

A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF QUALITY-OF-LIFE
TRAINING IN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS OF YOUNG ADULTS
WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

by

Traci. L. Maynard

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Education

Liberty University

2023

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Abstract

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand lived experiences in young adults with Asperger's syndrome (AS) as they transitioned out of high school after completion of quality-of-life training. The theories guiding this study were Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning and Adam Morton's theory of mind in predictive behaviors. Pavlov's theory relates to understanding whether individuals could be classically conditioned to reinforce a natural reflex or some involuntary behavior that would occur as a response to classical conditioning. Morton's theory helped focus this phenomenological study by describing the training in predictive behaviors by conceptual structure. Participants were selected from local high schools, colleges, and universities using purposeful sampling data collected through a triangulation of three methods: surveys, interviews, and focus groups. The analysis used was Moustakas transcendental phenomenological approach. Data collection results generated themes of challenges in social communication, academics, employment, and self-sufficiency. The two major themes prevalent were challenges in both social communications and self-sufficiency since completing QoL training in high school. There are empirical, practical, and theoretical implications of data analysis and recommendations for future research. Empirical research was examined to determine a curriculum-based instruction vocational training program that would help equip young adults with AS to transition to self-regulation toward self-sufficiency. Young adults with AS would function in postsecondary education with the knowledge to identify beneficial accommodations and supports learned in quality-of-life training.

Keywords: Asperger's syndrome, quality-of-life training, self-regulation, self-sufficiency, and transitional planning

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my beautiful daughter, who inspired me to pursue literature relating to young adults with Asperger's syndrome.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my chair and committee for the time they spent with me on this journey. Their help and encouragement were immeasurable. I spoke with Dr. Swafford, and she provided me with the most enlightenment in the types of approach for my study. It was a blessing to have quality research consultants such as Dr. Swafford and Dr. Bruce on my committee to provide the input needed to develop this study. The attention to detail, high standards, and words of encouragement had a great impact on the outcome of this work.

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List of Acronyms

Asperger's syndrome (AS)

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Community Based Instruction (CBI)

Daily living skills (DLS)

Grade point average (GPA)

High-functioning autism (HFA)

Individualized education plan (IEP)

Quality of life (QoL)

Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT)

Speech-language pathologist (SLP)

Theory of mind (ToM)

World Health Organization (WHO)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

Young adults with high-functioning autism (HFA), or Asperger syndrome (AS), often benefit from various educational methods and interventions throughout their lives. One such approach is quality-of-life (QoL) training. Autism spectrum disorder (ASD) is a developmental disability that causes deficits in self-regulation, effective social communication, emotional, and behavioral (Atwood & Gray, 2016). This transcendental phenomenological study was designed to examine the experiences of young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training of transitional planning in high school and have attended a local university, yet still experience deficits in self-regulation toward self-sufficiency. The topic of AS QoL is insufficiently understood, therefore, producing a gap in the research. This first chapter details the significance of the study, four research questions, definitions relevant to this study, and provides a summary. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a framework for this qualitative research study.

Background

QoL is an individual's perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live. QoL includes five core domains that should be included in measurement: physical well-being (i.e., health, fitness, and physical safety); material well-being (i.e., possessions, income, transport and living environment); social well-being (i.e., interpersonal relationships, acceptance, and support); emotional well-being (i.e., mood, satisfaction, self-esteem, status/respect, and religious faith); and development and activity (i.e., independence, self-determination, education, leisure and productivity) (D. Parsons et al., 2020).

Approaches to understanding QoL include understanding human needs, subjective well-being, expectations, and phenomenological viewpoints (Karimi & Brazier, 2016).

Definitions of QoL in literature include “a conscious cognitive judgment of satisfaction with one’s life” and “an individual’s perception of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and about their goals, expectations, standards, and concerns” (Karimi & Brazier, 2016, p. 2). The theoretical and philosophical framework in understanding QoL can be observed from (a) subjective to objective standpoints based on personal outcomes; (b) a social construct that guides program practices and quality improvement strategies; and (c) a criterion for assessing the effectiveness of those practices and strategies (Gal et al., 2015).

Quality-of-Life Training

QoL training is only facilitated in high school. QoL training consists of daily living skills (DLS) with the focus on allowing young adults with AS to build skills in personal hygiene, meal preparation, and money and time management, which are important to living independently and obtaining employment. Promoting personal self-care and employment may reduce the lifetime costs associated with having a child with ASD, as well as contribute to the individual’s well-being (Järbrink, 2007). Individuals with AS experience deficits in social communication and developmental delays and therefore have their personal perceptions of what is considered a QoL regarding self-regulation in self-sufficiency. Thorough QoL training would also consist of three main approaches in focusing on classifying social skills interventions, teaching specific behaviors that facilitate positive social interactions, and problem-solving skills.

Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders

The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 5th edition (*DSM-5*) has three diagnosis level of symptoms such as: least, moderate, and severe. In level one on the *DSM-5*, individuals require minimum support; hence, it is known as HFA or known to have AS. Level two consists of individuals requiring substantial support, and the symptoms associated with this level include a more severe lack of verbal and nonverbal communication skills. Level three has a severe level of autism and requires a very substantial support base due to a severe lack of communication skills. Level three autism also displays repetitive or restrictive behaviors (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). *DSM-5* ASD are neurodevelopmental disorders the core clinical features of which are persisting deficits in social communication and interaction as well as restricted, repetitive behaviors, interests, and activities. Today, there are no biomarkers for ASD; the diagnosis of which is still strictly clinical. For instance, there are differences in the cognitive profile that can be found between those patients who once according to *DSM-IV-TR* would receive a diagnosis of autistic disorder (“high-functioning”) and those who would receive a diagnosis of AS disorder, but who all fall into an ASD (usually severity level one) according to *DSM-5*. Alternatively, while according to the *DSM-5* intellectual disability appears as one of the most important associated conditions in patients with ASD, the *DSM-5* subdivision into four severity groups (i.e., mild, moderate, severe, and profound) of intellectual disability is based on descriptive criteria concerning adaptive functioning in the domains of conceptualization, socialization, and practical skills and no longer on the intelligence quotient (as was the case according to the *DSM-IV-TR*).

Historical Context

Hans Asperger observed autism-like behaviors and difficulties with social and communication skills in boys with average intelligence and language development. AS was first introduced into the history of psychopathology by Leo Kanner (1943) and Hans Asperger (1944) (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2015). Kanner and Asperger were Austrian-born physicians who used the term “autistic” to describe a unique group of children who shared features of impaired social interaction and restricted, repetitive behaviors and interests. Leo Kanner was an Austrian psychiatrist and physician known for his work related to autism (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2015). Leo Kanner’s work formed the foundation of child and adolescent psychiatry in the United States and worldwide. Hans Asperger provided the name “Asperger syndrome,” or HFA, in 1944, one year after Leo Kanner (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2015).

Evolution Since Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger

The autism diagnosis has changed in criteria and name from its first description by Kanner in 1943. The first diagnosis appeared in the *DSM-III* (American Psychiatric Association, 1980), named infantile autism under a group of five overlapping pervasive developmental disorders (Huebner, 1992). The revised version of the third *DSM-III-R* (American Psychiatric Association, 1987) published by the American Psychiatric Association acknowledged autistic disorder and pervasive developmental disorder. This new version attempted to establish a developmental orientation and to cover the entire spectrum of this disorder by using a series of set criteria (Volkmar et al., 1988). One effect of this broadening of the diagnostic criteria was an increase in the number of diagnosed children. Furthermore, at least 8 of the 16 criteria had to be met for a diagnosis of autism.

In 1994, the American Psychiatric Association published the *DSM-IV*, which included different subtypes and categories of pervasive development disorders. In this version, an individual only needed to exhibit 6 of the 16 criteria to be diagnosed. The three main categories of criteria for a diagnosis were: (a) qualitative impairments in social interaction, (b) qualitative impairments in communication, and (c) restricted, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, or activities (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). These categories stayed the same for the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). As a result of the increased research attention given to ASD over the past decade, the pervasive developmental disorder subtypes were eliminated in the publication of the fifth version of the *DSM*. The three main categories of diagnostic criteria were also reduced to two: (a) persistent deficits in social communication and interactions across contexts and (b) restricted repetitive patterns of behavior (American Psychiatric Association, 2020). As opposed to a checklist of 16 criteria organized into 3 categories of the earlier version, from which 6 criteria needed to be met for diagnosis, the *DSM-5* diagnosis requires deficits in the 3 areas of social communication and interaction category (i.e., socioemotional reciprocity; nonverbal communication; and developing, maintaining, and understanding relationships), and the manifestation of at least 2 areas of restricted repetitive patterns of behavior (i.e., stereotyped or repetitive motor movements, use of objects, or speech; insistence on sameness, inflexible adherence; highly restricted, fixated interests; hyper- or hypo-reactivity to sensory input or unusual interest in sensory aspects of the environment).

Social Context

After Leo Kanner first described autism as having deficits in the social context associated with communication, he focused only on children with ASD, not young adolescents and adults; hence, research on preparation for the real world is limited (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2015).

DLS, such as personal hygiene, meal preparation, and money management, are essential to independent living. However, many individuals with ASD exhibit impairments in DLS relative to their cognitive skills (Barahona-Corrêa & Filipe, 2015). Many young adults with HFA autism often have difficulty with DLS and independent living within their communities due to deficits in social interaction and communication. Moreover, many communities do not have effective programs to provide a smooth transition into postsecondary education and independent living (Kilincaslan et al., 2019). Since there are few programs for young adults with AS when transitioning from high school into postsecondary education or living independently, most decide to continue living with their parents before going to college (Bal et al., 2015). Young adults with AS/HFA are unable to complete their postsecondary education due to deficits in social communication and difficulty in interpersonal interactions, as they often do not have the necessary support and accommodations implemented to help with these deficits after high school (Kuder & Accardo, 2018).

Theoretical Context

Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory and Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors formed the theoretical framework on which this research study was based. Ivan Pavlov believed individuals could be classically conditioned to reinforce a natural reflex or some involuntary behavior that would occur in response to a particular stimulus called classical conditioning (Clark, 2018). Pavlov also believed there were four stages of classical conditions: acquisition, extinction, generalization, and discrimination. The acquisition stage is the initial learning of the conditioned response (Clark, 2018). The generalization stage implies that a conditioned response might occur with similar stimuli without further training. However, the discrimination stage indicates that a conditioned response might occur with one

stimulus but not another (Clark, 2018).

How does Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory apply to young adults with AS in gaining self-sufficiency and self-regulation in QoL training? Determining whether adequate training of classical conditioning in DLS as part of QoL training would be essential for those with AS, learning in both self-regulation toward self-sufficiency depends on a cue or stimulus from the learning environment presented and how they react to the cue or stimulus. Therefore, practical community-based instruction, infused within a QoL training, could help those with AS build healthy social communication and interactions within their communities, live independently, and attend postsecondary education. Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning techniques implemented within a QoL training include creating procedures and expectations to manage the classroom, using rewards as incentives to achieve academic and behavioral goals, and using punishments (e.g., loss of privileges, withholding of rewards) effectively and sparingly to change learners' behaviors (Clark, 2018). Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory proposed within this qualitative phenomenological research study could help delineate the effectiveness of pre/post-transition programs for young adults with AS in improving social communication of their needs and wants while in other environments such as living on their own and while attending postsecondary education. The findings in this research integrate a picture of the social, behavioral, and evolutionary levels of what is needed to implement a robust pre/post-transition plan model so that young adults with AS can thrive socially while living in the real world.

Premack and Woodruff (1978) built the theoretical framework ToM, as it referred to the ability to attribute mental states, such as beliefs and intentions, to self and others to explain and predict. Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM proposed that our everyday understanding of

human psychology constitutes a kind of theory by which we try to predict and explain behavior in terms of its causation by beliefs, intentions, emotions, and traits of character (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985). Morton's (1980) theory-theory is a view of how concepts that are structured, acquired, and deployed create mental representations that are implicated in higher thought processes that deploy a concept in a cognitive task in theoretical reasoning. Therefore, the classic false belief task used to study ToM involves a child in a story seeking an object that has been moved from its original location without their knowledge. Therefore, an observer who can reason about this situation using ToM accurately predicts that the child will look in the original location. The false belief of another person is one of the milestones in the development of ToM (R. A. Mason & M. A. Just, 2009).

How does Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM QoL training in predictive behaviors of conceptual structure help invoke higher thought processes in young adults with AS in gaining self-regulation in self-sufficiency? Young adults with AS experience impairments in pragmatic language. However, some believe this relates to deficits in ToM, in the capacity to make inferences about what others think, feel, and know (Baron-Cohen, 1988). Several studies have found atypical brain activation in autism during language processing and mental state attribution of ToM tasks (Wang et al., 2006). Therefore, the interrelationship of the processes of language comprehension and ToM in individuals with ASD may be examined within the context of discourse processing, in which understanding the intentionality of the main character plays a central role (Schultz et al., 2003). If a person receives QoL training to make inferences; while demonstrating predictive behaviors, does it correlate to positive outcomes with self-regulation toward self-sufficiency in everyday life? The interrelationship of the processes of language comprehension and ToM in individuals with ASD may be examined within the context of

discourse processing, in which understanding the intentionality of the main character plays a central role (Gernsbacher et al., 1998).

Problem Statement

The problem is children diagnosed with ASD experience challenges during transition and beyond that are partly caused by problems accessing adult services (C. Anderson & C. Butt, 2018). However, after exiting high school, these youths encounter an adult service system that is inadequately funded, fragmented, and difficult to navigate; therefore, leaving those with AS with limited support after high school (J.L. Taylor et al., 2022). Young adults diagnosed with ASD have experienced social isolation resulting in a lack of close friends. The lack of friends is often due to deficits in social communication; therefore, young adults with ASD have poor adjustments in self-regulation in terms of living and working independently and building relationships (Gal et al., 2015). Young adults with HFA have deficits in their perception of emotion. Since those who have AS are not socially adaptive within their communities, their QoL is impacted (Gal et al., 2015). HFA young adults obtain competitive employment and are admitted into colleges and universities, but deficits in social communication compromise the possibility of longevity in employment; consistently attending colleges and universities affects their QoL (Howlin et al., 2004).

