A MULTI-SITE CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS WHO PROVIDE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW SES BACKGROUNDS AND/OR WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

by

Amanda Blake Champion

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The theory guiding this study is Bandura's social cognitive theory. It connects the beliefs of self-efficacy held by school leaders and teachers to their values and philosophies, and their capability to include and welcome students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. This study investigated how school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, as well as how teachers are prepared to meet the diverse learning needs of every student. Purposeful sampling was used to secure the school leadership and teachers from three Christian schools in different geographical regions of the United States. Multiple forms of data were collected from each site that included individual interviews, document analysis, observation, and focus groups. The data from this investigation were analyzed using Stake's case study worksheets and steps for case study methodology: coding, organizing data into themes, and examining the relationships of the data obtained. The results of this study indicated that school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences because of their personal beliefs, by intentional practices done with consistency, by being highly relational, through the equipping of teachers, and by providing support to students, teachers, and parents.

Keywords: Christian school, inclusive, welcoming environment, low SES, learning differences, school leaders, teachers, social cognitive theory, self-efficacy, biblical mandate

Copyright Page

Dedication

To my committed husband, Hassan, who always centers our marriage in Jesus Christ. Thank you for your encouragement and the enormous sacrifices that you have made for me to do this. Thank you for being my sounding board. Your prayers and belief in me enabled (us) to earn this doctorate!

To my children, Justin, Hudson, Levi, Eme, and Tyson. You have been gracious to me over these past few years as I have spent umpteen hours at the dining room table and brought my "work" to your practices, road trips, movie nights, and everywhere else! Thank you for always asking me if I was almost done. You helped me to finish! Always know that with God's help, you can complete the hard things that you set out to do.

To all of the students who learn differently. You helped me to find God's purpose for my life: Love the unlovable, speak life into struggling students.

To all of the school leaders and teachers who questioned why students who learned differently were at "their" school. You motivated me to find excellent school communities that lived out their biblical mandate to serve "the least of these."

Acknowledgments

I would like to express appreciation to my committee chair, Dr. Collins. I am grateful for your high expectations and standard of excellence. I am humbled by the countless hours that you gave to me to provide careful scrutiny to my dissertation. I did not know the level of excellence that I could reach until you pushed me to it. I also thank Dr. Ryff for your guidance and support. I learned so much as a student in your classes and I knew the critical feedback that you gave me was what I would need to complete my dissertation. You and Dr. Collins make a great team!

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List of Abbreviations

Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI)

Christian Schools International (CSI)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS)

New International Bible (NIV)

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL)

Socioeconomic Status (SES)

Universal Design for Learning (UDL)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Chapter One introduces the study by providing a comprehensive background of the problem that informs the problem and purpose of this study. Within the background, the study's historical, social, and theoretical contexts are discussed. Following the purpose statement, the significance of the study provides the reader with the contributions that this study makes from the theoretical, empirical, and practical perspectives. The research questions and definitions of terms important to the study conclude this chapter.

Background

An excellent, Christ-centered education where every child can flourish academically and reach their God-given potential should be available to all children regardless of their socioeconomic status (SES) and ability level. However, students from a low SES usually cannot afford or cannot access a quality Christian education (Lane & Kinnison, 2020). Additionally, students with a learning difference typically do not meet the criteria to gain entrance into a quality Christian school (Lane et al., 2019). A private Christian education is thought of for the privileged or elite, and some private Christian schools have been referred to as exclusive (Norsworthy et al., 2018). Private Christian schools do not fall under the same laws as public schools and are not required to provide an education to all children (Lane, 2017). However, there are private Christian schools that seek to provide an inclusive education to students from low SES and/or with learning differences. This qualitative research study examined how and why

some private Christian schools provide an inclusive education that welcomes students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community.

Historical Context

Early American schools were founded on biblical principles and allowed the teaching of non-sectarian Christian principles that included studies of the Bible (Slater, 2019). With the creation of the Common School in 1837 by Horace Mann and John Dewey's Progressive School movement from 1880–1904, the biblical principles on which schools were founded began to be removed to appeal to the growth of students enrolled in public education, particularly from immigration (Glenn, 2018). Parents started looking for other schooling options with a desire to sustain the biblical principles in their child's education that previously existed. In 1920, the National Union of Christian Schools and Christian Schools International were founded (Slater, 2019). The National Union of Christian Schools converted to the Association of Christian Schools International (ACSI) in 1978 (ACSI, 2021). ACSI is now the largest international organization promoting Christian education, with over 25,000 schools, which provides training and resources to Christian schools and educators (ACSI, 2021). Christian Schools International (CSI) is the second largest Christian school accrediting agency with 348 member schools (CSI, 2021). The mission of CSI is to advance God's kingdom by providing Christian schools with curriculum, leadership training, accreditation, and employee benefit services (CSI, 2021). The 1940s–1980s led to immense growth of private religious schools. Specific numbers do not exist, but historians have estimated that between 1920 and 1960 some 150 of these schools were established (Slater, 2019). Christian schools have grown faster than any other private education segment, with thousands of these schools being established since the 1960s (Johnston, 2021). In the 1980s, Christian school advocates claimed that the establishment of these schools stood at a rate of two per day (Slater, 2019). For most of the 20th century, while the U.S. educational

establishment struggled with such issues as funding, test scores, competing in a global market, campus violence, teacher retention, and religious issues such as school prayer, a multitude of private Christian schools quietly popped up all over the landscape as a viable option for evangelical families.

Social Context

There has always been a struggle for individuals to access equal systems and structures in our society (Brady, 2019; Payne, 2019). The educational system for minority children and those with disabilities has been unequal in our society (Duncan et al., 2019). Students who are different because of race or ability level have been denied equal educational opportunities (Bicard & Heward, 2016; Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). The civil rights landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) changed this for Black children and children of other minority races. The outcome of this case led to equal access to public education for children that were a minority race. Additional court cases began to follow, acknowledging the lack of equitable educational settings for children with special needs. *The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. D.C. Board of Education* (1972) set the requirement that all students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education, in the same schools as their non-disabled peers, along with means to resolve disputes regarding placement (Turnbull et al., 2020). In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Students Act, Public Law 94-142, which has been amended several times and renamed in 2004 to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA declared that the nation's goals for students with disabilities are equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (Turnbull et al., 2020). However, when parents enroll their child in a private school, they forfeit the educational rights for their child that would have been provided in a public school under IDEA. Instead, the regulations for parentally

placed private school students grant public officials the power to develop service plans and to decide which students from private schools will be served (IDEA, 2004).

Private schools have a choice to accept federal financial aid in the form of Title 1 under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973). Additionally, school vouchers are state-funded programs—often called scholarship programs or school choice—that allow students to use public monies to attend a private school. The state provides a set amount of money, typically based on the state's per-pupil amount, for private school tuition (EdChoice, 2022). There are currently 25 voucher programs in 14 states and the District of Columbia (Erwin et al., 2021). As noted by the National Center for Educational Statistics (2019) about 95% of students ages 6–21 served under IDEA were enrolled in public schools in the fall of 2018. Three percent of students served under IDEA were enrolled in separate schools (public or private) for students with disabilities; 1% were placed by their parents in private schools serving a general population (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). The opportunity for students with special needs to attend a Christian school will increase as schools develop unique programs to meet the growing demand (Lane et al., 2019). A learning environment where all children are accepted and valued is desired by many families and students alike. More students have been identified for special education services in the last two decades than ever before in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). This creates a growing need for Christian schools to provide research-based practices to serve this population of students in an inclusive setting that employs a non-traditional educational approach.

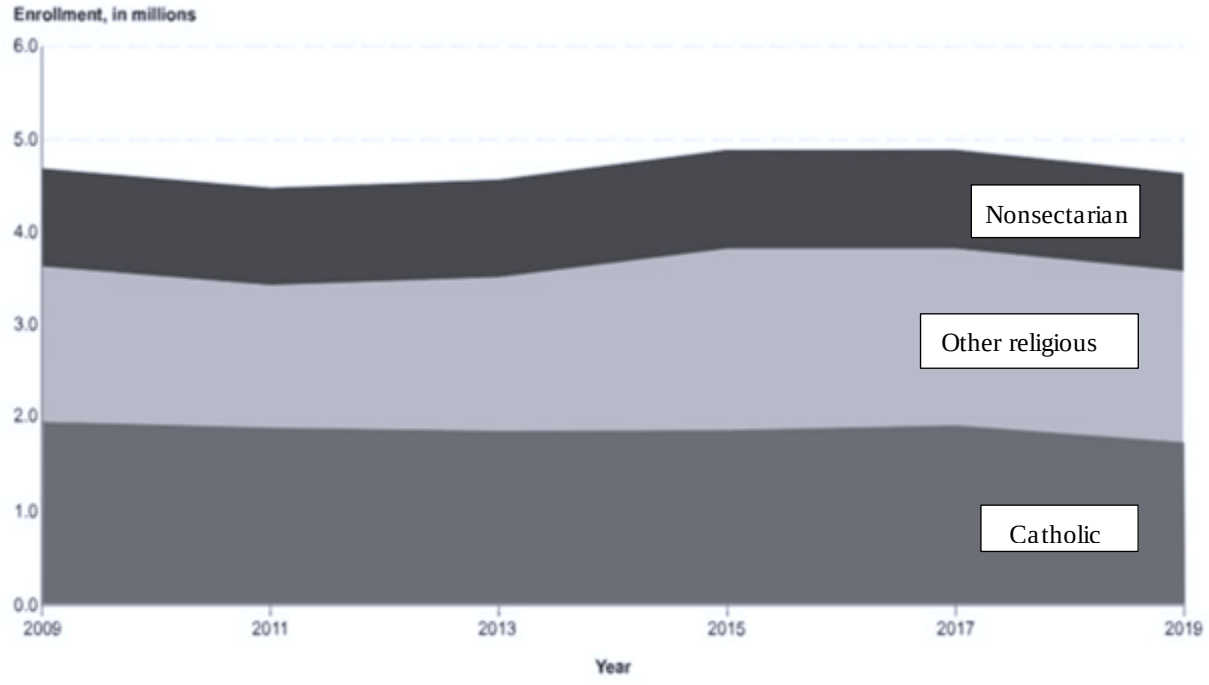
Diversity is an area that has generally been greatly overlooked in Christian schools. In fact, in some places Christian schools were started as a reaction to desegregation, or as part of "White flight" from public schools, or simply by a board of well-intentioned and well-motivated professionals who are demographically homogenous (Brady, 2019). Children from low SES

and/or with special needs have not had the same educational rights as their typical peers nor do they have the same educational opportunities as their more affluent peers (Duncan, et al., 2019). Bicard and Heward (2016) rendered, “If a society can be judged by the way it treats people who are different, our educational system does not have a distinguished history” (p. 218). As our nation grows and becomes more diverse, it is essential to look at national demographic trends of private school enrollment and the racial and cultural diversity representation among all school children in the United States (Brady, 2019).

According to the U.S. Census Bureau’s findings from 2009 to 2020, the proportion of White and Black students has decreased (from 54% to 46% and 17% to 15%, respectively) while the percentage of Hispanic students has increased from 22% to 28% (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). At the same time, while private schools continue to educate 9% of all K–12 students in the United States, private school enrollment has recently fallen from 6 million in 1999, to 5.7 million in 2017, and to 4.7 million in 2019 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Data for private schools are grouped into the following categories by school orientation: Catholic, other religious (which includes conservative Christian, schools affiliated with other denominations, and religious schools not affiliated with a specific denomination), and nonsectarian (not religiously affiliated).

Figure 1

Number of Students Enrolled in Kindergarten Through 12th Grade Who Attended Private Schools, by School Orientation, During the Schools Years of Fall 2009 Through Fall 2019

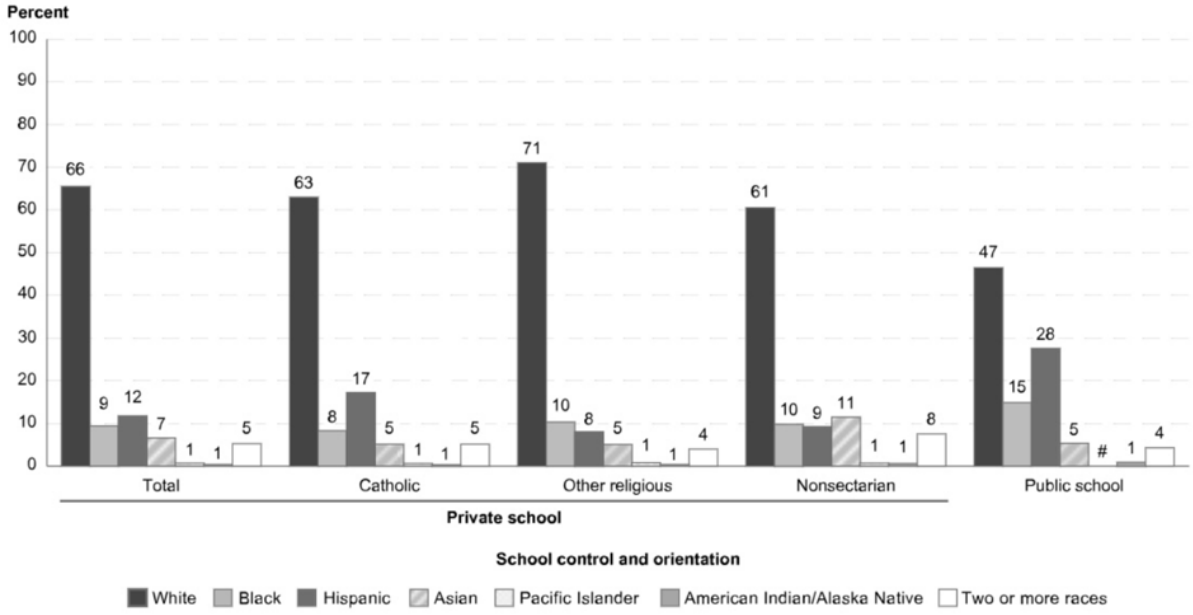


Note. The source for the data in this graphic is the U.S. Department of Education (2021), Table 205.20.

Among the 4.7 million K–12 students who were enrolled in private schools in fall 2019, 66% were White, 12% were Hispanic, 9% were Black, 7% were Asian, and 5% were students of two or more races (U.S. Department of Education, 2021).

Figure 2

Percentage Distribution of Students Enrolled in Kindergarten Through Grade 12, by School Control and Orientation and Students' Race/Ethnicity: Fall 2019



Note. The source for the data in this graphic is the U.S. Department of Education (2021), Tables 203.65 and 205.30.

Private school students also differed from public school students in other demographic characteristics. In fall 2019, the poverty rate for K–12 private school students was 9%, compared with 17% for public school students (U.S. Department of Education, 2021). The U.S. Department of Education (2019) reported that of the 10.9 million families with children in Grades K–12 with annual incomes of $75,000 or more (the highest income bracket measured), 87% have children only in public schools and 11% have children only in private schools.

The poverty threshold is a dollar amount that varies depending on a family's size and composition and is updated annually to account for inflation. In 2022, for example, the poverty threshold for a family of four with two children is $27,750 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). In 2019, approximately 11.6 million children under the age of 18 were

in families living in poverty (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022). Poverty often occurs when the cost-of-living increase does not keep pace with inflation, and real wages for the middle class and poor go down (Jensen, 2016). Over half (51%) of all American workers make less than $30,000 a year; the federal poverty level for a family of five is $28,410; and almost 40% of all American workers do not earn $20,000 per year (Jensen, 2016). Children from high-poverty backgrounds generally have poor cognitive development, language, memory, and socioemotional processing (Duncan et al., 2019).

The relationship between poverty, trauma, and neurobiological development requires a better understanding for effective educational reform. Trauma refers to events that exceed a person's capacity to cope (Craig, 2016). When children are exposed to family violence, toxic stress, and a lack of nurturing early childhood relationships, normal childhood development is disrupted. Research has found that children exposed to poverty are more likely to academically underperform when compared to their non-low-income peers (Payne, 2019). Students' development and learning are shaped by interactions among environmental factors, relationships, and learning opportunities they experience both in and out of school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Their brains are designed to reflect their environment, not to rise above it (Duncan et al., 2019). Every individual's background and experiences provide valuable information to shape their learning process.

There is a need to provide the best teaching practices that are culturally responsive and student-centered so that students from a low SES background and/or those who have learning differences can reach their highest God-given potential. In Matthew 25:31–46 (*New International Bible* [NIV], 1978/2011), Jesus explains to his disciples that by caring for others in need we care for Christ: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." Educators have come to accept the theories of human development

embraced by an educational system that discounts spirituality and is a naturalistic worldview rather than a biblical view of human development (Brown, 2018a; Lane et al., 2019; Norsworthy et al., 2018). This idea or belief that only natural laws and forces, as opposed to supernatural or spiritual ones, operate in the universe is contrary to In the book of Ephesians in which Paul instructs us:

> So Christ himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (*NIV*, 1978/2011, Ephesians 4:11–13)

The Holy Spirit has given Christian educators unique gifts to build up the schools that serve. As educators, it is our calling to faithfully use those gifts to help students so that they can reach the full measure of their God-given potential.

Educators have personal biases and assumptions that influence the teaching process and shape the classroom culture. Engaging in critical self-reflection about their assumptions and cultural beliefs is an essential first step to recognizing where one stands concerning the current sociocultural context. As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. stated (1968a), “Rarely do we find men who willingly engage in hard, solid thinking. There is an almost universal quest for easy answers and half-baked solutions. Nothing pains some people more than having to think” (p. 3). Culturally responsive pedagogies prompt educators to design instruction from the perspective of students’ diversity as strengths rather than deficits (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Gay (2002) identified five essential elements of culturally responsive teaching: (a) develop a cultural diversity knowledge base; (b) design a culturally relevant curriculum; (c) demonstrate cultural caring through a

learning community; (d) establish cross-cultural communications; and (e) establish congruity in classroom instruction.

Linking classroom learning to students' cultural contexts and experiences through positive relationships with teachers has been proven to increase student engagement and achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). The classroom environment plays a vital role in educational outcomes, and research indicates that school conditions contribute more to learning rates of low SES students than family characteristics do (Payne, 2019). Meaningful connections to past experiences are crucial for all students, particularly students from impoverished backgrounds. An explicit effort to demonstrate how all things hold together, looking at the way different facts, fields, and objects of knowledge relate to one another, gives purpose to the learning process (Cantor et al., 2019). Since race, social class, and language deeply influence students' thinking, values, beliefs, and behaviors, teachers need to be purposeful in the learning environment that they create and authentic in making connections with each student.

Theoretical Context

In Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, he demonstrated that individual learning occurs in a social environment. Bandura (1986) believed that individuals could learn new actions by watching others perform and that both environmental and cognitive factors interact to influence individual learning and behavior. The social context in which cognitive activity takes place is an essential part of the learning process (Bond & Blevins, 2019; Brown, 2016; Cantor et al., 2019). The social environment is important for positive relationships and experiences to guide the maturation of a child's developing neurobiological systems (Cantor et al., 2019). Neuroscience research confirms that when strong interpersonal connections are found, neural integration leads to strengthened linkages between existing synapses, regions, and functions critical for brain development (Brown, 2016; Osher et al., 2020). This is critical for students

from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences who have not had exposure to positive developmental relationships that encompass the characteristics of warmth, consistency, and reciprocation (Cantor et al., 2019).

Other key assumptions of the social cognitive theory include self-regulation, agency, and self-efficacy. Self-regulation is known as the competencies that aid in managing cognition, emotion, attention, and goal-directed behavior (Bandura, 1982, 1997; Cantor et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2016). These competencies are distinct from attitudes, beliefs, and mindsets, and include automated physiological functions to effortful, complex cognitive processes (Cantor et al., 2019). Research has demonstrated that students who learn these competencies and take responsibility for their own learning master higher levels in reading and writing (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). A year-long study of fourth- and fifth-grade urban elementary students found that students who engaged in self-regulating metacognitive strategies achieved higher reading and writing levels. Additionally, students with a learning disability even outscored the regular education students (Cantor et al., 2019).

Through self-regulation, individuals have a desire to control the events that affect their lives. Bandura (1989) refers to these acts that are done intentionally as agency. Self-efficacy determines how much a person is willing to persist until successful (Bandura, 1997). Research on students with learning disabilities has demonstrated a positive correlation between an individual's level of self-efficacy and environmental factors (Bandura, 1986). Leithwood et al. (2017) found that students' sense of agency and motivation enhanced when they strive for and demonstrate improvement. They also found that feedback linked explicitly to clear performance standards, along with students who are allowed to evaluate and problem-solve, facilitates increased learning among students and leads to greater student motivation. Everyone holds a

perception of their own self-efficacy—about how controllable or alterable their environment is—and their ability to make a change or persist in the face of adversity (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Problem Statement

An excellent, Christ-centered education where every child can flourish academically and reach their God-given potential should be available to all children regardless of their SES and ability level. A school that welcomes and includes students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities creates a learning environment where all children are accepted and valued (Norsworthy et al., 2018). The problem is that there are very few Christian schools that serve as an exemplar for other Christian schools seeking to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Teachers at Christian schools often lack professional development opportunities that support the best practices for engaging diverse learners or awareness of culturally responsive teaching techniques (Lane et al., 2019; Lane & Kinnison, 2020). Christian schools that serve students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences need to be identified as exemplar models (Lane et al., 2019).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low- SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community. Intentional practices will be generally defined as a deliberate effort to foster an educational climate that allows learning to flourish within all students (Dickens, 2015). Bandura's social cognitive theory demonstrates how individual learning in the classroom is connected to a welcoming and inclusive school environment, leading to the shaping of the hearts and minds of young learners into Christian disciples.

Significance of the Study

This multi-site case study contributes to the knowledge base of how schools provide a welcoming and inclusive school environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The theoretical perspective outlines how self-efficacy beliefs and the interconnectedness of the environment, behavior, and internal personal factors contribute to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities. The empirical perspective confers with other studies that highlight the need for Christian schools to provide welcoming and inclusive environments for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities. The practical perspective describes how this study can effect change for students and families, teachers, and school leaders.

Theoretical Perspective

This study examined the self-efficacy beliefs of the school leaders and teachers who create a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Welcoming and including students from historically marginalized groups into a school community requires a belief that challenges the status quo. Self-efficacy has significant implications for students, teachers, and school leaders (DiBenedetto, 2018). Teachers and school leaders who believe that they can reach every student in their classroom have increased self-efficacy. When a student has a teacher who believes they can learn something new, that student will likely have greater self-efficacy (Lyons & Bandura, 2019).

Additionally, when students can develop their learning capacities, their sense of confidence or efficacy grows significantly. Through the social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) stated that behavior, environmental influences, and internal personal factors all cause and can be caused by each other (Bandura, 1986). This framework makes it clear how children's

development and learning are shaped by interactions among the environmental factors, relationships, and learning opportunities they experience, both in and out of school.

Empirical Perspective

The significance of this data is helpful given the growing racial diversity in our nation. Christian schools need to prepare for and lead the dialogue on diversity, equity, and inclusion with the Gospel (Murray, 2020). Experts agree that there is a shortage of Christian schools providing services to students with special needs and students from low SES backgrounds (Bachrach, 2021; Lane, 2017). There is an overall unfamiliarity and lack of collaboration between policy, practice, and professionals working together (Payne, 2019). Educators in general are unfamiliar with the main principles of IDEA (Lane & Kinnison, 2020) and culturally responsive teaching practices (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Preservice teachers often do not feel prepared to meet the needs of diverse learners or to build collaborative relationships with supportive services, community resources, and parents.

Practical Perspective

By highlighting three Christian schools currently educating children with learning differences and/or students from low SES backgrounds, critical information can be gleaned regarding this phenomenon. This multi-site case study addressed current staffing, service delivery models, and how Christian schools can train qualified Christian teachers to serve children from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences (Lane, 2017). Educating students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences requires an instructional approach grounded in research that seeks to engage the whole child. Effective professional development that is evidence-based, job-embedded, and content-focused has been limited for Christian educators (Lane & Kinnison, 2020). Additionally, more recent evidence has found Christian schools serving students with learning differences that did not have a staff member

trained in the field of special education (Lane, 2017). Educators have tremendous opportunities to influence and make a difference in the lives of students academically, cognitively, ethically, physically, psychologically, socially, and emotionally (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Few researchers have addressed how Christian educators are equipped to handle the developmental needs of students, considering the interrelated systems, and how to connect with the family and the community context.

Research Questions

The central research question is derived from and aligns with the problem and purpose statements. The phenomenon of Christian schools that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities will be understood through a detailed description of each sub-question. The research questions guided the description of the beliefs, intentional practices, and preparation for Christian school leaders and teachers.

Central Research Question

How do Christian school leaders and teachers provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

Sub-Question One

How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools describe their self-efficacy beliefs about providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

This study examined the elements of three schools that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The beliefs of school leaders and teachers who see a need to provide this environment set the precedence for the phenomenon to occur. Self-efficacy refers to how strongly an individual

believes in their capabilities to perform certain behaviors at designated levels (DiBenedetto, 2018). A stronger self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1977, 1986, 1997; Lyons & Bandura, 2019). The attitudes, actions, and expectations that school leaders and teachers hold for their students determine the outcomes that their students reach (Leithwood et al., 2020). Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) suggested that educators must be aware of the varying levels of their student's culture; understand their personal cultural experiences, biases, and perspectives; and recognize the developmental milestones in learning.

Sub-Question Two

What are the intentional practices of the Christian school leaders and teachers in providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

Intentional practices involve a deliberate approach to integrating insights across multiple fields: biological, neurosciences, psychology, sociology, developmental and learning sciences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). A school intentionally prioritizes what it deems important, such as the allocating of monies and resources for curriculum and materials, highly-qualified teachers, and programs to support the school's mission. Kieran and Anderson (2019) stated that "educators must consider how students' differences affect learning and align pedagogies that address this diversity" (pp. 1212–1213). Differentiated instruction meets the needs of diverse learners as educators are aware of their students' readiness to learn, their interests, learning preferences, strengths, and challenges (Tomlinson, 2017). When schools, school leaders, and teachers foster an environment where students feel safe, valued, and celebrated, they are more likely to be successful (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).

Sub-Question Three

How do the K–12 educators who teach in Christian schools meet the varied learning needs of their students?

The present study is framed using Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, in which perceived self-efficacy is defined as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). When teachers believe their students can be successful, they create learning environments that promote students' success (Tomlinson, 2017). The connection between an educator's beliefs in their own capabilities to meet the diverse learning needs of the students in their classroom and their practice as an educator will be exhibited through engaging, relevant, and interesting learning environments. Educators who are aware of the varied ways that students learn, design and plan instruction that meets the needs of every learner (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). This research study contributes to understanding how the K–12 teachers at three private Christian schools are prepared to meet the diverse learning needs of every student.

Definitions

Terms pertinent to the study are listed, defined, and supported by the literature.

1. *Christian school* – Private, non-denominational founded primarily on Protestant beliefs formed primarily by evangelical Christians (Maitanmi, 2019).
2. *Culturally responsive teaching* – Using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, frames of reference, and performance styles of ethnically diverse students to make learning encounters more relevant to and effective for them (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).
3. *Inclusive* – A learning environment where all children are accepted and valued; understanding and accommodating individual differences through appropriate

curriculum, instruction, and resources; and provision of supports as needed within the general education system (Lyons et al., 2016; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018).

4. *Low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds* – Historically underserved groups that experience inadequate nutrition; fewer learning experiences; instability of residence; lower quality of schools; exposure to environmental toxins; family violence; and homelessness, dangerous streets, less access to friends and services (Duncan et al., 2019).
5. *Social and emotional learning (SEL)* – The process by which individuals acquire and apply core competencies to recognize and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, appreciate the perspectives of others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, make responsible decisions, and handle personal and interpersonal situations constructively (Elias et al., 1997).
6. *Learning differences* – Children who are formally identified with an educational disability as defined under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or who do not qualify for such services yet demonstrate academic, behavioral, or adaptation ability or achievement deficits (Lane et al., 2019).
7. *Worldview* – "A commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently about the fundamental constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being" (Sire, 2015, p. 141).

Summary

Norsworthy et al. (2018) presented an urgent need to provide best teaching practices that are culturally responsive and student-centered so that students with learning differences and/or students from high-poverty backgrounds can reach their highest, God-given potential. It is

essential for Christian schools to serve students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences in settings that promote an inclusive learning environment. In Matthew 25:31–46 (*NIV,* 1978/2011), Jesus explains to His disciples that by caring for others in need we care for Christ: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." As Comenius (1907) stated, "We do not know to what uses divine providence has destined this or that man; but this is certain, that out of the poorest, the most abject, and the most obscure, He has produced instruments for His glory" (p. 66). We must view each student as God's image-bearer. Genesis 1:26 (*NIV,* 1978/2011) tells us, "God created mankind in His own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." Our origin as God's image-bearers overrides our abilities and our ethnic origins; a multicultural education approach insists that a diverse society can achieve unity through diversity; it need not eliminate cultural differences (Stonestreet, 2017). The need for cultural competence in our society is still a substantial barrier to overcome. The attempt to infuse a culturally responsive mindset into a racially diverse, multicultural school can even be viewed as a daunting task. However, Christian schools can take the lead on providing a welcoming and inclusive environment with the effort to produce teachers and key leaders with a sensitivity to students' differences and a commitment to meeting the academic needs of all students through culturally relevant and responsive teaching.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

Choosing to serve students who learn differently and/or come from a background where they do not have the resources or opportunities available to them takes a certain mindset from the school leaders and teachers. Unfortunately, many private Christian schools have a culture of exclusiveness that does not model the world that Jesus has placed us in to share the gospel. The mission field is considered "out there" instead of the Christian school campus. It is up to the leadership team to create a culture where all students are included, belong, and are served in a hospitable manner (Bachrach, 2021; Lane, 2017). Christian school leaders are responsible for ensuring that students from low-income communities and with learning differences have opportunities for educational success.

This chapter explores Bandura's social cognitive theory (1986), which provides the theoretical framework for this study. This chapter also examines the relevant scholarly literature that focuses on four categories that pertain to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences: (a) a Christian education, (b) students with learning differences, (c) students from low SES backgrounds, and (d) best practices of school leaders and teachers. These categories are essential in understanding the common threads among Christian school leaders and teachers who welcome students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

Theoretical Framework

Implementing a theoretical framework for this qualitative case study is essential to connect the research to the existing body of knowledge and then extend that knowledge to current settings that will benefit from the information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory informed the approach of this study. In 1971, Bandura first

introduced the social learning theory, stating that people learn through direct instruction or observation (Bandura, 1971). Bandura observed this while conducting research in his lab using an inflatable clown named Bobo to model behaviors for children. Bandura observed that children who witnessed adults beating up Bobo the clown were more likely to do so themselves. Findings based on this observation became a research movement, demonstrating that learning can occur through imitation and social modeling (Bandura, 1971). Bandura (1986) later changed the social learning theory to social cognitive theory and added that people also reach self-efficacy through self-regulation, observations, and reciprocal determinism. Within the social cognitive theory, Bandura (1986) stated that behavior, environmental influences, and internal personal factors all cause and can be caused by each other. Individuals are shaped by what they see and experience and are also influenced by those around them by what they say and what they do. According to Bandura (2001), social behavior comes from our environment and the people we imitate.

