smart, obsessions, difficulty with abstract content, comprehension, difficulty with open-ended questions	Cognitive Abilities
Need to be right, perfectionist, misses social cues from friends, lacking empathy, need for routine, rule follower, aggressive, level of maturity	Social Interactions
Major Theme 3: Successful Outcomes	
Mainstream, co-taught, self-contained, part-time schedule, strongest subject in general education, paraprofessional supports	Placement Options
Next steps, middle school, beyond	Future Paths
Major Theme 4: Personal Factors	
Fair level of confidence, rely on professionals, self-advocate, trust, building as time goes on	Confidence Level
See the best in your child, need to experience learning in the general education environment, don't want to shelter	Motivations
Fear of bullying, stigmas, typical kids' reactions, cruelty	Stressors

Prior Experiences

The first theme describes the participants prior experiences with choosing a classroom placement for their child with HFASD. Nine out of the 10 participants had experiences with early intervention programs and realized there was an issue when their children were at a very young age. These experiences shaped their views on classroom placement options prior to their children enrolling in the school system. In her interview, Jenny indicated:

> We knew there was a speech delay, that was obvious very early on. So, he received early intervention services, just speech therapy, before he was 3. Then, he was able to enroll in special needs preschool with the knowledge that he would repeat a preschool year in order to catch up.

Support. Nine out of the 10 participants received some support from early intervention services. These support services either came from a medical professional or from a Georgia state-funded program called Babies Can’t Wait. These early intervention services included speech therapy, occupational therapy, and special needs preschool beginning at age 3. Dee reported in her interview:

> Our son was 18 months when we had him evaluated by Babies Can’t Wait for feeding problems. When they came out, they noticed all sorts of things that we didn’t notice. From there, he received occupational therapy and [he] went to special needs preschool. They treated his symptoms but honestly, he has a very interesting presentation of autism because he has good eye contact and likes to be touched.

Process. Nine of the 10 participants described the process of enrolling in early intervention services as significant for their future experiences with choosing a classroom placement setting. The process of enrolling and receiving early intervention services includes extensive testing and assessments, medical professionals, health insurance, and receiving an eligibility or diagnosis. In her interview, Jenny complained, “We had some god-awful health insurance at the time, and everything was a nightmare to try and get covered.”

In her interview, Christy reported prior experiences with the individual education plan (IEP) process while living in a different state:

> In Colorado, it was a very different experience. Once we moved here [to Georgia], I met with someone while still living out of state and they put the whole process together for me. They did his paperwork, updated his assessments, and let us know the special help he could get here [in Georgia].

Equal Partner. All 10 of the participants had prior experiences with feeling an equal partner of the IEP or early intervention team. As this theme emerged, it was obvious that all 10 participants wanted to be equal partners on the IEP team; each had different prior experiences with the phenomenon, including how well or poorly they were able to express their concerns to a medical professional or a member of the educational team. Eight of the 10 participants felt like they had earned their spot as an equal member of the IEP team, while two of the participants felt as if they were not equal members of the team. In her journal, Grace explained, “We are simply told what’s going to happen in our son’s school life.” Barb, on the other hand, had a different experience and reported in her journal prompt:

> I have never felt more part of a team and like an equal member. All involved have truly put his best interest first and I feel like everyone has done their part, communicated, and worked together to get where we needed to be.

Level of Functioning

The second theme that emerged was the student’s level of functioning. It became apparent that a student’s level of social and cognitive functioning has a large role in how parents feel about choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. In her interview, Christy described her son in the following way:

> He’s a little bit naïve. He has a sweetness to him but also a little bit of a kick. He can get sassy or even a little aggressive. He will kick a chair when he’s mad, then be a little cuddle bug when it’s over.

Katie also had concerns over her son’s level of functioning. She explained in her interview:

> My son has a lot of stimming behaviors. He is a big rocker. He will rock back and forth over and over. He also has some verbalizations that he makes at random. I think this affects his performance in a regular classroom. You know, it sets him up for bullying or negative attention.

Cognitive Abilities. All 10 participants reported their child’s cognitive abilities as a major factor when determining classroom placement and the best fit for their child. Cognitive abilities that were mentioned most frequently were how bright and smart their children are, how they have difficulties with abstract concepts, become obsessed with objects or routines, and have difficulty comprehending things that seem to come easy for the majority. Cathy explained in her interview that her daughter “is really smart in a lot of ways but struggles with academics, math and reading.”

In his interview, Andy explained:

> My son has a difficult time with abstracts. Like, anything that’s not tangible. He is so smart, he can read an entire passage from a book but if you ask him why something

> happened, he can’t answer you. He is a perfectionist and doesn’t want to be wrong.