Children and adolescents with ASD show the most negligible relative adaptive behavior strength in DLS and have poorer DLS than children with other developmental disorders or typically developing children (Kenworthy et al., 2009). Some research suggests that deficits in DLS are more pronounced in those with higher IQs (Liss et al., 2001). Challenging behaviors are another major obstacle to successful employment among individuals with ASD (Wehman et al., 2014). ASD phenotypic behaviors, ritualistic activities, and inflexible routines were reported as

barriers for an individual with ASD in the daily workplace (Schall, 2010). Therefore, their individualized educational plan (IEP) fails to integrate critical transition skills typically taught in DLS training programs. They are less likely to have goals related to postsecondary outcomes of employment, college, or independent living (Wehman et al., 2014). Additionally, Klin et al. (2007) found a negative relationship between age and DLS in intellectually disabled individuals with ASD, suggesting that deficits in DLS may worsen with age because they are not acquiring skills at the same rate as their typically developing peers (Kanne et al., 2011). Therefore, implementing QoL training in high school would be essential for those with AS, as this would enhance transition skills such as academics, social communication, and self-regulation in self-sufficiency in daily living after high school.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of young adults with AS as they transition out of high school after completion of QoL training. The purpose of this phenomenological study was also to focus on the benefits of those with AS in participating in a rigorous QoL training and effective transition planning in high school to be successful in a postsecondary educational setting and to live independently in self-sufficiency. The focus of this transcendental phenomenological study was to allow young adults with AS to express what they perceive about their ability to interact with others within their communities (Orsmond et al., 2013). The theories guiding this research were Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory and Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM. Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory relates to young adults with AS, and the classical conditioning used within QoL training impacts self-regulation of self-sufficiency. In this research, Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory helped determine whether adequate training of classical conditioning in DLS

as part of QoL training would be essential for those with AS; learning in both self-regulation toward self-sufficiency would depend on a cue or stimulus from the learning environment presented and how they react to the cue or stimulus. Would it change or alter the perception in those with AS by classical condition learning in instruction? Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM in predictive behavior theory used in this research helped determine if adequate training of predictive behaviors used in a QoL training would help young adults with AS use predictive behaviors to successfully live a self-regulated life in self-sufficiency.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this phenomenological study was to inform high schools about promoting QoL training and effective transition planning for young adults who are high functioning on the AS. Transition planning is recognized as a collaborative effort across interagency providers, schools, individuals, and families (Carter et al., 2014). However, recent findings indicate insufficient interagency involvement, limited skill building and community access, and restricted efforts to gain employment (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). A better understanding of the types of training, accommodations, and support for students with AS and the requirements that would lead to QoL training completion in high school is needed (K. Powers et al., 2008).

Benefits of Quality-of-Life Training

This phenomenological study helped in identifying the benefits of QoL training. The benefits of QoL could aid college administrators and faculty in improving peer mentorship programs that help young adults with AS become acclimated in their first year in colleges or universities. QoL training also decreases anxiety, stress, and depression in young adults with AS. According to Jackson et al. (2018), research showed that many students with ASD appeared to

face challenges that generally stemmed from non-academic aspects of collegiate life. Additionally, Jackson et al. (2018) also found that over three-quarters of the students reported everyday struggles with feelings of isolation, being left out, and lacking companionship. The group averaged DASS-21 scores representative of “severe” levels of stress and “extremely severe” symptom levels of depression and anxiety, while difficulties with co-occurring depression and anxiety are in line with previous findings in the adult ASD literature (Doyle et al., 2014). Therefore, QoL training would benefit young adults with AS by infusing three main approaches in focusing on classifying social skills interventions developed for ASDs depending on where the focus is allocated by increasing positive behaviors in social situations (Hops, 1983). For instance, the Program for the Education and Enrichment of Relational Skills (PEERS) (Y. Chang et al., 2013; E. A. Laugeson et al., 2012) would focus on teaching specific behaviors that facilitate positive social interactions and cognitive restructuring for social skills or a cognitive-behavioral approach (Weiss & Lunskey, 2010) including interventions such as the Multimodal Anxiety and Social Skills Intervention program simultaneously targeting anxiety management and social skills and improving interpersonal cognitive problem-solving skills, which are considered a domain of intelligence (S.W. White & B.B. Maddox, 2013). Moreover, there is an emphasis on the cognitive processes of problem resolution that could be trained (E. C. Chang et al., 2009). This approach highlights the importance of the role that others play in an interaction where ethical issues are integrated and need to be dealt with (Nezu et al., 2008).

Research Questions

QoL and effective transition planning in high school are essential experiences for students who have AS and excel in academics, social communication, self-regulation, and self-sufficiency post-high-school (Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003). Because young adults with AS have

known deficits in how they communicate socially, and this often affects self-regulation in self-sufficiency, additional methods of vocational training, support, and accommodations in high school were examined so that they could improve in social interactions and DLS that could help with transitioning into adulthood (Wehman et al., 2014). Most DLS training in high school is fundamental in terms of learning how to cook simple meals, use specific appliances, and shop at local stores. However, the employment skills such as taking directions from managers or supervisors and the responsibilities related to the desired job are limited in young adults with AS. Young adults with AS continue to struggle with social communication interactions, stress, and anxieties when presented with a daily non-routine task outside of school (Neal & Frederickson, 2016). To better understand the phenomenon of young adults with AS who completed/or are completing a QoL training in high school, the following research question was developed to guide the study.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school?

Sub-Question One

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their academic experiences?

Sub-Question Two

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their social communication?

Definitions

1. *Asperger's syndrome disorder (AS)* - is a neurobiological disorder characterized by autism-like abnormalities in social interactions but with normal intelligence and language acquisition. The disorder is named for Austrian physician Hans Asperger, who first described the symptoms in 1944 as belonging to a condition he called autistic psychopathy. AS is considered an autism spectrum disorder, a category that includes autism (sometimes called classic autism) and mild autism-like conditions in which affected persons exhibit some but not all symptoms of autism (Encyclopedia Britannica, n.d.).
2. *Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* - also known as autism, is a common, highly heritable, and heterogeneous neurodevelopmental disorder with underlying cognitive features and commonly co-occurs with other conditions. Manifestations of autism include impairments in social communication and interaction, sensory anomalies, repetitive behaviors, and varying levels of intellectual disability (Lord et al., 2020).
3. *Daily living skills (DLS)* - consist of personal hygiene, meal preparation, and money management (Bal et al., 2015). DLS increases independence and positive functional outcomes (Kilincaslan et al., 2019).
4. *Quality of Life (QoL)* - is defined as individuals' "perceptions of their position in life in the context of the culture and value systems in which they live and in relation to their goals, expectations, standards and concerns" (WHO, 1997 p. 3).
5. *Self-determination* - Self-determination is conceptualized as the inherent human tendency toward psychological growth, independence, and improved well-being, based on meeting the basic needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

6. *Self-regulation* - is considered regulating oneself or doing so without intervention from external bodies (R.R. Dijkhuis et al., 2017). Neither a mental ability nor a performance skill, self-regulation is instead the self-directive process through which learners transform their mental abilities into task-related skills in diverse areas of functioning, such as academia, sport, music, and health (Zimmerman, 2015).

Summary

Children diagnosed with ASD face uncertain functional outcomes into adulthood. Young adults who are diagnosed with AS have experienced social isolation resulting in a lack of close friends due to deficits in social communication; young adults with AS have a poor adjustment in terms of living and working independently and building relationships in association with deficits in emotional self-regulation (Gal et al., 2015). Most QoL and DLS training in high school does not seem to address these deficits in social communication in young adults. Therefore, a smooth transition from high school to a postsecondary setting or living independently is difficult for those with AS. The theoretical framework on which this research study was based is a combination of Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory and Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors. Therefore, the focus of the study was to examine whether young adults with AS/HFA could either be classically conditioned or trained in predictive behaviors to determine the impact of self-regulation on self-sufficiency (Clark, 2018). The use of Pavlov's classical conditioning and Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM of predictive behaviors within this study helped fill gaps in determining whether QoL training in high school would have lasting effects on young adults with AS.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic literature review was conducted to describe the experiences of young adults who have AS, have completed QoL training, and have participated in individualized transition planning at their local high schools. Students with AS aspire to attend colleges or universities but are concerned about most colleges or universities' ability to meet their unique needs (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009). However, most of this research focuses on young adults with AS and the experiences that contribute to the completion of QoL training received in high school and transitional plans for preparation after high school. This chapter reviews the current literature related to the topic of study. The discussion of the selected theories makes up the first section as connections to the topic are made while constructing a theoretical framework.

The literature review in Chapter Two provides an understanding of Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning and Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM in relation to predictive behaviors in young adults with AS. Chapter Two focuses on prior literature on how those with AS would be able to learn to become fluent in their self-regulation in self-sufficiency, transitional planning, DLS training, academic skill, social communication, and interaction after the completion of QoL training. To begin this chapter, the theoretical framework for this study is described. The final section reviews literature about connections in young adults with AS, including social communication interactions, self-esteem issues, lack of preparation in DLS, and the readiness to receive adequate training in high school to transition into postsecondary education and live independently with a greater QoL. Therefore, a comprehensive review of research related to the selected study area is provided, and the areas lacking research are noted. Finally, Chapter Two concludes with a summary of the information presented.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundations described below are essential for integrating concepts and ideas presented throughout this study. Therefore, the research process for this qualitative study is supported by a theoretical framework that allows a researcher to build upon previous observations established by the founding theorist. Research conducted by Russian physiologist Ivan Petrovich Pavlov (1849-1936) has become the foundation of the modern science of learning, the influential theories of Watson and Skinner, and the entire school of behaviorism (Jarius & Wildemann, 2017). According to Jarius and Wildemann (2017), Ivan Petrovich Pavlov played an essential role in defining classical conditioning and other processes, such as generalization, discrimination, and extinction. Classical conditioning is a learning process induced by the repeated pairing of a neutral stimulus with a potent biological stimulus eliciting a usually natural reaction (Jarius & Wildemann, 2017). Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory relates to those with AS learning by using classical conditioning in a repeated pairing of a neutral stimulus and how it could provide positive experiences in social communication and interaction in DLS in self-regulation in emotion with an overall outcome of self-sufficiency. The implications of using Ivan Pavlov's theory of classical conditioning within this transcendental phenomenological study is to make connections to determine if young adults with AS could be classically conditioned in a QoL training that would help improve self-regulation in self-sufficiency.

Moreover, from this tradition, contributions to the topic of young adults with AS constructs are self-regulation, self-sufficiency, and social-communicative skills. Understanding awareness for typically developed humans is considered a frequent nonconscious process. Hence, our daily routine attributes thoughts, feelings, and perceptions related to other people to

make sense of their behaviors. Individuals with ASD show impairments in recognizing mental states in other people, particularly epistemic states such as belief and knowledge (Williams & Happé, 2010). Prior studies explored the overall awareness in the pattern of findings described above that strongly support a taxonomy in self-awareness that clearly distinguishes between physical and psychological aspects of self (Gillihan & Farah, 2005). Developmentally speaking, the case of those with ASD demonstrates that one can have a diminished awareness of the psychological self without any obvious implications for awareness of the physical self. Lewis and Ramsey (2004) expressed an example of reflexive awareness of the physical self that does not depend on the kind of meta-representation required for a reflexive awareness of one's mind; hence, the development of these aspects of self-awareness appears domain specific. Therefore, the awareness of the physical self is sufficient for developing awareness of the psychological self, although such awareness may be necessary (Russell, 1996). Some researchers have suggested that Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors shows difficulty in individuals with HFA/AS; as it may result from a distortion in understanding what others are thinking or feeling as defined by the social-cognitive component of ToM, which has also been referred to as "cognitive empathy" (Mazza et al., 2014).

In contrast, most individuals with HFA or AS tend to be just as efficient in understanding these tasks as control subjects (Bowler, 1992). Two important milestones characterize the development of Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors: first is the emergence of pretend play, in which infants as young as 18 months separate the natural world from fictional or imagined worlds as the explicit understanding, and second, the false belief, which develops around the age of about four years and demands a differentiation between mental states and reality. In a child's development, a milestone in the development of a ToM is attained

when children distinguish false belief from reality around the age of about four years (Wellman et al., 2001). However, this may be because first- and second-order false belief tasks have a ceiling corresponding to a mental age of about four to eight years. Furthermore, Wellman et al. (2001) noted that in the absence of an intelligent quotient (IQ) impairment, passing such tasks cannot be taken as conclusive evidence of an intact mentalizing ability in HFA. In understanding a person's false belief, one must understand that another person misrepresents some state of reality. Therefore, understanding false belief requires understanding the representational relationship between mind and world, which is considered meta-representation (Perner & Davies, 1991). Leslie (1987) has found a strong position in ToM and the false belief reasoning, calling it a "decoupling process," which keeps a misrepresentation of reality separate from a reality-based representation, as this would determine the differences between mental states from reality.

Adam Morton's theory-theory proposes explaining certain psychological capacities in terms of a tacit or explicit internal represented theory of domains. Adam Morton's theory-theory/ToM relates to those with ASD, as it would help explain how social communication problems define these disorders and create predictive behaviors that would help those with AS live a better QoL. Advanced studies and substantial evidence suggest difficulties in understanding the nature of mental representations and successfully link how each role determines individual behavior (Baron-Cohen, 1985). Some say the problem with Adam Morton's ToM in predictive behaviors and its association with ASD is based on many factors, such as deficits in IQ and language development. Therefore, it may present problems with QoL training in those with AS in predictive behaviors. Since AS is considered higher functioning with ASD, this study helped determine whether practical QoL training while in high school would

help those with AS with social, pragmatic, and adaptive behaviors in living and self-regulation in self-sufficiency mentally and emotionally to improve QoL (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Moreover, the connection between how ToM illustrates self-awareness and self-sufficiency in QoL in an individual with ASD and the specific difficulties in using language for social communication in interactions would depend on the competence to sequence in no, first-order only, or second-order ToM abilities. Pedreño et al. (2017) conducted advanced studies in ToM concerning individuals with HFA compared with typically developing individuals. All three studies of advanced ToM tests supported a distinction between the social-cognitive and social-perceptual components of ToM. Hence, results in the advanced ToM test also made connections in youths with HFA and the difficulties in all components associated with social knowledge but used different underlying cognitive abilities depending on the nature of the tasks given (Pedreño et al., 2017). Moreover, there is consistent evidence subjecting individuals with ASD show difficulty in their ability to understand the nature of mental representations and their role in being predictive in determining people's behavior (Wellman et al., 2001). Also, the degree of ToM difficulties may vary widely depending on IQ and language development, defining an ASD diagnosis as being more severe than those with AS (Baron-Cohen et al., 2000).