An individual who believes in their ability to be successful in certain circumstances exhibits self-efficacy, as Bandura (1986) described. Bandura (1997) defined self-efficacy as "an individual's beliefs about their capabilities to produce at designated levels of performance that exercise influence over events that affect their lives" (p. 71). Self-efficacy governs how much a person is willing to strive and persist until they are successful (Bandura, 1997). Lyons and Bandura (2019) described self-efficacy as how strongly individuals believe in their own capabilities to perform certain behaviors at designated levels. A stronger self-efficacy reflects confidence in the ability to exert control over one's motivation, behavior, and social environment (Bandura, 1986, 1997; Lyons & Bandura, 2019). The persistence of effort also describes the nature of self-efficacy (Lyons & Bandura, 2019).

As a result of Bandura's work, psychologists recognize that all individuals are the agent of their self-development, with the ability to adapt and self-regulate to achieve their desired

future (DiBenedetto, 2018). Self-regulated learning is a deliberate action performed by an individual that aims at improving learning or performance of some type (Lyons & Bandura, 2019). Research demonstrated that students' behaviors, classroom environments, and self-efficacy are closely related, and positive teacher feedback has been proven to improve self-efficacy (DiBenedetto, 2018; Korinek & deFur, 2019). Bandura (1986) also believed that students learn through reflection and modeling in a social context. The sense of efficacy is gleaned from observing a negative or positive model that will influence the level of self-efficacy an individual has when confronted with a similar task.

While self-efficacy is related to an individual's perceived abilities (Bandura, 1986), self-regulation involves self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions that are consistently designed to affect individual learning (McClelland et al., 2016). Self-regulation skills, combined with motivation, goal-seeking, and systematic control of effort, are essential skills for successful learners to possess (Lyons & Bandura, 2019). They are behaviors that are crucial for successful academic and social performance across a range of subjects and school levels (Cantor et al., 2019). Students with learning differences and low SES backgrounds have better educational outcomes in self-regulated learning environments because they learn how to make choices and take responsibility for their behavior as they focus their thoughts, feelings, and actions. Students who lack self-regulation are more likely to exhibit poorer student outcomes, including underachievement, absenteeism, dropout, strained relationships with peers and adults, and time away from teaching and learning (Turnbull et al., 2020).

Researchers concur that self-regulation leads to increased responsibility for their behavior and learning over time (Cantor et al., 2019; Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). The basic self-regulation processes involve setting goals and judging anticipated outcomes of actions; evaluating progress toward goals; and self-regulating thoughts, emotions, and actions (Bandura,

1986). The systematic practice of setting and attaining goals is critical to self-regulation. Positive relationships with teachers promote self-regulation, supporting children's classroom behavior (Osher et al., 2020). Self-regulated behaviors include attending, participating, following directions, organizing, managing materials and time, and completing assignments (Korinek & deFur, 2019). The connection of a person's thinking with the behavior that is a result of that thinking, concerning the environmental factors, helps to set the precedence to establish a welcoming and inclusive environment in a school.

Everyone has lived experiences that shape their current beliefs and motivations. If an individual lacks certain experiences due to environmental factors, how will the knowledge and thinking necessary to function in different environments form? Personal beliefs about an individual's situation serve as a critical source of their motivation (Leithwood et al., 2017). Examining the commonalities and patterns of Christian schools that include students with disabilities and/or from low SES backgrounds illuminates the benefits of a welcoming and inclusive school environment that is mutually beneficial to all stakeholders. The relationship of the interconnectedness of the beliefs of school leaders, paired with the views of teachers, and paired with the students' beliefs, provides the evidence for the purpose of serving students with disabilities and from low SES backgrounds (Payne, 2019). People are motivated when they believe the circumstances in which they find themselves are conducive to accomplishing the goals they hold personally important (DiBenedetto, 2018; Leithwood et al., 2017).

Related Literature

There is a limited body of literature related to Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Research regarding Christian schools that serve diverse learning populations points to the values and practices of the school leaders. It is essential to consider that students from low SES backgrounds have

additional factors that must be in effect in a school environment so the students will flourish and reach their full potential. Typically, students with learning differences and students from low SES backgrounds need individualized support that is research-based and incorporates neuroscience that supports the best way any student learns (Cantor et al., 2019). The research on schools' best practices is not specific to Christian schools. Still, best practices that are empirically validated to improve student achievement can be applied to Christian school settings.

A High-Quality Christian Education

Christian schools are under immense pressure to meet academic standards while maintaining an integral faith-based school environment. Stonestreet (2017) defined Christian education as a sweeping narrative that allows students to understand the implications that Christianity is the truth to interpret who they are. A biblical worldview connects students to a larger vision of the world that provides meaning and purpose on what life is all about. The emphasis for Christian education has been for students to develop a worldview based on biblical truths so that they can maintain a reference point and live a Christlike life in the real world (Slater, 2019). Smith (2016) suggested that the task of Christian education might be framed as the process of helping people find what they were made for and learning to love what they are made to love. It involves the intentional shaping of an educational environment in which students can learn to know and love God, themselves, and others so that consequently, all may flourish (Norsworthy et al., 2018).

The gospel is exemplified when Christian schools do not just give instructions for how to behave when students leave campus and enter the world, but model it on the school campus by welcoming students from diverse backgrounds and with various abilities. The biblical mandate for Christians to welcome and include others is evidenced throughout the Bible. For example, in John 9:1–3 (*NIV*, 1978/2011), Jesus makes it clear that God has a purpose for disability:

> As he passed by, he saw a man blind from birth. And his disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "It was not that this man sinned, or his parents, but that the works of God might be displayed in him."

Jesus also reminds his followers to include individuals from all walks of life in Luke 14:12–14 (*NIV*, 1978/2011):

> When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

The goal of Christian educators teaching from a biblical worldview is to affect the whole child, not just the mind, by allowing an encounter with Jesus Christ in every aspect of the school. Biblical education promotes a worldview emphasizing that the God of creation and revelation, not simply the God of nature and humanity, is the ultimate object of our worship (Norsworthy et al., 2018). It is essential that the perspectives of various stakeholders, students, parents, administrators, and teachers ensure that all persons are seen as valuable creations of a Sovereign God (Bachrach, 2021). In a continuing examination of what God's word says, 1 John 4:7–8 (*NIV*, 1978/2011) states, "Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love." How we understand God's love, shapes how we understand individuals, which, in turn, shapes how we approach education. The parable of the sheep and the goats found in Matthew 25:34–40 (*NIV*, 1978/2011) illustrates a model for the Christian community of educators, who embody His life and love, to anchor their teaching practice in:

> Then the King will say to those on his right, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me." Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?" The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

This portion of scripture reflects the mandate for Christian school leaders and teachers to have a mindset that is inclusive, welcoming, and believes that all students can learn. The question arises, Is it possible for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences to receive a quality Christian education? There is a lack of empirical evidence supporting the idea that Christian schools should be open to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The lack of research reinforces the need for teachers and school staff to be equipped to meet the needs of different learners so that students with autism spectrum disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders, specific learning disorders, intellectual disabilities, physical disabilities, communication disorders, poor social skills, traumatic life experiences, and students from poor neighborhoods who do not have exposure to enriching environments are welcomed and included into a Christian school community (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Jensen, 2016; Lane et al., 2019).

If typically developing students are the only ones served in Christian schools, then it shows preference for one student over another (Lane et al., 2019). There is an element of

resistance to include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities in the general education classroom. Many teachers still hold a mentality that these students belong elsewhere, and that extra effort would be required to include these students into the classroom (Norsworthy et al., 2018). It may be realistic that extra effort is needed, but usually when a teacher is willing to see the strengths of the individual student and find ways to celebrate and appreciate their differences, they become aware that they are more alike than different.

The option for parents of children from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences is limited in terms of a quality Christian education. This limitation results from the inability of the Christian school to meet the educational needs of these children through available services and support. However, many parents have the desire to enroll their children with special needs in Christian schools. Lane et al. (2019) proposed this is due to a low view of public schools. Private schools are perceived to offer a safer environment and quality academics in a religious environment.

Typically for families of multiple children of various achievement levels, hard choices need to be made about where to send all of their children since many Christian schools include certain siblings that are typically developing and exclude others. This leaves families with the dilemma of whether to enroll their child with a disability in their local public school because their Christian school has stated that it is not equipped to serve the child with a disability, or do they keep the family together and enroll all the children in the public school where all children can be served together? This is a decision that Christian families may be forced to make when one or more of their children has an identified disability (Lane & Kinnison, 2020). The primary teachings of Christ, that all are welcome, is negated when Christian schools separate family members by accepting some and rejecting other children.

Bachrach (2021) suggested that the Christian virtue of hospitality is a "necessary quality" that should characterize the classroom and embody the Christian educator for classrooms to be inclusive. Hospitable classrooms require intentional communication through words and actions that convey acceptance and belonging (Lane et al., 2019). Educators must recognize that students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences are created in God's image and are more like the other students than different. Moltmann (1988) suggested the need to re-envision people and recognize that "every human life has its limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. We are all born needy, and we die helpless. So, in truth there is no such thing as a life without disability" (p. 106).

Effectively meeting the needs of all students is a common goal of most schools; however, welcoming and including students into a Christian school is based more upon the perceived capacity of a school. Christian schools will cite the lack of funds, qualified faculty, and the perceived need by the school's constituency (Lane et al., 2019). The commitment to care for another human being should take precedence in a place such as a Christian school, which usually emphasizes loving one another in its mission statement. Christian schools that do not demonstrate welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities are not living up to their moral imperative that society might expect, which is to have more of an inclusive environment in which all students are enrolled regardless of ability or SES status (Bachrach, 2021; Norsworthy et al., 2018).

Students with Learning Differences

Historically, children with special needs did not have the same educational rights as their typical peers. The civil rights landmark case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) demonstrated that Black children, and children of other minority races, were entitled to equal access to a public education. Additional court cases began to follow acknowledging the lack of

equitable educational settings for children with special needs. *The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Citizens (PARC) vs. the Commonwealth* (1972) and *Mills v. D.C. Board of Education* (1972) set the requirement that all students with disabilities are entitled to a free and appropriate public education, in the same schools as their non-disabled peers, along with means to resolve disputes regarding placement (Turnbull et al., 2020). In 1975, Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Students Act, Public Law 94-142, which has been amended several times and renamed to Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). IDEA declared that the nation's goals for students with disabilities are equal opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (Turnbull et al., 2020).

Parents who place children in private schools forfeit their right to special education services (Kurth et al., 2017). The IDEA's regulations stipulate that students who attend private schools lack individual rights to receive some or all of the special education and related services that they might have received in public schools (IDEA, 2004). Additionally, Christian school leaders can choose not to accept public services or funding. This does not mean that children in private schools are denied all services under the IDEA. Instead, the regulations grant public officials the power to develop service plans and to decide which students from private schools will be served. Public schools may provide services to students placed in private schools, but public schools are not required to do so. However, collaborative and consultative Child Find activities are required (Lane & Kinnison, 2020).

Child Find is defined under IDEA (2004) as the responsibility of each state to identify, locate, and evaluate children who have or are suspected of having a disability. Once a child is identified as having special needs, districts afford each child the opportunity to participate fully in special education programs through a free and appropriate public education (IDEA, 2004). Parents are faced with deciding to return their child to the public school or remain in the private

school with limited to no services (Bachrach, 2021). The decision to provide services varies significantly among districts and states. Most Christian schools that offer limited special education programs and services, if any at all, typically tell parents that the absence of services is due to the lack of funds, space, qualified faculty, and the perceived need for special education by the school's constituency (Lane et al., 2019). Christian schools that provide supportive services to students with learning differences may include (a) minimal formal services, (b) additional tuition for access to formal services, (c) private services at parent expense, and (d) minimal consultation services from the public school (Lane & Kinnison, 2020).

One of the significant questions regarding the provision of special education services to students with disabilities in Christian schools is the extent to which they are eligible for funding under current IDEA regulations because, in general, faith-based schools do not qualify for tax dollars (Lane et al., 2019). Although some Christian schools do participate in federally funded programs such as Title I and free and reduced lunch programs, they usually do not receive direct, state, or federal tax dollars. Christian schools depend on tuition, gifts, and in some cases endowments for their operation (Bachrach, 2021). Having to rely on tuition and gifts creates a challenge of balancing rising tuition costs to keep affordability a goal for families. Christian schools must prioritize budget items to align with the core values and mission of the school, which may result in the elimination of supplemental programs and services such as the hiring of a highly qualified ESE (exceptional student education) teacher, behavior therapist, or reading interventionist (Lane & Kinnison, 2020). Schools that have successfully funded special education programs begin with the mindset that students with special needs were "wholly" part of the school culture and that funding to serve them should derive from the general budget (Lane et al., 2019).

While IDEA (2004) does not define inclusion, it offers the principle of least restrictive environment (LRE), which focuses on student placement in general education classrooms with non-disabled peers. Participation ranges from physical placement to meaningful participation and outcomes (Kurth et al., 2017). Federal legislation for Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015) also promoted an expectation that students will be increasingly served with their typically developing peers in an inclusive educational setting. ESSA (2015) also requires the use of preventive frameworks like multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS), and Universal Design for Learning (UDL), to increase the integration of effective academic and behavioral practices for all students, including those with an identified disability.

When MTSS is used in a school, students' progress is routinely monitored and different instructional interventions are implemented based on the assessment results (Choi et al., 2017). Research has shown that when evidence-based interventions, as a part of MTSS, are implemented with fidelity, student achievement in reading and mathematics improves, as well as student behavior (Choi et al., 2017; Collins et al., 2019). UDL addresses student differences by considering how traditional instructional approaches produce barriers to learning for non-traditional students (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Educators must be aware of each student's present skill level and consider a variety of ways to plan instruction. UDL aims to change the design of the environment through engagement, representation, action, and expression rather than to change the learner. When environments are intentionally designed to reduce barriers, all learners can engage in rigorous, meaningful learning (CAST, 2018). Research has shown that when PBIS is implemented with integrity, schools experience a reduction of issues related to discipline, and aggressive behavior. In addition, research acknowledges that students' emotional

regulation and academic engagement are improved, along with school safety and improvement in teacher retention data (Bilias-Lolis et al., 2017).

The opportunity for students with learning differences to attend a Christian school continues to increase as schools develop unique programs to meet a growing demand (Lane et al., 2019). A learning environment where all children are accepted and valued is desired by many families and students alike. More students have been identified for special education services in the last two decades than ever before in the United States (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019). This creates a growing need for Christian schools to provide research-based practices to serve this population of students in an inclusive setting that values, respects, and involves all individuals (Turnbull et al., 2020). Effective teaching practices are beneficial for *all* students. Research indicates that students with and without disabilities do as well or better being educated together than those who are educated separately (Lane & Kinnison, 2020; Lyons et al., 2016). Schools that foster deep learning—the kind that forms character and transforms lives—should focus on developing practices of life together (Messmore, 2018).

Although all individuals are uniquely created, neuroscience tells us that developmental trajectory is influenced by ongoing reciprocal interactions between their developing brain and their physical and social contexts (Osher et al., 2020). A biblical view of human development acknowledges that intelligence is constantly changing. A child's brain grows as they explore the environment through their senses, and spiritual growth is supported by developmentally appropriate learning experiences (Penn, 2019). The brain is built to change in response to experience and in response to training (Brown, 2016). Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to heal, grow, and change (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Osher et al. (2020) found that developmentally rich contexts can function as a "constructive web" (p. 8) where complex dynamic skills such as problem solving, decision making, language acquisition are developed.

Education that focuses on the logical reasoning and problem-solving skills of cognitive development not only increases neuroplasticity but also strengthens academic achievement and intrinsic motivation (Osher et al., 2020). Christian schools need to lead with the knowledge that intelligence is not fixed as they create rich learning environments that welcome students with autism spectrum disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders, specific learning disorders, intellectual disabilities, communication disorders, and motor disorders. Christian school educators must foster the belief in the brain's plasticity as they embrace these families and students who are created in the image of God for his purposes and His glory (Messmore, 2018).

Lane et al. (2019) emphasized that a deep and sustained commitment to inclusiveness is necessary before a school can accomplish this agenda in policy and practice. An inclusive school should seek to create problem-solving opportunities, emphasizing the educational strengths of all students. Inclusion encompasses three fundamental principles: access, participation, and support (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Qvortrup & Qvortrup, 2018). Inclusion welcomes students who learn differently into a traditional learning environment. Still more importantly, inclusion also educates students who are considered typically abled in the social acceptance of non-typical peers. All employees share the responsibility of working together to create and maintain a climate conducive to learning. An effective, inclusive school acknowledges that such a commitment requires administrative leadership, ongoing technical assistance, and long-term professional development (Jones & Watson, 2017; Lane et al., 2019). However, a lack of understanding surrounds the special education programs' existence, characteristics, and performance in Christian schools (Lane & Kinnison, 2020).

Students from Low SES Backgrounds

Payne (2019) suggested that poverty is typically thought of in terms of monetary resources only; however, poverty impacts an individual's background and experiences that

contribute to the learning process. Poverty affects the resources available to an individual or family related to emotional choices, cognitive abilities and skills, spiritual guidance, and physical health (Payne, 2019). Duncan et al. (2019) found that poverty limits supportive systems/relationships/role models that are nurturing and appropriate, knowledge of hidden cultural norms, and having proper language and vocabulary to succeed in school and work settings. Poverty occurs when the cost-of-living increase does not keep pace with inflation, and real wages for the middle class and poor decrease (Jensen, 2016). The Office of Management and Budget defines poverty as individuals with less than what is needed to purchase food, shelter, clothing, and other essentials (Duncan et al., 2019). Over half (51%) of all American workers make less than $30,000 a year; the federal poverty level for a family of five is $28,410; and almost 40% of all American workers do not earn $20,000 per year (Jensen, 2016).

There is a strong correlation between most measures of social disadvantage and school achievement (Choi et al., 2017; Payne, 2019). The racially based disparities and segregated service of special education students and students from low SES backgrounds have been documented since the 1960s and 1970s and continue to impact our education system today. Research indicated a correlation between children from low SES environments and a lack of high-quality early learning experiences and environments, dysfunctional homes, and a culture of punishment instead of prevention (Turnbull et al., 2020). Payne (2019) found that living in poverty causes individuals to experience more stress in their everyday environment, affecting their children's development. Schools in low-income communities are more likely to be overcrowded with structural problems and children face physiological and emotional stress from higher levels of air pollution, which leads to impaired socioemotional, physical, cognitive, and academic development (Duncan et al., 2019; Leahy & Shore, 2019).

Children from high-poverty backgrounds generally have poor cognitive development, language, memory, and emotional and social challenges, as well as health and safety issues (Duncan et al., 2019). Students' development and learning are shaped by interactions among environmental factors, relationships, and learning opportunities they experience both in and out of school (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). According to Jensen (2016), their brains are designed to reflect their environment, not to rise above it automatically. Duncan et al. (2019) found that frequently students from low SES backgrounds have chronic exposure to violence and toxic stress which disrupt the process of normal child development. Payne (2019) found that the stress of poverty increases depression rates among mothers, which results in increased use of physical punishment and the inability to adjust parenting to meet the demands of higher-needs children. Additionally, Payne (2019) found that a mother's SES is also related to her child's inattention, disinterest, and lack of cooperation in school.

Low socioeconomic status is negatively associated with brain development when it specifically relates to language, memory, and executive functioning skills (Brown, 2018a; Cantor et al., 2019). Brain development is complex and evolves throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence. Neuroscience has documented specific periods of active brain development that are highly sensitive to both positive and negative environmental stimuli. There is evidence of neural tube development just 5 weeks after conception and considerable brain growth continues from late pregnancy until 2 years old (Osher et al., 2020). Cantor et al. (2019) affirmed that the prefrontal cortex, which supports self-regulation and executive functions, develops rapidly in the first 2 years of life, at 7 to 9 years old, and again in the mid-teens. Research has found that material deprivation and stress are linked to low SES, which in turn shape neurodevelopment by depriving the brain of critical stimuli and increasing its exposure to negative input (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019). There is a consensus that brain development is driven by both genetic and

environmental influences, and interactions between the two (Brown, 2018b). Increasing evidence supports the link between low SES, learning disabilities, adverse psychological outcomes, and chronic disease, including asthma, obesity, hypertension, heart disease and diabetes (Cantor et al., 2019; Johnson et al., 2016).

Duncan et al. (2019) found that a child's home environment can substantially influence the communication patterns in children. Usually, communication in poverty environments focuses on stopping the behavior, whereas communication in higher SES environments focuses on coaching the child on appropriate behavior (Payne, 2019). Students develop communication patterns and habits from social relationships nurtured from an early age. Emotional resources develop from observing how positive role models deal with unfavorable situations. Students need warm, person-to-person interactions to form positive relationships with peers that positively impact long-term socioemotional consequences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Cantor et al. (2019) found that caregivers in low SES environments lack warmth and sensitivity, are overworked, overstressed, and authoritarian with children, resorting to the familiar discipline strategies that their own parents harshly used.

Cognitive development and skills are impacted by poverty. As measured by reading and mathematics test scores, the gap in academic preparation has increased significantly between low SES and high SES students (Choi et al., 2017). Children are more successful in school when they can pay attention, get along with peers and teachers, and are not preoccupied or depressed because of troubles at home. Duncan et al. (2019) compared reading skill and behavior gaps between high- and low-income kindergarten and fifth graders in the areas of reading achievement, school engagement, antisocial behavior, and mental health problems. The results from their national study revealed that high-income students scored higher in reading achievement and school engagement and low-income children scored higher on the measure of

antisocial behavior and mental health problems. Educational achievement gaps are much more complex and costly to close as children advance through elementary, middle, and high school.

Research has found that children from poverty have difficulty meeting the academic and social challenges of school (Dietrichson et al., 2017; Duncan et al., 2019). Research has shown that initial reading competency in children is correlated with the home literacy environment, the number of books owned, and parent distress (Choi et al., 2017). Many low SES parents are busy working multiple jobs and/or do not have the skills themselves to parent in a way that fosters rich, cognitive development. Choi et al. (2017) found that children from low SES families enter high school with average literacy skills 5 years behind students from high-income backgrounds. The high school dropout rate among persons 16–24 years old was highest among low-income families, almost 10%, as compared to almost 3% for high-income families (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019).

There is a greater likelihood of the child's neighborhood being less conducive to academic achievement, impacting positive peer support and positive role models (Dietrichson et al., 2017). Additionally, students from low SES backgrounds may not be aware of the skills needed to thrive academically in school, such as displaying appropriate behavior in educational environments, using free time for enrichment and learning activities, and attaining the necessary support from home to complete assignments (Bilias-Lolis et al., 2017). Payne (2019) found that the socioeconomic problems extend beyond school walls and into the community to include high levels of unemployment, physical and mental health issues, migration, and low educational achievement. Additionally, schools in these areas often face other pressures such as challenging student behavior, high levels of staff turnover, and poor physical environment. Osher et al. (2020), pointed to:

> developmentally unsuitable, insufficiently supportive, and culturally incongruent contexts that can exacerbate stress and hinder the development of foundational competencies, which include the necessary bonds that children make with adults, skills to cope with and manage stressful conditions, and the regulation of emotion and attention to effectively engage and accomplish goals. (p. 8)

Other research demonstrated that educators working in schools serving low-income students must exceed normal efforts to achieve and sustain improvement because students from low SES backgrounds are starting school well behind their more affluent peers (Berkowitz et al., 2021; Dietrichson et al., 2017). These reasons contribute to the evidence that schools in low SES areas find it harder to improve and stay effective. There are specific approaches that have been proven effective when looking at educating students from low SES environments. These include a highly structured learning environment that is personal and caring, positive reinforcement from the teacher, and connecting learning to real-life experiences. When these approaches are in place, students from low SES backgrounds can make transformations that transfer to other contexts, thereby enabling them to succeed in new, challenging environments (Osher et al., 2020).

The prerequisite for correcting ineffective education requires the examination and engagement of critical self-reflection about personal assumptions and cultural beliefs. This is an important first step to recognize where one stands concerning the current sociocultural context. When Christian schools address the challenging topic of diversity, they have an opportunity to prepare students with academic excellence for the diverse world that they will soon be entering. Addressing diversity is a challenge. Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) noted that after decades of research by social scientists, economists, and demographers, research supports the fact that socially diverse groups are more innovative than a conforming group. As educators and students

solve problems together and learn from each other's perspectives, their understanding is broadened.

There is a wide array of research that supports the assumption that there are elements of successful schools that can be replicated to improve aspects of most schools (Leithwood et al., 2020). When the best educational practices converge with biblical principles, students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences can reach their highest God-given potential. Leithwood et al. (2020) noted that elements of successful schools include focused leadership, student achievement, school culture, safety, and professional development. These are important factors; however, if they do not rest on the belief that all children have a God-given potential, then they will not work together towards the measuring stick of academic achievement. Research has found that educational environments that support the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual dimensions of children's development need to be interactive and interrelated to achieve optimal student outcomes (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). A focus on improving teaching and learning, creating information-rich environments, the collaboration of a learning community, ongoing professional development, parental involvement, and increased funding and resources have been found to improve the quality of academic achievement in low-income schools (DiBenedetto, 2018; Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Rhew et al. (2018) found that having educators who focus on curriculum and instruction and use constructive feedback leads to significant academic achievement.

Leadership

School leaders set the tone and help to establish the culture of a school. It is up to the leaders of the school to influence the school culture toward their biblical mission of reflecting the reality that students are God's "workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that they should walk in them" (*NIV,* 1978/2011, Ephesians 2:10). An

effective, inclusive school that welcomes students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences acknowledges that such a commitment requires administrative leadership that is collaborative, culturally aware, and focused on cultivating relationships (Eckert, 2018; Swaner et al., 2021). These leaders successfully promote environments with strong relationships of trust, vision, goals, and a sense of community (Khalifa, 2018). School leadership is difficult regardless of the setting. Research indicates that leadership operates best within a school when it is distributed and collaborative (Leithwood et al., 2020; Marzano, 2018; Swaner et al., 2021). The transformational leadership approach focuses on distributing leadership among stakeholders, leading to a shared vision and shared commitment to school change (Marzano, 2018). Leithwood et al. (2020) found that transformational leaders increase the capacity of others in the school, which leads to a positive link between the degree of distributed leadership within a school and students' academic achievement. For a school to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, a collaborative school culture must be established in which members take collective responsibility for all students (Marzano, 2018).

Dhuey and Smith (2018) indicated that effective leaders positively influence student learning, especially in schools serving high proportions of students from historically disadvantaged backgrounds. The principal is expected to understand the standards of quality instruction and to have ample knowledge of the curriculum to ensure that appropriate content is being delivered to all students (Marzano, 2018). The mindset of the school leader, that every student can and will succeed, is replicated throughout the school building. High expectations positively affect the attitude and motivations of students, teachers, and staff (Leithwood et al., 2020). This is critically important for schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Effective school leaders repeatedly communicate the school's mission and vision statement clearly so that teachers and staff are focused on goals

and expectations related to student learning and achievement (Marzano, 2018). Schools are enhanced when a shared vision includes high expectations, a common understanding of the nature of good teaching, student learning, and effective ways to evaluate student learning (Schildkamp et al., 2017). When teachers receive this clarity from their school leaders, they can more effectively help students learn. Clear communication from school leadership that is consistent in words and actions and aligned to the school's mission leads to the achievement of academic goals for all students (Marzano, 2018).

Schein and Schein (2017) identified in his unfolding of the organization culture theory that the organization's culture consists of intangible and tangible factors such as individual and collective values, assumptions, norms, behaviors, and convictions. Within the school setting, organization culture is the fusion of the work environment and the teachers' assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, skills, behaviors, perspectives, habits, and prejudices (Murphy & Louis, 2018). School leaders of welcoming and inclusive schools recognize and nurture the cultural identity of students, staff, and the community in which the school is located. Khalifa (2018) also found these dynamics influenced teacher and student morale, behavior, commitment, child development, and student learning. Positive school culture is necessary to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. When a school leader employs effective processes and strategies that communicate that all children are capable of learning if given an equal opportunity to excel, they build a positive school culture simultaneously (Eckert, 2018; Khalifa, 2018).

Instructional Practice

Research indicates that the most important factor affecting student learning is the teacher (Marzano, 2018). There are certain instructional practices that are consistently associated with student achievement when paired with understanding the characteristics of the learner: creating

academic objectives to establish learning expectations; specific classroom management strategies; pacing instruction appropriately (Leithwood et al., 2020). While the teacher and instructional practices are correlated with student achievement, research on instructional leadership points to the need for school leaders to have a clear vision, common language, and model of instructional practice in a school (Marzano, 2018). School leaders who effectively support teacher instruction emphasize the value of research-based strategies (Leithwood et al., 2020).

Bambrick-Santoya (2019) asked, "How do we know if our students are learning, and if they're not, what do we do about it?" (p. 17). The answer is by collecting data that show evidence of student learning and using that data to inform education-related decisions. Researchers acknowledge the effectiveness of using data to adapt instruction to meet the needs of diverse learners (Janakiraman et al., 2019). Data on student learning allow principals to steer and oversee instruction, pinpoint problems with student learning, and professionally develop staff (Marzano, 2018). Data become a regular part of the learning process as time is built into the teachers' schedules to analyze the data, enabling the data to inform decision-making. Educators need to learn skills such as collecting and organizing data, analyzing and summarizing data, and synthesizing and prioritizing data (Schildkamp et al., 2017). Data that help the teacher to evaluate the learning environment are gathered through formative assessments. Continuous formative assessment is necessary to help teachers differentiate instruction to meet the diverse learning needs in a classroom. Formative assessment provides constructive feedback to improve the teaching and learning process and leads to significant academic achievement (Rhew et al., 2018).

Culturally Responsive

Authentic learning occurs when experiences are socially and culturally responsive, which involves understanding the background and culture of all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Penn, 2019). Being aware of the culture and climate of a school is necessary to bring together a diverse student body and teaching staff. School leaders need to play a leading role in cultivating cultural responsiveness in their schools (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018; Khalifa, 2018). A cross-cultural understanding is necessary among school leaders, teachers, and staff that includes knowledge of personal biases, students' backgrounds/strengths, how the learning environment should build from students' strengths, and how to bring about change in school systems (Kieran & Anderson, 2019; Turnbull et al., 2020). Along with growing ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity, classrooms are experiencing increasing diversity within sexual orientation, gender identity, and racial tensions. According to Faust (2017), while public schools are required to remain neutral toward the topics of sexual orientation and gender identity, Title IX of the Civil Rights Act does not apply to religious schools "to the extent that application of Title IX would be inconsistent with the religious tenets of the organization" (p. 1204), even if they do receive federal funds. Christian schools can, however, model equity and inclusiveness when it comes to race, color, or national origin. As stated by Taylor (2020), Christian schools cannot fit every cultural issue into their training. Still, civil rights, justice, and human dignity are topics that need the voice and thoughtful consideration of the Christian community. As Christian schools welcome students who are consistently excluded, they could resolve sustained insensitivity and injustices that continue to be present in our society today.