Social Interactions. All of the participants agreed that their child’s level of functioning in the area of social interactions was a huge factor in determining their child’s successful placement in a classroom environment. Katie was proud of the social interactions her son achieves. In her interview, she explained: “He didn’t really talk until he was around 4 years old. Then, his language just exploded. He is really empathetic towards others for someone who is diagnosed with a language disorder.”

Successful Outcomes

The third theme that emerged from the data was successful outcomes for students with HFASD. All 10 participants had strong beliefs that having their child in the correct classroom placement provides them with the best opportunity for the future in the form of next steps and beyond. In her interview, Barb put it best by saying:

> All I really want is to see him have a fair chance. I don’t want to have to fight to get him an education. I don’t want him to have to struggle to be where he feels he can fit in. It doesn’t matter to me what classroom serves him best, special education or regular education as long as he is happy and learning because he is smart. He is going to take over the world one day or something.

Placement Options. The classroom placement options repeated themselves frequently throughout the data in the larger sense of parents wanting their child to be in the best classroom fit for their child’s needs so they can achieve to their full potential and find success. Christy wrote in her journal: “It is most important to me that my daughter feel safe and cared for in whatever classroom environment she is in. I think her maturity level and educational deficits are important to consider in her classroom placement.”

Future Paths. All 10 of the participants had strong thoughts on the future paths for their child with HFASD. As parents, it is only natural to express wanting success for your children. This developed from the participants in the form of thinking about the next steps in terms of the next school year, middle school and beyond. In her interview, Rita expressed:

> My hope is that they get a high school diploma and I know it's going to take a lot of hard work. When you want these goals, you can't be passive. You have to be really involved as a parent and do a lot of things outside of school.

Personal Factors

The fourth and final theme that emerged was personal factors of the participants. This theme comes from each participant being an individual in their parenting yet having similar factors that affect their decision of choosing a classroom placement for their child with HFASD. These factors included their personal motivations, their level of confidence in expressing their opinions to an IEP team, and stressors that come with this enormous decision.

Confidence Level. The level of confidence that participants had in the process of choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child with HFASD varied across the board from having nearly zero confidence and relying totally on the professionals to make the decision, to full confidence in advocating for their child and what they personally feel is the best fit. During the focus group discussion, Christy said, "I feel fairly confident I know what's best for my daughter." Val had a similar tone as she wrote in her journal prompt:

> I have become more and more confident with the placement options that are discussed at his IEP meetings. Early on, it was much more difficult to feel confident with placements because everything was so new. We literally felt as if we were building the airplane while flying it.

Meanwhile, some participants had very little confidence in the process of choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child with HFASD. Dee explained in her journal prompt:

> I do not have a lot of confidence when it comes to making the decision of my son's classroom placement. I do not remember a time when the IEP ever asked for my suggestion. I was just told that was where my son would be placed.

Motivations. There were a variety of personal motivations that developed including seeing the best in one's child, wanting them to experience what general education is like, and wanting to shelter their children from the real world while protecting them from the harsh realities. In her interview, Katie explained:

> I want my son to experience general education. It's not that he can't keep up with the work, but I think it's his stimming behavior. Other kids see that, and it bothers them, they want to know why he's rocking back and forth. [My son] doesn't know how to respond to them. His behaviors are a concern to me because it makes him stand out.

In her journal prompt, Val expressed her personal motivations:

> The most motivating factors that we consider when deciding on classroom placement is what will be the least restrictive environment in which [my son] can make progress. Our goal for [him] is that he will, in the future, ultimately spend at least the majority of his day in inclusion settings with typical peers, and to be able to graduate from high school with a High School Diploma. Inclusion is important so that he is able to build social skills, develop appropriate relationships with peers, and be able to function socially in a variety of environments. So, when considering placements, we feel that it is important to

> have these discussions as a committee in what is appropriate for [him] at his present levels of functioning as well as how to help him reach his highest potential.

Stressors. There were several repeating elements in the form of stressors that affected the participants' decisions. These stressors included the reactions of typical children, stigmas, fear of having their child experience bullying, and the cruelty that can be experienced from others. In her interview, Jenny explained:

> Other kids become more harsh as they get older and into middle school. They become hardened over time, and we do not want to shelter him but at the same time we do not want to push him off a cliff. On the flip side, I know he needs to experience that, it's just the hardest thing as a parent because kids can be cruel.

In her interview, Katie had similar stressors related to her son's participation in a general education classroom including having a fear of bullying: "I just feel like a regular classroom would set him up for some type of bullying and negative attention. He's different, so he has a hard time making friends. Other kids don't see him as normal."