Pruett et al. (2015) suggested that individuals with AS who are HFA present deficits in mentalization in all the components of social knowledge and show a dissociation between the abilities related to emotion recognition and understanding mental states. The use of Adam Morton's predictive behavior theory ToM within this qualitative study helped provide a unique link between young adults with AS who suffer from deficits in social, pragmatic, and adaptive everyday life and can self-regulation mentally and emotionally to live a high-quality life.

Related Literature

Previous research shows that young adults with AS require transitional planning and vocational training in high school and transitioning into college (Cai & Richdale, 2016). Young adults with AS can build an understanding of shared experiences and realize that the challenges faced are different from their typically developed peers (Pedreño et al., 2017). Moreover, most related literature on transitional planning in young adults with AS expressed unclear expectations. Transitioning into postsecondary or living independently after high school can cause most young adults with AS to have constant anxieties. Young adults with AS often suffer from stresses and anxieties triggered directly by environmental stressors, such as facing challenging social situations with inadequate social awareness, social understanding, and social problem-solving skills, as well as a sense of loss of control (Smith Myles, 2003).

Moreover, adults diagnosed with AS are known to be socially isolated, remain dependent on their families, and cannot transition fully to independent adult roles (Howlin et al., 2004). Schmidt and Stichter (2012) stated that social impairments could lead to a lack or misuse of nonverbal or verbal behaviors, which negatively affects the development of positive peer relationships and social reciprocity. Additionally, areas of concern center around self-harm, aggression, and other inappropriate communication responses and initiations (Larkin & Gurry, 1998). Some factors unique to ASD affect students in postsecondary settings due to deficits in social interaction accompanied by restrictive, repetitive, and stereotyped behaviors or interests; therefore, increased anxiety and stressful situations present for most while attending postsecondary settings, illustrating a problem in the lack of formal DLS and vocational training while in high school (Klin & Volkmar, 2003). Moreover, the transition from primary to secondary school is considered an educational milestone that consists of changes to the physical,

organizational, and social environment for young adults with AS (Dixon & Tanner, 2013). As a result of these changes, this transition to secondary school is regarded as one of the most difficult in an individual's educational career, commonly causing a considerable amount of stress, worry, and anxiety, especially for those diagnosed with AS (Zeedyk et al., 2003).

Challenges and Experiences in Young Adults with AS Transitioning

The transition of a neurotypical adolescent to independent young adulthood is usually challenging for the young person's family, but for families with a child with AS, the transition period to adulthood may be the most challenging one for them since the initial diagnosis (Geller & Greenberg, 2009). Research shows that young adults with AS have limited vocational skills and postsecondary education outcomes throughout their lifespan (Geller & Greenberg, 2009). Experiences of young adults with AS begin with understanding how transitional planning in vocational training while in high school would help prepare them for postsecondary education settings and independent living toward self-sufficiency. However, for young adults with AS transitioning after graduating from high school who do not receive practical vocational training and transitional planning, life can be challenging after high school as the changes and demands from daily structured routines become unpredictable and stressful (Rydzewska, 2012).

Moreover, greater demands in self-sufficiency, self-direction, self-management of time, less structured timetables, and new peer groups and social situations are challenging in young adults with AS (Mitchell & Beresford, 2014). Cai and Richdale (2016) stated that in studying the needs of postsecondary students with ASD based on five themes associated with thematic analysis, most students felt they were provided education but not socially supported in communication. Cai and Richdale (2016) also illustrated how high-functioning young adults with ASD and their experiences transitioning from high school into postsecondary school showed that

they thought the transition was unplanned and they had not received enough training while in high school. They also believed they needed additional preparation time while still attending high school.

According to Adreon and Durocher (2007), individuals with HFA will likely face challenges, including college size, assessing and teaching independent living skills, and discussing when and how to disclose one's disability. Additionally, some students decide for varying reasons not to self-disclose, as some may be anxious for a "new beginning" in an educational setting to avoid being labeled. In contrast, others decide to wait to disclose until they are experiencing academic problems (Getzel & Briel, 2006). Additionally, students with disabilities enter colleges or universities unprepared to disclose their disability or lack the understanding of how to access support and accommodation services on campus (Brinkerhoff et al., 2002). VanBergeijk et al. (2008) noted that despite difficulties in interpersonal skills, the intellectual potential of young adults with AS is endless, provided appropriate educational supports are implemented based on pursuing postsecondary school education is possible for these individuals (J. L. Taylor & M. M Seltzer, 2010). Howlin and Moss (2012) showed an uneven parallel in providing help for young adults with ASD to transition to and support them in postsecondary education or finding and keeping employment.

Young adults with AS struggle with adapting to new social and learning environments that they have grown accustomed to, and their support needs may not be identified. According to Zager and Alpern (2010), there were high levels of cognitive ability in those with AS, and educational achievement may "mislead" staff into assuming they are coping with the demands of further education. Therefore, limited support and accommodations that are in place while attending college pose a challenge for those with AS. Beardon et al. (2009) stated that social-

emotional support and integration of social interactions in college life are limited for those with AS. The lack of quiet spaces also hampers those with AS from adapting and coping while attending college (Chown & Beavan, 2010). Some students with AS experience challenges while attending postsecondary education for many reasons. One reason is that some decide for varying reasons not to self-disclose their diagnosis, as some may be anxious for a “new beginning” in an educational setting, therefore avoiding being labeled. In contrast, others decide to wait to disclose until they are experiencing academic problems (Getzel & Briel, 2006).

Shattuck et al. (2012) noted in their research that experiences with unsuccessful outcomes in transitioning from secondary school to adulthood were illustrated in a U.S. national survey, which has shown that after young adults with ASD left the public school system, 80% continued to live at home, only 32% attended postsecondary education, just 6% had competitive jobs, while 21% had no employment or education experiences, and 40% reported having no friends. Moreover, several services and supports are essential to retaining students with disabilities in postsecondary education, such as developing self-determination skills, self-management skills, exploring technology, and obtaining internships or other career-related experiences. However, few colleges or universities have implemented these types of programs (Briel & Getzel, 2005). Students with disabilities need self-determination skills to transition or adjust to and remain in college successfully. These skills are a set of personal or interpersonal skills that include acceptance of a disability and how it affects learning, understanding which support services are needed, knowing how to describe one’s disability and the need for specific support to service providers, and having the determination to overcome obstacles that may be presented (Getzel et al., 2000).

Wehmeyer (1994) noted that on the Arc Scale of Determination, the individual's actions reflect four characteristics: (a) the individual possesses independence skills; (b) the individual has the skill to self-regulate behaviors; (c) the individual can attend and respond in social situations, and (d) the individual acts responsibly and recognizes consequences. Prior literature describes the importance of self-determination skills during the transition process of students with disabilities from high school to postsecondary settings (Getzel & Briel, 2006). However, there is a need to increase research efforts on the experiences of students with disabilities attending postsecondary programs to identify effective strategies that enable them to remain in these settings (Getzel & McManus, 2005).

Cai and Richdale (2016) noted in a survey conducted with HFA students that 63.6% believed their educational needs were met, but few felt their social needs were met (27.3%), while 27.3% rated them as inapplicable. Additionally, 63.6% of HFA students had experiences of feeling somewhat prepared for higher education, but only two (9.1%) felt well prepared; nine students (40.9%) undertook readings of lecture or tutorial material prior to classes. Cai and Richdale (2016) also noted that young adults with ASD experienced communication difficulties in colleges and universities. However, they did not want to draw attention or appear different from other students.

Attwood (1998) noted that the negative experiences in individuals with AS in social communication and the tendency to interpret others literally, therefore, experience in misinterpretation of teachers' instructions, leading to misunderstandings and this leads to a negative impact on the student-staff relationships, peer relationships, and student learning outcomes, resulting in becoming stressed. Hillier et al. (2011) noted that social and vocational skills intervention programs for adolescents and young adults with ASD would yield a broader

impact that would help alleviate stress and anxiety in those with AS. Moreover, intervention and QoL training such as DLS, vocational training, and community-based curricula help lower depression and anxiety due to familiarity with daily routine, providing self-sufficiency toward independence. Although many students with ASD have the intellectual capacity to perform college-level work, they are less likely to graduate than people without ASD (Hendricks & Wehman, 2009).

Challenges in Young Adults with ASD in Self-regulation Toward QoL

R.R. Dijkhuis et al. (2017) conducted a study investigating QoL and its effects on individuals with AS and concluded a reduced QoL compared to typically developing peers. R.R. Dijkhuis et al. (2017) also noted in prior research that those with HFA have shown additional problems in self-regulating skills in executive functioning and emotion processing also experienced challenges in daily executive functioning related to a lower QoL. Berthoz and Hill's (2005) earlier study illustrated individuals with HFA with a specific form of alexithymia characterized by impairments in the cognitive rather than the affective domain compared to recent studies. E.L. Hill (2004) found that potential problems with mentalizing or an underlying ToM deficit might lead individuals with ASD to focus more on external events rather than formulating and thinking about their inner emotional experiences.

Since young adults with AS exhibit repetitive and restricted behaviors, it would be beneficial to create a model of a routine prior to completing high school that would be geared toward mock independence if they were to attend a college or university by planning regular visits to a 12th-grade year or living independently by learning the bus schedules as this would prepare them to adjust to self-regulate in self-sufficiency.

How do young adults with AS self-regulate into QoL after receiving training in high school? According to Masicampo and Baumeister (2007), self-regulation is a multifaceted construct that involves monitoring, oversight, and modulation of behavior, emotion, and cognition; however, the problems with self-regulation, including executive function and emotion regulation impairments, are commonly described in individuals with ASD (Mazefsky & White, 2014). self-regulation is related to executive functioning capacity (e.g., one's ability to update and monitor information and inhibit prepotent responses) (Bridgett et al., 2013). Therefore, deficits are shown in individuals with ASD because of self-regulation and problems with inflexibility in routines, poor inhibitory control, time management, motivation, or impaired goal-directed behaviors (Jahromi et al., 2013). Hatfield et al. (2018) supported prior research about adults with ASD and focused on their difficulties and how they experienced poorer QoL than adults without ASD.

Moreover, adults with ASD showed weaknesses in work satisfaction, social relationships, perspectives on love and life, and living arrangement with other individuals with different diagnoses, such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Barneveld et al., 2014). Hatfield et al. (2018) noted engagements in vocational activities might improve QoL and performance in ADL and reduce ASD symptoms for people with ASD. In research, M.L. Wehmeyer and K. Webb (2012) pointed out that employment for young adolescents with ASD presents an opportunity to enhance through transition planning during early secondary school. Social communication difficulties mean that students may prefer not to participate in group discussions or group assignments due to interpersonal communication challenges and the stress this may cause to family members. According to Cai and Richdale (2016), students generally felt their educational needs were met but did not believe they received adequate social support. Likewise, parents

generally reported that their children did not receive adequate educational or social support (VanBergeijk et al., 2008). The transition period from secondary to postsecondary education is considered a critical time for students with ASD, as it prepares them for higher education and provides the structure needed to reduce stress and anxiety.

Cai and Richdale (2016) also noted in their study that many of their students with ASD had no formal transition planning and did not feel adequately prepared. However, preparations were made, and parents were often significantly involved, as well as teachers and career advisors. Cai and Richdale (2016) noted that students with ASD experience stress levels exceeding those of their neurotypical students. Glennon (2001) stated that transition is even more likely to affect adjustment, indicating the importance of appropriate transition planning. Hence, studies have found that adolescents with AS need to solidify their identity and overcome any feelings of isolation that may coincide with the emotional turmoil of youth to be successful in living within a larger community independently toward a better QoL after high school (Giarelli et al., 2013).

Challenges in Young Adults with AS in Social Interactions

The American Psychiatric Association (1994) defined the features of individuals with AS with severe deficits in social communication. The deficits in social competency associated with those with ASD can disrupt development leading to a decrease in positive learning experiences found in normative peer relationships (Frea, 1995). Moreover, challenging behaviors due to the misinterpretation of social cues can manifest in many ways for a child with an ASD diagnosis (Donno et al., 2010). Children who experience rejection during primary school are likelier to be truant and achieve poorly at the secondary school level (Frederickson & Cline, 2009). Active rejection can lead to intense emotional responses, often featuring anger and depression,

perpetuating social difficulties for the child with ASD in a mainstream setting (Roantree & Kennedy, 2012). Cowen et al. (1973) noted that a rejected individual is likelier to experience mental health problems later in life.

Challenges for Young Adults with AS in Gaining Employment

It can be a challenging adjustment for those with AS attempting to handle real-world experience and gain employment. Gaining employment for those with AS can be extremely challenging for families involved, as attempting to find the right job would be considered the right “fit,” especially if social communication and interaction deficits exist. Moreover, most individuals with AS rely heavily on the support of their families to gain employment, which is disappointing due to the types of jobs, which are considered low status or end prematurely due to a lack of support and accommodations in place to help with social communication difficulties (Mawhood & Howlin, 1999).

Geller and Greenberg (2009) noted many families do not encourage their children to seek job experiences during high school because they believe their child needs to concentrate on academics and other critical aspects of development. However, as those with AS continue to concentrate on academics while attending postsecondary education, they become more unemployed or underemployed, therefore, lack working experience. In examining the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the opportunities for young adults with Asperger syndrome to gain and maintain employment is the goal of special education for transition-age youth; however, students with ASD are a growing population in special education, and today there is no clear picture of their employment preparation needs and whether they are being met (Wong et al., 2020). Today, schools offer a range of service providers to help develop and coordinate services for high school students who may have difficulty transitioning to

employment, like students with ASD (H.-M. Chiang et al., 2012). Moreover, prior studies have focused on the personal characteristics of youth with ASD and emphasized individualized transition services for this population. They found it necessary to provide diversity in meeting the needs of youths with ASD, who have different intellectual and functional abilities, disability levels, and social communication skills (Palmen et al., 2010). Additionally, today there is limited knowledge of the types of school-based services that would help prioritize meeting the needs of youth with ASD. The main issue is limited time during the day to provide services because the focus is on academic preparation.