While many contemporary approaches to teaching cultural competence are influenced by diverse educational, philosophical, and political movements, Christian schools should set the precedence by starting and ending with God's Word. Acts 17:26 and 28 (*NIV*, 1978/2011) tells

us, “God made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place. . . . For we are indeed his offspring.” The effort to produce teachers and key leaders with a sensitivity to students’ differences and a commitment to meeting the academic needs of all students through culturally responsive teaching is necessary. Darling-Hammond et al. (2018) stated that culturally responsive approaches support opportunities to learn for all students by supporting communication between teachers and students. Teachers need to integrate the different cultural experiences of students into classroom experiences and learn to plan their lessons intentionally (Janakiraman et al., 2019). An approach that addresses the needs of the whole child, as well as the student’s family and community, is necessary.

Culturally responsive pedagogies prompt educators to design instruction from students’ diversity as strengths rather than deficits (Kieran & Anderson, 2019). Schools that have culturally responsive approaches in place support learning and development because they have minimized tensions and helped to build conditions for learning. Conversely, schools that have not implemented culturally responsive approaches require additional mental and emotional energy that takes away from cognitive and emotional energy for learning and socialization (Osher et al., 2020). Family engagement is enhanced in culturally competent schools because they regularly assess how school policies and assessment procedures affect culturally and linguistically diverse students and families (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).

Every individual’s background and experiences provide valuable information to shape their learning process. There are culturally responsive approaches that support learning opportunities for all students so that effective communication between teachers and students can occur. These include connecting learning and instruction to students’ individual experiences, cultural resources, and needs, with an appreciation and understanding of individual variation

(Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Since we know that factors such as race, social class, and language deeply influence students' thinking, values, beliefs, and behaviors, teachers need to be purposeful in the learning environment created so that authentic connections are made with each student. The ability to bridge the cultural divide is attainable for Christian school leaders as they lead in a culturally responsive way that involves understanding the background and culture of all students, staff, and family members.

Social–Emotional Learning

The basis for social–emotional learning (SEL) is to promote engaging, supportive, and participatory learning environments. Osher et al. (2020) stated that within these learning environments, the necessary non-cognitive skills of self-discipline, self-regulation, conscientiousness, motivation, and interpersonal skills have been linked to contribute to the likelihood of personal development and adult well-being. Embedding SEL skills into Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences is essential to mitigate the barriers to learning. The explicit teaching of SEL skills is beneficial to all students because it "fosters skills, habits, and mindsets that enable academic progress, efficacy, and productive behavior" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020, p. 30). Daunic et al. (2021) stated that children's social-emotional growth is entirely connected to academic learning.

Specifically for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, embedding SEL skills into the school culture creates supportive classroom environments that support the whole child in their growth and development. For Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, incorporating SEL into the daily routine is vital to building relational trust and respect between and among staff, students, and parents (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018). Weissberg et al. (2015) provided an

overview of approaches to teaching both students and adults methods for understanding and managing emotions and social interactions. Schools that teach and enforce social-emotional relationships help children handle adversity and reduce the effects of stress. Research has shown that children and adolescents who participate in SEL programs improve their attitudes about self, others, and schools and their prosocial behavior, thereby enjoying greater psychological well-being and academic performance and having fewer conduct problems, less emotional distress, and improved test scores and grades (Daunic et al., 2021). Additionally, SEL is a restorative approach to classroom management and discipline, where students grow in responsibility for themselves and their community (Cantor et al., 2019). For Christian schools to welcome and include students from low SES and/or with learning differences, a comprehensive, explicit approach that teaches students how to calm emotions and manage responses, as well as supportive routines that enhance positive social skills between peers is needed (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018).

Gregory et al. (2021) found that SEL can also be an essential part of dropout prevention programs. Daunic et al. (2021) found that there was a link between student reports of peer social and emotional competence to graduation rates. Additionally, Gregory et al. (2021) emphasized that SEL along with other interventions has been found to prevent bullying, low-level aggression, and the school-to-prison pipeline. Cantor et al. (2019) suggested that SEL interventions for teachers in the form of mindfulness training may reduce teacher stress, which appears to contribute to exclusionary discipline and discipline disparities. Teachers can also benefit by sharing the SEL framework of the school with families to bring unity toward shared student outcomes.

A growing number of SEL programs have been reviewed by independent reviewers using systematic research review criteria (e.g., What Works Clearinghouse, 2014) and included in

registries of evidence-based programs or published summaries of the strength of the evidence (Gregory et al., 2021). Empirical and descriptive research identified six critical criteria for determining effective SEL programs: (a) developmentally appropriate, (b) culturally relevant, (c) systematic, (d) comprehensive, (e) evidence-based, and (f) forward-thinking (Osher et al., 2020). There are a variety of different ways that an SEL program to be implemented: (a) a structured curriculum where lessons are taught during set aside time; (b) a schoolwide approach integrated throughout school life; (c) out-of-school service learning or internship (Osher et al., 2020).

Parental Involvement

Siegel et al. (2019) stated that parental engagement is an essential component of a positive school climate. It significantly contributes to the classroom, school, and children's school-related social, emotional, and academic outcomes. Parental involvement has predicted a decline in problem behaviors and improvements in future educational aspirations (Daunic et al., 2021). When parents feel trusted, valued, and connected to the school staff, they become more involved and are more likely to play an active role in their child's educational experience and development (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Research further suggests that the invitation for involvement from the school, paired with parent efficacy (the parent's belief of their ability to exert a positive influence on their child's school outcome), can lead to even greater parental involvement (Siegel et al., 2019). Parental involvement is necessary for schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Christian schools must facilitate parental involvement by promoting an open environment where parents are encouraged to be engaged in the life of the school appropriately.

Although it is known that achieving parental involvement is one of the most difficult areas of school improvement in low SES areas (Berkowitz et al., 2021), few empirical studies

have examined what a welcoming school climate looks and feels like from parents' point of view. Regarding families of students with learning differences, Payne (2019) suggested that the emphasis move from parent involvement to family school linkages or partnerships. Payne (2019) stated that many families feel that school is unwelcoming or intimidating and may feel uncomfortable when a school has a different dominant language or cultural norms. There is a need for mutual interaction and collaboration between family and school that addresses cultural awareness and self-reflection.

Culturally competent schools create conditions that support family engagement and cultural responsiveness by building staff cultural proficiency and cultural humility (Khalifa, 2018). Osher et al. (2020) found that schools are more apt to change policies and practices that privilege some students and disadvantage others when policies, staff attitudes, and practices are regularly assessed. Schools must come alongside parents to advocate for the necessary change to give all children the education they deserve. Parents may need additional support due to stress, motivational issues, skills, or resources (Cantor et al., 2019). Not every parent can provide support. In that case, schools should enhance community partnership with local businesses' wraparound services to include counseling, mentoring, tutoring, and advising. God has given parents the primary responsibility for nurturing their children and the Christian school partners with parents to assist them in carrying out this responsibility (Bachrach, 2021; Norsworthy et al., 2018). The support of the whole child occurs "within concentric circles of influence, beginning with the family and extending to the school, the community, and larger economic and social forces that influence children's development directly and indirectly" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2018, p. 3).

Summary

Choosing to serve students who learn differently or come from a background where they do not have the resources or opportunities available takes a certain mindset from the school leaders and teachers. Christian schools can be designed and organized to support students by providing supportive networks and courageous leadership that fosters developmental relationships between teachers and peers. Leaders have a responsibility to ensure that students from low-income communities and with learning differences have opportunities for educational success.

Schools support developmental relationships when they foster critical conditions for learning: emotional, intellectual, and physical safety; connectedness; support; challenge; engagement; respect; and agency (Berkowitz et al., 2021). Schools that are intentional to support learner-centered instruction and environments that successfully integrate cognitive, social, and emotional processes accelerate the developmental range of students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Osher et al., 2020). The research is clear that there is an urgency to provide best teaching practices that are culturally responsive and student centered so that students with learning differences and/or students from high-poverty backgrounds can reach their highest God-given potential. The importance for Christian schools to serve students with learning differences and/or from high poverty backgrounds in settings that promote an inclusive learning environment is necessary. Courageous leadership is best summed up by Martin Luther King Jr. (2017):

> The first question which the priest and the Levite asked was: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" But . . . the good Samaritan reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?" (p. 14)

Christian schools need to do more to ensure that all students are seen as valuable creations in the image of a Sovereign God (Lane et al., 2019). In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus

explains to his disciples that by caring for others in need we care for Christ: "Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me" (*NIV,* 1978/2011, Matthew 25:40). We must view each student as God's image-bearer. Genesis 1:26 (*NIV,* 1978/2011) tells us, "God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them." As Stonestreet (2017) stated, "Our origin as God's image bearers overrides our ethnic origins" (p. 284). A multicultural education approach insists that a diverse society can achieve unity through diversity; it need not eliminate cultural differences. The need for cultural competence in our society is still a substantial barrier to overcome. The attempt to infuse a culturally responsive mindset into a racially diverse, multicultural school can even be viewed as a daunting task. However, the effort to produce teachers and key leaders with a sensitivity to students' differences and a commitment to meeting the academic needs of all students through culturally relevant and responsive teaching is necessary. "In Christ, we have the one tool that can ultimately overcome racial strife and tear down ethnic barriers" (Stonestreet, 2017, p. 287). The link between brain development, cultural learning, and social–emotional experiences that result from everyday human interactions and cognitions play a critical role in learning across the life span (Immordino-Yang et al., 2019).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences. In this chapter, I discuss the research design, the participant selection process, and the research sites. In addition, the research procedures, including research questions and analysis for the present research study are discussed. The instruments used to collect the data are introduced and explained. The analysis of the data is provided, in addition to a description of how I ensured the trustworthiness and ethical considerations of the study. The chapter concludes with a final summary.

Research Design

This qualitative study was conducted using a multi-site case study as the research method to investigate three private Christian schools that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment. Qualitative research examines "how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, pp. 7–8). A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this research study because of the desire to obtain rich, descriptive data to enhance an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Acting as a human instrument, I situated myself within three different school communities to explore the practices and strategies used at each site, with sensitivity to the participants involved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). A case study does not separate the phenomenon from its context. In case study research, the goal is to present an in-depth understanding of the case (Yin, 2018).

Case study research is defined as an empirical method that investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-world context (Yin, 2018). Case study designs vary between single case, which focuses on one issue or concern, and multiple case, which focuses on one issue with multiple cases (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The decision between single and multiple case design is based on the intent of the researcher and the goal for the study (Yin, 2018). Given the purpose of this research study, a multi-site case design was more appropriate to strengthen research findings and understand multiple variables of the phenomenon (Yin, 2018). A multi-site case study approach provided different perspectives on the issue within boundaries (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this multi-site case study, I studied the self-efficacy beliefs of school leaders and teachers that provided a welcoming and inclusive environment, and how the teachers are prepared to meet the varied learning needs of every student.

Case study research is determined by a timeframe and a specific place in order to define the data collection range (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Stake, 2006; Yin, 2018). The procedures for this multi-site case study approach were replicated to increase the strength of the findings (Yin, 2018). Multiple data collection methods led to both inductive and deductive data analysis, resulting in the identification of themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each Christian school was examined individually and across cases. Cross-case analysis was framed using Stake's (2006) data analysis worksheets including Worksheet 2 through Worksheet 4 (see Appendices J–L).

By collecting and analyzing data from three Christian schools that serve students from low SES and/or with a learning difference, I was able to identify common themes within and among all three cases, resulting in relevant recommendations for the development and implementation for Christian schools to welcome and include students that they would not otherwise. Given the amount of time required to collect data from each school that has agreed to

participate in this study, I spent 2–3 days at each site collecting data through interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus groups.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

Sub-Question One

How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools describe their self-efficacy beliefs related to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

Sub-Question Two

What are the intentional practices of the Christian school leaders and teachers at providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?

Sub-Question Three

How do the K–12 educators who teach in Christian schools meet the varied learning needs of their students?

Sites and Participants

The description of the sites and participants for this multi-site case study provides sufficient detail for the reader to visualize the context of the study. Three private Christian schools were intentionally selected because they exhibited the phenomenon of a welcoming environment that includes students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The criteria to be selected as a participant included serving as a school leader and/or a teacher for 3 or more years at one of the Christian school sites in this study.

Sites

The sites for this study were three private Christian schools that are in different geographic regions of the United States. Variation was increased by selecting schools in various geographical locations with varied size enrollments. The first school, Agape Christian School (pseudonym), is in a northern city with over one million people. The K–8 school has approximately 600 students and welcomes students with learning differences (70 students). There are two sections of each grade level. The school is racially diverse: 50% White, 35% Black, 8% Hispanic, 3% Asian, and 4% other. The school leadership is comprised of a head of school, middle school principal, lower school principal, dean of students, and director of learning support.

The second school, Promise Academy (pseudonym), is in a major city in the Midwest with a population of 420,324. The school enrolls more than 620 students, representing over 30 countries of origin. The school's racial diversity is defined as follows: 27% Hispanic/Latino, 42% Caucasian, 5% Asian, 20% African American, 5% African, and 1% Native American. One third of the student body have identified learning differences. Fifty-eight percent of students are from families under the federal poverty line and 90% receive tuition assistance. The school leadership is comprised of a superintendent, assistant superintendent, elementary/middle school principal, and high school principal.

The third school, Phileo Christian School (pseudonym), is in a northeastern city with over 1.5 million people. The K–12 school has three campuses positioned in different neighborhoods throughout the city. There are two K–5 campuses with approximately 200 students each. Each K–5 campus has one section of each grade. There is one campus for sixth- through 12th-grade students with one section of each grade totaling 125 students. The school is racially diverse: 60% Black, 25% Hispanic, 10% White, 3% Asian, and 2% other. Phileo Christian School's school

leadership is comprised of a head of school, middle/high school principal, and two elementary school principals.

Participants

I used purposeful sampling to select Christian school leaders and teachers who welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Those selected included seven school leaders and six teachers who have served for 3 or more years at one of three Christian school sites in this study.

Researcher Positionality

There are certain philosophical assumptions that I hold as a researcher. It is essential to recognize that there are biases, beliefs, and personal experiences that contribute to the position of the researcher. According to Berger (2015), reflexivity is the self-appraisal in research. It is also viewed as the process of internal dialogue and self-evaluation, as well as the acknowledgement and explicit recognition that the outcome of the research may be affected by one's situatedness within the study (Berger, 2015). Additionally, personal characteristics of the researcher, such as gender, race, affiliation, age, immigration status, personal experience, linguistic tradition, beliefs, biases, preferences, theoretical, political and ideological stances, and emotional responses affect the research process and outcome. Each person has a worldview from which they view the world and make sense of reality. I possess a biblical worldview.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework used for this case study was social constructivism. The meanings and interactions of individuals and their environment were evaluated. Researchers construct meaning from a situation and recognize how their own background shapes their interpretation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I positioned myself in the research and acknowledged

how my interpretation of the phenomenon flows from personal, cultural, and historical experiences.

Philosophical Assumptions

My worldview is a biblical worldview, based on the infallible Word of God. I believe the Bible is entirely true, and it is the foundation for everything I believe, say, and do. It means trusting and applying God's truth to every area of my life. The perspective from which I see the world and what I think about it is compared to the Word of God, enabling me to act in a way that reveals what I truly believe: "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind" (*NIV*, 1978/2011, Romans 12:2).

Contrary to a biblical worldview, someone who holds a secular worldview may be influenced by science, media, politics, or the god of their understanding, not the true and living God. One is then taken "captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ" (*NIV*, 1978/2011, Colossians 2:8). Additionally, ontological, epistemological, and axiological philosophical assumptions have provided direction for this study.

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions relate to the nature of reality and its characteristics (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The multiple realities of the individuals and schools from whom the research was gathered have significantly different settings and backgrounds that contribute to their perspective. What happens in one school may not be the nature of what happens in another. I have gathered different perspectives from different teachers and school leaders.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological assumptions define how knowledge is known (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It can be described as how we know what we know. As a researcher, I deliberately sought to

understand the values, philosophies, and intentionality of each school leader and teacher participant by conducting multiple in-depth, open-ended interviews, school observations, document analysis, and focus groups. My epistemological belief is influenced due to my role in this study as a researcher and practitioner. Thus, I can best understand the phenomenon of Christian schools providing a welcoming and inclusive environment by being involved in the experience.

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption states that the research is value-laden and that biases are present in relation to the researcher's role in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confirmability of the findings are enhanced due to the researcher's acknowledging personal values, beliefs, knowledge, and biases (Berger, 2015). As a practitioner, I am compelled to make a difference in this world by improving the educational opportunities for students who learn differently and those from low socioeconomic environments that do not have opportunities to access the best resources. As a scholar, I am committed to applying the skills and knowledge I have learned from research to inform the skills and practice of God's calling on my life. This is of particular interest to me, because I have served students with disabilities ranging from mild to severe, and from birth to adult for the past 20 years. I have worked in various settings that include home-based, public school inclusion, public school self-contained, and for the last 6 years I have had the role of supporting students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences at private Christian schools. All of my teaching experiences have been in diverse, multicultural schools with at least 70% of students at or below the poverty line.

Additionally, for the past 6 years I have had the opportunity to teach as an adjunct professor at two universities in their School of Education, focusing on special education instruction for preservice teachers. Through my different experiences in and out of the

classroom, I have been fascinated to learn about individual perceptions and biases of school leaders and teachers when confronted with students from high-poverty environments and with special education needs. It has been particularly eye-opening and at times shocking to learn about the implicit and explicit bias that I have witnessed at a few private Christian schools that do not feel students who "act the wrong way" or "have learning needs" are "welcome here."

I am compelled by the belief that "whatever God does is significant; we need to do something significant" (Crabb, 2011, p. 39). God created each person in His image (*NIV*, 1978/2011, Genesis 1:27). Dr. Larry Crabb (2011), a Christian psychologist and Bible teacher, defined significance as follows:

> A realization that I am engaged in a responsibility or job that is truly important, whose results will not evaporate with time but will last through eternity, that fundamentally involves having a meaningful impact on another person, a job for which I am completely adequate. (p. 39)

The Christian schools that were included in this study are serving these students well and serve as an exemplar as to how they promote an inclusive, culturally responsive, and academically excellent environment. Knowing that intelligence is not fixed and can be improved, Christian schools need to reflect this in their approach to welcoming students with autism spectrum disorders, attention-deficit hyperactivity disorders, specific learning disorders, intellectual disabilities, communication disorders, and motor disorders (Brown, 2016). The Christian school leaders and teachers included in this study embrace these families and students who are created in the image of God for his purposes and His glory.

Researcher's Role

I did not have any prior relationship with the participants or schools that were the subject of the study. I am employed by a private Christian school in the southeast as a principal. I also

serve as an adjunct professor at a private Christian college in the School of Education. I have taught as a public school pre-kindergarten/kindergarten varying exceptionalities teacher, a middle school physical education teacher, and a middle school intellectually disabled teacher. I have served as a learning specialist at two different private Christian schools and at a public charter K–8 school. I have also served as an infant and toddler developmental specialist for 0 to 3-year olds, working with the children and their parents in their homes.

Having served in various schools that include private Christian, public, and charter, there is a core need for students to feel welcomed, to experience a sense of belonging, and to have their needs met. The impetus for this research is my strong faith as a Christian and the belief that all individuals are created in the image of God. Having served at private Christian schools that accepted students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, but that did not create a welcoming environment to meet the needs of these diverse learners, I was compelled to find Christian schools that welcome and include these students and provide an excellent education for them.

I have over 20 years of experience as an educator who provides a welcoming and inclusive environment. Still, it was necessary to put that aside to be able to look at the data as if for the first time in these schools. Biases that I brought into the study that may have influence the outcomes were disclosed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The schools included in this research are different from those in my background so I needed to set aside my opinions and be open to what the data revealed (Yin, 2018). Reflexive journaling acknowledged my biases (see Appendix N).

Procedures

This section describes the steps I took to obtain permission to conduct the research for this study. Additionally, I delineated the recruitment plan, data collection and data analysis plan for the research that is gathered through individual interviews, document analysis, observations,

and focus groups. The questions for the individual interviews and focus groups are included as well as ways that I ensured trustworthiness.

Permissions

Before contacting the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to seek permission to conduct this research, I acquired permission from three private Christian schools to participate in this study. I placed PDF copies of these signed letters temporarily in Appendix A, but they were replaced with the IRB approval letter in my final dissertation to preserve the confidentiality of these schools. Approval from the IRB of Liberty University was acquired before I began to recruit the participants and the subsequent data collection for this study.

Pilot Study

Immediately after securing permission from the IRB, I conducted a pilot study using two Christian school leaders and two Christian school teachers from my current school to practice the data collection methods and ensure that the collected data would answer the research questions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In preparation for the multi-site case study, I contacted one school leader and two teachers at a private Christian school in my home state with a proposal to serve as the site for the pilot study. I received permission from the Head of School. The pilot study was conducted to test the validity and reliability of the data collection tools to determine whether content effectively addressed the research questions and whether the interviews to be scheduled could be completed within a designated time period. This preliminary examination involved individual interviews with the Head of School and two teachers and a focus group with the Head of School and two teachers, modeling the profile to be replicated at three additional Christian schools in the multi-site case study that followed. This learning opportunity enabled me, as the researcher, to set aside assumptions and practice letting participants speak about their experiences and insights, allowing for consideration of identification of themes and patterns in

future data collection events. Validity and reliability of the data collection tools were confirmed. After completing the pilot study, I determined that the individual interview and focus group questions were detailed enough to provide information related to the research questions.

Recruitment Plan

After completing the pilot study, I requested the faculty contact list from the school leaders who permitted me to conduct research at their schools. Then, I sent the potential study participants a recruitment email (see Appendix B) with a screening survey link (see Appendix C). The individuals who were well suited for the research (based on the screening survey results) received an acceptance email (see Appendix D) with an appropriate consent form (see Appendix E). After receiving the signed consent forms, I began data collection by scheduling interviews with each participant.

Data Collection Plan

This qualitative study utilized a multi-site case study design to investigate three private Christian schools with a welcoming and inclusive environment. Although Yin (2018) recommended six types of data collection (documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts), I included interviews, document analysis, observations, and focus groups. Multiple methods of data collection ensure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon and show different perspectives on the issue (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Stake (2006) stated that multiple sources of data rich in real-life situations are the distinguishing characteristic of case study methodology. According to Stake (2006), data triangulation is a process of repetitious data gathering and a critical review of what is being said. I used multiple data sources to collect evidence that converges to a similar conclusion (Yin, 2018). Specifically, I used interviews, document analysis, observations, and focus groups as the multiple data sources to analyze.

Individual Interviews

A semi-structured interview approach occurred in which I asked the same questions and sequence of questions to all participants. Questions were open-ended with follow-up probes that were modified for each interview. By allowing the interview to be natural and exploratory, a complex understanding of the phenomenon was uncovered. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in person at each school site and lasted for 45–50 minutes. Each interview was conducted in a private office to ensure confidentiality. Simple Recorder was used as the primary recording device to document the interview so that attention was focused on listening and responding to the interviewee. Voice Recorder was used as the secondary recording device. A file was kept for each interview, with notes documenting the questions discussed, which questions to address further, identifying information on the interviewee, and any unique circumstances that may have played a factor in the interview. Reflection on the data in the form of memoing occurred. Following each interview, I used my researcher's reflexive journal to record any biases that were noted by the participants or myself as the researcher. Documentation occurred if questions were added or withdrawn.

Individual Interview Questions **(see Appendix F)**

1. Please tell me about yourself – where you grew up, your family, and your stage of life.
2. How did you come to work at this school?
3. What is your involvement in the community where you live?
4. What was your family experience growing up?
5. What are your beliefs about Christian education?
6. How does your personal faith influence your philosophy of education?
7. Please describe, in your opinion, the most essential aspect of a Christian school.
8. Please describe your educational philosophy.

9. What are your beliefs about educating students with learning disabilities among students without learning disabilities?
10. What are your beliefs about educating students from low-income backgrounds among students without low-income backgrounds?
11. What are your beliefs on inclusion?
12. What is the vision and mission for your school, and how is that vision and mission shared with the faculty and staff?
13. In what ways does this school reflect the vision and mission?
14. How would you describe your school's culture?
15. How does the school build a partnership with the home environment?
16. Please describe what you feel would be an ideal school culture and how you would make changes to reach that optimal level.
17. Please describe how teachers and staff at your school are equipped to serve diverse students.
18. Please describe the varying levels of learning differences in classes and how the varied learning needs are met.
19. What challenges emerge from serving students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences and what supports are incorporated into the learning environment to ensure a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment?
20. Please describe the most challenging aspect(s) about serving the students that you serve.

Questions 1 through 4 were background questions (Patton, 2015), and were designed as follow-up questions to the screening survey that the participants had previously submitted. These questions were intended to be relatively straightforward and non-threatening and ideally helped to develop rapport between the participant and myself (Patton, 2015). The questions also

gathered background and demographic information and were adjusted as necessary for each participant, based on the data included on each individual timeline. A key tenet of the social cognitive theory is that the environmental influences of a person's life leads to thinking patterns and patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1997). By understanding the background of the participants, the explanation of the "why" of the phenomenon of Christian schools providing a welcoming and inclusive environment was explained.

Questions 5 through 7 were pertinent to the individual's beliefs about Christian education. Questions 8 through 11 were related to the teacher or administrator providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to students. Self-efficacy describes the personal confidence that an individual possesses to make a change or persist in the face of adversity (Leithwood et al., 2017). The "how" question can be explained by investigating administrator and teacher's self-efficacy beliefs. Questions 12 through 16 were relevant to the intentional practices of the school to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment. Bandura (1997) believed that individuals could learn new actions by watching others perform. Additionally, he stated that environmental and cognitive factors influence individual learning and behavior. Questions 15 through 18 sought to understand how students with varied learning differences can succeed in a classroom. School leaders and teachers that feel confident in their ability to welcome and include students with varied learning differences have higher self-efficacy beliefs. Strong self-efficacy beliefs lead to an increased ability to perform various tasks and reach specific outcomes (Miller et al., 2017). This study sought to understand the "why," "what," and "how" of Christian school leaders and teachers who intentionally welcome students from low socioeconomic environments and/or with learning differences into their student body. The school as a body was examined based on the beliefs of the school leaders, practices of the teachers and staff, and an environment of

hospitality to make all students feel welcome. The social cognitive theory supported this research because it connected the influences of the environment, internal personal factors, and behavior.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

Each interview was audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim by me. The interview transcription was member checked for accuracy, and participants were asked to make any needed corrections. Once I received their checked transcripts, I read each participant's transcript multiple times to develop a list of preliminary codes. Analysis and reanalysis took place using Stake's (2006) worksheets (see Appendix J) as data were collected and analyzed to ensure that the research was an authentic and genuine experience for each participant (Yin, 2018). The first step was to analyze the interview data to determine codes. Saldaña (2016) defined a code as "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 3). Multiple coding cycles established a pattern of coding, identified common themes, and determined groupings (Yin, 2018). Line-by-line analysis ensured thoroughness and identification of common themes. Tentative themes were created upon the completion of coding. Saldaña (2016) stated that similarities will start to emerge through categorizing. As I analyzed the data from each data collection instrument, I adhered to the following principles for high-quality analysis: (a) attend to all the evidence, (b) investigate all plausible rival interpretations, (c) address the most significant aspect of the case study, and (d) demonstrate a familiarity with the discourse of the case study topic (Yin, 2018).

Document Analysis

After the interview, interviewees were asked to share any school documents that offered information related to the school providing a welcoming and inclusive environment. Relevant documentation was in the form of school-wide information and personal teacher communication

that indicated a desire to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The most important use of documentation for case study research is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources (Yin, 2018). The documents were converted to electronic images and stored securely on my computer. The gathering of the documents and other information was converted to an electronic document and securely stored on my password-locked computer.

Document Analysis Data Analysis Plan

The documentation was analyzed from the perspective of determining codes. This occurred several times to ensure that a pattern of coding was established (Yin, 2018). During the first cycle coding the documents, I identified either a single word or paragraph (Saldaña, 2016) through circling, highlighting, and underlining. Themes were created upon the completion of coding. Saldaña (2016) stated that similarities should start to emerge through categorizing. As needed, recategorizing occurred to develop final codes for the data collected through the documents. Within-case patterns began to emerge. It was essential to discuss the potential differences among the individual cases to show the comparable dimensions of the case (Yin, 2018).

Observations

General observations of the whole school climate were a way to gather firsthand data on a variety of interactions that existed in natural, unstructured, and flexible settings (Stake, 2006). I developed a holistic perspective of the phenomenon by directly observing interactions and activities in selected participant classrooms, hallway transitions, the cafeteria, and recess. Observations also allowed me to learn about things that the participants may have been unaware of or that they were unwilling or unable to discuss in an interview. I acted as a non-participant observer during the scheduled observations. In addition to general observations of the whole

school, I scheduled classroom observations with selected participants for 45–60 minutes at a time. A structured protocol was used for all observations (see Appendix G). Descriptive and reflective field notes were hand recorded.

Observations Data Analysis Plan

The data collected from observations were documented on the observation protocol and coded according to behaviors, actions, words, and visuals that relate to the phenomenon. The open coding process allowed me to identify patterns and codes within the data. As I collected the data, I noted assertions about what I observed. These assertions reflected my understanding of how the school leaders and teachers provided a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Within-case patterns began to emerge. The final codes from the observation data started to emerge as I repeatedly processed the data.

Focus Groups

Two semi-structured focus groups were used to draw additional information about shared experiences among the study participants. After completing interviews, document analysis, and observations, I conducted the two focus groups using Zoom technology. Zoom technology was used because the participants in the focus groups were from three different regions of the country. These focus group interviews lasted 45–60 minutes. The first focus group consisted of the school leaders of the three different schools. The second focus group consisted of the teachers of the three different schools. The focus groups provided an avenue for discussion related to the intentional practices of the three Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The questions (see Appendix H) addressed the themes related to welcoming and including students from low SES

backgrounds and/or with learning differences that have emerged from the interviews, data analysis, and observations.

Focus Group Questions **(see Appendix H)**

1. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997) as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). What thoughts, feelings, or associations come to mind when you first think of self-efficacy beliefs related to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds? What thoughts, feelings, or associations come to mind when you first think of self-efficacy beliefs related to welcoming and including students with learning differences?
2. How would you describe the intentional practices to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds at your school? How would you describe the intentional practices to welcome and include students with learning differences at your school?
3. Schools that welcome and include students from low SES and/or with learning differences have students with various learning needs in the classroom. What training do teachers need to have to meet the diverse learning needs of students from low SES backgrounds? What training do teachers need to have to meet the diverse learning needs of students with learning differences?