Research Question Responses

This section provides the concise answers to the research questions. The central research question of the study was designed to understand the experiences of parents as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. The essence of the experience for the participants emerged through all four themes and consisted of the combined textural descriptions that answered the central research question.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of parents as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD? Parents of students with HFASD must choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child each year at their annual IEP meeting. Using their prior experiences, motivations, and personal factors, parents seek out the best placement options for their child, taking into consideration the individual needs of their child, recommendations from educational professionals, and their confidence level in advocating for their child.

Sub-Question One

What prior experiences do parents bring to the decision of choosing an appropriate classroom for their child with HFASD? The majority of parents have had several years of prior experience with making decisions for their child with HFASD through early intervention by the time they reach elementary school. The prior experience comes from recognizing differences in their children at an early age and taking steps to receive services and supports offered through early intervention programs. The majority of the participants began attending IEP team meetings when their children reached age 3 through special needs preschool. In her interview, Rita, mother of twin boys who both have a diagnosis of HFASD, described her early experiences as follows:

> We had a hard time getting an actual diagnosis of autism. They [medical doctors] enrolled [the twins] in Babies Can’t Wait but they wouldn’t give us a diagnosis other than global developmental delay. We had to take them [the twins] to a psychologist for an actual written diagnosis. We had to pay for it all ourselves. I mean, we knew they had autism.

Sub-Question Two

What are the motivating factors that parents take into consideration when making a decision regarding classroom placement for their child with HFASD? There were several motivating factors that parents take into consideration when making a decision regarding classroom placement for their child with HFASD. These factors included the current level of functioning for their child, which takes into account their cognitive abilities and social interactions. Parents want to make sure their children are well-suited and prepared both socially and cognitively to ensure they are able to keep up and learn in whichever setting they are placed. In her journal, Val wrote:

> The most motivating factors that we consider when deciding on classroom placement is the least restrictive environment in which our son will make progress and be successful. I want him to spend at least the majority of his day in inclusion settings with typical peers so that he can build social skills, develop appropriate relationships with peers, and be able to function socially in a variety of environments.

Sub-Question Three

What degree of confidence do parents have that their decision regarding the classroom placement for their child with HFASD is the best one? The degree of confidence had the most variations within the results of this study ranging from zero level of confidence and leaving the choice of classroom placement completely up to the educational professionals to having a full level of confident to advocate for their child and disagree with the IEP team when they felt it was necessary. The varying degree of confidence levels was the most surprising within the theme of personal factors because the majority of the participants expressed that they felt they were equal partners within the IEP team as a decision-maker within the theme of prior experiences. In her journal prompt, Barb described her level of confidence:

> I have always had a great interest in my son’s success so that provides me with the confidence I need. Even when I go in expecting a battle ahead of me, I am always willing to put in the work. I am always more than happy to see that everyone seems to have the ideas ahead of me and even suggest over and above what I wanted to try.

Summary

This chapter presents the results of the study and answered the central research question and sub-questions. Detailed descriptions of the participants were provided, followed by a description of how the themes were developed using the hermeneutic circle and phenomenological reduction. The four themes that emerged were (a) prior experiences, (b) level of functioning, (c) successful outcomes, and (d) personal factors. The experiences of the participants were described in rich detail through each of the four themes, subthemes, and codes. It is interesting to note that most of the participants felt like equal partners within the IEP team; however, there was a wide range of confidence levels that emerged among the participants. Ultimately, the essence of the experience was arrived at, which answered the central research question. Lastly, the answers to the sub-questions were provided using the previously developed themes.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to describe the experiences of parents of students with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder (HFASD) as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. This chapter contains an interpretation of the findings of this study, a discussion about the results' implications to special education policies and practice as well as the theoretical and methodological implications. This chapter concludes with the limitations and delimitations for the study and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The findings of this study are discussed in relationship to the four themes that developed through the process of phenomenological reduction. The four themes that emerged from the study were able to tell the story of participants' experiences regarding the phenomenon of choosing a classroom placement for their children with HFASD. The four themes that will be discussed are (a) the prior experiences of the parents, (b) the level of functioning for their child with HFASD, (c) successful outcomes, and (d) personal factors.

Interpretation of Findings

The phenomenon of choosing a classroom placement that is appropriate for a student with HFASD is based on the experiences of parents as they grapple with this decision each year at their child's individualized education plan (IEP) meeting. The data collection process was focused on trying to capture this experience as the participants attended their child's annual IEP meeting where the classroom placement decision is made. Data included an interview prior to the IEP meeting, journal prompts which were completed by the participants 2 weeks prior to their IEP meeting, and a focus group which took place after the IEP meeting was held.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Using the phenomenological process of reduction as outlined by van Manen (1997), four themes were developed from an analysis of the data. The four themes that emerged were (a) the prior experiences of the parents in choosing classroom placements for their child with HFASD, (b) the current level of functioning that their child has achieved, (c) successful outcomes for their children which rely on an appropriate classroom placement, and finally, (d) personal factors that each individual parent considers important in their child's academic paths.