The lack of adequate training and skills to be considered qualified for most jobs in a young adult with AS results in frustration, loss of self-esteem, and, for some, a cycle of anxiety and depression or other psychiatric disturbance (Howlin, 2005). Additionally, other challenges to take into consideration are skills necessary in seeking employment, such as filling in job application materials; thinking on their feet in an interview; keeping up with new procedures and routines; and remembering and following instructions and directions given on the job (Beardon & Edmonds, 2007). Hence, studies have shown how those with AS have low rates of obtaining independent employment, jobs that are not commensurate with independent ability levels, and difficulty sustaining jobs (J.L. Taylor & Seltzer, 2011).

Muller et al. (2003) found that young adults with AS demonstrated a comparatively high level of job switching, resulting in a fragmented work history, which may have limited their potential for ongoing work history and overall career development, and this, in turn, contributed to stress, depression, isolation, and financial insecurity. In addition, it appears that many adults with high-functioning ASD are not receiving the support at work needed to perform their jobs efficiently (Beardon & Edmonds, 2007). Additionally, since there is a challenge for those who

have AS to gain employment due to limited technical vocational skills and social skills, some are qualified for state and federal benefits such as Medicaid and Supplemental Security Income (Turcotte et al., 2015). However, some who may qualify for either Medicaid or Supplemental Security Income may have limited information on the regulations related to salary caps that may affect both, discouraging those with AS from gaining employment, as making them fearful they may lose their benefits (Turcotte et al., 2015).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

The Federal Bureau for the Education of the Handicapped, which is called the Office of Special Education, which is part of the Department of Education, showed as of 1 July 1974, a year before the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), 78.5% of the 8,150,000 children with disabilities in American public schools received varying degrees of services (Gibson vs Forest Hills, (1975). Of these children, 47.8% received what would today be considered special education and related services, 30.7% did not receive related services, and 21.5% did not receive any educational services (Gibson vs Forest Hills, (1975). In 1975, Congress passed the EAHCA; before this, students with disabilities were denied services that allowed them to be excluded from the school system and interact with their non-disabled peers (Jones, 2015). They were misdiagnosed or undiagnosed and did not receive adequate resources through the American public school system (Jones, 2015).

In 1986, the EAHCA was amended to include services for children with disabilities from birth (Jones, 2015). In 1990, the EAHCA was amended again to offer transition services from high school to adult life, to include children with autism and traumatic brain injuries, to define services and technology available, to clarify the requirements of providing the least restrictive environment, and to remove language now considered inappropriate (Assistive Technology

Training Online Project, 1990). In 1997, the IDEA was amended again to require the inclusion of students with disabilities on state and district assessments, further develop the involvement of general education teachers in creating an IEP, and increase parent participation in decisions (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 1998).

IDEA—Eligibility

Students must satisfy four requirements to become eligible for IDEA special education services. First, students must be between 3 and 21 (IDEA, 2004). The IDEA also addresses the needs of children aged three through nine experiencing developmental delays, as defined by the state and as measured by appropriate diagnostic instruments and procedures, in one or more of the following areas: physical development; cognitive development; communication development; social or emotional development; or adaptive development (IDEA, 2004). Second, children must have specifically identified disabilities. A child with a disability would be diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, or specific learning disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

Third, students need special education services, which means they need a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environments (LRE). The LRE includes full inclusion as a goal rather than a right, directed by the contents of IEPs developed by teams including various educators and a child's parents (IDEA, 2004). Fourth, children must need related services such as developmental, corrective, and other supportive services, including transportation, speech-language pathology, psychological services, and physical and occupational therapy (Yell & Drasgow, 2007). IDEA protects children entitled to these services when necessary to help them benefit from their special education by establishing support, goals,

or objectives on an IEP. Moreover, school boards must provide students with related services and special education to assist them in receiving educational benefits from their IEPs (Russo, 2019).

Individual Educational Plan

An IEP is a mandated legal document consisting of the student's present level of achievement and functional performance and how the disability impacts involvement and progress within a general curriculum setting (general curriculum would be the same as non-disabled peers) (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). According to Shriner and Destefano (2003), the individualized education program mandated in IDEA is the mechanism by which the student, family, and school staff agree on the support and services to be provided to the student. Hence, the IEP is a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed and reviewed (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). Moreover, in an IEP, there are statements listed that consist of the student's present level of achievement and functional performance and how the disability impacts the involvement and progress within a general curriculum setting (general curriculum would be the same as non-disabled peers) (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

The IEP provides a statement of annual measurable goals and objectives and functional goals that would help provide the student with the opportunity to be more involved in making progress within the general curriculum setting and meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disability. Hence, periodic reports on the child's progress toward meeting the annual goals, known as "progress reports," are sent quarterly or concurrent with other periodic reports or the issuance of report cards. Additionally, listed on an IEP are a statement of the extended school year, special education and related services, and supplementary aids and services based on peer-reviewed research provided to the child or on behalf of the child,

and a statement in needs of the program modifications and/or accommodations or supports for classroom or statewide assessments (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

Transition Planning

In transition planning, as it relates to the IEP process for students 16 years of age and older, the team must identify appropriate measurable postsecondary goals, transition services, and a course of study. Additionally, this would require the IEP team to (a) focus on decreasing or eliminating barriers to positive outcomes and (b) shift from an exclusive focus on within-school goals to the inclusion of goals and activities that prepare students for post-school outcomes (Flannery & Hellemn, 2015). According to Test et al. (2009), active involvement from students and parents has been noted for over three decades. The evolution in transition planning since the passage of federal special education legislation in 1975 shows a strengthening in the intent that parents are full partners with school staff in educational planning for their children with disabilities in the participation of planning their post-high-school transition so that their preferences and goals would be met (Wagner et al., 2012). Moreover, since the initial inception of the EAHCA in 1975, parent and student participation in IEP and transition planning meetings has become an essential component of federal education policy. Hence, the overall goal of transition planning is to provide support for all students with disabilities to achieve positive post-high-school outcomes (Johnson et al., 2020).

Although strides and advancements have been made in meeting transitional planning goals in children with disabilities, studies recently show that some students with disabilities are present during the IEP transition planning meeting; however, they play a passive role in the decision-making process during these meetings (Hetherington et al., 2010). Additionally, direct observation of stakeholder participation during IEP meetings suggests that students spoke at

meetings approximately 3% of the time (Agran & Hughes, 2008). Moreover, studies have also shown students' attendance during transitional planning within an IEP meeting without participation (M. Mason, 2010). Examining whether students passively participate in their transition planning may answer why so many young adults with AS are ill-prepared due to the lack of QoL training for real-world experience post-high-school.

Parent Perspectives

Today transition planning continues to be a challenge for both parents and students. Although there have been recent strides in the comprehensive approach for those with ASD, parents still lack knowledge of how the transition process works. Most parents do not understand how transition planning works when their child graduates high school, limiting the understanding of relationships and interactive connections of the comprehensive academic transitional planning from preschool to postsecondary settings (Lee et al., 2014). Overall, the transition process is considered the source of high-stress levels for parents and students on the spectrum (Lee et al., 2014). Prior studies documented parents' significant influence on a child's educational aspirations and outcomes (Stoner et al., 2007). Research has shown that ASD parents often have different perspectives on academic services due to the heterogeneous nature of the disorder (S. Parsons et al., 2009). However, prior studies regarding parents' perspectives regarding the transition to postsecondary education showed that parents were interested in developing the student's independence, social skills, and work skills development (Lee et al., 2014). Although individual planning for postsecondary education was a priority, parents were generally unaware of the postsecondary transition element in the IEP (Fox, 2011). Moreover, Lee et al. (2014) noted that the outcome of their meta-synthesis research showed that the parental perspective of

transition to postsecondary education indicates a trend in which the parents were more interested in their child's personal development, specifically in social and independence skills.

Landmark et al. (2010) found parents' involvement increased student attendance and graduation rates; moreover, IDEA noted that parents are considered equal partners in the IEP process. Although research has shown parents' continued involvement in the IEP transition planning process, some parents still have experienced challenges and barriers to participating in IEP meetings. According to Zeitlin and Curcic (2014), parents continue to report challenges in the lack of opportunity to provide input, communication challenges, and a lack of a strengths-based approach by the school in educational planning. Moreover, some parents have even noted feelings of alienation in the IEP process and meetings (Valle & Aponte, 2002). Moreover, parents have expressed that the meetings were dominated by unfamiliar language that prevented their meaningful participation in assessing student abilities and goal setting (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). An essential responsibility of IEP team members can include facilitating family and student involvement in the IEP process (Mandak & Light, 2018).

Student Perspectives

According to Meadan et al. (2010), the most successful IEP transition planning showed students as active agents in the process so they may authentically contribute to IEP meetings. Moreover, student involvement in transition planning has been linked to higher levels of IEP development, goal attainment (L. E. Powers et al., 2001), and higher graduation rates (Cavendish, 2013). Hence, students and parents play an essential role in IEP transition planning. Nevertheless, over 62% of students with ASD do not attend their transition planning meetings or attend with minimal participation (Cameto et al., 2004). Although research shows a higher level of goal attainment and graduation based on student involvement in transition planning and

participation in the overall IEP process, research has shown there are still students who lack leadership within their own IEP meetings. According to Agran and Hughes (2008), student survey results ($N = 76$) related to the level of understanding of the IEP and involvement in IEP planning revealed that only 53% of high school students with disabilities attended their IEP meeting and that only 33% of students knew what their IEP goals were.

Moreover, prior research showed limited student participation during the IEP planning process, as Martin et al. (2004) surveyed 1,638 IEP members who participated in 393 IEP meetings at the middle, junior high, and high schools across 3 years and found that of all IEP team members, special educators talked the most and made most of the decisions, second only to administrators. Moreover, Martin et al. (2006) conducted a follow-up study; the results showed that special education teachers talked for 51% of the intervals, the family talked for 15% of the intervals, general education teachers and administrators each talked for 9% of the intervals, support staff talked for 6% of the intervals, and students talked for only 3% of the intervals, which showed students lacked leadership skills during their IEP meetings.

Teacher Perspectives

According to Cavendish and Connor (2018), teachers expressed challenges in scheduling parents to attend IEP meetings. The teachers also noted that parents who did attend did not seem to know the overall purpose of an IEP meeting. Moreover, other concerns the teachers expressed were that most students with an IEP experienced challenges in passing state-mandated assessments to obtain a standard diploma (Cavendish & Connor, 2018). Snell-Rood et al. (2020) stated that most IEP meetings were crucial for facilitating transition planning. However, participants in prior studies were observed across the board as providing limited and ineffective communication processes and decision-making and lacking key players. Additionally, parents

and school providers noted that inappropriate goal setting led to inappropriate plans to identify and develop individuals' skills (Snell-Rood et al., 2020). According to Van Laarhoven-Myers et al. (2016), parents and special educators reported speaking more about students' preferences and interests than students, which shows limited student participation and limits adequate transition planning appropriate for the student.

Speech-Language Pathologist Perspective

SLP help those who suffer from speech and language deficits; therefore, they help facilitate independence, communication, and interaction skills necessary for postsecondary and workplace success (Perryman et al., 2020). According to Wei et al. (2014), speech-language therapy services are among the most common for individuals with ASD. As members of the IEP team, SLP play an integral role in examining current and standard practices for transition planning to formulate viable solutions for achieving successful transition outcomes (Perryman et al., 2020). Moreover, SLP assists with designing a student transition program that would help integrate self-determination and self-advocacy skills in speech; research shows that students with ASD need to practice these skills in a safe setting (Gragoudas, 2014).

Collins and Wolter (2018) noted that the focus for a SLP should be in elementary schools to help provide direct skill instruction, as the responsibility shifts to strategy instruction as students enter secondary school. The average student is expected to become self-sufficient by the time they reach middle school; however, with the deficits in young adults with AS in social communication, there are goals, support, and accommodations for speech. Young adults with AS would benefit from QoL training in self-determination, self-advocacy, and independent living skills in postsecondary contexts. Incorporating these practices would be beneficial to be included in the transition goals listed on their IEP (Test et al., 2009). Hotton and Coles (2016) found

explicit instruction, role-playing of target skills, and implementation of peer support systems increase social interaction abilities in individuals with ASD. The goals implemented by SLP utilize peer-mediated approaches to increase peer confidence and willingness to interact with peers with disabilities and increase the availability of communication partners (Carter & Asmus, 2014).

Career Technical Instruction

IDEA defined transition services as a coordinated set of activities for a child with a disability designed to provide a results-oriented process that would focus on improving the academic and functional achievement of the child with a disability (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). A transition plan helps to facilitate movement from school to post-high-school activities, which includes postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, and independent living (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). For example, according to the Georgia Department of Education Career Technical Institute Coordinators handbook, Georgia offers a program called Career Technical Instruction Support Services that is designed to provide secondary students with disabilities with the support necessary to complete high school and attain employment skills in broad or specific career pathways (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

Moreover, Career Technical Instruction Support Services provides services in Georgia high schools that would help support students with disabilities enrolled in a career readiness course while in high school to provide these students with employment opportunities after their career, technical, and agricultural experience (Georgia Department of Education, 2007). Previous research has shown that effective QoL training implemented within high schools is essential. Therefore, S. W. White et al. (2017) conducted research proposing a training program called

Stepped Transition in Education Program for Students with ASD (STEPS). STEPS targets self-regulation in several ways, including teaching effective stress management techniques, problem-solving and goal-setting training, and outings within their communities related to the student's goals. Hence, the goal of developing a STEPS program is to create a multi-method approach to create a developmentally sensitive transition program that would support students with ASD both prior to and during the transition into college (S.W. White et al., 2017).

Colleges and Universities

In the United States, students with special needs, including those with ASD, are not supported under the IDEA upon exiting secondary education or reaching age 21 (IDEA, 2004). Young adults with AS who participate in transition planning participation and identifying transition goals of college enrollment while still in high school are associated with increased odds of attending a postsecondary institution (Wei et al., 2016). Therefore, identity development at the high school level could also work to address postsecondary expectations and overall outcomes (K. A. Anderson et al., 2016). Moreover, for a student with disabilities to continue receiving services from their postsecondary institution, the student must disclose their disability, self-advocate, and provide the necessary documentation regarding their disability (S.W. White et al., 2017).