Question 1 and Question 2 explored the thoughts, feelings, and associations of the personal self-efficacy beliefs held by school leaders and teachers at the three private Christian schools. By understanding the personal self-efficacy beliefs that teachers and school leaders hold, the phenomenon of Christian schools providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences was explained.

Question 2 allowed the participants to share the intentional practices that lead to a welcoming and inclusive environment. This helped explain the "what" and "how" of school

leaders and teachers providing a welcoming and inclusive atmosphere. A vital tenet of the social cognitive theory is that the environmental influences of a person's life led to thinking patterns and patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1997).

Question 3 explored the teacher training that is needed to meet the diverse learning needs of students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences in a classroom. Practical recommendations for teachers to be equipped to meet the diverse learning needs in their classrooms were discussed.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

As the focus group interviews were conducted, I made notes in the margins and white spaces alongside the focus group questions. The notations described the responses that participants made, and my initial interpretation of their response. Stake's (2006) data analysis worksheets (see Appendices J–L) allowed me to identify shared experiences among the teachers and school leaders. Transcribed interviews, documents collected, observations and focus group transcriptions were coded and then grouped among categories (Stake, 2006).

Data Synthesis

Both Yin (2018) and Stake (2006) influenced the data analysis for this study. Specifically, Stake's (2006) worksheets were used to record data and findings. The notes from the interview transcripts, document analysis data, observation notes, and focus group transcripts were read several times to get a feeling of the data as a whole set. I wrote notes expressing feelings of the data in the margins of the transcripts; these notes assisted me in the process of writing the final codes from which the themes and sub-themes emerged. Yin (2018) recommended playing with the data by searching for patterns, insights, or concepts. Open coding was used to describe, classify, and interpret the data. I coded the data by labeling text with one or more keywords. Data were coded into categories of information and detailed descriptions were

provided (Yin, 2018). The data were put into different arrays to reflect different themes and subthemes (Yin, 2018). The data were re-analyzed using the codes for the datasets from each case to bring more apparent meaning to the emerging patterns. A matrix was made to contrast the categories by organizing the evidence (Yin, 2018). Each case was first analyzed separately using Stake's (2006) Worksheet 2: The Themes (Research Questions) of the Multicase Study (see Appendix K) and Worksheet 3: Analyst's Notes While Reading a Case Report (see Appendix L). These worksheets allowed me to identify shared experiences among the teachers and school leaders of Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

A thematic analysis across the cases, also known as a cross-case analysis, was conducted. This led to assertions or an interpretation of the meaning of the case. The final interpretive phase reported the meaning across all three cases and the lessons learned from the multi-case study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Naturalistic generalizations are described by Stake (2006) as the expectations that the multi-case report will be a guide to setting policy for a population of cases such as those studied and that the assertions may be transferred from the cases within the study to others as well.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness addresses credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, and ethical considerations. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), trustworthiness in research is critical to evaluating its worthiness. This multi-site case study ensured trustworthiness by employing safeguard methods.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings accurately describe reality. Credibility is one of the most critical factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Credibility depends on the richness of the information gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher. I ensured credibility of my study through triangulation, member checking, and prolonged engagement. Triangulation was used to corroborate collected information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). According to Stake (2006), data triangulation is a process of repetitious data gathering and a critical review of what is being said. I used multiple data sources to collect evidence that converged to a similar conclusion (Yin, 2018). Specifically, I used interviews, document analysis, observations, and focus groups as the multiple data sources to analyze. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking further ensures credibility by allowing the participants to review the transcripts from their interview and their part of the focus group for accuracy. Each participant received an email attachment with the transcription of their interview and their part of the focus group to review for accuracy. They were asked to confirm that an accurate account of the data collection took place and to respond to me within 5 days. Another means of ensuring credibility is using prolonged engagement. I spent 3 days at each site collecting data through interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus groups. Lincoln and Guba (1985) highlighted how spending extended time with participants in their natural setting gives a better understanding of their beliefs, values, and behaviors.

Transferability

Transferability is defined as the reader transferring the information and findings to other locations if the two settings or participants have shared characteristics (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability is essential in qualitative research so that lessons learned may be transferable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Rich and thick descriptions were provided to allow readers to make decisions about transferability and help other Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An audit trail (see Appendix M) provided a list of events that took

place throughout my research study. This will enable another researcher to replicate this study and help with transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Dependability shows that the findings are consistent and could be repeated (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) described the dependability of a study as a measure of the quality of the study process. This was demonstrated by a thorough description of the procedures undertaken for the study. An internal audit reflected peer-debriefings by two individuals with doctorate degrees and experience with qualitative research. I requested the two individuals' participation through an email request and sent electronic copies of my data. Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined the role of peer debriefing as the "devil's advocate" (p. 308). The individuals asked questions about the procedures, meanings, interpretations, and conclusions of the study. After my response was received, they agreed that the quality of the study process was consistent and could be repeated.

Confirmability

Confirmability is a degree of neutrality or the extent to which the respondents shape the findings of a study and not researcher bias, motivation, or interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). My reason for conducting this study was to understand how Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Asking open-ended questions and listening more than talking helped me seek further clarification when needed. The Researcher's Reflexive Journal (Appendix N) exhibited additional instances of achieved neutrality as the human instrument while conducting the research. This procedure of writing detailed field notes to describe the participants' views, feelings, and biases ensured that the direction of the findings was participant-led (Yin, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Several ethical considerations took place before, during, and after this study to ensure the safety and confidentiality of all participants. First, IRB approval was obtained and consent forms were signed before data collection began. Participants were protected from harm with the avoidance of disclosing information that would harm participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). No participants in the study were students or subordinates of the researcher. Confidentiality was maintained by assigning pseudonyms for the schools and participants. The screening survey administered was confidential. All data were stored on a password-protected computer and will be held for 3 years. After three years the computer data will be deleted, and paper copies will be shredded.

Summary

The primary focus of Chapter Three was to clearly describe the methods used throughout the study to understand the intentional practices of Christian schools that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment. This chapter included the data collection method and procedures of the multi-site case study. A detailed description of the research plan, design, research questions, participants, and data collection methods was provided. The methods for establishing trustworthiness and ethical considerations that are needed to perform this qualitative case study were discussed.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Sites were purposefully selected based on being an accredited Christian school that welcomed and included students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Seven school leaders and six teachers were selected from three different schools. The school leaders and teachers were also given pseudonyms randomly chosen by me as the researcher. This chapter presents the data collected through document analysis, interviews, observations, and focus group interviews. The quotations from the participants were transcribed verbatim to reflect each participant's responses, which included verbal ticks and grammatical errors in speech and writing to accurately depict the participants' voices.

Participants

The participants were chosen from three private Christian schools in different geographic regions of the United States because they exhibited the phenomenon of a welcoming environment that includes students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The criteria to be selected as a participant included serving as a school leader and/or a teacher for 3 or more years at one of the Christian school sites in this study. Each of the seven school leaders and six teachers were involved in the individual interviews. Seven school leaders had intended on participating in the focus group, but two school leaders had to drop out of the focus group interview. Six teachers had intended to participate in the other focus group, but one teacher had to drop out of the focus group interview. Pseudonyms were used for all the participants and any other identifying aspects. Table 1 gives general information about the school leader participants

who came from three different schools. Table 2 gives general information about the teacher participants who came from three different schools. Following each table are the individual descriptions of the participants represented in each preceding table.

Table 1

School Leader Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Current Position
Glenn	Male	55	30	Head of School/Co-founder
Phillip	Male	70	45	Head of School/Co-founder
David	Male	44	22	Head of School
Laura	Female	49	15	Elementary Principal
Jason	Male	41	24	Elementary Principal
Jeremy	Male	41	25	Middle & High School Principal
Shavonne	Female	47	17	Elementary Principal

Glenn

Glenn was raised in the suburbs of a major city in the Midwest and stated that he had "almost no contact with the inner city or the urban community" growing up. After graduating from college and getting married he felt a "missionary calling" which led him and his wife to move to the inner city of a large city in Europe. They intentionally moved into the poorest neighborhood to help the church reach out to the Islamic community and his wife taught in the neighborhood school there. He stated that the experience shaped him and his wife to the point that when they returned to the United States, "they were not fearful of those kinds of communities, but we were actually seeking them out." They joined a group of people from the church who were looking to ask the question: "If the followers of Jesus were called to be the light of the world, what part of our city was most in need of the light of the gospel?" They

intentionally chose to move into a neighborhood that is known primarily for the "highest concentration of poverty of any neighborhood, incredible racial and cultural diversity with over 100 languages spoken in just this one neighborhood, and crime and violence."

It was when Glenn's children were school aged that they were looking for a "great faith-based education for them and there was nothing like that in this neighborhood." They found such a school by driving 10 miles across town to the school in the wealthiest neighborhood. Glenn shared during his interview that every day as he drove out of the inner city, he was confronted with the question, "What does it mean to love your neighbor as yourself and what would it mean for these children to have the same opportunities and advantages that my own children have?" Glenn decided he wanted to bring the same kind of education that he wanted for his own children to his neighbors.

Phillip

Phillip stated in his interview that his upbringing was a "very unique existence" being raised in a middle-class family in the Dutch suburbs of a northern city. The immigrant community had a very strong sense of responsibility for each other and lived in a communal way. After graduating from college, Phillip became a public school teacher. He and a group of 15 college graduates who were very "enthusiastic" about their faith "wanted to go into an under resourced neighborhood and make a difference." In 1974, they moved into the low-income, inner-city neighborhood and began an evening activity club for the kids of the neighborhood. This grew over 6 years and they decided to start a school to better serve the significant academic, emotional, and spiritual needs of the children. Phillip shared their belief that "money isn't going to stand in the way of what God is going to do. You have to pray it in and/or go out and find it."

Phillip continued to work at the public school, while the two other co-founders quit their paid teaching jobs to work full-time at the new school. Phillip's income supported the three of

them. The first year of the school began in a church basement with 12 students and 2 volunteer teachers. Each of the three founders worked 3–8 years without pay until the school that they founded could pay their income. Today, the school enrolls more than 620 students with 143 staff members.

David

David has spent his entire life living in the city where he serves as Head of School. He attributes his strong belief that education is "the way out of your circumstances" to being raised in a family of educators, especially his mother who was a "teacher-of-the-year" public school teacher. He described his mother as being intentional to teach him and his brother to realize the opportunities they have and see how they can "come alongside people to get them opportunities they may not possess." David earned his degree in education from a private Christian university. He was one of five people of color enrolled at the university at the time and shared in how he

> really struggled because the education was phenomenal but the cultural competency awareness and how it impacted environments that I grew up around was difficult for me to navigate, to traverse, because they weren't addressing the issues—there was no cultural awareness of how to impact the people that I felt God was calling me to. So, I vowed to never go into Christian education.

He laughed and said, "You know when we vow, that is when God laughs."

David spent over 15 years teaching in inner-city public and charter schools before he completed his master's degree in Education Leadership and began serving as an assistant principal. He was attracted to his current position as head of school because

> it was a Christian school within the city that I love. . . . It drew me in because I wanted to see what does it look like to impact the city and see a vibrant Christian environment

thriving within a space that has its beauty and its warts, its challenges and its areas where it's thriving.

Laura

Laura holds an undergraduate degree in elementary education and a Master of Arts in teaching and learning. She has served in many roles over her 15 years of employment at Agape Christian School. She started her career as a fourth-grade teacher, then oversaw the center for student support, and now is the elementary principal. She describes herself as having a heart for diversity and believes strongly in "partnering with parents—not replacing them." She stated in her interview that the most difficult part of her job is partnerships and building relationships, and that the school has had to learn how to partner with urban parents. She also works hard to "build a network of community with teachers and donors."

Jason

Jason is committed to the community that he serves as a principal in, having gone to high school, college, and now working as a school leader in that community. He said in his interview that "he really enjoys the way ministry and education work together here and is glad to be a part of a Christian organization that really puts faith and nurture at the forefront." His father and grandmother were Christian school teachers, and he feels that has contributed to his commitment to Christian education. He shared in his interview that "there is something about being able to worship together with students and being able to not just discipline, but disciple students." He has taught as a middle school Bible and math teacher for 10 years and he is in his 14th year of being an elementary principal.

Jeremy

Jeremy was a math and special education teacher for 18 years and assistant principal for 3 years prior to becoming the middle and high school principal at Phileo Christian Academy. He

was raised in the northeast by parents who were both Christians, and his dad was a pastor. He shared in his interview that the church that he grew up in was "all Black" while the Christian school that he went to was "all White." He stated that it was "very challenging growing up in a Christian school that was all White." He noted how different he felt than his peers being the only student of color. "Often times, people would ask me if they could touch my hair or they would tell me that I was related to monkeys." It was not until taking a mission trip to Morocco that he felt called to Phileo Christian Academy because of the vast majority of children of color that the school represents.

Shavonne

Shavonne is a middle-aged African American female. She stated in her interview that she was raised by her aunt and grandmother "from the time she can remember." She feels very "blessed" and "grateful" to be raised in her family. She has been a special education teacher for over 10 years. She feels very passionate about giving the best Christian education to students who would not normally have access to it. She said that her head of school empowers her to build a staff necessary to serve students well. She feels confident in her ability to describe and discuss her experiences as a Christian administrator that serves students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

Table 2

Teacher Participants

Name	Gender	Age	Years of Service	Current Position
Lindsey	Female	27	4	Fourth-grade teacher
Kristen	Female	55	29	Middle school science
Martha	Female	63	13	Fifth-grade teacher
Zach	Male	65	23	High school history
Janet	Female	48	17	High school English
Pete	Male	51	20	Middle school math

Lindsey

Lindsey was raised in a large family in a major city in the Midwest. Her father immigrated from Asia and her mom is White. She shared that she is learning a lot about her mixed-race upbringing by working in such a diverse school. She is in her fourth year of teaching fourth grade and is "finally feeling comfortable with her classroom management." Serving inner-city children at a Christian school is exactly what she wanted to do with her life, but she also feels that it is the most difficult thing she has ever done. She has improved in her ability to connect with parents because she is stopping to listen to them more.

Kristen

Kristen is from a small town in the Midwest. She and her family felt called to the inner city 14 years ago and decided to move from the suburbs into the inner-city neighborhood of the school. She emotionally shared that in the past year, her family made the very difficult decision to relocate back to the suburbs. Their neighborhood suffered many riots in the previous 2 years and had been overcome with gang violence, drug addicts, tent communities, and prostitutes. Her bedroom and family room window has been shot twice in the last 2 years. She said that it was the

norm to find used drug needles on her front porch and have homeless individuals use her hose to clean themselves and urinate in her yard; she regularly watches drug and weapon deals occur on the sidewalk outside of her house. They were also fearful for her teenage son to be mistaken for a gang member and get shot. She said she feels a certain peace that she has never felt before and this is the first time that her 13-year-old daughter has been able to own a bike and go for bike rides in their neighborhood.

Martha

Martha is a 62-year-old, soft-spoken sixth-grade teacher. She was born and raised in the Midwest and always felt that she would be a missionary, teaching in a Christian school overseas. She graduated from college in 1981 with her bachelor's degree in communication and elementary education and was discouraged by family members to travel overseas. She stayed in the same area that she was raised and taught at a Christian school for 25 years—until it closed. She learned about an opening at Agape Academy and was excited about the "missional opportunity" but was apprehensive to explore the opportunity because she had never "driven into the city by herself." Her husband encouraged her "that she could do it." She said that the minute that she walked into the school "I knew this is the place that God wants me to be."

Her enthusiasm to reach each one of the students in her classroom was evident as she discussed the trials and successes that she has had during the last few years at the school. Martha stated, "The students have been exposed to traumatic life situations and I don't know if I could help them like I can here, if I was in a public school." She feels that a large portion of her job is to build relationships with students in an effort to help them grow and heal and develop into all that God wants for them.

Zach

Zach is a 65-year-old White male who was raised in South America and Spain "in an extremely diverse environment." He stated in his interview that diversity feels "normal" to him, and non-diversity seems "strange." He has taught at the school for 23 years and feels that his experience growing up in a culture that was not "native" to him allows him to connect and understand the students at his school. He feels confident exposing his students to various cultures and believes it is important to challenge them to reach their highest potential. He brings humor into his classroom to teach students because he realizes that is where his students are and thinks it brings deeper connections. He shared that he brings relief to Spanish-speaking parents because he speaks with them in Spanish when they come in for parent–teacher conferences. He said that they become very honest with him about "their major struggles with their kids . . . new culture, working two jobs, kids making bad choices, kids in gangs, pregnant."

Janet

Janet is a high school language arts teacher that has taught at Promise Academy for 18 years. She splits part of her day to help the administration with curriculum and teacher coaching needs. She is passionate about helping other teachers to view each student as an individual and offering the support necessary for each student to be successful. She talked extensively in her interview about having "kids with different learning needs and different learning speeds." She enjoys the open and honest conversations that she often has with students and shared that this is an intentional part of the culture at Promise Academy. Janet feels that she is able to connect easily with students because they feel valued and respected by her. "I build relationships with kids and so that gives you the relational capital to spend when you need it." She was influential in creating a weekly assembly titled "Keeping it Real" 10 years ago. This is where the school devotes 1 hour weekly to an open forum with high school students to discuss the current trends

of the culture. She said, “Our school has chosen not to make the hot topics, hot topics.” Janet shared that the heart of what you will see at the Keeping It Real assembly is getting students to understand how to talk and think about different topics and then compare it to what the Bible says about it.

Pete

Pete has taught middle school math for 18 years. He also has extensive experience with infusing technology into the classroom and serves as the Technology Innovation Teacher at the school. He was a former drug and alcohol counselor working with children that came off the streets at a drug and rehab center. He shared the importance of teachers at Promise Academy to have a missional mindset, meaning that “they have used their God-given gifts to serve the least of these” so that they can offer that to the students. He enjoys the transformational stories that come from the relationships that adults build with the students at the school. He said in his interview that the most important part of his job is that “we are training our students so that they will look for problems in this world and fix them for Jesus.”

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian schools that welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Each case was analyzed individually to identify patterns presented from interviews, observations, document analysis, and focus groups. Then, cross-case analysis was completed to identify patterns across all cases, resulting in the development of themes (Stake, 2006). This section examines the results obtained after research data were collected using document analysis, individual interviews, observations, and focus group interviews. The final themes that emerged from the data collection were personal beliefs, intentional, relational, teachers equipped, and support.

Theme Development

Table 3

Theme Development

Key Words/Phrases	Subthemes
Major Theme 1: Personal Beliefs	
prayer, sharing the gospel, image of God, call of God, cultivated, biblical worldview, weave the gospel, led by example, personal faith, dependent faith, power of the gospel, conviction, life-changing	Biblical Mandate
growth mindset, see potential in all, not limited by circumstances, consistent, for students, for parents, for teachers, accountability, clear, standard of excellence, core commitments	High Expectations
deep, extra time, hard, challenging, not 8 hours and leave, dependent faith, extra is needed, above and beyond, time intensive, exhausted, hardest job, creates extra, calling, no excuses, don't blame, accept responsibility, consistent, take risks, confidence	Commitment
Major Theme 2: Intentional	
faith, unity in mission/vision, overstated, communicated repeatedly, shared, mission minded, hiring, called, guiding principles, faith statement, core ideology, core values, God's mission	Mission
discipleship, advisory groups, shepherding, build relationships, see interruption as opportunity, lunch time, faith stories, positive behavior support, positive, mission-minded teachers, community, anchor points, athletic teams, situated in, included, common area, trust, collaborative, self-awareness	Culture
refugee, Hispanic, Catholic, Muslim, inclusive place, diversity of needs, professional development, diverse classroom libraries, community outreach, admissions, not covenant, underrepresented subgrouping, diverse school population, opportunity, all ability levels, All Belong	Diversity
difficult, faith, worth it, hardest part, families' portion, no voucher, no tax credit scholarship, fundraising, donor support, raising money, funding model, mission	Finances

Major Theme 3: Relational	
redemption of Christ, forgiveness, change, believe, sinners, radical dependence	Redemptive
restorative circles, choices, feelings discussed, forgiveness, dignity, highly relational, trust built, real repentance, owning of sin, approach	Restorative
parent commitment, teachers, leadership style, opinion, expression, listening, feedback, with families, with staff, leadership, deep level, take risks, self-awareness	Collaborative
Major Theme 4: Teachers Equipped	
student safety, self-regulation, engagement, relationships, self-awareness, empathy, interpersonal skills, SEL, Second Step, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) training, mental health, proactive	Trauma Informed
racial reconciliation, student choice, student voice, individual student needs, leveled instruction, differentiated instruction, math centers, multi-cultural curriculum	Cross-cultural Competency
different levels, specific, learning targets, data driven, standards, concrete goals, intentional planning, standard-specific vocabulary, individual skill development, research based, test taking, metacognitive strategies, critical thinking, text to speech, brain research, extended time, review sheets, limit distractors, individualized, success, feedback	Learning Strategies
Major Theme 5: Support	
buy-in, participation, advocacy, prioritize budget, support center, All Belong, added positions, voice, Child Find, Title 1, English language learners, accommodation plan, tutors, referral for support, stability	For Students
workshops, common planning time, common language, feedback, collaboration, professional learning communities (PLCs), professional development, learning specialists, support staff, added position, relationships built	For Teachers
commitment, partnership, buy-in, participation, understanding, engagement, on-going, parent partnership, parent covenant, come alongside, build trust, home visit, positive phone calls, parent connections, attend conferences	For Families

The themes and sub-themes emerged from the data. There were five major themes and 16 sub-themes that emerged. Each major theme and the corresponding sub-themes are discussed below. The participants' individual responses supporting the themes are embedded within the discussion of each major theme and sub-theme.

Major Theme 1: Personal Beliefs

The first major theme of "Personal Beliefs" described the strong conviction that school leaders and teachers had to serve the students at their school with the best education possible. The participants' perspectives were explained through three sub-themes: biblical mandate, high expectations, and commitment. Choosing to serve students who learn differently and/or come from a background where they do not have the resources or opportunities available to them takes a certain mindset from the school leaders and teachers. The school leaders and teachers discussed various ways that their personal beliefs were shaped from their personal faith in God.

Biblical Mandate. The first sub-theme within the major theme of "Personal Beliefs" was biblical mandate. School leaders believed that they were following a call that God had placed on their lives. Glenn, Head of School at Agape Academy, felt the responsibility to "shepherd hearts with what the scripture says is true about another, and what is true about the life-changing power of the gospel." David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, grew up seeing the disparity between multiple worlds. He explained in his personal interview:

> I was privileged to grow up the way that I did in multiple worlds. I saw the injustices that took place between the two, based off area code, tax brackets, and things like that. I saw as a young boy that my cousins didn't have the same opportunities that I did, and it was my mother who was very intentional teaching me and my brother to see and understand that and be change agents for that. That's what drew me into wanting to be a part of

education—helping to come alongside people to get them opportunities they may not possess.

Jeremy, principal of the middle and high school at Phileo Academy, shared in his interview that his teaching background in special education for so many years has led him to come alongside families. "Instead of starting with a No, we try to figure out how to make it a Yes."

Glenn, Head of School at Agape Academy, commented in his interview, "We've got the best opportunity in the entire city to live out Dr. King's dream." They relied heavily on their personal faith. For instance, Glenn shared, "without the gospel I don't think you can do the kind of hard work, have the kind of courageous conversations, and to have real repentance, real transformation." Philip, Head of School at Promise Academy, shared about his personal faith when the school was in the first year: "We kept asking and it came . . . ours was more miraculous than not . . . constant prayer . . . opening our day in prayer." An admissions pamphlet obtained during an observation at Phileo Academy stated, "We are a school where Jesus is glorified. God's word is taught and lived through how we treat one another."

Faith and learning were integrated very closely at each school. Intentional time was built into the schedule for prayer and sharing the gospel. The Promise Academy has a requirement that all staff meet for 30 minutes before school every morning for prayer. During my visit to Promise Academy, I was able to participate in the morning prayer with staff and then the morning prayer that is held with all students. An admissions flyer from Promise Academy stated, "Every day and every class begins in prayer." Jeremy, middle and high school principal at Phileo Academy, shared how the middle school students went through the neighborhood last week to knock on doors to share the gospel with their neighbors. Laura, elementary principal at Agape Academy, stated in her interview, "It's not uncommon to walk through the hallways here to find a student and a teacher or a couple of students praying about things." Martha, teacher at Agape Academy,

shared, “We are talking with kids all the time about their faith, we don’t let them keep it at arm's length.” Jason, elementary principal at Promise Academy, felt that the students at his school seemed more willing and able to pray together in a group setting more naturally because they did it frequently. Jason shared a document with me that stated the mission, core values, and vision of the school. Part of the vision statement read, “Through dependence on prayer, we will expand our voice and advocate for a model of Christ-centered education in under-resourced neighborhoods.”

Many of the school leaders and teachers emphasized the importance of seeing each student created in the image of God. While walking the halls of Agape Academy, I noticed student self-portraits that had captions written by the student (see Appendix O). These captions had statements that reflected student’s perception of themselves being created in the image of God. Glenn, Head of School at Agape Academy, shared what he felt when God called him to start a school for the kids who lived in his inner-city neighborhood:

> These are all children created in the image of God . . . I won’t diminish the image of God in any child by offering them a hotdog education, I will honor the image of God and seek to bring the very best to my neighbors . . . human beings are special creations of God, crated in the image of God and therefore have an inherited dignity that needs to be honored and respected.

In the teacher focus group, the passion for seeing each learner as an individual uniquely created in God’s image with their own strengths, weaknesses, and styles of learning was discussed.

School leaders and teachers emphasized that the students at their schools were called by God for a purpose in their life. They talked about the importance of equipping students to do God’s work through the math, writing, and reading skills that they acquired at school. One of

Phileo Academy's Core Commitments is Jesus. In a document given to me by David, Head of School, that defines the Core Commitments, it states,

> We are committed to integrating the Bible into every subject and honoring Jesus through personal conduct, corporate decision-making, and our efforts at loving one another. It is Jesus who saves us and, through the Holy Spirit, it is Jesus who teaches us how to live here on earth as it is in heaven.

According to Glenn, Head of School at Agape Academy:

> There is no such thing as neutral education. Every school has some fundamental beliefs and commitments that we might call a worldview and it's impossible to function as a school without those fundamental commitments and those are essentially around some things that religion speaks to. Every school has to answer the questions and it builds an entire educational program upon those answers: Is there a God? What's the nature of truth? What is the nature of man?

The teachers implemented a biblical worldview as they taught students how to think. One teacher described the heart of her school's approach being, "how do we think about this, what does the Bible say about this, without slant and without much interpretation and then letting kids ask questions along the way." When asked about a biblical worldview, Pete, a teacher from Promise Academy, stated,

> We work really hard about that here . . . to have that worldview . . . you have been called by God for a purpose in your life and the way we are training your skills in math and science and writing and reading is for you to be equipped to do God's work. A lot of Christian schools have the mission for students to reach the highest potential but here, you're actually applying the gifts Christ gave you . . . so it permeates everything.

Zach, a teacher from Promise Academy, believed that there is a difference between Christian teachers who teach from a Christian point of view and teachers who teach a Christ-centered worldview. He stated,

> We are training our students so that they will look for problems in this world and fix them for Jesus . . . they need to have a worldview that you aren't put on this earth that you just look nice on Sunday, but every day of the week they are proactively using their gifts which were trained at the school, for God's glory.

High expectations. The second sub-theme that emerged inside the major theme of "Personal Beliefs" was high expectations. School leaders and teachers identified their role to cultivate student's potential and enable them to meet high standards. Glenn, Head of School at Agape Academy, shared,

> There's a suburban standard of education and expectations and then there's an urban standard and that's OK—it's not OK. Again, it's sinning against the image of God and our students. So, we said in the very best schools they're teaching Latin, we are going to teach Latin; in the very best schools they're reading the great books, we are going to read the great books; in the very best schools they're having Socratic discussions around big ideas; we're going to do that.

After an observation at Agape Academy, a teacher gave me a copy of their Faith and Life Covenant. This document affirms the biblical principles to which members of Agape Academy's board and staff are accountable. High expectations were noticeable during classroom observations as teachers used language in their classrooms that encouraged students toward positive outcomes.

During my interview with David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, he gave me a copy of the school's Core Commitments. Excellence is one of the core commitments and is explained

as “training minds and discipling hearts by challenging students where they excel and meeting them where they struggle.” The standard for excellence is apparent not only in the high expectations set for students, but it “also includes a commitment to organizational alignment of mission, vision, goals, and instructional approach.” Teachers and school leaders exhibited the humility to identify areas in which they needed to grow. Glenn shared that they often talk about having a growth mindset during their daily instruction: “You can’t do it, YET.” Displaying an openness to becoming better in their designated area, Lindsey shared that there are many things for her to learn, to learn in her teaching and how she conducts her classroom. Phillip discussed in his interview how he had no knowledge of raising money when he helped to start the school, but “I pushed myself to do what I felt I had to . . . now I’ve been doing that for 40 years.”

As I walked the halls of Phileo Academy, I noticed that outside each teacher’s classroom was posted a laminated piece of paper with the results from their Clifton Strengths Finder assessment (see Appendix O). In the high school hallway each one of the 34 strengths from the Strengths Finder was posted, defined, and color coded. Jeremy, middle and high school principal at Phileo Academy, stated in his individual interview how the students and staff of the school continually talk about their results of this assessment. He shared that this has been helpful to identify areas of growth potential, to improve working together, and to better understand each other’s differences.

School leaders and teachers had a visionary perspective and recognized the unique set of circumstances and conditions at their present school. They chose to optimistically focus on the necessary skills that each student, teacher, and staff member brings to their particular environment. Jeremy leads his staff with the mindset to elevate students to give them an opportunity to learn at an excellent level:

> We are not trying to teach down to young people, we see their skill level and are trying to push them up. My challenge for every one of my staff members is to see each child as a child of light, not to think they have too many troubles, or to think, "Oh, I know that kid. . ." No, you don't. There is so much more inside of that kid. The challenge is to get to know that child and to learn how to motivate them.

Teachers recognized that they were responsible to inspire their students to flourish. In their focus group, school leaders discussed the importance of amassing a team capable of carrying out the mission of the school.

Commitment. The final sub-theme "Commitment" manifested under the major theme of "Personal Beliefs." School leaders and teachers agreed in their focus groups that there is a deep commitment required to work at their school. Phillip, Head of School at Promise Academy, shared, "It's hard work that requires a lot of humility and grace." Lindsey, teacher at Promise Academy, said in her interview, "You have to work harder here." Pete shared in his interview that teachers are hired for his school that go "above and beyond." Glenn, from Agape Christian School, noted that students have to know that their teachers care. As I conducted my observation at Phileo Academy, I noticed a plaque on the wall that identified their five core commitments: to Jesus, to shalom, to the city, to excellence, and to accessibility.