Prior Experiences. The first theme that emerged from the data was the prior experiences of parents in choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child with HFASD. Participants rely heavily on their past experiences, whether positive or negative, to guide their decision. In accordance with Knowles' (1990) adult learning theory, prior experiences are a major factor in how adults learn new skills. This can be seen in how the parents expressed their prior experiences and how it shaped their future decisions on classroom placement. For example, in her interview, Cathy described her prior experiences with IEP meetings as negative. Her original experiences occurred overseas while living as a missionary in France. She felt unheard and made to feel as if she did not know what was best for her child. Consequently, she was unsure and wary of IEP meetings. When Cathy moved back to the United States, her experiences with her daughter's IEP meetings were completely different. In addition, Christy had prior negative experiences with IEP meetings and classroom placement decisions while living out of state. Thus, when she moved into the state of Georgia, she was extremely cautious about what the IEP process would look like.

Several of the other participants reported positive prior experiences that helped to build their confidence in future IEP meetings. For example, Dee explained in her interview that "early intervention noticed things about our son that we as parents did not." This boosted her confidence because her son "has a very interesting presentation of autism." In addition, Barb reported in her interview that she feels most of her experiences with IEP meetings have been positive. "I am always more than happy to see that [the IEP team] seems to have ideas ahead of me and even suggests over and above what I wanted to try [with my son]." It is interesting that the prior experiences of parents are directly related to their confidence levels during IEP meetings and with choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. Although their underlying motivations are all basically the same (they want what is best for their child), the prior experiences of the parents weigh heavily on their attitudes towards their child's current IEP meeting.

Confidence Levels. The interpretation of the findings had strong elements relating to the confidence level of the parents. The responses from the participants regarding confidence permeated their answers. It is clear that a parent's level of confidence is related to all areas of their decision-making factors. The fourth theme that emerged from the data was the personal factors of the participants. These personal factors, which included their motivations for choosing a specific classroom placement for their child as well as the stressors that can affect the decision, all related back to how personally confident each parent is with making the classroom placement decision for their child with HFASD. The level of confidence addresses the problem statement of the study, which proposed that parents come into this process without any formal training and are therefore left to their own devices to learn about how to make this decision as an equal member of the IEP team. The confidence level of each individual parent was related to how much time and energy they had been able to put into learning the process, regardless of their underlying motivations for wanting to do what is best for their child. From this, I can conclude that the majority of the parents view their experiences with classroom placement decisions and IEP meetings as positive. They feel their input is valued from educators, but intrinsically, they have a wide range of self-perceptions regarding their own levels of confidence.

Parent's Knowledge about Their Child. Using the emerging themes as guide, it was clear that parents use their knowledge of their child as a major guiding factor in choosing an appropriate classroom placement for them. The child's level of functioning and obtaining successful outcomes were two themes that emerged from the data that related directly to the parents' personal knowledge of their child. It is evident that regardless of how much parents want their child to be successful within the general education environment, I saw no signs that they are in denial of their child's ability to be successful among typically developing students. It is true that parents want their children to reach their full potential, but they are realistic about what that might be for their individual child and their unique social and communication characteristics. This indicates that parents use the knowledge of their individual children as a guiding factor when making a decision for classroom placement that is most appropriate for their child.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The study revealed that parents have a varying degree of confidence when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. It also revealed that parents do not have a desire to push their children into a general education setting if the child has characteristics which make it difficult for them to be successful. This has implications which are important for special education policy and practice in that school districts can improve the way in which information is communicated to parents regarding the options for classroom placement. There is also an implication to update special education policy which requires that students with HFASD be included in the general education classroom environment as much as possible.

Implications for Policy

According to special education law dating back to 1975, students need to be placed in a classroom environment which is the least restrictive (LRE) and provides them with the most access to students who are typically developing. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1975 mandates that students with disabilities need to be included with typical peers as much as is appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). This study revealed that parents are not always comfortable with this decision, and while they want their child to be successfully integrated among typically developing peers, they are aware that their children may not be successful in that environment. Therefore, special education law should be updated to provide more specific options for those students with HFASD and improve upon the subjectivity of the word “appropriate.” This study, along with current research, revealed that the word “appropriate” is not used uniformly across school districts, IEP teams, and individual parents. The law could be much clearer in its delineation of the meaning and provide more options for these students to be inclusive that does not necessarily include educating them in an environment in which they will not be successful. Special education policy should also be updated to include formal guidelines for how to conduct IEP meetings so that every IEP team is aware of how to treat and value parents as equal members. The findings of this study demonstrated that although parents feel as if they are equal members, they come into each meeting with a different level of confidence. If special education policy is updated to begin each IEP meeting with a parent’s explanation of their child, what makes them unique and their special characteristics, it could improve the parent’s level of confidence in knowing the IEP team if focused on the needs of their individual child and not focused on or defining them solely by their disability.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study revealed that each individual parent had a different experience and brought a different level of knowledge to the phenomenon of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. The implication of these results shows that school districts should improve upon the way in which they communicate this information to parents. The findings can demonstrate that while some of the parents had a greater knowledge of their options, some parents had very little. All of the parents indicated they learned the information regarding classroom placement options on their own or through inquiry. They stated that they were not openly provided this information. In this case, school districts should improve upon their practice of communicating with parents. This could mean implementing practices which include parent information nights, flyers, or pre-meetings to ensure that parents go into the meetings fully prepared to discuss all of the options available for their child.