Shogren and Plotner (2012) noted that the transition to an advocacy-based approach has proven challenging for many people with ASD. The latter is less likely than students with other types of disabilities to take leadership in their transition planning. Therefore, it has been proven beneficial for young adults with AS to disclose their disability to educational support staff so that accommodations allow access to educational material in support (S.W. White et al., 2017). Hence, for students with ASD to succeed at the university level, course and classroom design

with support and accommodations must be considered. Paas et al. (2004) noted, “Knowing how students learn and solve problems informs us how we should organize the learning environment, and without such knowledge, the effectiveness of the instructional design is likely to be random.” Transition planning is essential for students with disabilities, especially those with AS who thrive on support, accommodations, and a well-organized classroom structure and design that impacts their learning. Universal design and person-centered planning have effectively facilitated the inclusion of students with ASD in academic settings (Stodden & Mruzek, 2010).

Success in Young Adults with AS

Getzel and Thomas (2008) conducted a study and found that solid self-determination skills produce a characteristic that supports active transition planning participation and is associated with improved postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities. The objective and goals set in transition planning while in high school create the student’s trajectory into their early post-high-school years and help to incorporate those goals into the transition plan and the activities that flow from it, which makes the transition from high school smoother for those with AS.

Wei et al. (2016) noted the effect of high school transition planning participation and goal setting and the high percentage in college enrollment rates among students with ASD and 40.29% of youth who actively participated in their transition planning meetings and 24.20% had a primary transition goal of college enrollment in their transition plan. Students diagnosed with ASD with postsecondary goals, including independent living in a community or college, are provided with interventions and strategies to increase independence in life skills and adaptive behaviors. Moreover, adaptive behavior skills are those required for independence in daily life (e.g., self-care, earning and managing money, domestic chores, safety, schedules, routines,

transportation) at home and in community settings (H. Chiang et al., 2017).

Additionally, Wei et al. (2016) also found that transition planning participation and having a primary transition goal of college enrollment during secondary school were associated with higher odds of attending a two- or four-year college among the sample of youth with ASDs. Landmark et al. (2010) noted the benefits of student involvement in transition planning and goal setting for students receiving special education services. Special education services allow them to articulate their post-high-school goals and work with parents, school staff, and others to chart a course for them. Wei et al. (2016) also suggested that participation in transition planning is a valuable opportunity to intervene and improve postsecondary education outcomes for secondary school students with ASDs.

Wei et al. (2016) also suggested that outlining a specific primary goal related to college attendance in transition plans also can effectively boost the odds of attending college by 564%. Myles and Simpson (2002) have found professionals such as school counselors or social workers must address these students' needs and assist them with transition planning. Nonetheless, students with AS and their families must receive support after high school and throughout their first year of college or living independently (Lozzi-Toscano, 2004).

Hence, in prior research, it has been suggested that a social worker can offer students with AS knowledge of federal legislation and university policies, identification of university and community support services, advocacy skills, and an understanding of a student's unique personal goals and needs in preparation for interaction challenges in both the academic and social realms of higher education (Dente & Parkinson Coles, 2012). Furthermore, according to Carter and Asmus (2014), college and university disability services staff can also serve as contacts for students. Therefore, it would allow the transition goals of employment to have

community-based opportunities early on to begin career exploration and learn job skills, as this would allow their perceptions to be consistent with the best predictors of employment for youth with significant disabilities—community-based vocational evaluation and job training—especially paid employment while still in high school that would lead to positive post-school vocational outcomes. Moreover, Snell-Rood et al. (2020) noted the importance of pre-employment transition services, including job exploration counseling, work-based learning, job readiness training, postsecondary counseling, and instruction in self-advocacy. High-quality transition planning has numerous benefits, ranging from reduced stress for families to increased independence and a better QoL for students. With better preparation, students are likely to obtain higher-paying jobs or maintain enrollment in postsecondary.

Colleges/Universities—Challenges for Those with AS

Teaching individuals with AS at the postsecondary level can be a challenge. Many colleges, faculty, staff, and other students may not be able to recognize AS as a disability and therefore do not make accommodations or adjustments that are typically made for individuals with more apparent disabilities (M.J. Taylor, 2005). Additionally, college personnel may not have received training to understand the complexities of these disorders (Graetz & Spampinato, 2008). The Autistic Self-Advocacy Network (2011) indicated that the “‘safety net’ in place for those with AS is weaker” than in high school. S.W. White et al. (2011) noted that between 0.7% and 1.9% of college students at one university could meet the criteria for HFA. They predicted that universities could expect to enroll more students who meet the diagnostic criteria in the future but who have not been previously identified. Those with AS also demonstrate challenges with executive functioning skills and with understanding their emotions and the emotions of others (Wolf et al., 2009). These challenges can impede academic performance, often leading to

college failure (Dillon, 2007). As mentioned, challenges are shown in social skills and gaining functional employment skills, including teamwork and public speaking. These challenges must be considered possible student success obstacles (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009).

Young people with ASD can experience social isolation outside their secondary school lives. Although some colleges and universities have a disability services department that provides support and accommodations, it is only designed to focus on providing academic support (Bell et al., 2017). Beardon et al. (2009) cautioned against adopting a deficit model concerning the inclusion of young people with ASD within higher education institutions. Their research indicated that successful transitions for these young people depend on understanding their unique needs within the higher education environment. Hart et al. (2010) observed that students with ASD can face challenges with nonverbal communication, socializing, and adapting to a very stimulating higher education environment. Furthermore, limited social support in higher education enables these young people to navigate this complex social environment (Hart et al., 2010).

Accommodations and Supports

Despite these challenges, they also identified strengths in students with AS, including passionate interests and accurate, detailed knowledge. According to Bell et al. (2017), most faculty and staff adapted their teaching to take account of the strengths and difficulties experienced by students with ASD: designing more structured approaches; making course demands very explicit; using detailed questioning and setting clear expectations about required answers; offering opportunities for students to follow their interests; and increasing their sensitivity and awareness of how increased anxiety can be manifested. In addition, Jacklin and Robinson (2007) observed that support services needed to be flexible enough to provide varied

support for those with AS, such as material resources and encouragement from peers encountering similar issues in adapting to college life.

Beardon et al. (2009) reported that support to understand the behavior of their neurotypical peers would have significantly reduced the daily social challenges they experienced. Therefore, supportive programs, such as mentoring programs, are effective in helping those who step into postsecondary education (Hart et al., 2010). Mentoring programs would help those with AS to be comfortable in becoming social. It also provides informal interaction among students and between staff and students, which has been reported as beneficial for this student cohort. Faculty and staff perceived students with ASD struggle with the social skills required for classroom and curricular engagement, critical thinking, which entails generalizing from specific examples, and evident anxiety that can inhibit learning (Gobbo & Shmulsky, 2014). QoL training is only offered at high schools with three main approaches focusing on classifying social skills interventions, teaching specific behaviors that facilitate positive social interactions and problem-solving skills in those with AS. QoL training is not an out-of-the-box curriculum approach. Rather, it is to promote different skills to QoL that would help those with build DLS skills in personal hygiene, meal preparation, and money and time management, which are important to living independently and obtaining employment for those with AS. QoL training is offered at high schools and consists of vocational training programs that include academic study, a wide range of courses, and work experience programs designed to introduce students to different trades.

Summary

Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory relates to those with AS learning by using classical conditioning in a repeated pairing of a neutral stimulus and how it could provide

positive experiences in social communication and interaction in daily living in self-regulation in emotion with an overall outcome of self-sufficiency. Premack and Woodruff (1978) built their framework on the ToM theoretical framework as it referred to the ability to attribute mental states, such as beliefs and intentions, to self and others to explain and predict. Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory proposed an explanation for certain psychological capacities in terms of a tacit or explicit internally represented theory of a domain. Morton's (1980) theory-theory creates a view of how concepts are structured, acquired, and deployed. Therefore, mental representations are implicated in many higher thought processes. Morton's (1980) theory-theory proposes that those with AS could be taught predictive behaviors based on concepts that would contribute to theoretical reasoning. AS is considered a milder form of autism; however, due to their deficits in experiencing social interactions, individuals with autism qualify for an IEP.

In transition planning, as it relates to the IEP process for students 16 years of age and older, the team must identify appropriate measurable postsecondary goals, transition services, and a course of study. Today, those with AS experience challenges within a postsecondary setting due to limited support and accommodations outside of academics. Moreover, a transition plan would help to facilitate movement from school to post-high-school activities, which include postsecondary education, vocational education, integrated employment, continuing and adult education, adult services, and independent living (Georgia Department of Education, 2007).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the experiences of young adults with AS who were completing or have completed QoL training and transitional planning in high school. In this chapter, the research design is identified, research questions are presented, and the rationales for the setting and selection of participants are discussed. The study procedures are outlined, and the researcher's role is explained. Data collection and analysis techniques are detailed, trustworthiness is addressed, and ethical considerations are discussed. The chapter concludes with a summary.

Research Design

A transcendental phenomenological approach described the experiences of young adults with AS who completed QoL training and transitional planning in high school. Phenomenology is used to understand a phenomenon and the lived experiences of a particular group of individuals (Moustakas, 1994). The transcendental phenomenological approach was a good design for this study because it provided intricate highlights of individual lived experiences relating to this research topic. Moreover, this transcendental phenomenological research was based on principles identified by Husserl et al. (1931) and translated into a qualitative method by Moustakas (1994) and was considered a viable procedure for transcendental phenomenological research. Intentionality, noema and noesis are concepts central to phenomenology. Noema is that which is experienced, and noesis is how it is experienced; hence, noema and noesis intertwine, and terms refer to meanings. Intentional experiences are the combination of the outward appearance of something and how it looks inside one's head based on memory, image, and meaning (Moustakas, 1994). Hence, Husserl's "back to things themselves" (Pg. 26) emphasizes

knowledge rooted in meanings rather than in an analysis of physical objects (Moustakas, 1994). The core of the transcendental phenomenology of science is a design for acquiring and collecting data that explicate the essence of human experience (Moustakas, 1994).

The researcher's objective in conducting a transcendental phenomenological study was to describe rather than interpret or explain (Moustakas, 1994); therefore, perception is conclusive; in turn, deeper layers of meaning may always unfold as one continues searching. The transcendental emphasis in this study includes features that allow the researcher to set aside prejudgments by using systematic data analysis procedures (Moustakas, 1994). Moreover, transcendental phenomenology worked well for this study because it involves open-ended questions to young adults with AS that described the benefits of QoL training and transitional planning in high school and whether it was successful. Hence, the researcher's goal was to provide logical, systematic, and coherent design elements leading to an understanding of lived experiences described by the participants.

A quantitative research method would not have been appropriate because little research relates to young adults with AS who completed QoL training and transitional planning in high school (Swayne & Dodds, 2011). Moreover, quantitative research does not have a narrow focus; therefore, one ignores other relevant observations as a researcher. In using quantitative research, one finds patterns and averages, makes predictions, tests causal relationships, and generalizes results to wider populations; therefore, one receives a broader response from participants and sampling, leading to missed data and imprecise measurements, or inappropriate sampling methods are biases that can lead to the wrong conclusions (Apuke, 2017). Hence, the statistical techniques of quantitative research answer questions related to who, how much, what, where, when, how many, and how (Swayne & Dodds, 2011). Quantitative research also describes the

methods of explaining an issue or phenomenon by gathering numerical data (Apuke, 2017). Qualitative research involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data (e.g., text, video, audio) to understand concepts, opinions, or experiences (Swayne & Dodds, 2011). Therefore, as the researcher, it was appropriate to use qualitative research in this study because one could narrow the research topic by gaining information from a specific population based on lived experiences, leading to a firm conclusion in research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative research is used to gather in-depth insights into a problem or generate new ideas for research (Swayne & Dodds, 2011).

Research Questions

This transcendental phenomenological study describes the experiences of young adults with AS who completed QoL training and transitional planning in high school. One central research question and two sub-questions were created to understand this phenomenon better.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school?

Sub-Question One

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their academic experiences?

Sub-Question Two

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their social communication?

Setting and Participants

The settings for this study were a high school and a university located in a northern

suburb of a metropolitan area in Georgia. The city where the university is located was home to over 34,000 residents. The settings for the high school and university used were appropriate for this study because both high school and university served students with AS, which was, therefore, relatable to this research.

Site One

The first site for this study was a high school with an enrollment of 2,846 in Metro Georgia with a population of 790,588. The university's main campus served over 41,000 students. The high school was one of the largest school districts in Georgia and among the largest in the United States. The high school was accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, and the district was among the first to have earned district-wide accreditation. All participants eligible for this study had completed QoL training and transitional planning upon the completion of high school and had transitioned into a local university.

QoL training is only provided in high school. A QoL training would consist of DLS with the focus on allowing young adults with AS to build skills in personal hygiene, meal preparation, and money and time management. QoL training would help those with AS to build successful communication interactions that would help transcend into their academic and independent lives. QoL training would consist of high school teachers who are considered highly qualified by the state of Georgia to teach vocational training courses, DLS units, and a money management course. The goal of promoting QoL training in high school is to prepare those young adults with AS for readiness after high school into a local university, personal self-care, and employment. QoL training may reduce the lifetime costs associated with having a child with ASD, as well as contribute to the individual's well-being (Järbrink, 2007). Those with AS experience deficits in social communication and developmental delays and therefore have their personal perceptions of

what is considered a QoL regarding self-regulation in self-sufficiency. The thorough QoL training would also consist of three main approaches in focusing on classifying social skills interventions, teaching specific behaviors that facilitate positive social interactions, and problem-solving skills.

Site Two

The second site for this study was a public research university in the U.S. state of Georgia that had two primary campuses. The university was founded in 1963 by the Georgia Board of Regents using local bonds and a federal space grant during a time of major Georgian economic expansion after World War II (Scott, 2003). The university also held classes in the local northern part of Georgia, serving approximately five counties. The fall 2020 enrollment at the university exceeded 41,000 students, thus making this the second-largest university by enrollment in Georgia while also having the largest first-year class in the state. The university served 8 counties in Georgia, reaching a population of over 380,000 people (Scott, 2003).

Moreover, this university was part of the University System of Georgia and was classified among R2 doctoral universities, meaning it had high research activity. The university had multiple academic programs in business, education, engineering, nursing, physical sciences, information technology, criminal justice, and sports management (Scott, 2003). The university served two main campuses within the northern suburban areas. Although QoL training is only facilitated at a high school, the purpose of conducting the research at the university was to determine if the quality-of-life training proved to be effective for those with AS who completed the training in high school. The participants from the university helped this research identify themes after completing QoL training (Scott, 2003).