In his interview, Glenn shared, "To do that usually requires some extra extraordinary actions—typically it's connecting with students outside of school hours and going above and beyond to build those relational connections." In their focus group, the teachers echoed the school leaders by saying, "I've never been so exhausted." In her interview, Lindsey stated, "The work that we do well requires extra hours . . . making lesson plans that are going to meet multiple needs, making multiple assessments, sometimes staying after to work with students and coming early to work with students."

Major Theme 2: Intentional

"Intentional" was recognized as the second major theme. School leaders and teachers shared practices that were done intentionally. The extra effort to plan and carry out specific routines, traditions, and approaches was described in each focus group. The sub-themes that emerged from the "Intentional" theme were mission, culture, diversity, and finances.

Mission. The first sub-theme identified under the umbrella of "Intentional" was mission. Each school has a specific mission statement, and school leaders and teachers described ways that they have stayed true to their mission. During each school observation, I noticed that mission statements were prominently displayed on the walls of the school (see Appendix P). Promise Academy's mission statement is to provide a Christ-centered education to children of all ethnic heritages and income levels, equipping them to serve God and society to their fullest potential. Phillip, head of school at Promise Academy, shared that they have over 200 students on their waiting list. This is evidence of how Promise Academy has stayed true to their mission because all 200 students on the waiting list are full-paying students. The school chooses to only accept 20% of students who have the ability to pay full tuition so that 80% of the spots serve students who would not otherwise have access to a private Christian education. This requires a deep commitment to the mission of the school. Phillip explained, "I didn't want kids to feel like they were a scholarship kid in some wealthy school. We want them in a school that they can feel like it's their own. It belongs to them and everyone else."

Agape Christian School's mission is to foster hope in God within the inner-city neighborhoods by providing youth with a remarkable, God-centered education. In her interview, Lindsey shared that her school's mission and vision are widespread. "We strive toward it, and they talk about it a lot, especially in all staff meetings." Pete shared in his interview that Promise Academy has a mission to "reach kids from all income levels and ethnic heritages." Jeremy,

middle and high school principal at Phileo Academy, shared in his interview that there is unity in the mission and vision and it is a joy to be a part of it. Their mission statement is "to train students' minds, disciple their hearts, and bring light to the city—one child at a time."

Culture. Culture was the next sub-theme that was repeatedly stated in interviews when participants were describing the experiences and beliefs that were shared among the students and staff of the school. Glenn, Head of School at Agape Christian School, discussed the idea of shepherding as a form of discipleship in his interview. He stated, "We are deeply committed to a kind of school culture that's marked by the idea of shepherding the hearts of our students with the gospel. Our teachers are pastors of the flock they are shepherding." As I walked the halls of Agape Christian School, there was a bulletin board with the heading, "How does my teacher help me see God?" The answers from different students throughout the school were posted next to the picture of the teacher (see Appendix P). As I completed my observation at Promise Academy, I noticed a refurbished newspaper mailbox. It was repainted in bright orange with the monthly character theme of self-control posted on the outside (see Appendix P). Students were encouraged to write positive examples of other students exhibiting the character trait. The notes were then shared at schoolwide meetings.

Janet, teacher at Promise Academy, shared in her interview about discipleship groups that occur once per week. The discipleship groups are led by upper class students: the junior class mentors the freshmen, and the senior class mentors the sophomores. Jason, elementary principal at Promise Academy, shared in his interview that they have a big discipleship program at school starting in fifth grade that includes mentoring, scripture memory, and prayer. A mailer from Promise Academy states, "Students are discipled in the way of Christ, and taught how to live out his calling in their classrooms, homes, and communities." As I walked the hallways of Promise Academy, I noticed a discipleship cart that had books to borrow on the topic of discipleship (see

Appendix P). There was a sign-out sheet to borrow the books and a verse of the week. Laura, elementary principal at Agape Christian School, shared in her interview that she encourages teachers to view all the interruptions and obstacles that happen throughout the day as opportunities to disciple the students' hearts.

As I walked the halls of Phileo Academy, I noticed their framed mission statement: "Training students' minds, discipling their hearts and bringing light to the city—one child at a time" (see Appendix P). In a document given to me by David, Head of School, it expounded on the school's mission statement. Discipleship was defined as follows:

> We care for the physical, emotional, and spiritual needs of our students. Values like love, forgiveness and grace are taught and modeled every day. The name of Jesus is glorified, and students are taught to see all truth in light of the Christian worldview.

In another publication provided by David, it stated, "Excellence includes training minds and discipling hearts by challenging students where they excel and meeting them where they struggle."

The school leaders agreed in their focus group that teachers are critical to setting a positive culture in the school. The schools prioritized hiring teachers who are able to integrate faith and learning into the classroom. Phillip, Head of School at Promise Academy, shared in his interview, "They hire people that tell us that they are passionate about following Jesus, and if they are not, then it's not going to happen." Jason, elementary principal at Promise Academy, shared in his interview that his teachers have to want to invite kids to follow Jesus. A publication obtained during my visit to Promise Academy stated, "Our staff is a dedicated community of Jesus-followers who feel called to serve our students and show them the love of Christ." In the school leader focus group, David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, shared that he wants teachers who have been missional all their life and they are going to offer that consistently to

students. Another bulletin board that I noticed at Agape Academy stated, “I know my teacher loves God. . .” (see Appendix G). Some of the responses given by students were: “She always prays; she reads about God in class; she is loving and really helpful; he talks about God and we dance for God too; she talks about God every day and trusts Him.”

Jason, elementary principal at Promise Academy, shared that it took “insight” to understand the “nuanced relationships” and bridge cultural divides to cultivate belonging among teachers and students. Janet shared in her interview that there is a very intentional approach to shape the culture at Promise Academy. For example, during lunchtime there are two common lunch areas where the students can eat. There is no technology out during lunchtime. Janet explained in her interview, “We want the kids to talk, we want them to get out a deck of cards and play a game, we want them to commune, we want them to be family.” When I walked around the halls of Agape Christian School, Promise Academy, and Phileo Academy, I observed that the display of artwork on walls and themes on bulletin boards were intentional to reflect the culture of the students and staff in the school (see Appendix P).

Janet, a high school teacher at Promise Academy, shared in her interview that the school is “very, very purposeful” in building community.

> The goal is community, the goal is that everyone is included, the goal is that we have as few cliques and tight exclusive groups as possible. The goal is that there is never anybody who eats alone—never anybody who does break alone—unless they choose to because they want a break.

At Promise Academy, the “common area” of the high school is a large open space in the center of the school with comfortable seating arranged in groupings. There is a very large whiteboard mounted on the wall with the sports teams’ schedules for the week and location of the games. The students are encouraged to eat their lunch together in this space.

During his interview, Jeremy, middle and high school principal at Phileo Academy, said that during morning announcements he is intentional to build community by asking students to "stop right now, talk to someone who you haven't talked to in the past week." In the teacher focus group, one teacher noted that student leaders in student council are challenged to sit by someone new at lunch. David, Head of School from Phileo Academy, referred to the city as "our classroom." He stated that he lives by the Bible verse Ephesians 2:10 (*NIV*, 1978/2011), "For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." In his interview, he discussed his recent effort to connect with the police captain and church leaders of the neighborhood to build a community connection. The Faith and Life Covenant of Agape Christian School stated that "we are a community of Christians who seek to live according to biblical standards laid down by Jesus Christ for his body, the church."

Diversity. Diversity was the next sub-theme highlighted within the major theme of "Intentional." School leaders and teachers recognized that their schools are intentional about diversity and see diversity as a way to reflect the kingdom of God. Diversity manifested itself through languages, culture, race, ethnicity, learning needs, socioeconomic status, family structure, and religion. Janet shared that Promise Academy is "diverse in every way possible. It's one of the joys and one of the challenges." Martha, teacher at Agape Christian School, discussed the diversity of learning needs in her interview. Lindsey explained in her interview,

> What I love about Agape Christian School is how multicultural it is and especially being a Christian school—how it beautifully reflects the kingdom of God. If you look into any classroom across our school, you can see the beautiful diversity of our kids. That diversity in our students is a reflection of God and a reflection of His kingdom.

In their focus group, all of the school leaders affirmed that they are not a covenant school—meaning that families do not need to be Christian to enroll in the school. Jason, elementary

principal at Promise Academy, stated in his interview that Promise Academy has families from a wide variety of religious denominations, which the school desires to have: "To overgeneralize, we are in a Hispanic neighborhood with a large number of Catholic families, we have refugee families and often refugee families come from a Muslim faith." He shared the faith statement part of their enrollment paperwork that parents are required to sign for enrollment.

School leader Phillip explained in his interview that Promise Academy has lots of families who do not speak English and are missing the country from which they emigrated.

> As a teacher or staff member we get to meet so many different people from so many different places . . . Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Africa, China. We have this great blending of economic backgrounds, cultural backgrounds, birth countries, refugees. We have had so many refugees in this school that have been life changing for us.

A document obtained from Promise Academy's admissions department stated:

> We believe that who you learn with matters. Learning alongside people from all backgrounds and cultures is an essential and transformational part of a Promise Academy education. We aspire to be a glimpse of what Revelation 5:9 describes, where people of every tribe, language, people, and nation worship Jesus together.

David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, shared about the importance that race, ethnicity, and culture are a representation of all of us together, a part of the body of Christ. He noted in his interview that students living in an urban context, such as the city in which Phileo Academy is located, are interacting with race and ethnicity all the time:

> You walk through the city and see a Cambodian has a donut shop in the Chinese neighborhood, the Jamaican spot over there where I like jerk chicken, usually run by someone of Latino descent. There is a Buddhist temple across the street of this school. [see Appendix P]. It's important to shed light on it as well as the importance of the beauty

> of it and how it benefits everyone. We are all a part of the kingdom of God and it is not just a Eurocentric religion, but I am a part of that and heaven is the representation of all of us together being a part of the body of Christ.

As I walked through the halls of Phileo Academy, I noticed a framed letter from a parent that expressed her appreciation for her White children being "immersed in an environment where they are the racial/ethnic minority among their peers" (see Appendix P). She expressed hope that this "unique experience would help them to be more sensitive to others who are in the minority when they are in the majority." I also observed this diversity as we stood outside of one of the elementary locations the morning that I arrived. Next to the school was a Ukrainian church. The pastor of the church walked by pushing his newborn baby in a stroller. David greeted him by name and the pastor thanked him for the donations from the fundraiser that Phileo Academy had raised for the church, specifically for the families affected by the war in Ukraine (see Appendix P). They agreed to see each other later in the week at a community event.

Finances. The final sub-theme within the major theme of "Intentional" is finances. A large portion of each school budget was raised through fundraising and donor support. Philip, Head of School at Promise Academy, shared in his interview that he has raised $4.5 million so far this year. All three schools required all families to pay a portion of the school's tuition, based on the family's income. All three school leaders that served as head of school shared in their individual interviews that raising the money for the budget was the hardest part of their job. In the school leader focus group, all school leaders concurred that their schools were in states that did not have a school voucher or tax credit scholarship to aid their private school financially. During individual interviews, each head of school provided their annual report. Each report listed the operating budget, donations received, and tuition received.

David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, stated in his interview, "The hardest part is the lack of resources . . . it is a daunting task because if the students have the opportunity, access, exposure, they will be the ones who change the trajectory of some of our greatest problems . . . but I can't build a home with a fork and a knife." In a publication obtained from Agape Academy's lobby while conducting observations, the school's "partner program" states that "no student is turned away for lack of funds." The funding model per student is described as 70% partner gifts, 20% other donations, 10% family tuition. Glenn, Head of School at Agape Christian School, shared in his interview:

> To raise $12,000 for every child, that's a difficult thing. Our state doesn't provide any voucher assistance, so the constant temptation is to say, "Couldn't we just put all this faith stuff to the side and then we could become a charter and collect all that money that a charter school would bring in for each student?" . . . I say the day we do that, we change the name because we're so convinced that hope in God is what changes everything. It's not a program, it's not a curriculum, it's because all we do is rooted in hoping in God.

Phillip highlighted the connection between the mission of Promise Academy and finances:

> We have turned away hundreds of families that could have paid full tuition and we chose to give it to those who couldn't pay. We could have chosen numerous times to become 50% or 60% full pay, but that's not what we ought to do.

Each of the three schools offered supportive programs for students with learning differences that were free of charge. The three schools all developed accommodation plans for students who had a diagnosed learning difference, free of charge. The three schools had built in tutoring (before school, during lunch, and after school) that all students could take advantage of and were required to if they were struggling academically. Each school also partnered with the public school district through the collaborative agreement of IDEA. This collaborative agreement

funded special education services in the form of math and reading instruction and speech and language therapy. If students needed more support than what the school was already providing, the school leaders worked with the families on an individual basis to navigate private insurance options that would fund additional support. I witnessed an example of this while I was visiting Promise Academy. During my observation of a fourth-grade class, a student who was diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder had a one-on-one paraprofessional. The head of school mentioned to me in his interview that the family really wanted him to be here with his siblings and they agreed to "try it." The family was paying for the one-on-one paraprofessional through their private insurance.

Major Theme 3: Relational

The third major theme "Relational" emerged as data from the investigation were analyzed. School leaders and teachers believed in the need to be relational with the students, parents, and staff. Jeremy, middle and high school principal at Phileo Academy, shared that he was "not about hierarchy or power" but instead demonstrated numerous ways that he built relationships with his staff based on trust, support, and mutual interest. The need to love kids and be able to connect deeply with them was stated repeatedly in individual interviews and focus groups. It was also evident in observations conducted at the schools. As I conducted observations as each school, I noticed bright pictures of students working together that were hung in the hallways (see Appendix Q).

During my school visit to Phileo Academy, as I waited in the lobby for the head of school, the intentionality to build relationships with parents was evident in a conversation that I witnessed between a principal and a parent. The principal showed genuine concern for the family as she asked about their recovery from a fire that devastated the apartment building where the

family lived. The parent was grateful for all that the school had done so far to support her and their family by providing meals, clothing, and a hotel.

Redemptive. Redemptive is the first sub-theme highlighted within the major theme of "Relational." The belief that God is at work to redeem all things was evident at Agape Christian School, Promise Academy, and Phileo Academy. The core values statement for Agape Christian School was provided as a handout by a teacher. One of the core values at Agape Christian School is pursuing God's redemptive work. Lindsey evidenced this as she explained that the students need to build trust with teachers, and it takes time for them to feel that people are not going to give up on them. Another teacher shared in the focus group about the importance of weaving the gospel into everything they do in the classroom and how they "always" focus on the redemption of Christ. Janet, a high school teacher, described the "redemptive system that is led by our principal and leadership of the school by admitting sin, confessing it and changing."

In an observation conducted in a fourth-grade classroom at Agape Academy, a teacher who was in the classroom as a reading interventionist demonstrated her care for a student who was disrupting the classroom as he rolled on the ground making noises instead of sitting in his seat. She went over to him, knelt beside him, and asked him if he needed to take a break. The student nodded his head in agreement and walked out of the classroom and sat at a table right outside of the doorway. He pushed a button on the timer that was on the table and watched the class through the glass window. When the timer beeped, he stood up and came back into the classroom and sat down in his chair at his desk. He made eye contact with the reading interventionist, and she nodded with a smile at him. He was able to rejoin the class without any interruption. When the class dismissed to lunch, the student gave a quick hug to the intervention teacher before leaving the classroom. I was able to ask her about that exchange during the students' transition to recess. She explained that the same scenario happens repeatedly

throughout the day with multiple students. The school is intentional to teach the students self-regulation skills and to notice when they need a break from the learning environment. The goal is for students to get to a place where they can independently identify their own need for a break and become adept in self-regulation. This redeeming process is a crucial step in orienting the student's heart and mind toward Christ.

Restorative. The second sub-theme that emerged from the major theme of "Relational" was restorative. The schools placed an emphasis on orienting the students to continually choose God. Lindsey shared in her interview that Agape Christian School is in a neighborhood of the city that was impacted by race riots. She found the best way to work through this with her class was to "talk about it and not shy away from the difficult things that are going on in their lives." She shared about the importance of "always taking those little opportunities" to talk about the hope that is in Jesus. Jason shared in his interview, "It's never just a consequence for an action or something like that, it's how do we help kids." Jason, principal of Promise Academy, explained the importance of restorative circles for them. He said in his interview when referring to student discipline: "We always want students to feel they will be able to be back but with some level of responsibility on the student's part." A document shared with me by a teacher described the experience that students receive from Promise Academy as a supportive and caring community that often stands in contrast to trauma and loss in their past and present.

A document shared with me by the head of school at Phileo Academy defined the school's core commitments. One of the core commitments is *shalom*, which is described as God's peace that guides everything they do:

> It is a deep, abiding concept that finds expression everywhere you look: you see the faces of smiling kindergartners as they learn to read; you see shalom when students who have wronged each other reconcile and forgive in Jesus' name; you see shalom as graduating

seniors plan their college careers around their calling to honor God as learners and servants in whatever community they enter.

Collaborative. Collaborative was the third sub-theme that evolved from the major theme of "Relational." Glenn shared in his interview that he places a high value on teachers who are able to collaborate with one another. Additionally, the schools placed paramountcy on collaboration with families. They felt that collaboration with parents was necessary for students to reach their highest God-given potential. A school leader from Agape Christian School shared the Parent Report Card with me that they give each family at the end of the school year. This lists commitments parents are expected to uphold such as attending the following events: Parent Kick Off/Meet & Greet, Teacher Home Visits, Parent Involvement Day–Fall, Parent Teacher Conferences-Fall, Parent Involvement Day–Winter, Parent Teacher Conferences–Winter, Tuition Scholarship Conferences, and Volunteer Service Activity. Parents are rated on a scale of 1–3 (1 for not fulfilling parent commitment, 2 for fulfilling parent commitment late, and 3 for fulfilling parent commitment on time).

Lindsey discussed in her interview how communicating with parents was very difficult for her at first, but because Agape Christian School places such a high value on partnering with parents, she has had to grow in that area. In the teacher focus group, Kristen shared about the collaboration that takes place between employees at school and community social service agencies. Other teachers in the focus group echoed the importance of collaboration when helping families with needs such as transportation to school, resources for groceries or clothing, and referrals for counseling. During my observation at Phileo Academy, I noticed a large canvas mounted in the stairway that stated, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together" (see Appendix Q). A collaborative relationship was purposeful between the school community and its alumni. The schools showed honor to their previous students'

accomplishments by posting pictures, biographies, and announcements in the hallways and in quarterly mailers (see Appendix Q).

Major Theme 4: Teachers Equipped

The fourth major theme revealed from the investigation was "Teachers Equipped." It was evident at each school that an emphasis was placed on supporting and equipping teachers to be effective toward the goal of improved student learning. Within the major theme of "Teachers Equipped," the three sub-themes that surfaced were trauma informed, cross-cultural competency, and learning strategies.

Trauma Informed. The first sub-theme within "Teachers Equipped" was trauma informed. Teachers received ongoing professional development about trauma and how it manifests itself in students. In the teacher focus group, several of them shared that their school provides on-going trainings about how to help students experiencing trauma. Jason, principal at Promise Academy, talked about the helpfulness of having a "common language" as a school. Martha, teacher at Agape Academy, shared in the focus group how she felt appreciative that her school leaders prioritized the hiring of mental health counselors at her school. She also shared that the mental health counselors frequently lead staff development sessions for the staff.

Cross-cultural Competency. The second sub-theme that emerged from "Teachers Equipped" was cross-cultural competency. Zach, a teacher at Promise Academy, recognized that his students are seeing everything through a lens that "I haven't seen it that way so now I'm having that racial inequity happen . . . and how can I teach history in a way that is beneficial to them that doesn't make them feel second class?" During classroom observations, teachers exemplified a multicultural curriculum with the historical figures that they integrated into the history lessons (see Appendix R). The vocabulary that was used in a fourth-grade classroom at Agape Christian School during a science lesson tied in the different cultures in the classroom.

The hallways in each school were decorated with multi-cultural historical figures and artifacts done in art class were displayed to reflect indigenous people at each of the school sites (see Appendix R). As I was conducting my observations at Agape Christian School, I attended their Cultural Harmony session. This occurred on the last Wednesday of the month at 7:30 a.m. It was a time where the staff met to discuss the current cultural context of the school and city and how it relates to being a follower of Jesus Christ. The staff had been reading through the book *Prophetic Lament* by Soong-Cham Rah and having monthly discussions. On this particular day, the high school Bible teacher led the final discussion on the book and the art teacher facilitated an activity centered around lament (see Appendix R). I participated in a small group of teachers as we were given supplies to depict what the word *lament* meant to us. We talked about the different aspects of lament as we worked on depicting our thoughts in the art activity.

Learning Strategies. Teachers were effective in meeting the diverse learning needs of their students because they used proven techniques to help students remain engaged in the learning process. Teachers were trained in differentiation strategies and students with learning differences were provided effective strategies to mitigate their individual challenges. In the teacher focus group, Lindsey shared about metacognitive strategies such as self-monitoring, self-explanation, and self-verbalizing that she is teaching her fourth-grade class this year. All of the school leaders shared separately in their interviews that they work closely with the consulting agency, All Belong, in an effort to be more inclusive. All Belong collaborates with Christian schools to provide a site study for schools, professional development and teacher training, and educational evaluations for students.

Jeremy, principal at Phileo Academy, discussed in his individual interview a new partnership with a local consultant agency that the school has invested in this past year to help teachers become more equipped in their instructional methods. Teachers learned how to embed

executive functioning skills into everyday classroom routines, such as test taking, providing rubrics to aid the organization of writing and color-coded word walls in alphabetical order. Janet, a teacher at Promise Academy, stated in her interview that students are taught organizational skills beginning in kindergarten, and they continued to learn how to use them all the way through their senior year: "There is a systematic approach to teaching kids how to stay organized here." She stated that teachers are required to use advanced organizers, study guides, and outlines to help students to be successful. Laura, principal at Agape Academy, shared in her interview that the learning specialists at her school conducted monthly professional development workshops for teachers. The learning specialists stay informed of the latest research that relates to their grade levels and then transfer that knowledge to the teachers. The school has focused on pre-teaching subject vocabulary this past year, critical thinking techniques, and identifying links to prior learning.

Major Theme 5: Support

"Support" was revealed as the fifth and final major theme. Within the major theme of "Support," three sub-themes emerged. The delineation of support was separated as support for students, support for teachers, and support for parents.

For Students. Support for students was the first sub-theme that emerged from the major theme of "Support." In his interview, Jason, principal of middle and high school at Promise Academy, explained that the school takes a proactive and reactive approach with the students. He shared that an example of proactive would be developing a common language so that there is a "building-wide feel." Another proactive approach is the flexible seating and that was present at each school as well as visual reminders (see Appendix S). A reactive approach was described in the school leader focus group as "high support." If students do not meet the high expectations set by the schools, there are measures in place to support them. During my observation at Promise

Academy, I observed a third-grade class of 18 students. One of the students had a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder. He had a one-on-one paraprofessional that stayed with him for the entire school day. The principal shared with me that the parent's medical insurance covered the cost of the paraprofessional. The school also allowed a private speech and occupational therapist to work with the student twice per week during the school day. Jason stated that they consider families with "significant needs like this on a case-by-case basis." This family had two other students who attended the school and "the school felt the need to partner with the family so that all of the kids could be at the same school."

At Agape Christian School, the student support center is open an hour before school, during the lunch hour, and an hour after school. If students are on academic probation, they are required to attend one of those sessions four times per week. A learning support coordinator manages all support services offered to students. This includes a social worker, learning specialists, reading interventionists, and elementary, middle, and high school guidance counselors. There is a learning specialist on staff at Agape Christian School for each elementary grade level, kindergarten through fifth grade. Two additional learning specialists serve the middle and high school students. Students must have a diagnosed disability or be referred to the student support center by a staff member to receive support. Additionally, eligible students receive 1 hour of math and 1 hour of reading tutoring each week. This is provided during the school day through a collaborative agreement with Title 1 federal funding.

In the teacher focus group, Janet shared about her school's student support team, comprised of two principals, a learning specialist, and two guidance counselors who meet weekly to discuss student concerns and potential needs. This time was used to discuss specific students and current issues that they were facing. Janet explained that if a student was returning from an extended absence, they would discuss potential support that the student may need. For

students that had a D or F, a list was generated, and the students were required to attend extra support sessions. In my interview with Phillip, Head of School at Promise Academy, he stated that roughly 10% of students in the high school had accommodation plans. A student had to have a diagnosed disability to have an accommodation plan. The middle and high school had three learning specialists and the elementary school had two learning specialists to support students with learning differences. The school did not charge extra tuition for these students. Janet provided the school's official accommodation plan document to me in her individual interview. Extensive support was offered to these students and included the following categories: test taking, grading and evaluation, materials, coaching/tutor support, study support, and coursework. Each category had a range of options that could be checked to individualize support to students. Additionally, eligible students receive 1 hour of math and 1 hour of reading tutoring each week. This is provided during the school day through a collaborative agreement with Title 1 federal funding.

Sherri, the elementary principal of Phileo Academy, described in her interview how she tries to partner with teachers in identifying and cultivating the different learning styles of students. She shared a story from this past year about a second-grade student who struggled to read. He was diagnosed with dyslexia and the academic support program at the school provided specialized one-on-one instruction three times a week. She was happy to report that he has made significant progress and is on grade level. Sherri provided Phileo Academy's official accommodation plan document to me in her individual interview. Additionally, eligible students receive 1 hour of math and 1 hour of reading tutoring each week. This is provided during the school day through a collaborative agreement with Title 1 federal funding. The commitment to support students with varying learning differences was described in Phileo Academy's quarterly publication:

> We are committed to making an excellent education accessible to students beyond boundaries of race, ethnicity, financial status, faith traditions, and academic abilities. Our commitments to excellence and accessibility drive us to challenge students where they excel and meet them where they struggle.

For Teachers. The second sub-theme under the major theme of "Support" was support for teachers. School leaders prioritized supporting teachers with needs in their classrooms, as they grew in their pedagogy, and cultivating the collaborative relationship with them. Teachers at each of the three schools affirmed that their administration does everything possible to support them. Martha described in her interview the support that she feels through the administration with "trauma classes and an incredible group of deans and back up support." A principal from the Promise Academy shared that he has used the social–emotional learning curriculum, Second Step, for the last few years for elementary and middle school. He explained that the curriculum has been very helpful in developing a common language within the school for students and teachers. He felt that it also built the teachers' competence in handling difficult situations that arise from the students' emotional needs. Teachers from the Promise Academy have received training in the curriculum with helpful strategies that help teachers and students feel like they are on the same page. A teacher from Promise Academy shared in her interview that she felt supported to meet the diverse learning needs in her classroom because there are two full-time support teachers for kindergarten through fourth grade. Teachers in the focus group explained that Title 1 provides pull-out support for reading and math to the equivalent of two full-time teachers.

For Parents. The final sub-theme identified under the umbrella of "Support" was support for parents. School leaders and teachers recognized that the parents are called to be the first educators of their child and to do that well, they would need consistent support from the school.

The overwhelming consensus was that this was done by building relationships. Parents were required to be involved in their child's education at each of the three school sites. Schools recognized that they are serving an under-resourced and at-risk population but also emphasized the importance of families who are willing to partner. Phillip, Head of School at Promise Academy, stated in his interview: "It has to be a partnership or why are we doing this?" Martha stated in her interview, "We are partnering with parents, not replacing them." Each school was aware of the need to provide extensive support to parents and families so that they could meet the expectations set forth by the school for parent involvement. David, Head of School at Phileo Academy, explained in his interview, "We are calling the families up. We want them to meet a higher standard than they may be accustomed to, but we are going to support them along the way." Phileo Academy allocated funds in the budget for a family liaison position. This person was well known in the community by families and worked to foster the relationship between the families and the school staff.

Glenn, Head of School at Agape Christian School, shared, "We are teaching parents to do what every excellent parent does." Teachers at Agape Christian School were required to make three positive parent contacts each week. Glenn stated that this requirement for teachers "is the best form of parent partnership." He reported that parents were more likely to want to be involved in their child's school when the communication was overwhelmingly positive instead of negative. In her interview, Laura, elementary principal at Agape Christian School, shared that her school prioritized hiring teachers with the ability to build relationships with parents. Agape Christian School expanded their staff by building a Family Ministry Department. This office was comprised of a Spanish Family Liaison and a Parent Covenant Coordinator (see Appendix S).

In Agape Christian School's 2020–2021 annual report, the page titled "Partnering with Families" stated 239 families attended parenting workshops, 98% parent–teacher conference

completion, 283 home visits, and thousands calls, texts, and emails to encourage parents. Agape Christian School requires parents to attend two parent involvement days per year, which occur on Saturdays. These consist of workshops for parents focused on key parenting topics and time spent in their student's classrooms to see what "great Christian education is about, and they come to treasure it and not trade it in for anything." Phillip, Head of School at Promise Academy, described the difficulty of getting parents to partner as an "arduous task but I wouldn't change it and I've been requiring it for 40 years now." He explained, "When families come alongside and learn what it means for their child to attend an excellent Christian school, they also have a perspective shift that is life changing."

Each school recognized that they are serving an under-resourced and at-risk population and knew that they could not do it without the partnership of the parents. The school leaders did not waiver on the requirement for families to be involved in their child's education. One of the ways that they held this standard was by requiring every family to pay tuition. In the school leader focus group, each school leader echoed that every family must pay "something."

Research Question Responses

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. For this purpose, a central research question and three sub-questions were created. The data collected provided answers to these questions through individual interviews, document analysis, observations, and focus groups. All the data were organized into five major themes to express how school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school.

Central Research Question

The central research question asked, "How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?" The data from this study revealed that school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences because of their personal beliefs, by intentional practices done with consistency, by being highly relational, through the equipping of teachers, and by providing support to students, teachers, and parents.

Sub-Question One

The first sub-question asked, "How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools describe their self-efficacy beliefs related to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?" This question dealt with personal beliefs that contribute to the school leaders and teachers welcoming students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Self-efficacy describes one's confidence to achieve a goal. The school leaders and teachers exhibited a strong confidence that they could not do this alone, but with God's help they could: "Instead of starting with a No, we try to figure out how to make it a Yes."

The school leaders and teachers acknowledged their self-efficacy beliefs were rooted in their love for God: "Without the gospel I don't think you can do the kind of hard work, have the kind of courageous conversations, and to have real repentance, real transformation." Their sense of purpose and mission in life was at the forefront of their profession, which enabled them to have high self-efficacy beliefs: "We are a school where Jesus is glorified. God's word is taught and lived through how we treat one another." The school leaders shared a strong conviction to serve the students at their school with the best education possible and felt the responsibility to

"shepherd hearts with what the scripture says is true about another and what is true about the power of the life-changing power of the gospel." The school leaders each had a strong faith in Jesus Christ that was rooted in their upbringing. Each one of them felt determined that they were given certain opportunities in life to courageously provide opportunities for others who did not have the same opportunities.