In addition, it is important that school districts develop a procedure for educators to reflect upon their experiences with parents after each IEP meeting. Educators should document what they learned about each individual parent as an equal member of the IEP team. This can help to shed light on how to interact with that parent or parents with similar characteristics in the future. By understanding the perspective of the parents, educators can develop best practices and guidelines that are vital to the way IEP meetings are conducted.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Data from this study hold implications in both the theoretical and empirical components of the phenomenon of parents’ experiences as they go through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. The full experience of the parents including their thought processes, challenges, and opinions were extracted from the data collection process. These findings show a strong connection to Knowles' (1990) adult learning theory.

Theoretical Implications

This study was based on Knowles' (1990) adult learning theory. In his theory, Knowles (1980) explained that adults learn differently from children under five main assumptions. The five assumptions include the self-concept of adult learners, their experiences, their readiness to learn new concepts, orientation, and their motivations for learning. These five assumptions are evident in the experiences of parents as they chose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. All of the participants understood their task and came into the experience with a different set of prior experiences, opinions, and motivations. The experience of the adult learner was evident throughout the responses of the participants in that they highlighted their own motivations, demonstrated self-concept through their level of confidence, and explained prior experiences with the phenomenon.

The adult learning theory was the correct theory to guide this study because it assumes that adults are motivated to learn new concepts, are ready to receive the information, and use their prior knowledge to orient their learning (Knowles et al., 2015). The findings of the study revealed that parents of students with HFASD are aware of their task as equal members of the IEP team and take their role as decision-makers seriously.

Empirical Implications

There has been previous research about understanding the experiences of parents of students with autism as they navigate through their child's educational path. According to

Fenning et al. (2011), parents of students with disabilities want the same things for their child as families with typically developing children. Parents of students with HFASD have to face many challenges in making educational decisions for their child. These challenges include wanting their children to be included, wanting their children to feel like they are part of the school community, and most importantly, wanting their children to reach their full potential. The challenges that were found from the parents that participated in this study aligned with the themes that emerged from the data analysis process including their prior experiences with negative IEP meetings, the level of cognitive and social functioning of their child, and personal factors such as their own levels of confidence in expressing their desires for their child.

With 1 out of 54 elementary-aged children being diagnosed with autism (Maenner et al., 2020), this research may help inform other school districts on a larger scale regarding the experiences and challenges that parents face as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child with HFASD. With the number of elementary-aged students requiring special education services under the category of autism rising, it is essential that the field of education increase their understanding of the experiences of parents. Parents are a critical part of the specialized team that services these students and provides them with an educational plan that best suits their needs. The findings of this research highlight the experiences of parents and show that there is a varying degree of understanding with which parents enter into this decision. Armed with this knowledge, school districts can improve upon their policies and practices to make this experience more seamless for parents.

In addition, the lack of existing research on the experiences of parents from their perspective as equal members of the IEP team demonstrates that there is an underlying problem with the way school districts handle the process of IEP meetings. There is an acknowledgement among the existing body of research (Bashir & Muhaidat, 2014; Francis et al., 2016) that parents have a variety of opinions on the topic of the IEP process, but so far, no research has been done to correct the discrepancy of how each individual parent approaches the task. This study provides an extension to the existing research by examining the process directly from the lived experiences of the parents as they went through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom placement for their child with HFASD at their annual IEP meeting. This is a novel contribution which adds a richer understanding of how school districts could improve IEP meetings and ease the process for parents and educators alike.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study was conducted with parents of elementary-aged students who are diagnosed with HFASD, and therefore, some limitations were taken into account. First, the sample size for this study was 10 participants. This limits the results only to this small group of participants and may not represent the results of larger studies. The sample of participants was also taken from one school district in one state. The results of a statewide or national study could produce different results. In addition, this study was completed voluntarily with no compensation given for participation. Of the larger number of potential participants within the school district, there was not much interest in completing this study due to time constraints and limited availability of the parents within the sample pool. Conducting this study with a larger sample pool or in a different setting could produce further results or insights into the phenomenon.