Participants

The criteria to participate in this study included being a high school student aged 16-21, a diagnosis of ASD, receiving special education services, and considered AS/HFA. Based on these criteria, the possible sample pool consisted of approximately 10-15 students from prospective sites. Based on best practices and to ensure enough research to reach saturation, the sample size included between 10-15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The participants for this study were selected using purposive sampling to understand better the phenomenon studied (Patton, 2015). A meeting was held with the principal or special education coordinator at a local high school and another meeting was held with the appropriate administrator at the university to seek potential candidates for this research. Once the potential participants have been chosen, consent forms were sent to the participants' email addresses. Once the consent forms were sent back within 36 hours from the participants who agreed to participate in this research, a link to the survey questions was sent to their email addresses. When the consent form was signed, answers to the survey questionnaires were received and then purposeful sampling began. Additionally, the use of snowball sampling helped recruit participants and was applied when participants recruited acquaintances who met the study participant criteria until data saturation was realized. It was hoped that the purposeful sampling method would address the current research need to understand the everyday social experiences of children with AS/HFA by capturing their lived experiences of their perspectives, thoughts, and feelings (Cordier et al., 2016).

In this transcendental phenomenological study, to obtain an in-depth description of the participants' lived experiences, an adequate sample for this study was between 10-15 participants (Moustakas, 1994). If data saturation was not realized, additional participants would be added until saturation occurred (M. Mason, 2010). Recruitment attempted to gain the maximum

number of diverse participants to reinforce transferability within the research data (Polkinghorne, 1995). Moreover, after the recommendation was received from the principal, program director, and instructors, the potential participants were emailed a five-question survey to seek volunteers and confirm eligibility. Pseudonyms were used for each participant (Moustakas, 1994).

Researcher Positionality

The motivation behind conducting this qualitative phenomenological transcendental research was to help articulate the links between social constructivism and phenomenology. Phenomenology attempts to identify and describe the subjective everyday experiences of individuals who share a common experience or phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). The Moustakas approach helped highlight that phenomenological research in individual experiences. The Moustakas approach allowed participants in this study to provide personal recollections while completing or after completing QoL training in high school, which would positively or negatively impact young adults with AS of self-regulation in self-sufficiency. Ontology helped this qualitative phenomenological transcendental research by exploring alternative ways of understanding what society perceives as disability, normality, and reality, troubling the “truth” about human difference. Therefore, the critical realist epistemological position was adopted, and a qualitative approach was taken. The qualitative interpretative methodology and the epistemological underpinning of the study were consistent with the realist and relational approach related to young adults with AS outlined in Chapter Two.

Interpretive Framework

The interpretive framework of this qualitative phenomenological transcendental study was social constructivism. Social constructionism is a general term referring to a range of approaches with a focus on language. Broadly speaking, it is an epistemological position that challenges the

conventional assumptions about individuals and society (O'Reilly & Kiyimba, 2015). Simply put, this position argues that knowledge is socially constructed through language use. It utilizes phenomenological methods to explore lived experiences of students with AS and how they interpret QoL. According to WHO (2006), QoL is defined “as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (p. 5). The larger segment of society thinks QoL consists of subjective measures of one’s well-being. Some researchers have insisted that QoL must involve objective as well as subjective measures (Karimi & Brazier, 2016). One’s overall health and well-being were deemed to involve more than just efficient biological functioning, which had implications both for treatment design and measurements of population health (Karimi & Brazier, 2016).

Philosophical Assumptions

The philosophical assumptions guiding this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research were based on a philosophical lens to bring forth the evidence of those with AS/HFA and their lived experiences and perspectives. On average, when a person graduates from high school, it can be both exciting and scary. Although most students get a job and work part-time at a local restaurant or local retail store while attending a local community college, some may not still understand how the real world operates. Most have a perception of an overall fantasy such as things will be perfect while living a great QoL. Some realize how the real world works the hard way, by trial and error and experiencing pitfalls. Most students who graduate from high school have this perception that obtaining a great QoL consists of going to college for four years, graduating, obtaining a high-paying job, then finding a husband or wife, buying a house with a white picket fence, having some children and then living happily ever after. Unfortunately, most such perceptions do not match reality. Let us consider young adults with AS. The question is can

they be trained to be either classically conditioned or live a predictable QoL?

Ontological Assumption

The ontological assumptions guiding this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research rely on being and the nature of existence; it is the exploration of what is (Grey, 2009). Grey presented two ontologies, the ontology of becoming in a “changing and emergent world” and that of being in a reality that is “permanent and unchanging.” The ontological position of this research sat within the ontology of becoming. Social actors live in a world that constantly changes. People modify their attitudes and perceptions toward the meaning of existence by interacting with other people, institutions, government policies and general societal attitudes and expectations. All people’s lives steadily evolve, and we all must adapt to these changing circumstances.

Epistemological Assumption

The epistemological assumption guiding this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research consists of what counts as knowledge, how knowledge claims are justified, and, more specifically, the relationship between young adults with AS and their perceptions of the natural world and how they know if they are living the best QoL in self-sufficiency (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Thus, epistemological assumptions influence which knowledge we legitimize, and whose knowledge we legitimize. Moreover, epistemology influences how we go about seeking truth(s) by conducting research via our methodologies and methods, and how we construct knowledge. The epistemological assumption relating to this study coincides with young adults with AS and their perceptions in understanding how things are known by either being classically conditioned to live the best QoL or a predictive life with the notion that possibly they are living the best QoL (Boon & van Baalen, 2019).

Axiological Assumption

The axiological assumption guiding this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research is based on prior and current knowledge and values of teaching in special education and being a parent to a daughter with AS. Thus, unbiased opinions remain. Therefore, this qualitative research remains subjective in context. Axiology concerns the biases and values that researchers and participants carry into the study. Saldaña (2011) provided axiological assumptions as the illustration of the researcher's lens perceives social inequalities in the world and they are driven to rectify them, then their axiological objective is likely to first understand the social inequalities. In other words, the researcher subjectively becomes a part of the research. Transparency assisted with the mitigation of biases, as the researcher's values and interpretations were shared with the participants. As a result, the comingling of the researcher's philosophical beliefs with the participants' beliefs and experiences on the topic allowed for a deeper analysis of themes and findings.

Researcher's Role

My role as the researcher is to concisely relate the participants' lived experiences and ensure a reliable transcendental phenomenological study is conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I gained interest in this phenomenon because I am a parent of a child diagnosed with a higher form of autism called pervasive developmental disorder-NOS, which has similarities in deficits in social communication, self-regulation, and self-sufficiency as those with AS and is considered HFA. Moreover, I witnessed firsthand as a parent with a child with ASD that there is a need for adequate QoL training and transitional planning programs in high school to prepare young adults for the real-world experience that would help reduce future stress, anxieties, and depression based on unpredictability.

The unpredictability of not being on a daily schedule can be incredibly challenging as most individuals on the autism spectrum depend on routine, repetition, and predictability; thus, completing high school and leaving a structured environment causes a lack of balance in their daily lives. Moreover, as a teacher working within an autism unit within an elementary school, visual schedules and a routine learning structure that consists of warning those before the transition from one activity to another are needed. Hence, QoL training and transitional planning should be offered in high school to provide familiarity and preparation to be socially comfortable within a different environment, which includes postsecondary settings.

Procedures

Approval was obtained from the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB), and approvals were obtained from a local school district and the university to protect study participants (see Appendix C) (Patton, 2015). Once the 10-15 participants were chosen and the consent forms returned, the data collection began and was validated using a validation strategy called member checking, which allowed the participants to play a critical role in verifying the interpretations and observations obtained by the researcher. The information given by the participants was verified for accuracy and depicted their sentiments and thoughts in a clear and concise manner. It was crucial for the researcher to allow time and space for this process to ensure the credibility of the data collection and analysis.

Permissions

After IRB approval was received, a meeting was held with the principal or special education coordinator at a local high school and another meeting held with the appropriate administrator at the university to seek assistance with recruiting eligible participants for this study (Patton, 2015). Furthermore, snowball sampling was utilized to obtain participants

recommended by either a principal or special education department coordinator within the university (J. Mason, 2002). Snowball sampling occurs when participants recruit acquaintances who meet the study participant criteria until data saturation is met (Guest et al., 2006). Therefore, the participants of the study had the same relationship to this research; the snowball sampling consisted of the following demographic: participants were between the ages of 16-21; all had the same diagnosis AS/HFA and must have been completing or had completed QoL training and had attended or were attending the same local high school and/or local university. Phenomenological study size can vary from 10 to 15 participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study involved a rich, in-depth description of the participants lived experiences; a sample size of 10 participants was examined (Moustakas, 1994), when saturation was reached and new data collected did not further describe the phenomenon being studied (M. Mason, 2010). The recruitment letter can be found in Appendix C.

Recruitment Plan

The recruitment plan consisted of recruiting between 10 to 15 participants from a local high school and university. This study complied with the researcher's university dissertation procedures. One criterion to be a participant of the study was the students needed to be attending a local high school or local university. A consent form and a demographic questionnaire were sent out to each participant when scheduling the interviews (see Appendix B). If the participant was under 18 (16-17), a consent form was sent to the parents for permission to participate. Additionally, each participant was asked to bring some form of identification representing completion of QoL training and transitional planning in high school (Douglas et al., 2015). The students' ages ranged between 16-21, all receiving special education services and considered AS/HFA. Based on these criteria, the possible sample pool consisted of approximately 10 to 15

students from the two sites. This study complied with the researcher's university dissertation procedures by obtaining 10-15 participants. Hence, maximum purposive sampling was an important part of the sampling process as participants who had AS from varying age, racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic backgrounds provided an increased understanding of QoL training and experiences that those with AS have had, or who have been trained in the use of formative assessment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To help with the recruitment process, initially, a meeting with either a principal or special education department coordinator was held at both a local high school and a university; therefore, a point of contact will be established at that time. The candidates were chosen by either a principal or special education department coordinator at the sites. Once the candidates were chosen, a consent form was sent to their personal email address provided and returned to the researcher email address provided on the consent form. The participants were given a total of three days to send back the consent forms and reminders were sent on the second day (see Appendix I). Once the participants sent back the consent form and agreed to participate in the research, a survey link was sent to each participant. The completed survey was sent to the researcher and saved on a universal serial bus drive. The purpose of using a universal serial bus drive was to ensure back up and the researcher would be able to access the folder from any computer. The incentives used within the recruitment process consisted of \$50 gift cards to either Amazon or Target.

Data Collection Plan

Data triangulation ensured that the information collected during the study was strong and could withstand scrutiny (Patton, 2002). To achieve data triangulation, I collected data using a variety of methods consistent with phenomenological research (Patton, 2002; Vagle, 2014). The data collection plan for this study was completed using interviews, surveys, and focus groups.

These data collection methods were used to ensure the credibility of the findings and the dependability of the information for repeatability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Ensuring participant comfort, safety, and integrity were the key components of data collection (Lub, 2015).

Surveys

The first data collection task was to administer a survey from SurveyMonkey to students to determine their opinions on the effectiveness of QoL training. Butin (2010) stated survey research was a very common tool in social science, and each question should be deliberate and linked to answering the research questions. Surveys were helpful in obtaining demographic data allowing the researcher to disaggregate data and, thus, could narrow or focus the research. The survey questions were sent to the participants' emails with a link attached. The survey included five questions. For questions one to three, the participants were prompted to a Dropdown menu and asked to choose likely or unlikely. Questions four and five were open-ended to obtain deeper information concerning their overall perspectives of QoL; therefore, the participants were asked to write approximately 75-150 words in the comment section. It took approximately 15-40 minutes to complete the survey. The participants answered five questions (see Appendix A). A five- and seven-day reminder email was sent to each participant to return the surveys within one week (see Appendices D and E). The data received from survey questions was transcribed verbatim by the researcher and double-checked for accuracy. Participants of this study had the opportunity to conduct member checks of their transcripts to make necessary edits based on personal experience to ensure accuracy. A process of data analysis and phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was conducted using bracketing, horizontalization, and creating clusters of meaning to determine the essence of the experience of the participants. The survey questions for the students were as follows.

Survey Questions—Students

1. (Dropdown menu: from likely or unlikely). After completion of QoL training, how often do you still experience challenges in your academic and social communication interactions? (CRQ, SQ1, and SQ2).
2. (Dropdown menu: from likely or unlikely). Do you believe you are receiving or have received adequate QoL training in high school that would allow you to live a self-sufficient life? (CRQ, SQ1, and SQ2)
3. (Dropdown menu: from likely or unlikely). Do you believe you have received adequate QoL training in high school? (CRQ, SQ1, and SQ2).
4. Since completion of QoL training in high school, do you feel you received adequate skills to be successful in being employed? Why? Please comment with a minimum of 150 words (CRQ, SQ1, and SQ2).
5. Experts suggest that a person is often unaware of their worldview and its influence on their life and choices. How aware are you of your worldview toward what you perceive as quality-of-life? Please comment with a minimum of 150 words (CRQ, SQ1 and SQ2).

The survey questions included how young adults with AS who are either completing or have completed QoL training in high school and the skills received proved to be beneficial in everyday life. The rationale in asking question one was ASD is a highly prevalent developmental disorder in childhood and youth with an onset at an early age and leading to delays in meeting developmental milestones; hence, the impairment in social interactions and communication makes it more difficult to perceive what is considered practical living skills training toward QoL (Knüppel et al., 2018). The rationale in asking question two is the transition to adulthood was described as a particularly difficult time despite their desire for autonomy. Therefore, there

existed an ongoing dependency on families, difficulties in social and professional integration, vulnerability and psychological health fragility shown in those with AS. (Vincent et al., 2020). Research indicates that approximately as few as 25% of individuals with ASD are employed (Holwerda et al., 2012). Hence, the rationale in asking question three was in a recent study of 169 adults with high-functioning ASD found that only about half of the participants were in paid employment (49%) and many (36%) were on Social Security benefits (Barneveld et al., 2014). The rationale in asking question four was Levy and Perry (2011) found that 50-60% of adults with ASD leave school without educational or vocational qualifications, 76% are unable to find gainful employment, and 90-95% do not establish romantic relationships or meaningful friendships. The rationale in asking question five was families experience significant emotional, financial, and physiological stress from parenting a child with ASD, and the stresses of parenting can be especially high during adolescence (L.E. Smith & K.A. Anderson, 2014). The rationale in asking question five was L.E. Smith and K. A Anderson (2014) noted that parents play critical roles (e.g., caregiver, advocate, career counselor) in the lives of adolescents with ASD in the post-high-school transition and beyond.