The school leaders built self-efficacy among their teachers by providing support to them through the hiring of additional learning support staff and mental health professionals. One teacher said, "Administration provides trauma classes and an incredible group of deans and back up support." They also supplied professional development based on their needs and empowered and encouraged staff participation. There was continuous learning expected for all, emphasizing a growth mindset. Teachers and staff were empowered to lead other teachers and staff in devotionals, teacher workshops, etc., based on their expertise. Teachers acknowledged the challenge of educating students that came from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences but did not feel overwhelmed because they felt supported. Each school had licensed mental health counselors as well as guidance counselors to support students' emotional needs.

Collaborative leadership contributed to increased self-efficacy beliefs as the school leaders and teachers had a strong sense of unity. There was a collective responsibility for all students, and they believed they had to work together to achieve a common goal. The consensus of school leaders and teachers was that the work was hard, but they felt a strong calling and commitment to it. An emphasis was placed on teachers being mission-minded, which was a criterion for hiring: "We hire people that tell us that they are passionate about following Jesus, and if they are not, then it's not going to happen." Teachers acknowledged a strong sense of support by their administrative team to come alongside of them to solve problems together.

Sub-Question Two

The second sub-question asked, "What are the intentional practices of the Christian school leaders and teachers at providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?" This question addressed the significance of intentional practices that were done on a consistent basis by school leaders and teachers. There was a deliberate effort by the school leaders and teachers to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

Intentional was a final theme that was broken down into the sub-themes of mission, discipleship, culture, community, diversity, and finances. The Christian school leaders remained committed to the mission of the school and made decisions to foster that commitment. Mission statements were prominently displayed on the walls of the school and were repeated frequently by school leaders and teachers during individual interviews, focus groups, and throughout the document analysis: "We strive toward it, and they talk about it a lot, especially in all staff meetings."

School leaders acknowledged their determination to raise large sums of money to stay committed to their mission of welcoming the majority of their students from low SES backgrounds instead of students who had the ability to pay the full price of tuition: "I didn't want kids to feel like they were a scholarship kid in some wealthy school. We want them in a school that they can feel like it's their own. It belongs to them and everyone else." All three schools required all families to pay a portion of the school's tuition, based on the family's income. They were also intentional to try to "say yes instead of no" when it came to accepting students with learning differences who needed additional support. Each school leader emphasized the importance of building a team of board members, staff, faculty, as well as community constituents who whole-heartedly aligned with the mission and vision of the school. Each school

leader acknowledged difficult conversations they had recently to part ways from a constituent who was not completely aligned with the mission and vision of the school.

The school leaders and teachers sought to build community where school leaders, teachers, and students fellowship together within the context of ongoing discipleship. The theme of discipleship emerged from the data collection: "Students are discipled in the way of Christ and taught how to live out his calling in their classrooms, homes, and communities." Meaningful, supportive relationships were forged to promote student healing from trauma and give hope for their future. A high priority was placed on setting aside time for deliberate connection: "The goal is community, the goal is that everyone is included, the goal is that we have as few cliques and tight exclusive groups as possible." This included students, their families, in addition to the external community in which the school was situated.

Each school required parent involvement and placed an emphasis on supporting families with an acknowledgement of how challenging this was. They shared an overall determination that it was not optional whether to include families in their student's education—it was mandatory, and they remained steadfast until it happened. All families were required to pay tuition based on a sliding scale. All families had to pay something. In the rare instance where a family was unwilling to meet the partnership criteria set forth by each school, the school leaders shared with resignation that the family was asked to leave.

The theme of support was consistently demonstrated by each of the three cases. Support was given to the teachers, students, and families. Teachers explained that they felt supported because school leaders obtained and allocated resources to support the teaching and learning needs of students. This was evidenced by time given to teachers for common planning and professional development. The school leaders collaborated with teachers to find out what would be the most helpful and most needed professional development. School leaders shared that they

prioritized in the budget the additional hiring of teaching staff to support student learning needs and behavior. They also prioritized in the budget the additional hiring of deans, mental health and guidance counselors, as well as family support liaison positions to foster parental and community involvement. Teachers appreciated the additional resources that were allocated to these positions because it enabled them to increase their focus on teaching and learning. Martha stated the support that she feels through the administration with "trauma classes and an incredible group of deans and back up support."

Sub-Question Three

"How do the K–12 educators who teach in Christian schools meet the varied learning needs of their students?" This question addressed the significance of teachers meeting varied learning needs in their classroom. The final major theme of "Support" aligned with the schoolwide acknowledgement at each school to meet the varied needs of each individual student. Jason stated there was a "building-wide feel." Teachers expressed that the challenge of having students with varied learning differences was achievable because of the school leaders' commitment to support. The theme of "Support" divided into three sub-themes: support for students, support for teachers, and the support for families.

Each of the three schools hired additional staff to support students. The additional support was prioritized for students' learning needs, social and emotional needs, and needs related to trauma. The positions at the three schools were varied to include a private speech and occupational therapist; learning support coordinator; social worker; mental health counselors; learning specialists; reading interventionists; and elementary, middle, and high school guidance counselors. Each of the three schools had a collaborative agreement with Title 1 to receive federal funds to offer more support to students through reading and math tutoring.

The sub-theme of support for teachers was provided by administration through the hiring of additional support staff to help train teachers to better work with students with behavior and emotional trauma. These positions included deans, mental health counselors, and family liaison representatives. Each school had individuals on staff that were responsible for the success of students with diagnosed learning differences. Teachers were informed of learning strategies and best ways to support students by the schools' learning specialists. Teachers stated that they were also supported with time intentionally built into the schedule for teachers to have common planning time to collaborate. There was a high expectation for teachers to be accountable for student learning using data-driven instruction. Teachers focused on strategies to engage learners and constantly monitor their learning. School leaders took part in the common planning time to collaborate with teachers and foster an atmosphere of learning together. The collaboration between teachers and school leaders involved inquiry for professional development. School leaders were intentional to provide teachers with professional development in student needs and specific areas in which they wanted to grow instead of a top-down approach.

Outside experts were frequently brought in for professional development, especially for the topics of trauma, cross-cultural competency, and learning strategies. Phileo Academy consulted with a local agency to equip teachers with learning strategies, specifically executive functioning skills. Agape Academy's learning specialists stayed abreast of the latest research and practices that related to learning strategies and then hosted monthly professional development workshops to share the knowledge with the teachers. Local social service agencies, psychologists, and mental health counselors equipped the schools' staff on trauma-informed practices. Each of the three schools maintains an ongoing collaborative partnership with the consulting agency, All Belong. All Belong is an organization that partners with Christian schools, churches, and families to help meet the educational, socioemotional, physical,

and behavioral needs of students at all levels of ability and disability. The three schools have received a comprehensive site study, professional development and teacher training, and educational evaluations for students from All Belong.

Summary

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. This chapter described the data collected through individual interviews with school leaders and teachers, documents submitted by school leaders and teachers, in-person observations of the schools, a focus group with the school leaders, and a focus group with the teachers. This chapter included the data analyzed and how it supported the central research question and the three sub-questions.

There were five major themes that emerged from the data collected: personal beliefs, intentional, relational, teachers equipped, and support. The evidence gathered from this study revealed that school leaders' and teachers' personal beliefs were rooted in their personal faith in Jesus Christ. This enabled them to possess high levels of self-efficacy as they welcomed and included students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. This transferred to school leaders and teachers encompassing high expectations and a strong commitment to the hard work. The school leaders and teachers identified the importance of remaining committed to the school's mission, building community, and providing support.

A vital element of the school leaders and teachers was a deep dependence on God and a commitment to ongoing spiritual development as a school community. They realized that they would not be able to build their students' capacity for this same dependence on God if they did not promote it first within themselves. The teachers felt equipped to meet the varying learning

needs because of the supportive environment that was fostered by school leaders with the hiring of additional staff to meet the academic, social and emotional, and behavioral needs. They also received specific, on-going professional development and common planning time.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Stake's (2006) multiple case study data analysis process and worksheets were used to evaluate participant responses to individual interviews, document analysis, observations, and two separate focus groups. Data were viewed through the lens of the study's underpinning theory, the social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), which helped to reveal understanding surrounding the phenomenon. This chapter includes interpretation of the study's thematic findings, the implications from relevant literature and theory, methodological and practical implications, and limitations and delimitations. This chapter ends with recommendations for future research and final conclusions.

Discussion

In this section I discuss the study's findings in light of the developed themes which were situated in empirical literature and viewed through the lens of the supporting theoretical framework. The interpretation of the findings is discussed first, followed by implications for policy and practice. Theoretical and empirical implications are then conveyed, and the limitations and delimitations of the study are communicated. This section concludes with recommendations for future research. Participants' quotations are used to support and confirm my interpretations of the study's findings.

Summary of Thematic Findings

The themes discovered during the data analysis procedure were used to interpret the study's findings. The information gleaned from the three cases in this study addressed the gap in

empirical research regarding Christian schools that serve students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Using Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, the central research question and sub-questions were answered. Stake's (2006) multicase analysis procedure was used to investigate participants' responses to individual interviews, document analysis, observations, a school leader focus group, and a teacher focus group. Individual cases were analyzed and the findings between the three nested were merged to reveal the quintain.

The individual cases in this study were scrutinized, and later the findings were merged using cross-case analysis. The five major themes revealed during data analysis were as follows: (a) personal beliefs, (b) intentional, (c) relational, (d) teachers equipped, and (e) support. The major theme of "Personal Beliefs" had three sub-themes of biblical mandate, high expectations, commitment. Collectively, the seven school leaders and six teachers discussed various ways that their personal beliefs were shaped from their personal faith in God. They described experiences growing up that impacted them, and they knew they were created to make a difference in this world. They believed that as a Christian, they were called to a biblical mandate to see each student created in the image of God.

School leaders and teachers also discussed the major theme of "Intentional" as the extra effort to plan and carry out specific routines, traditions, and approaches. The sub-themes that emerged from the intentional were mission, culture, diversity, and finances. Intentionality was evidenced by phrases that were used as a part of the "common language," the décor and artifacts that were warmly displayed throughout each of the schools, and the clear focus on using each minute in the school day to optimize students' personal relationship with Jesus through relationships and to maximize learning opportunities.

The major theme of "Relational" encompassed the sub-themes of restorative, responsive, and collaborative. School leaders and teachers demonstrated numerous ways that relationships

were built with students, staff, and parents based on trust, support, and mutual interest. The need to love kids and be able to connect deeply with them was stated repeatedly in individual interviews and focus groups. It was also evident in observations conducted at the schools to always focus on the redemption of Christ. Janet described the redemptive system that is led by her principal and leadership of the school by admitting sin, confessing it, and changing.

"Teachers Equipped" was the next major theme that evidenced itself through the sub-themes of trauma informed, cross-cultural competency, and learning strategies. This study revealed that each school prioritized ongoing professional development by providing teacher workshops and maintaining an ongoing partnership with All Belong, a Christ-centered consulting agency that promotes inclusion. The school leaders ensured that teachers infused each student's cultural heritage into instructional time. Teachers were trained in differentiation strategies and students with learning differences were provided effective strategies to mitigate their individual challenges.

Finally, the major theme of "Support" encompasses the sub-themes of students, teachers, and parents. Each school leader and teacher placed a strong emphasis on supporting students toward the goal of improved student learning, social and emotional regulation, and to come to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. Support was shown to teachers through collaborative relationships with teachers and school leaders. Teachers unanimously indicated that this support was provided for them. The precedence of parent involvement was set, and the realization was that this would only occur from supportive relationships. The schools prioritized investing in families in a way that they will feel connected and want to be involved in their child's education.

Interpretation of Findings

The findings of this study indicated that there are three essential elements to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into a

Christian school. During this investigation, I spent 3 days at each school engaging with school leaders and teachers and then converged this experience with the multiple methods of data collection during this study. It was apparent that for Christian schools to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences, they must have a leader of conviction, cohesion within the school community, and competence of the school leaders and teachers.

A Leader of Conviction

A leader of conviction was the most significant interpretation of this research study. The school leaders believed that an excellent, Christ-centered education where every child can flourish academically and reach their God-given potential should be available to all children regardless of their SES and ability level. Choosing to serve students who learn differently and/or come from a background where they do not have the resources or opportunities available to them takes a certain mindset from the school leaders and teachers. The findings of this research study revealed that the mindset requires a deep personal belief in the transforming power of the gospel. In this investigation, school leaders' personal beliefs and experiences played a significant role in their decision to lead a school where students from low SES and/or learning differences were welcomed and included.

As I conducted this research, it was apparent that the school leaders were very much aware of the circumstances of their students' personal lives, and they knew the potential implications of accepting these students into their school. The school leaders considered the potential cultural shift that could happen from accepting low SES students, refugee students, and students of other religious faiths. These are all marginalized students that would not normally be accepted into a private Christian school. They also had to carefully consider the capacity of their teachers' classrooms when accepting a student with learning needs to ensure that learning would

still occur for all students. The school leaders were very aware of the balance between the high expectations of the full-paying students' families and the reason they did not have them in public school but had them receiving a private Christian education. Despite all of these factors, the school leaders remained true to their conviction that an excellent Christ-centered education where every child can flourish academically and reach their God-given potential should be available to all children regardless of their SES and ability level.

School leaders maintained a deep dependence on God. They did not try to solve problems in their own strength, which would result in ineffectiveness, but displayed a faith that God was directing this effort and they needed to step into God's power. Leaders recognized that the difficulties of serving students from low SES backgrounds and/or learning differences did not have to be unbearable. It is the way we look at them—through faith or unbelief—that makes them seem so. They talked about their inner dialogue, their thinking and doubting if this was possible ("You can't, won't, and never will"). Those are false beliefs in the eyes of these leaders. They recognized the need to identify negative thoughts and renew their thinking. The humility displayed by the leaders was evident in their believe that they could do this because they were serving at God's appointment. Their faith constantly contradicted *The Little Engine that Could*. Instead of saying "I think I can, I think I can," their faith said, "I know He can, I knew He could." The leaders fueled teachers' confidence by telling the story (repeating school's mission, student success stories, God's calling) of the goodness and trustworthiness of God.

Cohesiveness

According to the data, there was an intentional focus by the school leaders and teachers to maintain alignment in the school community. Although the major themes that emerged in this study represent separate elements, the five areas are highly interrelated. As I interpreted the connections between the five major themes of (a) personal beliefs, (b) intentional, (c) relational,

(d) teachers equipped, and (e) support, I determined that these areas need to be united and working together effectively to reach the goal of welcoming and including students from low SES and/or with learning differences. Cohesiveness represents how the five major themes work together in each school that was studied. Cohesion has been defined by researchers as the tendency for a group to be in unity while working towards a goal or to satisfy the emotional needs of its members (DeWitt, 2018).

Leaders understood that cohesion did not develop spontaneously and were instrumental in helping their school communities understand the relationships among the various aspects of welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. In interpreting the data, I concluded that the distinct mission statements and core values of the schools undergirded ways of doing things in every aspect of school life. Leaders did not shy away from difficult conversations with teachers, and in reciprocity, teachers did not shy away from difficult conversations with students. Increased self-awareness encouraged teachers and students to become more reflective and effective, which develops a more collaborative school culture. Jason shared that there was a "building-wide feel." School leaders and teachers realized the need to deeply understand what is going on in their students' lives. When students feel a connection with their teachers and feel respect and trust, they behave better and learn better.

Cohesiveness was also demonstrated through embedding an approach to social and emotional learning and integrating trauma-informed practices into every aspect of the school community. The experiences that the teachers shared exposed how the schools prioritized finances to support students in these areas. Martha shared that she was grateful for the additional deans, mental health counselors, and trauma classes that were provided at Agape Christian School. Cohesiveness was also demonstrated by participants treating each student as a person created in the image of God. According to the data, participants believed that this best occurred

through discipleship, which happens to ensure that each student benefits from meaningful relationships with adults. As I conducted the research, I came to suspect that teachers and leaders came to school each day passionate about the Word of God, looking for opportunities to turn ordinary moments into redeeming experiences that shape the mind and heart of their students.

Competency

I observed during the data gathering process that teachers faced the obstacle of engaging learners who were often distracted with their complicated lives outside of school. Despite this, they did not surrender to what one school leader stated as the "soft bigotry of low expectations." Throughout the data gathering, the research conveyed that teacher competence was fueled by the leader's conviction and developed from a shared vision of what excellent teaching entails. Teachers were effective because systems were in place to ensure teachers' needs were identified and met. Throughout the data gathering, teachers conveyed the risks that they took to try new teaching practices in an effort to reach their students. Teachers were enabled to elicit high intellectual performance from all students because they had greater confidence, which in turn enabled the students to have greater confidence in their learning capabilities.

The research demonstrated that the competence of the school leaders and teachers stemmed from their confidence as they worked collaboratively to improve student learning, build relationships with students and families, and share the life-transforming power of the gospel. In leading this study, I concluded that the teachers who participated in the study felt that mutual trust existed in their school community. Quaglia and Lande (2017) found that when teachers have a voice in decision-making, they are four times more likely to believe they can make a difference and three times more likely to encourage students to be leaders and to make decisions.

Implications for Policy or Practice

The findings of this multi-site case study revealed several implications for policy and practice. The results exposed how school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Rich and thick descriptions were provided to allow readers to make decisions about transferability and help other Christian school leaders and teachers provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

Implications for Policy

An analysis of the findings indicated that access and opportunity are the greatest needs for low SES and/or students with learning differences to gain entry to private Christian schools. The results from this study indicate that raising money to support the tuition of the students is the hardest part of the school leaders' jobs. By increasing the number of states that offer a tax-credit scholarship and/or school voucher would provide greater access and opportunity to students who would not normally have it.

Tax-credit scholarships allow taxpayers to receive full or partial tax credits when they donate to nonprofits that provide private school scholarships. Twenty-one states have tax-credit scholarships (EdChoice, 2022). One of the schools involved in this case study was located in a state that participates in tax-credit scholarships. Vouchers give parents the freedom to choose a private school for their child, using all or part of the public funding set aside for their child's education. Families can use vouchers to pay partial or full tuition for their child's private school, including religious options. Sixteen states, Washington, D.C., and Puerto Rico have school vouchers (EdChoice, 2022). Each of the schools studied in this research were located in a state that did not offer a school voucher program. Increasing school voucher programs across the

country will increase the opportunity for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences to access private Christian education.

Implications for Practice

The experiences provided by the school leaders and teachers of this study led me to conclude that while each school community is highly unique, there are similar desired outcomes of the schools. While each school remained consistent to its mission and core values, they had to adapt as new conditions presented themselves. School leaders and teachers were courageous to identify what was working and what was not. The research revealed that the three schools were adept at using data to inform not only the teaching and learning environment but also the cultural responsiveness, parent involvement, and students' social and emotional needs. The deliberate process that the schools used to problem-solve, make decisions, and reflect, along with the rationale behind each step, would be beneficial to assist other school leaders and teachers.

Another implication for practice involves the relationships that are present between student–student and student–teacher. The school leaders and teachers in this study were intentional about building positive relationships among all members of the school community. Acquainting other school leaders and teachers with the explicit ways that school leaders and teachers enhance feelings of belongingness is crucial to increasing the effectiveness of Christian school leaders and teachers welcoming and including students from low SES and/or learning differences into their school community.

One final implication for practice uncovered during this study surrounds the curriculum and learning opportunities that develop students' strengths, interests, and God-given passions. The educators in this study spent much time searching for multicultural curricula that honored God in their pedagogy. Additionally, they were resourceful to find innovative strategies to engage all students, especially those with diverse learning needs. School leaders should gather

best practices to build a framework within urban Christian schools that provide recommendations for approaches to teaching and learning, relationship building, discipleship, and parent engagement.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The findings that resulted from this analysis have theoretical and empirical implications. The theory supporting this study was Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. Based on implications from this study, recommendations relating to how school leaders and teachers welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences are made for stakeholders.

Theoretical Implications

The theory guiding the multi-site case study was Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory. This multi-site case study explored the experiences of school leaders and teachers who welcomed and included students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Social cognitive theorists support the premise that "most of the behaviors that people display are learned, either deliberately or inadvertently, through the influence of example" (Bandura, 1971, p. 5). The findings suggested that the personal beliefs of the school leaders led them to follow the biblical mandate they felt called to as they welcomed and included students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into the private Christian school community. This positively impacted the beliefs of the teachers, giving them greater confidence in their capabilities to welcome and include students with diverse learning needs into their classroom, which then had a positive effect on the students to believe that they were created by God for a purpose and they are capable to achieve high expectations.

The research conducted in this study found an intentional approach to infusing the mission of the school into every aspect of the school culture. Exemplifying the construct of

behaviors being learned through the example of others, students from diverse backgrounds and with diverse ability levels were welcomed and included into the school community because of the intentional efforts of school leaders and teachers. A vital tenet of the social cognitive theory is that the environmental influences of a person's life affects their thinking patterns and patterns of behavior (Bandura, 1997). The social cognitive theory framework facilitated the explanation of the environmental influences of the school's culture shaping the thinking patterns and patterns of behavior for all students. Findings from this research study confirmed what Cantor et al. (2019) indicated as the social environment is important for positive relationships and experiences to guide the maturation of a child's developing neurobiological systems (Cantor et al., 2019).

The findings also revealed how the social cognitive theory was prevalent and necessary to describe the importance of self-efficacy when welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into a private Christian school community. Bandura (1986) described an individual who believes in their ability to be successful in certain circumstances as exhibiting self-efficacy. School leaders in this study described personal beliefs that were grounded in a biblical mandate to provide an excellent Christ-centered education to students who would not normally have access or opportunity to it. Teachers in this study felt a strong sense of self-efficacy because they were supported by school leaders through mutual collaboration and on-going training in trauma-informed approaches and SEL strategies.

Empirical Implications

To date, there has been little research associated with Christian school leaders and teachers who welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community. Existing research has focused primarily on public schools that serve low SES students, or research based on best practices that pertain to students with learning differences. There is a clear gap in research regarding Christian school leaders and

teachers who welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community. This study sought to address that gap and examine the pragmatic lessons learned among three private Christian schools leading to implications for further study.

The empirical implications of this study have the potential to help school leaders and teachers within Christian schools to become more welcoming and inclusive to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Typically, students from a low SES usually cannot afford or cannot access a quality Christian education (Lane & Kinnison, 2020). Additionally, students with a learning difference typically do not meet the criteria to gain entrance into a quality Christian school (Lane et al., 2019). A private Christian education is considered only for the privileged or elite, and some private Christian schools have been referred to as exclusive (Norsworthy et al., 2018). Private Christian schools do not fall under the same laws as public schools and are not required to provide an education to all children (Lane, 2017). There were several apparent gaps in the literature addressing how Christian schools can be more accessible to marginalized students, the core beliefs of leaders and teachers who choose to welcome and include these students into their school community, and the intentional practices of welcoming and inclusive Christian schools. To begin to address these gaps in the research, this study focused on qualitative inquiry into the beliefs of Christian school leaders and teachers using a multi-site case study design to impart a thick and rich description of each case, with identified successes and challenges. As a result, this study answers the central research question related to how the leaders and teachers within Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Naturalistic generalizations are described by Stake (2006) as the expectations that the multi-case

report will be a guide to setting policy for a population of cases such as those studied and that the assertions may be transferred from the cases within the study to others as well.

Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations existed in this investigation over which I, the researcher, had no authority. Limitations for this investigation included my inability to study a greater number of private Christian schools. These constraints were a result of potential participants opting out of the research study and my limitation of time to visit more than three schools. Another limitation is the individuals at the research sites who were not available to be interviewed by me or observed. The end of the school year is a very busy time to host a researcher. The schools were incredibly gracious to give me access to the school leaders and teachers who were available at the time of my visits. While I did have 13 participants who were interviewed, a greater sample size would give a more robust and varied perspective.

The delimitations of the study involved the study boundaries I imposed. One delimitation was that this study did not offer specific details on the number of low SES students served at each school or the criteria for determining low SES. Another delimitation was that this study did not identify the number of students at each school with learning differences or the type of diagnosed learning differences. This information was not included in the study because participants did not know the specific numbers when asked during their individual interviews, nor was the information published on the school's websites or in printed material. I did send follow up emails to request this specific information but was not given an answer.

Recommendations for Future Research

Recommendations for future research are centered on the limitations and delimitations and the findings of this study. The participants were selected from three private Christian schools located in urban cities in different geographic regions of the United States. Future research may

focus on recruiting participants in a broader geographical location or including participants from rural and suburban communities within the United States. In consideration of the study findings, this study revealed how teachers are equipped to meet the diverse learning needs in their classroom and the need for teachers to receive support from school leaders.

A case study design might be appropriate to explore Christian higher education institutions that offer education coursework in urban education or exceptional student education for undergraduate and graduate degrees. Equipping preservice teachers and school leaders to serve students with diverse learning needs and from traumatic backgrounds is essential to the future of our educational system. Preservice teachers need to spend time in classrooms interacting with students and experienced teachers to learn specific teaching strategies. It is crucial for preservice teachers to spend time interacting with students from different backgrounds and with differing learning needs so that they are prepared to help their students achieve their highest potential. Since school culture is established by school leaders, Christian higher education institutions should also seek to equip school leaders with the characteristics needed to establish welcoming and inclusive school environments.

Future research might include a narrative study of the parents of students with learning differences to understand the rationale and the significance of wanting their children included in a Christian school environment. Many times, if a parent has a child with learning differences and other children without learning differences, they will have to drop their children off at different schools because the Christian school is not equipped to meet the needs of diverse learners. Parents have a strong desire to have their children with learning differences educated in a nurturing Christian environment alongside their siblings or typical peers.

Conclusion

This multi-site case study examined the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. Using Bandura's (1986) social cognitive theory, the investigation explored what contributed to the self-efficacy beliefs of seven school leaders and six teachers at three different private Christian schools. Data were collected from individual interviews, document analysis, observations, and two separate focus groups. The findings of this study indicated that there are three essential elements to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences into a Christian school. These essential elements are conviction, cohesion, and competency.

School leaders held a deep conviction which transformed their sense of purpose and mission in life. Their determination to welcome low SES and/or students with learning differences came from what they understood to be a biblical mandate: to view each student created in the image of God. The transforming power of the gospel is what propelled the school leaders to align the school community with their mission statement and core values. Remaining steadfast and committed to what they believed God called them to serve as an exemplary model for teachers to follow and exude the same characteristics to their students. This cohesion was evident in every aspect of the school community as the intentional practices of the school leaders and teachers led to a positive school culture. Confident teachers inspired students to thrive because relationships, discipleship, and collaboration were prioritized. The findings indicated that access and opportunity are the greatest needs for low SES and/or students with learning differences to access Christian schools. The results from this study indicate that raising money to support the tuition of the students is the hardest part of the school leaders' jobs. Increasing the

number of states that offer a tax-credit scholarship and/or school voucher would provide greater access and opportunity to students who would not normally have it.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 18, 2022

Amanda Champion
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY21-22-942 A MULTI-SITE CASE STUDY OF CHRISTIAN SCHOOL LEADERS AND TEACHERS WHO PROVIDE A WELCOMING AND INCLUSIVE ENVIRONMENT FOR STUDENTS FROM LOW-SES BACKGROUNDS AND/OR WITH LEARNING DIFFERENCES

Dear Amanda Champion, 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

Add date here

Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree. The purpose of my research is to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join in my study.

Participants must be 18 years of age or older and employed as a school leader or teacher for three or more years at one of the Christian schools under study. Participants, if willing, will be asked to participate in an in-person interview. This interview will take 45-50 minutes and will be audio recorded. You will also be asked to provide any school documents that provide information related to the school providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. These can be whole school documents or personal communication that you send to the parents of students in your classroom. Several participants will be selected for classroom observations that will last for 45-60 minutes. All participants will be asked to participate in a 45- to 60-minute audio-recorded focus group via Zoom. Finally, I will ask you to verify the transcriptions of the interview and your part of the focus group to ensure accuracy. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here to complete the screening survey (10 minutes):
[redacted]

If you are selected to participate in this study, you will receive an email from me to schedule your interview with the consent document attached. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me via email prior to the interview.

Sincerely,
Amanda Champion
Education Doctoral Student
[redacted]

Appendix C: Screening Survey

The purpose of this study is to investigate Christian schools that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students of low-socioeconomic (SES) background and/or with learning differences. This screening survey is intended to capture demographic information and better understand your perceived ability level to share and discuss your experience with welcoming and including these students.

Name:

Gender:

Current age:

Race/ethnicity:

Highest degree earned or expected to be earned:

Major(s) of degrees earned:

Employment position:

Number of years in your current employment position:

What additional certifications or trainings do you have:

Please answer the following questions using a numerical scale from 1-5,
1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree.

I am confident that I can describe instances of providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences into my school community (either done by myself or by someone else).
1 2 3 4 5

I am confident in my ability to reflect on and discuss my experiences of intentionally providing appropriate educational interventions for students from low socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences.
1 2 3 4 5

Appendix D: Notification Emails

Acceptance email:

Dear [insert name],

My name is Amanda Champion, and I am a doctoral student from the School of Education at Liberty University. Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study about Christian school leaders and teachers that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities. At this time, you are eligible to be in this study.

Please sign the consent form that can be found here: https://docs.google.com/document/d/13I9I4bN6OkYbEvvi2Jk8US27BWy7xvMNk8qYrY69oHY/edit?usp=sharing

Please email me your signed consent form to [redacted] and include your preferred day and time for a 30 minute in-person interview the week of [add date here]. I will send you a calendar invitation. Please let me know at your earliest convenience if you are not able to keep your preferred interview time.

Thank you very much.

Sincerely,

Amanda Champion
Educational Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Thank you, non-accepted email:

Dear [insert name],

My name is Amanda Champion, and I am a doctoral student from the School of Education at Liberty University. Thank you for your interest in participating in my research study about Christian school leaders and teachers that provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities. At this time, you are not eligible to be in this study.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,
Amanda Champion
Educational Doctoral Student, Liberty University

Appendix E: Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Multi-Site Case Study of Christian School Leaders and Teachers who Provide a Welcoming and Inclusive Environment for Students from Low-SES Backgrounds and/or with Learning Differences
Principal Investigator: Amanda Champion, Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University School of Education

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older and have served for 3 years or more as a teacher or school leader at a Christian school. 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 this multi-site case study is to examine the intentional practices of Christian school leaders and teachers who strive to provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low-socioeconomic (SES) backgrounds and/or with learning differences into their school community. At this stage in the research, intentional practices will be generally defined as a deliberate effort to foster an educational climate that allows learning to flourish within all students.