Researcher bias is also a limitation of this study. Since I am a special education teacher, I had to intentionally exclude my experiences with the phenomenon and let the experiences of the participants speak for themselves. I achieved this through keeping a researcher’s reflexive journal (see Appendix I) and employing the process of Moustakas (1994) in which researcher bias is addressed and bracketed out through the process of *epoché*. However, there is no way of truly eliminating all bias from a research study of this nature.

There were some delimitations placed on this study to keep the study focused on the experiences of participants. Participants in this study were delimited to parents of elementary-aged children diagnosed with HFASD. Parents of students diagnosed with a more severe form of autism were excluded as well as parents of older-aged children. The rationale for this choice was made to maintain a manageable number of participants and facilitate easy access to the participants for interviews and focus groups. However, this sample does not describe all of the parents of students with autism who are involved with the phenomenon of choosing classroom placements. The design of this study was limited to hermeneutic phenomenology, which was chosen in order to gain an understanding of the experiences of the participants as they go through the process of choosing a classroom placement for their child with HFASD. This excluded certain data collection methods which are found in other study designs and may produce a different set of results.

Recommendations for Future Research

I explored the lived experiences of parents of elementary-aged students diagnosed with HFASD as they chose an appropriate classroom placement setting for their child. The results of this study indicated that parents have a varying degree of knowledge and confidence as they enter into this decision each year at their child’s IEP meeting. Parents of students with HFASD are faced with this task as equal members of the IEP team but have no formal training in making this decision. Using their motivations of wanting the best for their child, parents seek out this information from a variety of sources and with different levels of success. Future research could explore the motivations and challenges that educators face when working with parents as equal partners of an IEP team. It is possible that combining the results from this research with the results from a study that focuses on educator motivations could result in a complete picture of the IEP process for all those involved. A multiple case study design could be used to explore the experiences of parents versus the experience of educators. This would add a different element to this research because it would examine several different examples rather than just one set of participants, adding an even richer analysis of the findings.

In addition, this research could be expanded to include parents of students with HFASD in middle school, high school, and beyond. It would be interesting to compare the experiences, challenges, and motivations of parents as their children increase in age. Along this same idea, future research should include parents of students with other disabilities and their experiences with choosing classroom placement. Special education law specifies that all students with disabilities need to be included and educated among their nondisabled peers as much as appropriate (U.S. Department of Education, 2017b). It would be interesting to see if parents of students with disabilities other than autism have similar experiences to those parents highlighted in this study.

Conclusion

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to describe the experiences and challenges of parents of elementary-aged students who are diagnosed with HFASD as they choose an appropriate classroom setting for their child. Using Knowles' (1990) theory of adult learning as a guide, I examined the experiences that parents go through as they navigate the classroom selection process. Data were collected from 10 participants by using three qualitative data collection methods which included personal interviews, journal prompts, and a focus group. Data were analyzed by coding and developing themes from the descriptions provided by the participants in their responses, ultimately arriving at the essence of the experience. From this data analysis, four themes emerged: prior experiences of the participants, the level of functioning for their child, successful outcomes for their child, and personal factors that affect their decision. The essence of the experience was that parents enter into this decision of classroom placement with varying degrees of knowledge and confidence. Without any formal training, parents are left to their own devices to learn about the process and how best to make the classroom placement decision for their child. The level of confidence in the decision-making process was in direct relationship to how much time and energy parents put into learning this process.

It is critical that administrators, stakeholders, and educators collaborate to develop a plan that ensures parents are all given the same information prior to making this decision. The largest takeaway from this study is that the parents have a wide array of confidence in the phenomenon—from non-existent to very sure of themselves. The results of this research indicate that there is no shortage in parents’ desires to have their children be successful. In the future, a plan needs to be in place that can provide a more seamless introduction into the process of classroom placement and ensure that all parents enter into the process with an equal level of knowledge that matches their motivations. Working collaboratively, parents, educators, and administrators can create a body of knowledge that allows all stakeholders to be aware of the best practices for choosing classroom placement that best fits the needs of the child in order to ensure their success.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

February 21, 2022

Lorie Mick
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-604 A PHENOMENLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS AS THEY CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM FOR THEIR CHILD WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER

Dear Lorie Mick, Gail Collins,

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

Your study falls under the following exemption category, which identifies specific situations in which human participants research is exempt from the policy set forth in 45 CFR 46:104(d):

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

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

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

If you have any questions about this exemption or need assistance in determining whether possible modifications to your protocol would change your exemption status, please email us at irb@liberty.edu.