Interviews

Individual (face-to-face) or virtual interviews on Microsoft Teams were set up with interested respondents who met the participation criteria. Two days before the interviews (face-to-face and video), participants were reminded to bring their identification. The overall interview process consisted of semi-structured, open-ended questions and recording of each individual interview. Part of the data collection in the interview process consisted of memoing to help with conceptual leaps from raw data to those abstractions that helped explain research phenomena in the context in which they were examined (Birks et al., 2008).

The face-to-face interviews were recorded using an iPad or phone, and the virtual interviews were recorded using the Microsoft Teams application. The interviews lasted between 45-60 minutes. Hence, once each interview was completed, copies of the transcripts were given to participants for accuracy to allow them to edit or add information regarding their personal experiences (Patton, 2015). After final editing of transcripts from the respondents, the data collected were stored in an Excel spreadsheet that was password protected. Next, the password-protected spreadsheet was saved into a labeled folder on a computer and an external universal serial bus hard drive. The collected data were then analyzed using Moustakas's (1994) steps.

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and provide your name and age. (CRQ)
2. What grade level are you currently in? (high school) or what year are you in while attending college or university? (CRQ)
3. In your opinion, what was your best experience in receiving quality-of-life training in high school? (CRQ)
4. Please describe any improvements in academic and social communication because of your quality-of-life training. (SQ 1 and SQ 2).
5. What are some examples of positive relationships with your peers, teachers, and administrators you have had since you completed the quality-of-life training? This question relates to CRQ.
6. Since the completion of quality-of-life training, which would you say has still been the most significant challenge for your academic or social communication? Why? (SQ 1 and SQ 2).
7. Have you seen improvements in academic or social communication, since completing the

quality-of-life training in high school? Why? (SQ 1 and SQ 2).

8. What impact have your teachers and parents had on the support in receiving the quality-of-life training? (CRQ)
9. When you hear the term “quality of life,” what does this mean to you? (CRQ)
10. What do you think are your parents’ perspectives of what your quality of life should be?

This question relates to (CRQ)

11. Do you think receiving quality-of-life training would help with the transition into postsecondary education with your academic or social communication interactions?

Why? This question relates to (CRQ, SQ 1, and SQ 2).

The individual interview questions included how young adults with AS who were either completing or had completed QoL training in high school explained whether the training proved to be beneficial in their academic and social communication interactions. Questions one through six were knowledge questions designed as follow-up questions to the development of academic and social communication interaction, negative or positive experiences while in high school, and after completion of QoL training received after graduating from high school (K. White et al., 2018). Moreover, questions one through six also allowed the participants to express how an individualized and strengths-focused approach with reinforcing factors and the timeline that included support and guidance, skill development, and real-life experiences helped them become successful/unsuccessful with their perception of what their QoL would look like if they attended a college or university or lived independently once they graduated from high school (Hatfield et al., 2018). Questions 7 through 11 addressed the quality-of-life training and whether the strategies and techniques used proved to be successful in helping assuage anxiety in those with AS so that positive outcomes could be shown in academic and social communication. Questions

7 through 11 also addressed the perceptions of QoL of those with AS and their parents and how curriculum and related services received based on their IEPs in high school affected the participants' perceptions of what the best QoL would be once they graduated from high school and attended college or university. Moreover, transitional phases can be particularly challenging for young adults with AS; therefore, preparation is essential (Jindal-Snape et al., 2006). Hence, the challenges associated with the underlying characteristics of students with AS included difficulties in the areas of social interaction, communication, and behavior and the need to be “prepared for changes in routine” and these changes can be taught while in high school (Safran, 2002, p. 64).

Individual Interviews Data Collection

The data collection driving this phenomenological qualitative research consisted of individual interviews with high school and college students considered young adults with AS or HFA who were either completing or had completed QoL training. The data collection approach consisted of individual interviews, and the rationale behind using this approach was to gain firsthand lived experiences from all involved in the transition planning process to the benefit of skills and resources provided in QoL aided by self-regulation in self-sufficiency living independently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The individual interviews were held face-to-face or on Microsoft Teams; the participants had that option (see Appendix B). The interviews were recorded using either the recording feature on Microsoft Teams or, if it was face-to-face, they were recorded on an iPhone. The open-ended questions focused on understanding the central phenomenon of the study, and pseudonyms were used to provide confidentiality for study participants. Furthermore, the questions were asked of the participants in high school and attending a university.

Individual Interview Data Analysis Plan

The individual interview data analysis plan mentally and physically analyzed each interview by replaying recorded interviews and reviewing the transcripts, then highlighting critical points within the transcripts and surveys collected. Data received from the individual interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and double-checked for accuracy. Participants of this study had the opportunity to conduct member checks of their transcripts to make necessary edits based on personal experience to ensure accuracy. A process of data synthesis and phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was conducted using bracketing, horizontalization, and creating clusters of meaning to determine the essence of the experience of the participants. The purpose of replaying recorded interviews and reviewing the transcripts was to gain an understanding by taking down key points and looking for themes of individual lived experiences of those with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training. Each participant chose the time and location of their in-person interview. With semi-structured interviews, the interviewer was open and flexible to obtain more information about the lived experience of young adults with AS stories to determine what emerges from each interviewee. The researcher added questions as needed to uncover the entire experience (C.E. Hill et al., 2005). The researcher developed an understanding of the themes, definitions, and experiences, and used with high school and postsecondary students at a local school district and university from the responses by young adults with AS who participated in the study. Interviews continued until saturation was reached or all participants were interviewed.

Online Focus Groups Data Collection

An online focus group of young adult participants with AS was used to review the information and themes obtained from the initial interviews. Using an online focus group

provided an opportunity for a relatively homogeneous group to offer more extensive insight into the phenomenon (Dilshad & Latif, 2013). The online focus group participants were sent a link to their emails to access Microsoft Teams. The focus group provided a fresh perspective on the outcomes of the research (Creswell, 2013). Equally important, the online focus group consisting of 10-15 young adult participants with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training was part of this phenomenon and related to it through their lens of QoL training and the impact it had on their academic and social communication interactions (Rockinson-Szapkiw & Spaulding, n.d.). The online focus group participants answered informal interview questions in an online format (Dilshad & Latif, 2013) (see Appendix H). The researcher took notes, and the online session information was transcribed to add to the final implications and findings of this study.

Standardized Open-Ended Focus Group Questions

1. What are the types of challenges you have experienced since graduating from high school? (CRQ).
2. What are the types of challenges you have experienced since attending college? The question relates to (CRQ).
3. Since graduating high school, do you feel you have developed a strong work ethic on a job based on your experiences from QoL training? (CRQ).
4. Since attending college have you been able to develop relationships with individuals on or off the campus? (CRQ and SQ2).
5. Do you feel if provided with the necessary resources you would be able to live independently on your own? (CRQ, SQ1, and SQ2).

The focus group questions included young adults with AS who were either completing or had completed QoL training in high school and their experiences in the types of challenges in

postsecondary education and everyday life. The rationale in asking question one was students with ASD faced unique and complex adjustment challenges as a result of an increased demand for higher-order, independent problem-solving, and executive functioning skills (Dipeolu et al., 2015; Hewitt, 2011). The rationale in asking question two was in the transition from high school to college, students with ASD encountered many of the same challenges as typical students (e.g., navigating campus, adjusting to a roommate, developing study routines, making new friends, homesickness; Hewitt, 2011). The rationale in asking question three was language skills and vocabulary remain intact in individuals with AD, social challenges involved in communication in college settings are common, such as understanding and effectively using verbal and nonverbal social skills, timing and intensity in conversations, humor, sarcasm, subliminal messages, assertiveness, expressions of intimacy and sexuality, and more (Dente & Parkinson Coles, 2012). The rationale in asking question four was college life makes unprecedented demands on students' social-emotional, cognitive, independent living, and self-advocacy skills, and the array and complexity of these demands can forestall a successful transition (Geller & Greenberg, 2010). The rationale in asking question five was traditional college accommodations appear to be insufficient to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Longtin, 2014). Institutional and family support provided during the student's k-12 education (IDEA, 2004) no longer applied (Longtin, 2014), and the student with ASD was expected to adjust and self-advocate within a complex, novel environment.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

The focus group data analysis plan included within this qualitative transcendental phenomenological research study was for young adults who had AS and attended a local high school and university. Data received from focus group interview questions were transcribed

verbatim by the researcher and submitted to the participants for member checks. The focus group data analysis plan mentally and physically analyzed each interview by replaying recorded interviews and reviewing the transcripts, then highlighting critical points within the transcripts and surveys. Data collected from the focus group interviews were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and double-checked for accuracy. A process of analysis and phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was conducted using bracketing, horizontalization, and creating clusters of meaning to determine the essence of the experience of the participants. Critical points within the transcripts were highlighted. The purpose of replaying recorded interviews and reviewing the transcripts was to gain an understanding by taking down key points and looking for themes of lived experiences of those with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training.

Data Synthesis

Data received from surveys, interviews, and focus group questions were transcribed verbatim by the researcher and double-checked for accuracy. A process of data analysis and phenomenological reduction (Moustakas, 1994) was conducted using bracketing, horizontalization, and creating clusters of meaning to determine the essence of the experience of the participants.

Bracketing

The researcher used the process of bracketing to purposefully identify and then separate from the study any personal related experiences or beliefs the researcher held. Moustakas (1994) identified bracketing as a valid means to remove subjectivity and ensure the research was not altered by the researcher's role. Additionally, the researcher used epoché, a process identified by Moustakas (1994) to eliminate any prejudgments in the study. Moustakas (1994) explained

epoché as a process “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (p. 34). By taking reflective notes, the researcher monitored any personal assumptions and consciously set aside my experiences and beliefs (Moustakas, 1994). Additionally, the researcher ensured the provision of an accurate and truthful description of each of the participants’ experiences. The researcher used bracketing and epoché to increase the study’s validity through confirmability, or ensuring the study was free from researcher bias (Schwandt et al., 2007).

Horizontalization

The researcher used horizontalization to list meaningful experiences and quotes that were significant to the study (Moustakas, 1994). By analyzing the transcribed data and identifying the meaningful statements, the researcher reduced the data by removing any redundant or unmeaningful comments. Following Moustakas’ (1994) rule of horizontalization, emerging statements were considered equally significant, and importance was not yet placed on specific ideas. This helped prevent themes from being inadvertently or prematurely chosen by the researcher. The reoccurring themes that naturally emerged through the data analysis process as the significant statements identified in the horizontalization process were then arranged according to meaning.

Clusters of Meaning

From the statements that were identified in the horizontalization process, meanings were identified for each statement and grouped accordingly. After the researcher identified the significant statements for meaning, the researcher then analyzed the data to find clusters of meanings by grouping common ideas that were identified as significant (Moustakas, 1994). From the information that was received, the researcher then developed a textural description of what the participants experienced and a structural description of how the participants experienced the

phenomenon to develop a composite description of the essence of QoL training and determine the positives or negatives of the program in terms of their academic and social communication interactions (Creswell, 2013).

Textural Description

A textural description of what the parents experienced was developed from the themes generated from the procedures described above. According to Moustakas (1994), a textural description emerges from the “themes and delimited horizons of each research participant’s experience” (p. 133). A composite textural description was developed by analyzing the information received from each participant and constructing a rich description explaining what the participants experienced.

Structural Description

A structural description was then developed to explain how each participant experienced the phenomenon. Structural descriptions conveyed the “underlying dynamics of the experience, the themes and qualities that account for how feelings and thoughts connected” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 135). Imaginative variation (i.e., considering all perspectives), reflection, and analysis were used to determine how the participants experienced the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994).

Composite Description

From the textural and structural descriptions, the researcher created a composite description of the meaning or essence of the shared experience of the participants. A composite description of the textural and structural descriptions composed of a combination of responses from all participants was created to vividly describe the meaning and essence of the experience of the young adults with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training and the outcomes in their academic and social communication interactions. By creating a composite

description, the researcher strove to paint a descriptive picture of the true essence of the lived experience of young adults with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training.

Trustworthiness

Quality in qualitative research is dependent upon trustworthiness. Qualitative researchers strive for the less which means that when readers interpret written work they will have a sense of confidence in what the researcher has reported (N. A. Stahl & J. R. King, 2020). Trustworthiness was established by incorporating a variety of techniques. Credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations are based on validity and reliability. Trustworthiness in the current study was addressed through the study's credibility, dependability, confirmability, transferability, and ethical considerations.

Credibility

Credibility refers to the extent to which the study findings accurately describe the participants' perceptions of reality when it comes to what they perceive as QoL and depends on the quality of the data gathered and on the analytical abilities of the researcher. Therefore, participants of this study had the opportunity to conduct member checks of their transcripts to make necessary edits based on personal experience to ensure accuracy (see Appendix G). The credibility established within this qualitative phenomenological research consisted of in-depth interviews, surveys, and focus groups of individual experiences. The use of the triangulation methods, such as interview, surveys, and focus groups, was helpful to this qualitative research because it provided thorough bracketing and allowed me to clearly state my role, which helped with the credibility of this research (Patton, 2002; Schwandt, 2015b). Credibility and the verification by triangulation through use of multiple methods of data collection, such as surveys, interviews, and focus groups, also helped with prolonged engagements and multiple encounters

with participants (Creswell, 2013). In-depth surveys, interviews, and focus groups from the interview questions helped conclude this qualitative research study (Casey & Murphy, 2009).

Transferability

Transferability of this qualitative phenomenological research refers to the ability to generalize study findings and apply them to other situations and contexts based on the likeliness of the outcomes on the interpretation of the data (Houghton et al., 2013). Using thick descriptions is one way to facilitate transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In the current study, by using thick descriptions of lived experiences, and the context thereof, transferability was strengthened (see Appendix C). Transferability was allowed by providing sufficient details to enable the findings to be justifiably applied to other settings (Shenton, 2004). Details shared such as the setting, demographics, and interview procedures bolstered transferability (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). The results from this study could be applied in different situations such as other high schools and postsecondary education settings. Transferability was presented in the analysis of lived experiences of young adults with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training in high school to illustrate themes that demonstrated transferability to other settings. Conveyed transferability through the comparison of cases was conducted to bring up unique and related aspects of the cases by using purposeful sampling. Finally, to provide transferability, significant efforts were put into providing detailed descriptions of the data collection process used and into presenting the findings with detailed, thick descriptions of the phenomena (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Dependability

Dependability within this qualitative phenomenological research was addressed by providing rich details about the context and setting of the study (Polit & Beck, 2012). In

addition, dependability was addressed by establishing specific details regarding the study to ensure consistency in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Dependability was addressed through the audit trail. The purpose of the audit trail was to ensure the consistency in the data collection process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The thorough audit trail consisted of a coding system with discussions for confirmability (Hays & Singh, 2012).