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. Participate in an in-person, audio-recorded interview. The interview will take approximately 45-50 minutes to complete.
2. Provide any school documents that provide information related to the school providing a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low-socioeconomic backgrounds and/or with learning differences. This will take approximately 15 minutes to complete.
3. If selected, allow a classroom observation for 45-60 minutes.
4. Participate in an audio-recorded focus group via Zoom. This should take approximately 45-60 minutes to complete.
5. Review the transcripts of your interview and your part of the focus group to check for accuracy. This should 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 school leaders or teachers from three Christian schools that welcome and include students from low-SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences.

Benefits to society include bringing an understanding of how Christian school leaders and

teachers provide a welcoming and inclusive environment to students from low-SES backgrounds and/or with disabilities.

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.

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

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. 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 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 Amanda Champion. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [redacted]

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

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. You can print a copy of the document for your records. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the researcher 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 me as part of my participation in this study.

_____
Printed Subject Name

_____
Signature & Date

Appendix F: Interview Questions

1. Please tell me about yourself – where you grew up, your family, and your stage of life.
2. How did you come to work at this school?
3. What is your involvement in the community where you live?
4. What was your family experience growing up?
5. What are your beliefs about Christian education?
6. How does your personal faith influence your philosophy of education?
7. Please describe, in your opinion, the most important aspect of a Christian school.
8. Please describe your educational philosophy.
9. What are your beliefs about educating students with learning disabilities among students without learning disabilities?
10. What are your beliefs about educating students from low-income backgrounds among students without low-income backgrounds?
11. What are your beliefs on inclusion?
12. What is the vision and mission for your school, and how is that vision and mission shared with your faculty and staff?
13. In what ways does this school reflect the vision and mission?
14. How would you describe your school's culture?
15. How does the school build a partnership with the home environment?
16. Please describe what you feel would be an ideal school culture and how you would go about making changes to reach that optimal level.
17. Please describe how teachers and staff at your school are equipped to serve diverse students.

18. Please describe the varied levels of learning differences in classes and how are interventions implemented.
19. What challenges emerge from serving students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences and what supports are incorporated into the learning environment to ensure a healthy, safe, and supportive learning environment?
20. Please describe the hardest thing about serving your students.

Appendix G: Example of Completed Observation Protocol

Date / Time (beginning/ending)	Participant/School Pseudonym	Place
5/23/2022 10:15-10:45am	**Agape Christian School**	**Room 114** Kindergarten class

Descriptive Notes:

10:15: The teacher was conducting a math lesson when I entered the classroom. I quietly sat at the back table. All students were spaced out on a large oval carpet and each student had a 3-ring binder on their lap. They were following along with the teacher's lesson on the board and writing answers in their binder.

-The teacher asks a question and instructs students to write answer in notebook.

-Teacher walks around to check answers.

-Teacher says "Give a thumbs up when you have it."

-Students quietly put thumb up and look around to see who else has the answer.

10:22: teacher claps hands 3x to transition

-Teachers gives directions then says, "I see (student's name) turning to the counting section."

-Teacher circulates to check student work.

-Choral counting with 10 blocks to 14.

10:23: teacher claps 3 times, says, "Go to weather." Students sing "What's the weather like?"

-Students follow along with teacher on board to fill in calendar in binder.

-Teacher says, "Give a thumbs up if you have 16" as she points to the 16 on the board.

-Teacher circulates room to check students' work.

-Teacher stops at a student to tell him to correct his answer. As she does this, the student complains about another student.

-Teacher says, "You worry about you. If I see something I will correct it." Student goes back to work.

10:26: Teacher says, "Give a thumbs up if you are ready to move." Students give thumbs up and then move to put binders on shelf and move to seats. Teacher looks over at 2 students and says, "Oh, good, I'm glad you guys solved a problem." "Walking (student's name), Walking (student's name)"

Reflexive Notes:

The teacher was noticeably pregnant but she remained on her feet and was very energetic.

All students are on task. It is obvious that this is routine to the class.

I am very impressed with this teacher's classroom management.

Teacher transitions quickly to maintain attention of students.

This was very surprising to me the little boy did not complain again to the teacher and immediately returned to work.

The teacher is very positive.

This student came running into the classroom. The teacher did not raise

	her voice when she instructed him to walk. It was obvious that the students were used to transitioning quickly. The teacher gave no instructions but the students knew what to do.
"Oh, look at my friends who have their paper out right away."	
10:31: Teacher holds up 5 fingers, begins singing phonics song starting with "Z" and gives a gesture with each letter and letter sound. A student has been chosen to use the pointer to point to each letter card on the wall. -Students finish singing song. Teacher says, "I love how some students already put charts away because they see we don't need them anymore and they've turned their bodies this way."	**I am thinking how this teacher doesn't waste any instructional time. She has already accomplished so much and I've only been conducting the observation for 16 minutes so far.**
-Teacher adds words to sight word wall. A student raises her hand. Teacher makes eye contact and says, "We'll talk later." Student quietly puts hand down.	**Teacher aide enters the room and it is obvious how in sync the teacher and aide are. They seamlessly transition the pointer and the aide carries on with the lesson as the teacher goes over to the corner of the room to prepare for what is coming next.**
10:33: Teacher says, "Turn your chair this way so I know your body is listening." Students begin reciting words as teacher points to words. -Students transition to carpet as aide holds up *Rainbow Fish*. No instruction was given nor did students talk as they got up out of their seats and came back to the carpet and quietly sat down. -Aide read book to students.	
10:38: Teacher alerts students to overhead projector to demonstrate what they will do on the worksheet when they return to their seats. -Teacher addresses a student who tries to talk to another student, "she is learning – we aren't going to talk to her and we'll let her learn."	**Again, teacher was completely positive when correcting a student.**
10:45: Students transition to centers.	**This is very orderly. It is apparent that students know what to expect.**

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

1. Self-efficacy is defined by Bandura (1997) as "beliefs in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments" (p. 3). What thoughts, feelings, or associations come to mind when you first think of self-efficacy beliefs related to welcoming and including students from low SES backgrounds? What thoughts, feelings, or associations come to mind when you first think of self-efficacy beliefs related to welcoming and including students with learning differences?
2. How would you describe the intentional practices to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds at your school? How would you describe the intentional practices to welcome and include students with learning differences at your school?
3. Schools that welcome and include students from low SES and/or with learning differences have students with various learning needs in the classroom. What training do teachers need to have to meet the diverse learning needs of students from low SES backgrounds? What training do teachers need to have to meet the diverse learning needs of students with learning differences?

Appendix I: Permission from Publisher to Use Stake's Worksheets

From: permissions@guilford.com
Subject: RE: [External] RE: republication permissions request
Date: June 27, 2022 at 2:34 PM
To: Champion, Amanda [redacted]

Dear Amanda,

Thank you for confirming the worksheet numbers.

One-time non-exclusive world rights in the English language for print and electronic formats are granted for your requested use of the selections below in your dissertation for Liberty University.

Permission fee due: No Charge

This permission is subject to the following conditions:

1. A credit line will be prominently placed and include: the author(s), title of book, editor, copyright holder, year of publication and "Reprinted with permission of Guilford Press" (or author's name where indicated).

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Best wishes,
Angela

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http://www.guilford.com/permissions

From: Champion, Amanda <>
Sent: Tuesday, June 14, 2022 10:46 AM
To: permissions@guilford.com

Appendix J: Worksheet 2. The Themes (Research Questions) of This Study

Theme 1: How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools provide a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?
Theme 2: How do the leaders and teachers within Christian schools describe their self-efficacy beliefs related to providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?
Theme 3: What are the intentional practices of the Christian school leaders and teachers at providing a welcoming and inclusive environment for students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences?
Theme 4: How do the K–12 educators who teach in Christian schools meet the varied learning needs of their students?

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 2, p. 43. Copyright 2006 by Guilford Press. Reprinted with permission of Guilford Press (see Appendix I).

Appendix K: Worksheet 3. Analyst's Notes While Reading a Case Report

Case ID_1__

<table>
<tr>
<td>Synopsis of case:
Located in northern city with over 1 million people
K–12 private Christian school
550 students
welcomes students with learning differences (70 students). There are two sections of each grade level. The school is racially diverse; 50% White, 35% Black, 8% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 4% other. The school leadership is comprised of a head of school, high school, middle school, & elementary principal, 3 dean of students, and director of learning support.

Low-income: 74% qualify for Free or Reduced lunch

Founded in 2000</td>
<td rowspan="2">Case Findings:
I. Successes: discipleship through relationships
II. Challenges: Raising 4 million dollars, maintaining high standards and expectations, helping parents to honor commitment
III. Mitigating Factors: God's redemption through the gospel of Christ, Relationships built with one another
IV. Lessons Learned: A deep dependence on God's power that is at work within us all can transform and redeem the most difficult situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uniqueness of case situation for program/phenomenon:
Site 1
School is situated in inner city. State does not offer any tax-credit scholarships, school choice vouchers or scholarships for students with disabilities. Fundraising through donor support is primary means to fund student tuition. All families must pay something. High expectations are consistent for students and parents.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance of case for cross-case Themes:
Theme 1: personal beliefs ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 2: intentional ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 3: culture ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 4: teachers equipped ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 5: support ⇒ highly relevant</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</table>

Case ID_2__

<table>
<tr><td>Synopsis of case:
Located in a major city in the Midwest with a population of 420,324.
PK–12 Private Christian School
2 campuses: PK–8 and 9–12
The school enrolls more than 620 students, representing over 30 countries of origin. The school's racial diversity is defined as so: 27% Hispanic/Latino, 42% Caucasian, 5% Asian, 20% African American, 5% African, 1% Native American. One third of the student body have identified learning differences. Fifty-eight percent of students are from families under the Federal Poverty Line and 90% receive tuition assistance. The school leadership is comprised of a superintendent, elementary/middle school principal, and high school principal.
Established in 1974</td><td rowspan="2">Case Findings:
I. Successes: Community of diversity within the school, stories of students overcoming challenges, discipleship and sharing the gospel by students
II. Challenges: raising money, parent involvement, supporting students with learning differences, supporting students with current trauma & traumatic backgrounds, serving students from 31 different countries or origin
III. Mitigating Factors: biblical mandate to serve students from varying ethnic heritages, schoolwide approach to supporting students
IV. Lessons Learned – Core Values:
Encountering the Presence of Jesus
Forming Disciples of Jesus
Embodying the Kingdom of God</td></tr>
<tr><td>Uniqueness of case situation for program/phenomenon:
Site 2
2 campuses. School is situated in inner city. State does not offer any tax-credit scholarships, school choice vouchers or scholarships for students with disabilities. Fundraising through donor support is primary means to fund student tuition. All families must pay something. High expectations are consistent for students and parents.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Relevance of case for cross-case Themes:
Theme 1: personal beliefs ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 2: intentional ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 3: culture ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 4: teachers equipped ⇒ highly relevant
Theme 5: support ⇒ highly relevant</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Case ID_3__

Synopsis of case: Located in a Northeastern city with over 1.5 million people. The K–12 school has three campuses positioned in different neighborhoods throughout the city. There are two K–5 campuses with approximately 200 students each. Each K–5 campus has 1 section of each grade. There is one campus for 6–12th grade students with one section of each grade totaling 200 students. The school is racially diverse; 71% Black, 20% Asian or Pacific Islander, 6% Hispanic, 3% White. Phileo Christian School's school leadership is comprised of a Head of School, middle/high school principal, and two elementary school principals. Established 1978	**Case Findings:** I. Successes: Students from low SES and learning differences are welcomed and accepted II. Challenges: raising money, limited resources, factors of surrounding community (i.e. violence, gangs), student's homelife III. Mitigating Factors: Additional hiring of counselors and academic support position. IV. Lessons Learned: The city is impacted by the vibrant Christian community of the school.
Uniqueness of case situation for phenomenon: Site 3 3 Campuses Each campus is situated in inner city. State does not offer any tax-credit scholarships, school choice vouchers or scholarships for students with disabilities. Fundraising through donor support is primary means to fund student tuition. All families must pay something. High expectations are consistent for students and parents.	
Relevance of case for cross-case Themes: Theme 1: personal beliefs ⇒ highly relevant Theme 2: intentional ⇒ highly relevant Theme 3: culture ⇒ highly relevant Theme 4: teachers equipped ⇒ highly relevant Theme 5: support ⇒ highly relevant	

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 3, p. 45. Copyright 2006 by Guilford Press. Reprinted with permission of Guilford Press (see Appendix I).

Appendix L: Worksheet 4. Estimates of Ordinariness

W=highly unusual situation, **u**=somewhat unusual situation, **blank**= ordinary situation
M=high manifestation, **m**=some manifestation, **blank**=almost no manifestation

Ordinariness of this Case's situation:	Case 1	Case 2	Case 3
Theme 1: Personal Beliefs	M	M	M
Theme 2: Intentional	M	M	M
Theme 3: Relational	M	M	M
Theme 4: Teachers Equipped	M	M	M
Theme 5: Support	M	M	M

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 4, p. 46. Copyright 2006 by Guilford Press. Reprinted with permission of Guilford Press (see Appendix I).

Appendix M: Audit Trail

Date	Action Step
12/3/2021	Received permission from 1st participating site.
1/3/2022	Received permission from 2nd participating site.
1/11/2022	Received permission from 3rd participating site.
3/10/2022	Expert review of Research Questions
4/11/2022	Successful Proposal Defense
5/18/2022	IRB Approval
5/20/2022	Collection of Consent Forms from School Leaders
5/22/2022	Collection of Consent Forms from Teachers
5/23/2022	Travel to Site 1- Individual Interviews, Observation, and Document Analysis conducted
5/25/2022	Travel to Site 2 - Individual Interviews, Observation, and Document Analysis conducted
5/31/2022	Travel to Site 3 - Individual Interviews, Observation, and Document Analysis conducted
7/18/2022	Focus Group - School Leaders
7/19/2022	Focus Group – Teachers
7–8/2022	Data Analysis
	Report Findings
	Successful Dissertation Defense

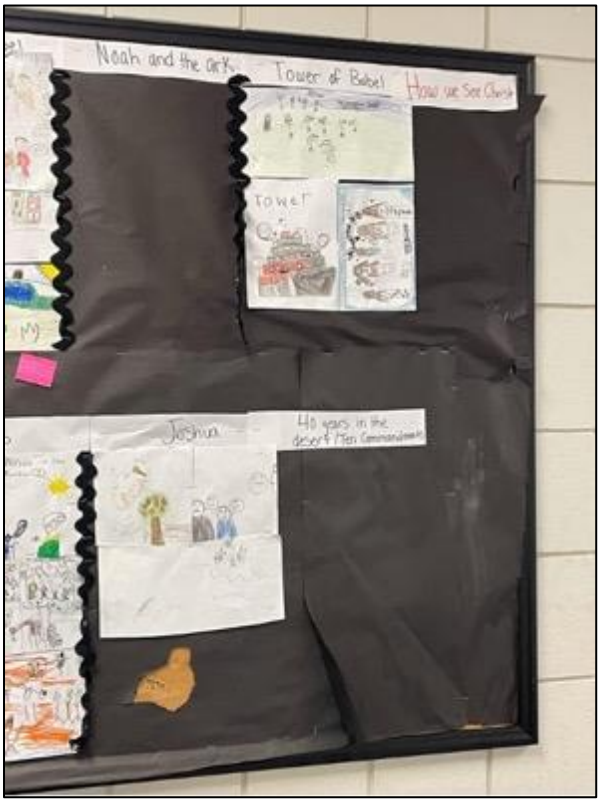
Appendix N: Researcher's Reflexive Journal

Date	Entries
9/2021	Reflection on topic of study: I am currently serving as a Principal at a Christian school with multiple campuses. The campus that I serve at serves all low SES students. Many of these students have learning differences. I realize my perspective may be biased.
10/2021	I have received several denials from school leaders. I am disappointed to receive another denial from school leader in southeast.
10/2021	In an effort to vary the participants in different geographic locations, I contacted a school leader in southwest that met criteria to participate in study.
10/2021	School leader was interested in participating and wanted to discuss further through phone call. I acknowledge my favorable bias that this school leader will participate.
10/2021	Phone call with school leader of potential site. School leader was excited about research but we both agreed that school site did not meet criteria to be included in study because they were a separate site for students from low SES backgrounds-not included in larger school. This school leader personally affirmed the need for my study. We agreed that her school was a segregated model.
11/2021	While discouraged at rejections so far, I am encouraged by this School leader and the need for my research study. I look forward to future collaboration.
11/2021	Requested meeting with Dissertation Committee for guidance on finding school leaders willing to participate. I feel encouraged after our meeting to press on and find 3 schools that will participate.
12/2021	I am excited to receive email approval for school leader in Midwest to participate in study.
2/2022	I am feeling anxious as I consider cost of travel and time off from serving as Principal to conduct research. Inquired with Dissertation Chair about possible funding. I feel compelled that this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to visit the schools in person.
2/2022	The personal biases that I have include the belief that Christian schools have a biblical mandate to welcome and include students from low SES backgrounds and/or with learning differences. The decision as to whether or not to welcome and include these students extends from the personal beliefs of the school leader. I believe that all children can learn and benefit from being educated with peers that learn differently and come from different backgrounds.
4/2022	Scheduled Proposal Defense with Dissertation committee. This had to be postponed because of a mishap with Committee Chair's technical difficulties. While I was looking forward to completing this, I am thankful to have more time to practice.
4/7/22	I submitted my IRB application.

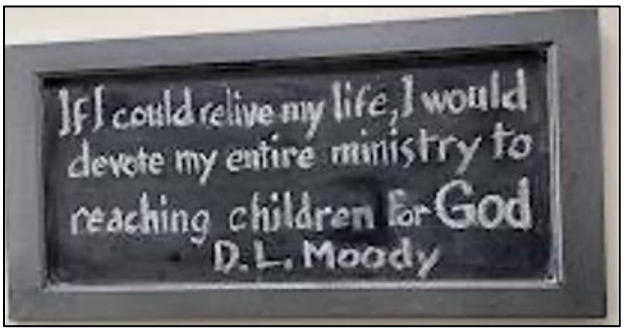
4/2022	Researched travel plans and tentative dates with school leaders. School leaders were very accommodating know that I was waiting on IRB approval, gave permission for any day up until last day of school.
4/11/22	Successful Proposal Defense
4/12/22	IRB acknowledged my application. There were a few clarifications that I needed to provide at first. As I await IRB approval, I am reflecting on my personal motivations in conducting this research.
5/18/22	I received approval from IRB to conduct my study.
5/2022	I arranged travel for 1st, 2nd, and 3rd school site including airfare, car rental, and hotel stays.
5/2022	I conducted my pilot study with a school leader and 2 teachers from my state. They were very supportive and encouraging. They affirmed the interview questions.
5/2022	Collected consent forms from school leaders and teachers. This took great confidence from me because I had to ask multiple times for the forms.
5/2022	As I visit first and second site, I stay in hotel in the cities and take public transportation to further situate myself in the context of the surrounding areas. It is essential for me to focus on the participants' perspectives and to remove my own personal biases from those drawn from participants' perspectives. I felt nervous to enter schools and impose on them for 3 days. However, they were expecting me and were very hospitable. They made me feel abundantly welcomed. They did not treat me like a stranger at all.
6/2022	Prior to the interviews, I think about any personal bias. As I completed interviews, I maintained eye contact and stayed focused on the speaker. Transcription of interviews was completed directly after interviews. Marginal notes were recorded and color coded. I reflected on the welcoming environment that I felt myself.
6/2022	I completed travel for 3rd site. Again, I stayed in the city and used public transportation. I was careful not to impose my own biases and assumptions because this was a very different environment than what I had experienced before.
7/2022	As I conducted the school leader focus group, I was apologetic and thankful for their time again. They greeted me with familiarity. I felt at ease and I felt they were more open since we had a prior rapport.
7/2022	The focus group for the teachers was productive because the teachers felt camaraderie with teachers from the other schools. I was careful to talk less and listen more so to not share my own biases during the focus group.
7/2022	After transcribing focus groups, I spend time to listen to the recording again to ensure there are no mistakes. Member-checking of participants' responses and interpretations was completed. The participants were allowed to review their statements because I wanted to correctly represent their accounts. This step was necessary to ensure my biases and opinions were not represented when reporting the findings.
7/2022	As I completed the data analysis, I was conscious to not skew the data one way or the other. I am amazed how the data is coming together in similar themes and sub-themes. This is a very time consuming process but I enjoy

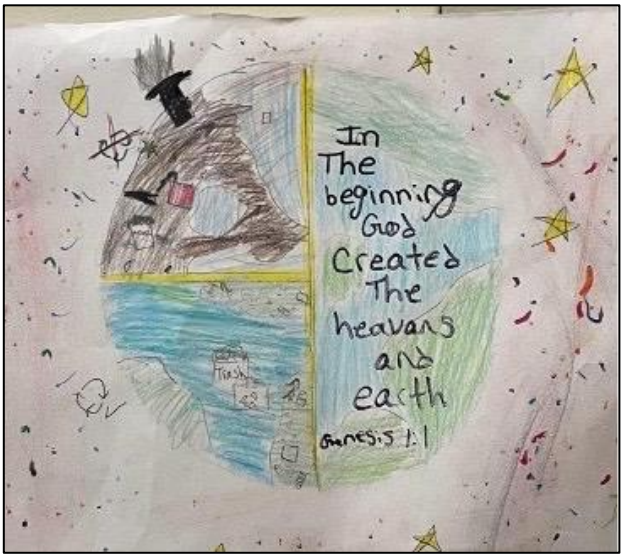
	going over the recordings and transcriptions repeatedly because the time spent at schools was so enjoyable.
8/2022	Report findings-I remained focused not to allow any bias into my findings – regardless if I agreed or disagreed with a particular point of view.

Appendix O: Visual Examples of Personal Beliefs

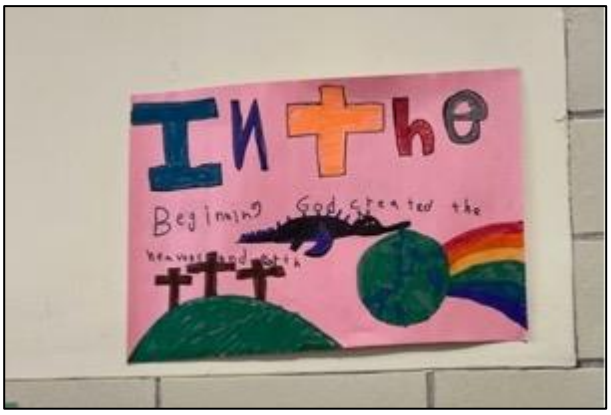



M.L.K. DAY
FAITH
2010
Knowledge + Truth + Action

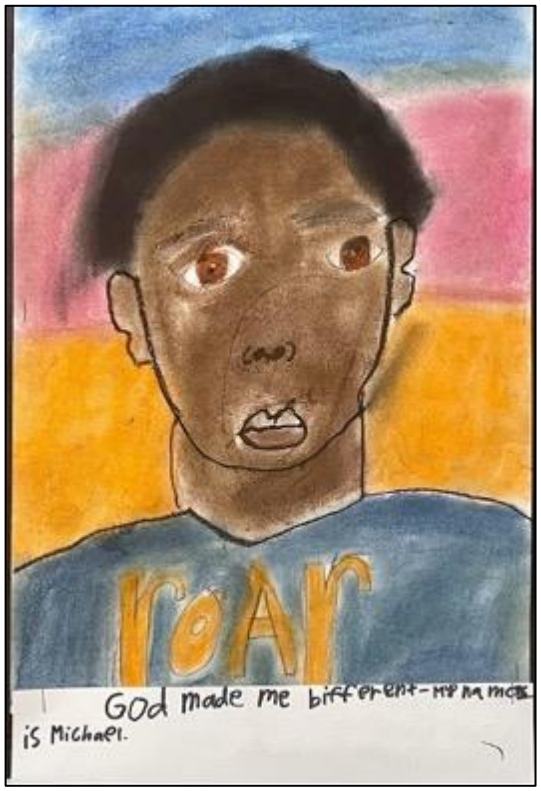

If I could relive my life, I would devote my entire ministry to reaching children for God
D. L. Moody

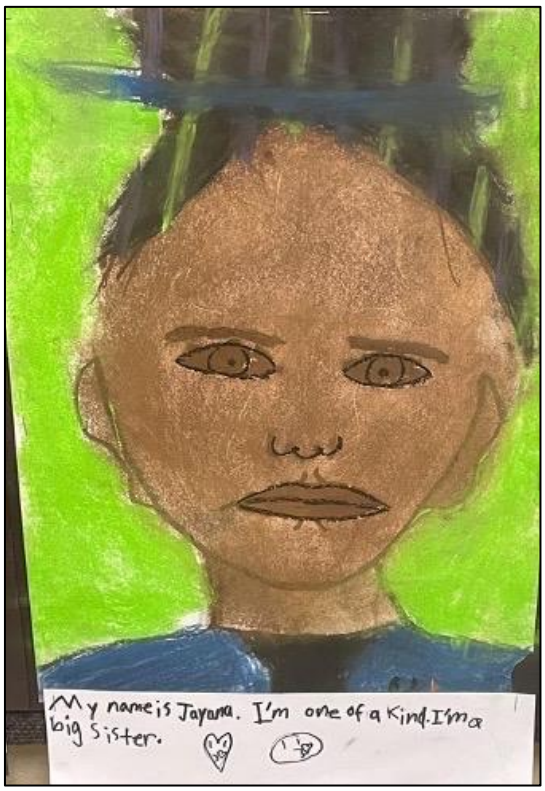

In The beginning God Created The heavans and earth
Genesis 1:1


For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, because it is the Power of God that brings Salvation to everyone who believes first to the Jew and then the Gentile. Romans 1:16
I am not ashamed of the Gospel
We're


In the
Beginning God created the

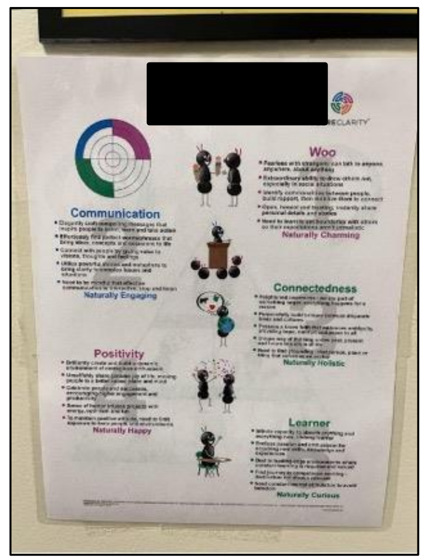

Happy
Earth
Day!


roAr
God made me bifferent-
is Michael.

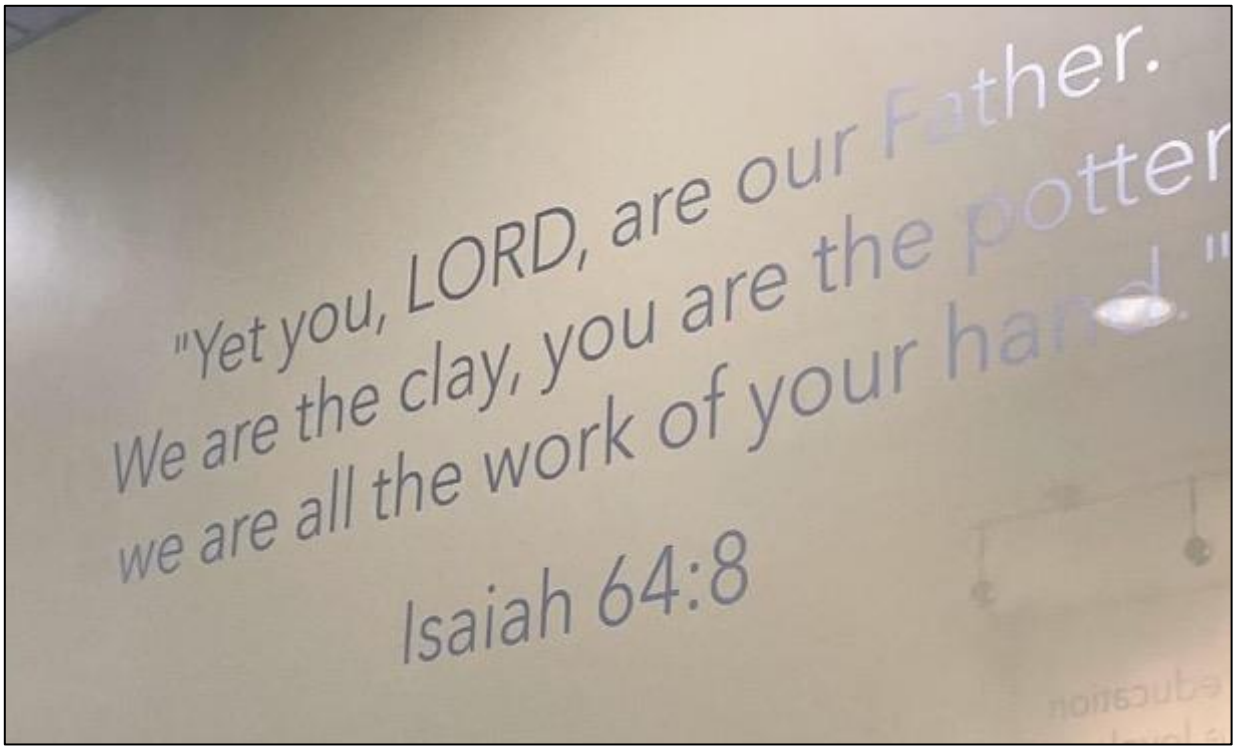

My name is Jayana. I'm one of a Kind. I'm a
big Sister.


My name is Elellan. God made me creative
and beautiful. I am a great friend.

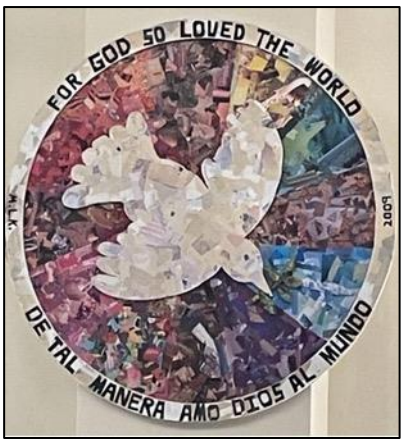

my name is
. I am smart and kind
God made me important.