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

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

Dear _________:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctorate degree in Special Education. The purpose of my research is to describe the lived experiences of parents of students with high-functioning autism as they go through the process of selecting an appropriate classroom setting during the annual IEP review, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be the parent of an elementary-aged child who receives special education services under the category of autism. Participants, if willing, will be asked to journal your experiences with the decision-making process of choosing a classroom setting for your child for 2 weeks prior to their annual IEP review meeting. You will be asked to participate in a 60-minute interview as well as attend a 60-minute focus group discussion with other participants. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, click here (insert link to screening survey) and complete the screening survey.

If you meet the criteria for the study based on your screening survey responses, a consent document will be sent to you via email. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document electronically via Adobe Sign.

Sincerely,

Lorie Mick
Special Education Teacher

Appendix C: Screening Survey

1. Are you the parent of an elementary-aged child who receives special education services under the category of autism?

   Yes/No

2. Are you the educational-decision maker for your child?

   Yes/No

3. Do you plan on attending your child's annual IEP meeting?

   Yes/No

4. Are you willing to participate in a research study that focuses on your experiences with choosing a classroom placement for your child with autism?

   Yes/No

5. Do you have the available time to thoughtfully journal your experiences for 2 weeks prior to your child's IEP meeting?

   Yes/No

Appendix D: Notification Emails

Acceptance Email:

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study titled: A phenomenological study of the experiences of parents as they choose the appropriate classroom for their child with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. Based on your screening survey responses, you have been selected to participate in the study. Please sign the electronic consent form that will be emailed to you through the platform Adobe Sign. If you have any questions, please contact me at___________.

Sincerely,
Lorie Mick
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Rejection Email:

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interesting in participating in the research study titled: A phenomenological study of the experiences of parents as they choose the appropriate classroom for their child with high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. At this time, you have not been selected to participate in this study. Thank you for being willing to participate. If you have any questions, please contact me a _____________.

Appendix E: Consent Form

Title of the Project: A PHENOMENLOGICAL STUDY OF THE EXPERIENCES OF PARENTS AS THEY CHOOSE THE APPROPRIATE CLASSROOM FOR THEIR CHILD WITH HIGH-FUNCTIONING AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER
Principal Investigator: Lorie Mick, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be the parent of an elementary-aged child who is receiving special education services under the category of autism. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the lived experiences of parents of students who are diagnosed with high-functioning autism as they go through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting during their child's annual IEP meeting.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Journal your thoughts and experiences for 2 weeks prior to your child's IEP meeting. You will be provided with a journal template. This will take approximately 10-15 minutes per journal session with a minimum of 4 journal entries.
2. Participate in a 60-minute recorded individual interview.
3. Participate in a 60-minute recorded focus group via Microsoft Teams online platform.
4. Review the transcripts of your individual interview and your part of the focus group to ensure that it is accurate. This will take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from taking part in a collaborative conversation with other parents of students with high-functioning autism who are also going through the process of choosing an appropriate classroom setting.

Benefits to society include informing future special education practices and procedures such as communicating with parents regarding the IEP classroom placement process and educator training.

What risks might you experience from being in this study?

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

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records. Data collected from you may be shared for use in future research studies or with other researchers. If data collected from you is shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed before the data is shared.

- 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 and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed. Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then erased. Only the researcher will have access to these recordings.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.

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

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University or Cherokee County school district. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you, 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 contributions to the focus group will not be included in the study if you choose to withdraw.

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

The researcher conducting this study is Lorie Mick. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at__________. You may also contact the researcher’s faculty sponsor, Dr. Gail Collins, at_____________.

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA 24515 or email at irb@liberty.edu.

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 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 participate in the study.

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

Printed Subject Name

____

Signature & Date

Appendix F: Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself, as if we just met one another.
2. I understand that you have an elementary aged child who has been diagnosed with HFASD. How old was your child when he/she was diagnosed?
3. What types, if any, of interventions has he/she received prior to entering school?
4. What types of behaviors does your child have?
5. How would you describe your child's verbal and communication skills?
6. Tell me about your experiences with choosing a classroom placement setting for your child? CRQ
7. Tell me about your knowledge of and prior experiences with the different classroom settings that are available for your child? SQ1
8. What factors go into your decision when choosing an appropriate classroom setting for your child? SQ2
9. Tell me about how you decide which classroom setting would be the most appropriate for your child? SQ2
10. Are your experiences during an IEP meeting regarding the choosing a classroom setting for your child generally positive or negative? Please explain your answer. SQ3
11. How confident are you with making this decision for your child? SQ3
12. What do you do to prepare when it is time to select the classroom setting for your child? SQ1
13. What do you find the most stressful about the process? SQ3
14. What do you find the most beneficial? SQ3

15. Is there anything else you would like to share about the experience of selecting an appropriate classroom for your child?