[redacted]
Woo
Communication
Naturally Charming
Connectedness
Positivity
Learner

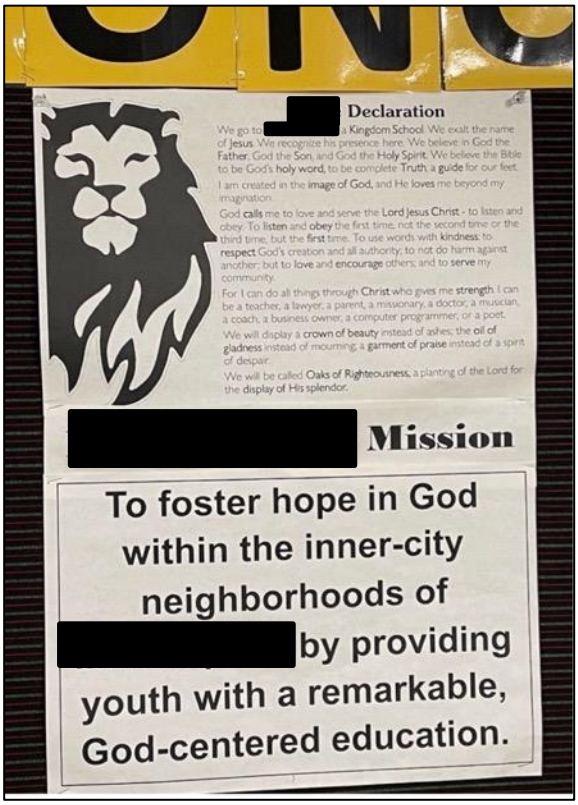

3rd Grade
Self-Portraits
using
oil pastels
chalk pastels

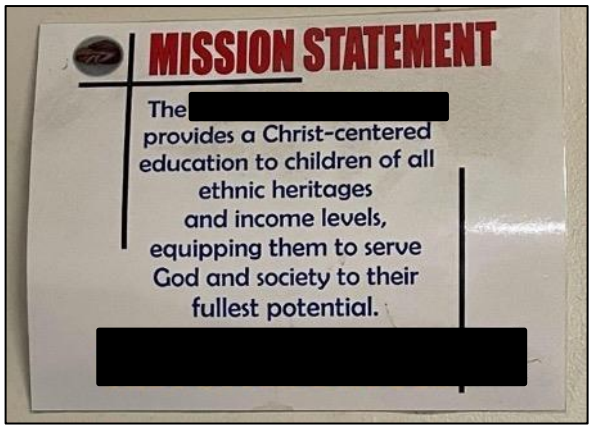

"Yet you, LORD, are our Father.
We are the clay, you are the potter
we are all the work of your hand."
Isaiah 64:8

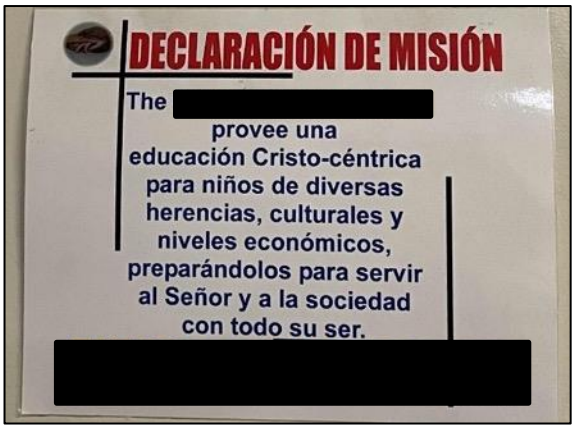

HOPE...
JESUS DIED FOR US


FOR GOD SO LOVED THE WORLD
DE TAL MANERA AMO DIOS AL MUNDO

Appendix P: Visual Examples of Intentional

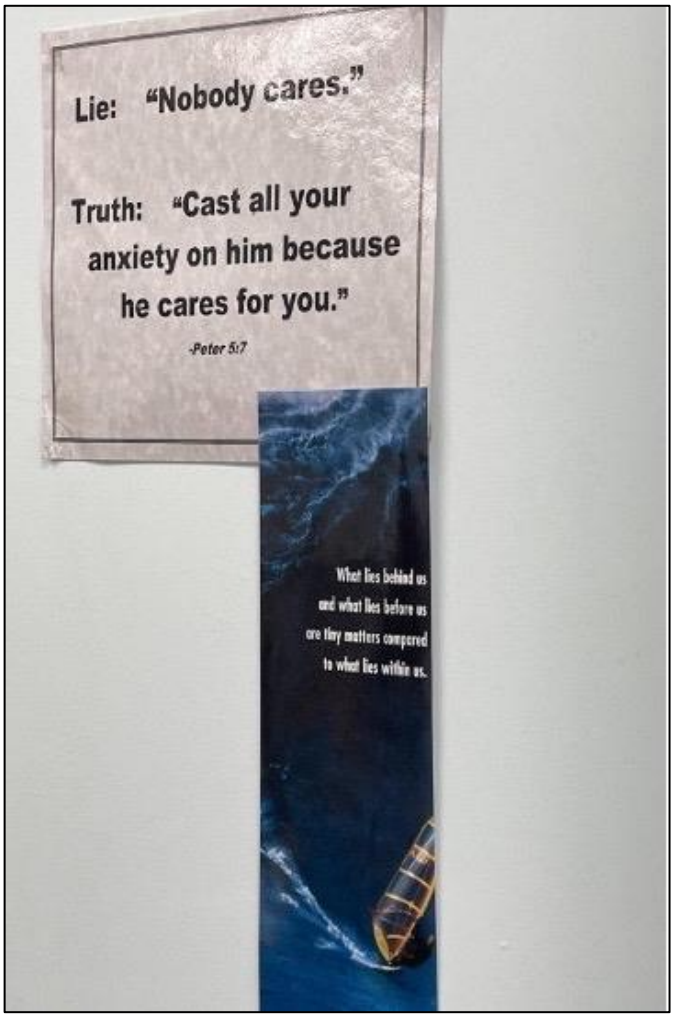






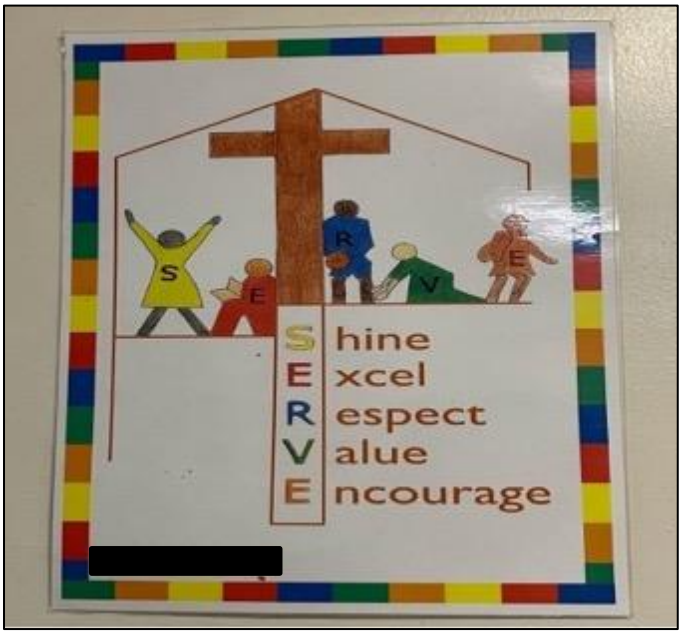

How Does My Teacher Help Me
See God?


I Know My Teacher
Loves God...

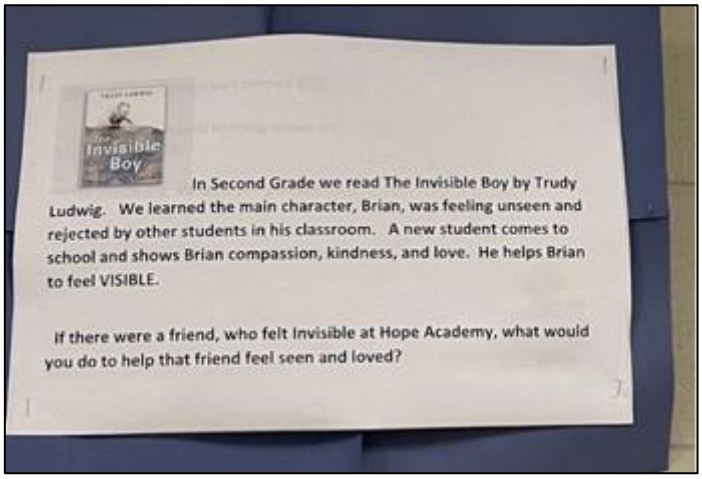

Lie: "Nobody cares."
Truth: "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."
-Peter 5:7
What lies behind us and what lies before us are tiny matters compared to what lies within us.

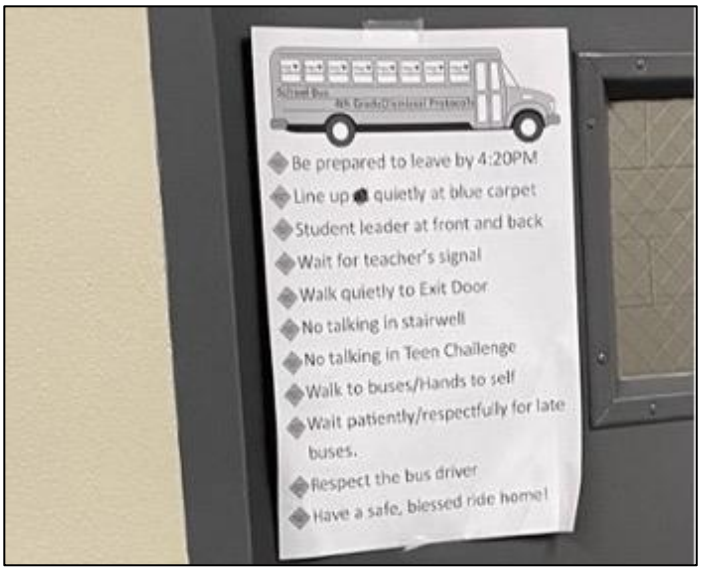

EXIT
Share Similarities
Celebrate
Differences

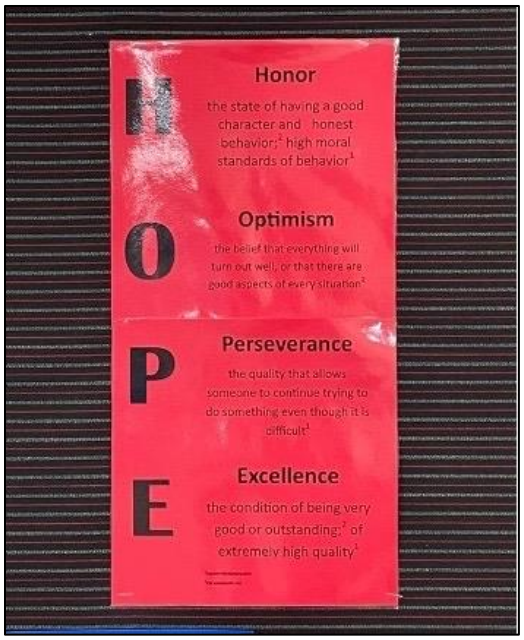

Armor of Dios
Armor of Dios
Put on the Helmet of Salvation
Take the Shield of Fe
The Sword of the Spirit (That's the Word of Dios)
Put on the Breastplate of Righteousness,
the Belt of Verdad
and Feet that are wearing the Gospel of Paz
Yo put on the Whole Armor of Dios
That yo may withstand the
wiles of the Devil
Ephesians 6:11


S hine
E xcel
R espect
V alue
E ncourage


L oving
E mpathy
A ssertive
D iligent
E couraging
R espect

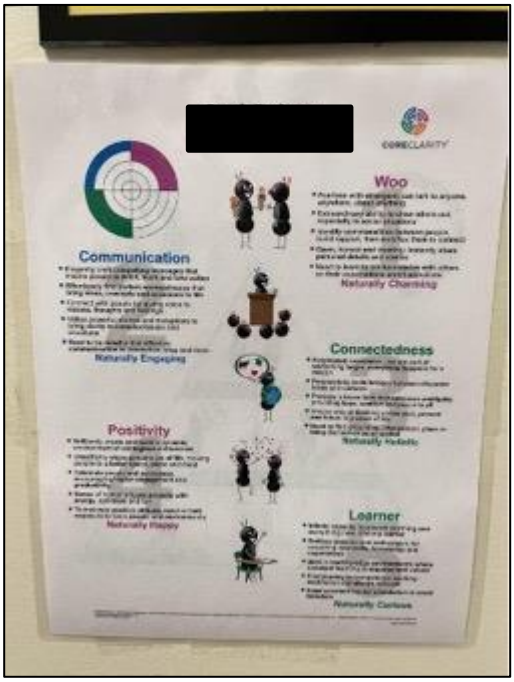

The Invisible Boy
In Second Grade we read The Invisible Boy by Trudy Ludwig. We learned the main character, Brian, was feeling unseen and rejected by other students in his classroom. A new student comes to school and shows Brian compassion, kindness, and love. He helps Brian to feel VISIBLE.
If there were a friend, who felt Invisible at Hope Academy, what would you do to help that friend feel seen and loved?


Be prepared to leave by 4:20PM
Line up quietly at blue carpet
Student leader at front and back
Wait for teacher's signal
Walk quietly to Exit Door
No talking in stairwell
No talking in Teen Challenge
Walk to buses/Hands to self
Wait patiently/respectfully for late buses.
Respect the bus driver
Have a safe, blessed ride home!

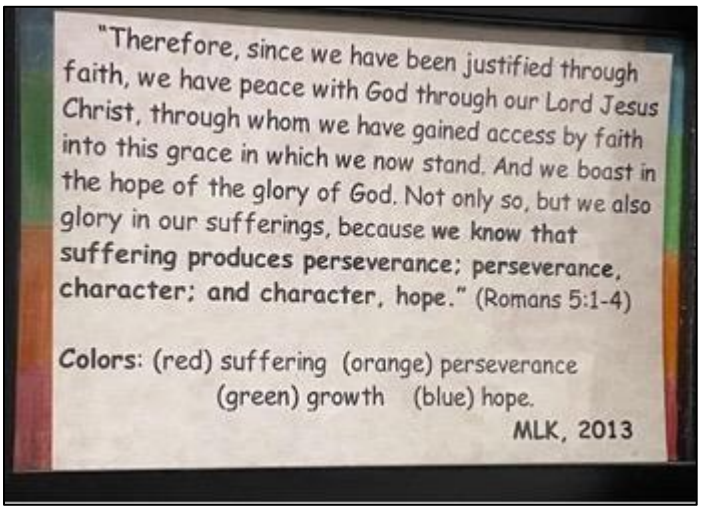

H
Honor
the state of having a good character and honest behavior;[1] high moral standards of behavior[1]
O
Optimism
the belief that everything will turn out well, or that there are good aspects of every situation[1]
P
Perseverance
the quality that allows someone to continue trying to do something even though it is difficult[1]
E
Excellence
the condition of being very good or outstanding;[1] of extremely high quality[1]

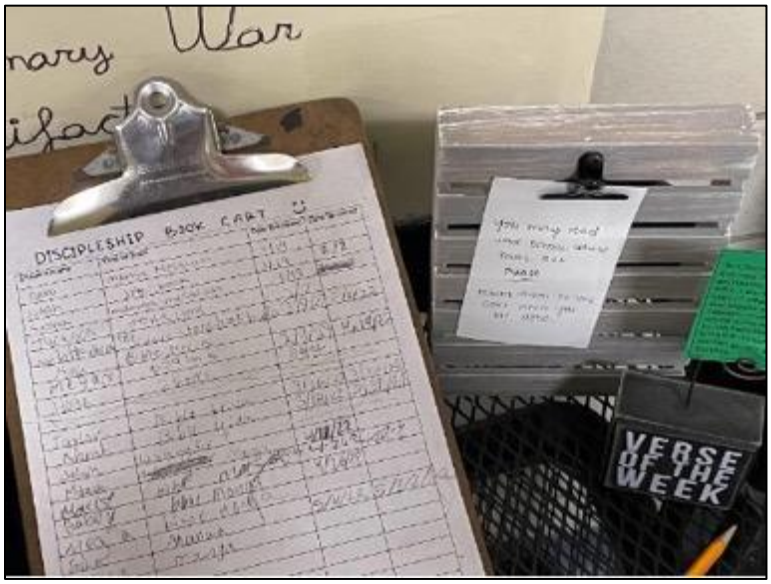

BEVERLY WRIGHT
Environmental Justice Hero
Beverly Wright is an environmental justice scholar and advocate, author, civic leader, and sociology professor. She addresses environmental and health inequities along the Gulf Coast, including after Hurricane Katrina, and along the Louisiana Mississippi River Chemical Corridor. She is the founder and executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice.


LUX URBI PRESENTS:
JUSTICE WEEK!
SHALOM TIME
TUESDAY and THURSDAY
Donuts and Discussion
Topic: What is Environmental Justice?


[redacted]
CORECLARITY
Communication
Naturally Engaging
Woo
Naturally Charming
Connectedness
Positivity
Naturally Happy
Learner
Naturally Curious


HONOR
OPTIMISM
PERSEVERANCE
EXCELLENCE


"Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we boast in the hope of the glory of God. Not only so, but we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope." (Romans 5:1-4)
Colors: (red) suffering (orange) perseverance
(green) growth (blue) hope.
MLK, 2013


DISCIPLESHIP
VERSE OF THE WEEK


VERSE OF THE
BIBLE

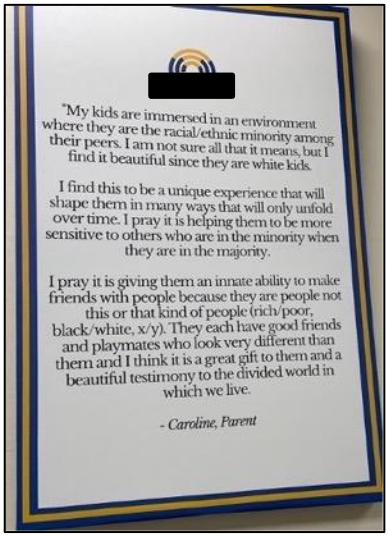

REFUSE TO
CCEPT THE VIEW THAT
MANKIND
S SO TRAGICALLY BOUND
O THE STARLESS MIDNIGHT O
RACISM AND WAR
HAT THE BRIGHT DAYBREAK OF
PEACE AND
BROTHERHOOD
AN NEVER BECOME A REALITY.
-MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.


CED ART
INTRO TO ART


MISSION
VISION

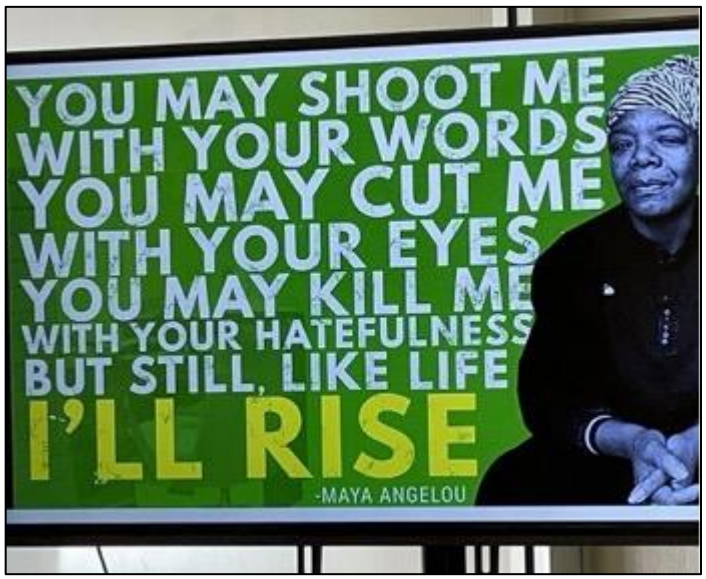

Varsity Soccer
Basketball
Softball


MY IDENTITY IN CHRIST
I am a child of God (John 1:12)
I have peace with God (Romans 5:1)
The Holy Spirit lives in me (1 Corinthians 3:16)
I have access to God's wisdom (James 1:5)
I am reconciled to God (Romans 5:11)
I am not condemned by God (Romans 8:1)
I am justified (Romans 5:1)
I have Christ's Righteousness (Romans 5:19; 2 Cor 5:21)
I am Christ's ambassador (2 Cor 5:20)
I am completely forgiven (Col. 1:14)
I am tenderly loved by God (Jer 3:11)
I am a temple in which God dwells (1 Corinthians 3:16)
I am Christ's friend (John 15:5)
I am a branch in Christ's vine (John 15:1,5)
I am blameless beyond reproach (Col. 1:22)
I am chosen by God, holy and dearly loved (Col. 3:12)
I have been made complete in Christ (Col. 2:10)
I am God's co-worker (2 Cor. 6:1, 1 Cor 3:9)

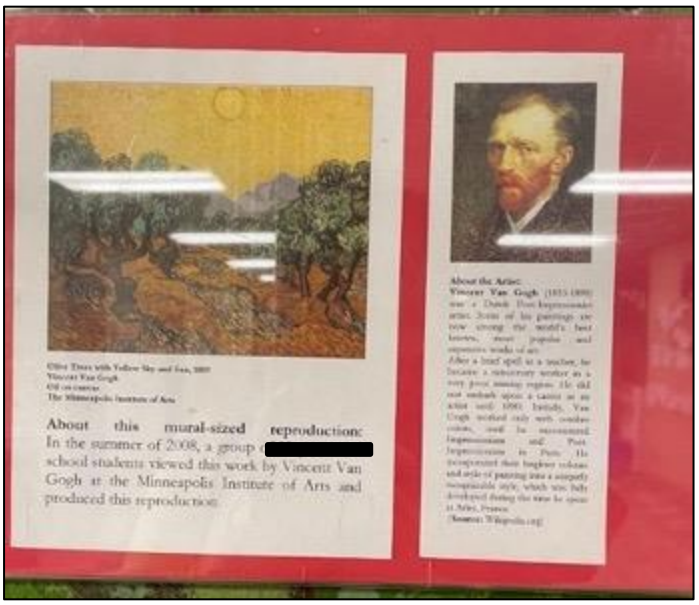

[redacted]
"My kids are immersed in an environment where they are the racial/ethnic minority among their peers. I am not sure all that it means, but I find it beautiful since they are white kids.
I find this to be a unique experience that will shape them in many ways that will only unfold over time. I pray it is helping them to be more sensitive to others who are in the minority when they are in the majority.
I pray it is giving them an innate ability to make friends with people because they are people not this or that kind of people (rich/poor, black/white, x/y). They each have good friends and playmates who look very different than them and I think it is a great gift to them and a beautiful testimony to the divided world in which we live.
- Caroline, Parent


Honoring
Mailbox
Self-Control


[redacted]
ALUMNI


YOU MAY SHOOT ME
WITH YOUR WORDS
YOU MAY CUT ME
WITH YOUR EYES
YOU MAY KILL ME
WITH YOUR HATEFULNESS
BUT STILL, LIKE LIFE
I'LL RISE
-MAYA ANGELOU


ART MONSTER
PROTECTED BY POWER
TRUST THE PROCESS
ROYALTY
HUMILITY
JUSTICE
LIVE LOVE LIFE
MERCY

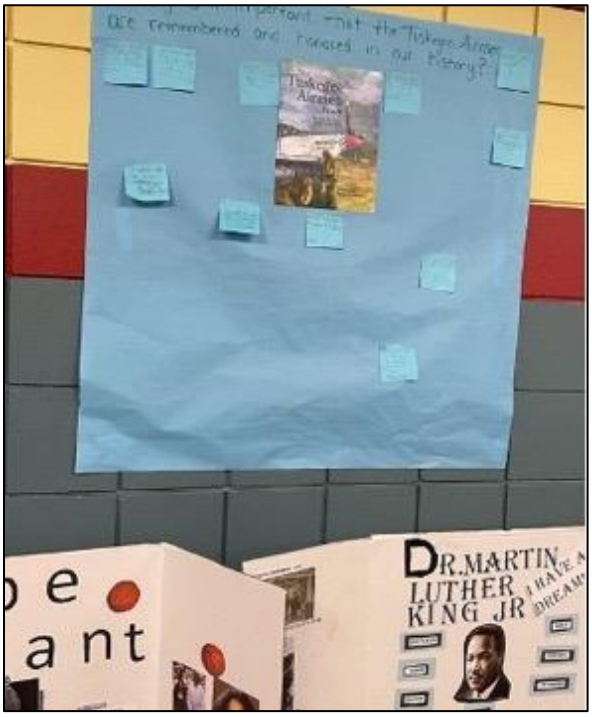

About this mural-sized reproduction:
In the summer of 2008, a group
school students viewed this work by Vincent Van Gogh at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and produced this reproduction.
About the Artist:
Vincent Van Gogh

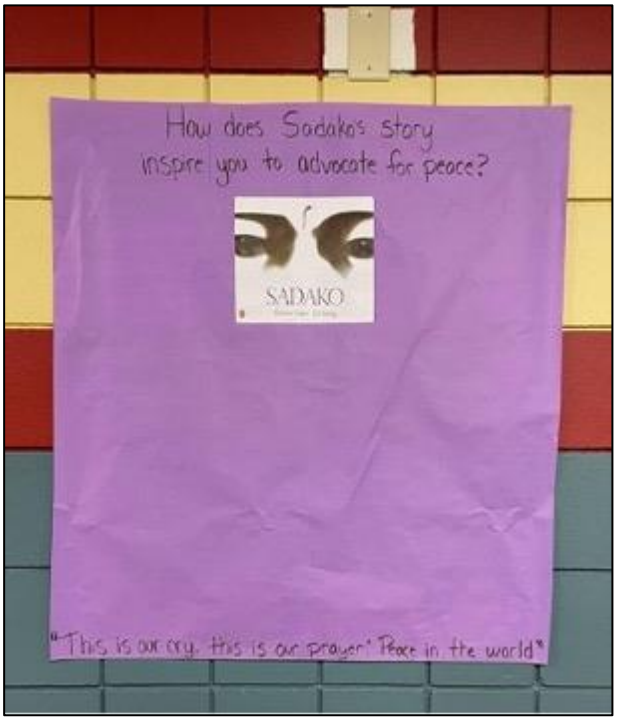

"Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that.
Hate cannot drive

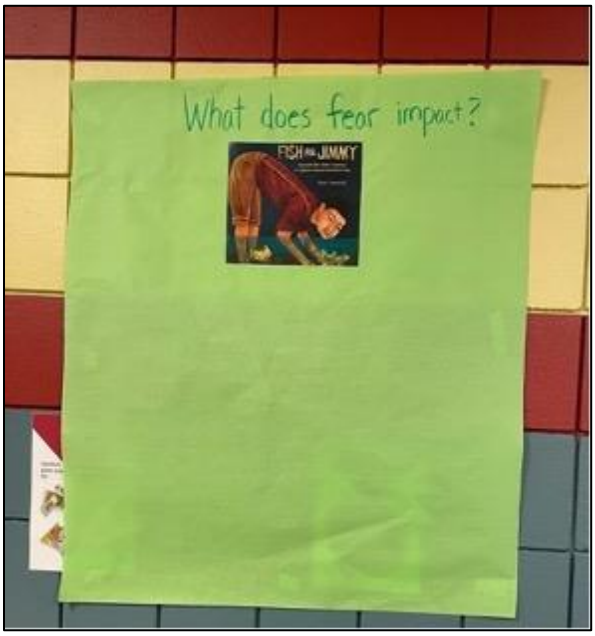

GENERATIONS
THROUGHOUT TIME
ECUADOR

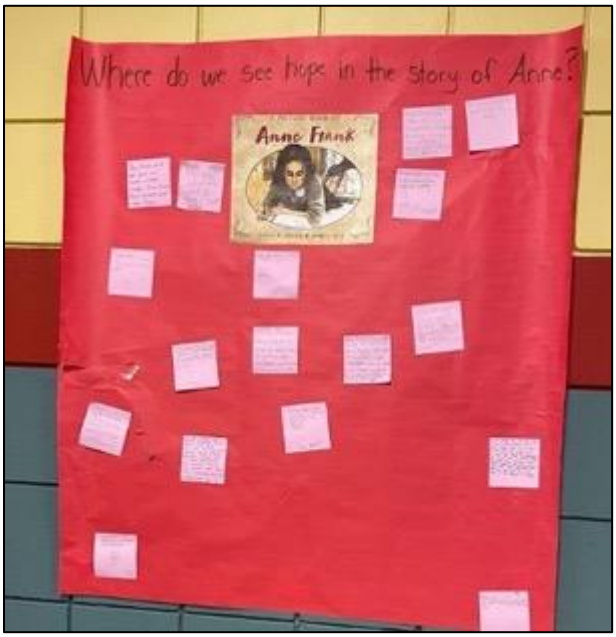
Appendix Q: Visual Examples of Relational

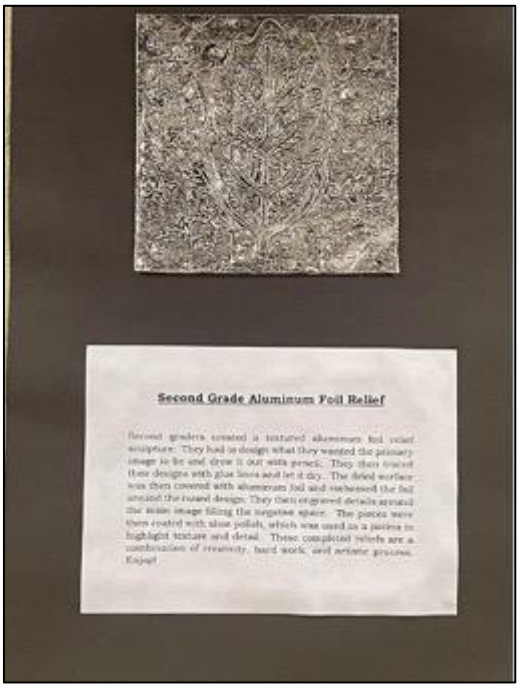
Appendix R: Visual Examples of Teacher's Equipped



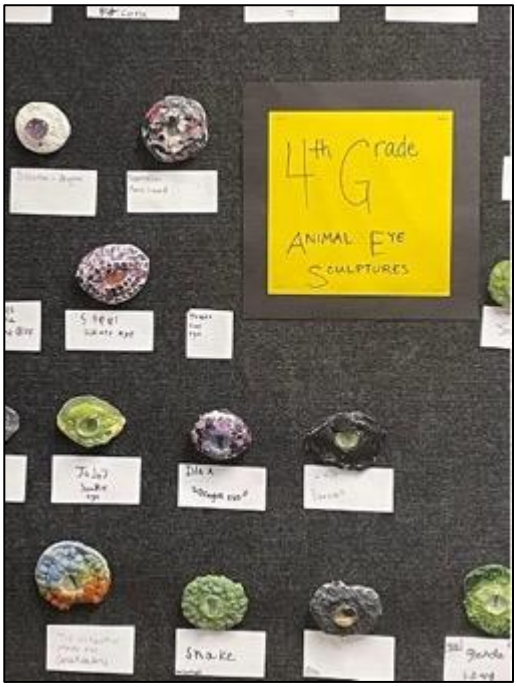







Second Grade Aluminum Foil Relief


Why is language important to culture?
How can we appreciate that even if we don't understand it?


4th Grade
Animal Eye
Sculptures
Snake


5th Graders

Appendix S: Visual Examples of Support