Appendix G: Electronic Journal Template And Prompts

Electronic Journal Instruction:

Dear Participant,

Please click on the links below to access an electronic journal to record your experiences. Click on one link for each journal entry you wish to submit over the next two weeks. The links provide a guiding prompt and space for you to record your thoughts and experiences. Please complete at least four journal entries during this period, writing as much as you can to fully describe your experiences.

Guiding Prompts:

- Reflect on your child. What characteristics make them special? (Insert Link to Microsoft Form)
- Reflect on your child’s upcoming IEP meeting. What are your thoughts on their current classroom placement? (Insert Link to Microsoft Form)
- What are the major motivating factors that you consider when making the classroom placement decision?
- Reflect on your child around typical peers. What are these experiences like? What challenges, if any, do they face? (Insert Link to Microsoft Form)
- Describe your level of confidence regarding your decision for classroom placement. Does it differ from the IEP team’s recommendation?
- Reflect on your prior experiences with choosing a classroom placement. Are they positive? Did you feel heard as an equal member of the IEP team? (Insert Link to Microsoft Form)

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

Focus Group Questions

1. Introduce yourself and tell us about your child.

2. Share your experiences with the group about choosing a classroom placement for your child. CRQ.

3. What prior experiences helped you the most with your decision process? SQ1

4. What information do you wish you had prior to making this decision for your child? SQ1

5. What factors go into your decision-making process? SQ2

6. Tell us about your greatest frustration with this process? SQ2

7. Tell us about what you find beneficial about the process? SQ2

8. What motivates you to learn more about the classroom placement options? SQ2

9. Is there anything else that you would like to share with the group?

Appendix I: Researcher's Reflexive Journal

Date:	Notes:
10/12/21	I began teaching in 2002 as a special education preschool teacher. Throughout the years, I have held positions at the preschool level up through fifth grade. I have taught a wide range of special education students including those with severe and profound disabilities to high-functioning autism. I have held my current teaching position as a self-contained teacher for students with high-functioning autism for the past 5 years. I teach a multi-age level group, so I typically have my students beginning in preschool up through second grade where they transfer to the third- through fifth-grade group. The school district had created a self-contained classroom for students with high-functioning autism that is based on the Georgia Standards of Excellence. These students are graded and tested on par with typically developing students. At the time, I was a graduate student at the University of West Georgia working on a specialist in education degree. It shocked me when one of my professors stated that it sounded like my classroom went against the LRE policy in IDEA. I hadn't thought about it that way and this sparked my interest to discover more about what characteristics of these students make them not suitable candidates for inclusion into a general education classroom. I found that some parents had strong opinions on this. Either they were really satisfied with a self-contained classroom because they didn't want their child subjected to teasing or they just felt they learned better from being in a small group setting. Other parents did not prefer their child to be in self-contained but wanted to push for inclusion so they could be surrounded by typically developing peers, while other parents had no idea they had these options and it seemed they just went along with what the IEP team suggested. This sparked my interest for discovering more about the experiences that parents go through as they make this decision for their child with HFASD. I am interested to know the challenges they face, what characteristics of their child do they use for a foundation for the decision, are they aware of all their choices?
12/17/2021	How much influence does a teacher have on parents? I wonder how much parents look to their child's current teacher to help them with this decision? Does the relationship between teacher and parent have any impact on how a parent makes their decision of classroom placement?
2/4/2022	As parents prepare for their IEP meetings, what level of support do they draw from? I recall when I was a foster parent for a child with autism, I felt so fortunate that I was familiar with the process because it was my job and area of expertise. I do not know what I would have done if I had no clue where to start. These parents have the hardest job in the world.
3/20/2022	As I begin my interviews, I am surprised by the various levels of confidence parents are reporting. I wonder if they are reporting an inflated level of confidence because they want to be more sure of themselves than they actually are because their children's educational future depends on it.

4/15/2022	I am really enjoying the data collection process. I feel I am really gaining an important insight into the process that parents go through as they make the choice for classroom placement during their annual IEP meetings. As I have had my own students' IEP meetings, I am more keen to the level of confidence and advocacy that each of my current students' parents bring to the table. I find myself taking more time to explain when they seem quiet or unsure of the placement options that are before them.

Appendix J: Audit Trail

DATE:	ACTION:
10/12/21	Request for school district authorization to complete research sent
11/9/21	School district requested letter of support of research from University committee chair
11/29/21	Research approval letter received from school district
2/21/22	IRB Approval Obtained
2/28–3/4/22	Conduct pilot study, review results to inform study
3/7–3/25/22	Solicit study participants, send acceptance emails and consent forms
3/28–4/15/22	Conduct individual interviews, send out electronic journal prompts
4/25–4/29/22	Conduct focus groups
5/4/2022	Begin data analysis
5/20/2022	Go over data analysis results with requested reviewer, a supervisor within the school district.