Confirmability

Confirmability ensures the researcher approaches the research with neutrality; therefore, the study findings were shaped by the data and not by the researcher's bias and motivation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The important aspect of confirmability in a study is to establish data and interpretations of the findings that are clearly derived from the data and not merely the viewpoints and opinions of the researcher (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Hence, to ensure consistency, the same interview protocol was used with each participant. Likewise, the same focus group protocol was used for both sessions. Additionally, a process for member checking was in place to allow the participants the opportunity to review transcripts and notes (Schwandt, 2015a).

Confirmability existed in this research by making my values and biases known upfront (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through reflexivity during data collection, analysis, synthesis, and the development of ontological interpretations, the researcher kept values and biases in check, letting the participants' lived experiences speak for themselves (Heindel, 2014; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Additionally, explicit data triangulation between the three instruments contributed to confirmability (Heindel, 2014; van Manen, 2016). Similarly, the researcher managed data meticulously so that all information provided could easily be linked to its source through a detailed audit trail to the participant who provided it or the source from

which it came. Finally, once the research was complete, a seasoned higher education researcher was familiar with qualitative design review the data, findings, conclusions, and interpretations to verify they were all well nested to help validate confirmability (Amankwaa, 2016; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were maintained throughout this study to protect the human participants (Moustakas, 1994). Therefore, IRB approval was obtained from Liberty University, a local school district, and university approval, and participant consent forms were acquired before data collection. Furthermore, this study was considered voluntary. To ensure confidentiality, pseudonyms were used for settings and participants. The integrity of the research was of utmost importance, and I always ensured its security. No data collection was conducted within the organization where I served as an administrator (Creswell, 2013). Furthermore, the research was not conducted using participants who were known personally. All information, including recordings, transcriptions, signed forms, completed surveys, and research notes was secured through computer encryption and locked within filing cabinets (Patton, 2002). After the study's conclusion, the data were stored for five years; after that, all data will be deleted from all storage devices.

Summary

This transcendental phenomenological qualitative study involved experiences of young adults with AS who were completing or had completed QoL training. Data collection methods included young adults with AS completing a survey questionnaire, individual interviews, and focus groups during the study. Those details included a restatement of the central and supporting research questions and young adults with AS who were completing or had completed, as a

diverse cross-section of high school and a local university provided rich and robust data to support the inquiry. The focus groups were intended to build on the experiences and reflective momentum participants built from the interview responses (Adams & van Manen, 2017; van Manen, 2016). Additionally, this chapter outlined the data synthesis steps required to produce meaningful phenomenological interpretations. Together, these detailed steps provided a comprehensive explanation of how, from start to finish, this research was transformed into data about students' lived experiences about QoL training. This chapter concluded with my professional commitment to trustworthy research by keeping the tenants of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability in the highest regard, as well as my duty to remain ethical and transparent by protecting participants' identities, safeguarding data, and sharing all findings, conclusions, and interpretations with the participants.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

This study examines the shared experiences of young adults with AS who completed QoL training in high school and attended postsecondary education. This chapter describes each participant and the data obtained (surveys, interviews, and focus groups). Four themes emerged: challenges in social communication, academics, employment, and self-sufficiency. The four themes emerged based on repeating comments and ideas shared via surveys, individual interviews, and discussions during the focus group sessions. In the following subsections are descriptions of the themes, the direct quotes from participants, and finally, the results of the finding as they relate to each research question.

The links in the effectiveness of QoL training received in high school were demonstrated among the findings of prior literature that would allow the reader to discern the contribution of this study to the field. Direct quotes from the participants have not been altered. Thus, this helped clarify what the participants tried to express in getting their points across. Participants' language was shared as evenly as possible. Thus, each participant shared approximately 1 to 1.5 pages of raw data. Participant quotes, therefore, were presented concerning the amount of data provided. Thus, readers can expect more direct quotes from some participants than others.

An Excel spreadsheet with each participant's themes was created and reviewed to look for common responses from each participant. Nvivo labels were moved to inclusive language to identify each theme. The findings showed participants experienced more challenges in social communications and self-sufficiency since completing QoL training in high school. These two recurrent themes dominated the overall data pool concerning research questions. The remaining themes, though less forceful in their appearance, showed the experience of challenges in

academics and employment since completion of QoL but still served to further the purpose of the study.

Participants

Participants were recruited after receiving IRB approval. Twelve participants agreed to participate in this research. All twelve participants opted to remain anonymous. Therefore, each participant was assigned a pseudonym so that their real identities were not revealed. There were four participants that were between the ages of 18-19 who had just graduated from a local high school in a metropolitan area in the Southern United States. Therefore, data collection took place after graduation. The other eight participants were between the ages of 20-25 and attending a local university.

Table 1
Demographic Information

Participant	Gender	Diagnosis	Age	Received QoL Training
Ryan	M	HFA	25	Yes
Christopher	M	HFA	22	Yes
Ashley	F	Asperger's	23	Yes
Ellie	F	Asperger's	20	Yes
Jennifer	F	Asperger's	21	Yes
Douglas	M	Asperger's	21	Yes
Peter	M	Asperger's	23	Yes
Tammy	F	Asperger's	18	Yes
Johnathan	M	HFA	19	Yes
Amber	F	HFA	18	Yes
Marie	M	Asperger's	25	Yes
Brandy	F	HFA	18	Yes

Ryan

Ryan is a 25-year-old male who is considered High Functioning Autism (HFA). Ryan also stated during his interview he received speech services. Ryan also mentioned he had an IEP since age seven and was classified under autism with speech impairment. Ryan states he was

taught by two teachers from elementary through high school. Ryan was enrolled at a local university and received support and accommodation within the classroom setting. Ryan had completed his undergraduate degree and was enrolled in a graduate program at a local university in a southern state. Ryan stated during his interview he had been attending the university for four years. Ryan stated he had to get used to the system at the university versus attending high school; once he became accustomed to how things went, he felt comfortable with the faculty and staff and even made friends. Ryan continued that with time, he became comfortable with coming out of his shell and talking to others to feel more relatable.

Christopher

Christopher was a 22-year-old male who is considered HFA. Christopher mentioned during his interview he had a speech impairment and received speech services throughout his entire public school academic career due to deficits in social communication. Christopher had an IEP in place since six years old and received support and accommodations. Christopher was taught within a self-contained classroom from elementary through middle school and, in high school, was placed in a co-taught classroom. During his focus group interview, Christopher stated, “QoL training in high school was so underwhelming when I went off into college, I felt ill-prepared. I tried so hard at the beginning of going to college to speak up for myself to the teachers in the class, but I was scared to bring attention to myself, so I asked the other students I had a good vibe with who helped explained the assignment little more in detail, but I’m cool now in asking the teachers about things I don’t understand.” Christopher attends a university located in Georgia and is in his second year of completing his undergraduate degree.

Ashley

Ashley was a 23-year-old female diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome (AS). Ashley mentioned during her individual interview that she had an IEP and received support and accommodations for reading, writing, and mathematics during elementary through high school. Ashley remembered receiving speech services in elementary school but stated that she stopped receiving speech services after elementary school and did not know why. Ashley was enrolled in an undergraduate program at a local university in Georgia. Ashley mentioned during her individual and focus group interview, "I am a little anxious on what to expect after I finish my undergraduate degree. I mean; I want to get more work experience but cannot work and go to school at the same time, I just don't want to get a degree but won't get hired because of having no experience."

Ellie

Ellie was a 20-year-old female diagnosed with AS. Ellie mentioned during her interview she had an IEP from elementary through high school and received support and accommodations for writing and during taking tests. Ellie also mentioned she suffered from anxiety stating, "graduating from high school to a university was considered a bit overwhelming." Ellie has always been taught within a co-taught setting from elementary through high school. Ellie also mentioned when she graduated from high school, she received an individualized transition plan that was given to the disability services department at the university. Ellie was enrolled with an individualized transition plan so that she would be able to have support and accommodation while attending postsecondary settings. Ellie is enrolled in an undergraduate program at a local university in Georgia.

Jennifer

Jennifer was a 21-year-old female diagnosed with AS. Jennifer mentioned during her interview that she had an IEP and received support and accommodations for reading, writing, mathematics, and during testing and received special education services from elementary through high school. Jennifer also mentioned she received speech services throughout elementary and high school due to deficits in social interactions and communication. Jennifer also stated she suffered from anxieties, and accommodations were in place on her IEP from elementary through high school to allow her breaks between each episode. Jennifer also stated she thought she could make new friends in college, but when presented with the opportunity to make new friends, she did not know how to maintain friendships. Jennifer was in an undergraduate program at a local university in Georgia and lived on campus.

Douglas

Douglas was a 21-year-old male diagnosed with AS. Douglas mentioned during his interview he had an IEP from elementary through high school and received support and accommodations for reading, writing, and when taking classroom and standardize test. Douglas also stated during the focus group interview, “I noticed a huge difference from high school verses university level”. Douglas stated, in high school, he felt his teachers were more involved in making sure he was accommodated in every area within his education but in college they do provide support and accommodation, but kind of feels alienated not included. Douglas was enrolled in an undergraduate program at a local university in Georgia and lived on campus.

Peter

Peter was a 23-year-old male diagnosed with AS. Peter stated during his interview he had an IEP from elementary through high school and received support and accommodations for writing, mathematics, and when taking classroom and standardized test. Peter also mentioned he received speech services from elementary through high school due to speech impairment and deficits in social communication. Peter stated, "I felt prepared for the real world, since graduating from high school." Peter also mentioned "I was able to make friends with a lot of students on campus and was able to get a part-time job through one of my friends that I met on campus." Peter was in an undergraduate program, would graduate in the fall of 2023, and lived off campus with his parents.

Tammy

Tammy was an 18-year-old female diagnosed with AS. Tammy stated during her interview she had an IEP and an accommodation through special education from elementary through high school and received support and accommodations in reading, writing, mathematics, and when taking classroom and standardized test. Tammy also mentioned she was taught within a general curriculum co-taught setting from elementary through high school. Tammy recently graduated from high school and planned to attend a Georgia university. However, Tammy had not successfully met the minimum score between 1050 and 1250 on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) to meet the requirements for admission to the program she was interested in. Tammy stated she felt behind in getting accepted due to her deficits in math and taking assessments. Tammy was scheduled to take the SAT in the upcoming months so that she would be able to attend the local university. Tammy stated she was undecided if she should let the state vocational

rehabilitation agency help her look for a job since she qualified to receive this service. Tammy lived at home with her parents.

Johnathan

Johnathan was a 19-year-old male diagnosed with HFA. Johnathan stated during his interview he received speech services, was classified as having a speech impairment, and showed deficits in social communication. Johnathan also mentioned he had an IEP since age 7 and was classified under autism with speech impairment. Johnathan was taught within a general curriculum co-taught setting from elementary through high school, and his IEP required that Johnathan receive support and accommodations in reading, writing, and when taking classroom and standardize test. Johnathan had just graduated from high school and was dual enrolled at a university while attending high school. Johnathan was enrolled in an undergraduate program at a local university in Georgia. Johnathan stated that without the support system from his family, his success would not be possible. Johnathan lived at home with his mother and siblings. Therefore, he would be attending the university by commute.

Amber

Amber was an 18-year-old female diagnosed with AS. Amber stated during her interview she had an IEP from elementary through high school and received support and accommodations in mathematics and when taking tests. Amber also mentioned she was taught within a general curriculum co-taught setting from elementary through high school. Amber recently graduated from high school, planned to attend a university in Georgia, and successfully met the minimum score on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) to meet the requirements for admission to the program she was interested in. Amber stated she felt excited about graduating with a 3.6 GPA, attending college, and meeting new friends. Amber stated she regretted not doing the dual

program while in high school so that she would have been halfway done with her undergraduate degree, but then again, it would have been overwhelming for her to do. Amber planned to live off-campus with her parents while attending the local university.

Marie

Marie was a 25-year-old female diagnosed with AS. Marie stated during her interview she did not recall ever receiving speech services in elementary through high school. Marie also mentioned during her interview that she had been considered eligible to receive special education services due to deficits in writing and mathematics. She thus had an IEP from middle school through high school. Marie stated she was taught within a co-taught setting and thus taught general curriculum from elementary through high school. Marie received support and accommodation in writing, mathematics, and when taking classroom test. Marie was attending a local university and was completing her undergraduate degree. Marie also stated during her interview, "I would have been done with my undergraduate degree a year ago, but I kept changing my major because I was so undecided."

Brandy

Brandy was an 18-year-old female diagnosed with HFA. During her interview, Brandy stated that she received speech services throughout her academic journey due to deficits in social interactions and communication with others. Brandy also mentioned she had an IEP from elementary through high school and received support and accommodation in reading and mathematics and when taking tests. During her interview, Brandy stated that she was initially taught within a self-contained classroom in elementary through middle school but was placed in a general curriculum co-taught setting through high school. Brandy recently graduated from high school and planned to attend a Georgia university. However, she had not successfully met the

minimum score between 1050 and 1250 on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) for admission to the program she was interested in. Brandy also mentioned that since she had difficulty passing the SAT, she planned to attend an online university to get 30 credits and then transfer the credit to her desired local university and program. Brandy stated she planned to make new friends at the university. After introducing themselves, she needed to figure out what to say.

Results

In reviewing the data collection methods of the surveys, interviews, and focus groups, the transparency in the analysis process enables readers to follow the logic from the raw data to the conclusions (J. A. Smith et al., 2009). In the data collection process, surveys were the first method used. The surveys were brief in structure; therefore, the participants completed them within 10-15 minutes. Some participants provided brief survey responses, and some were very detailed in their response comments. Therefore, brief responses required follow-up questions. The second data collection method was individual interviews. The number of minutes in the data collection method for the individual interviews was inconsistent with each participant; it ranged from 35 minutes to 1½ hour. The focus group was the third collection method used. The focus group questions, and discussion lasted 1 hour for the high school participants and approximately 50 minutes for the college students.

Theme 1: Challenges in Social Communication Interactions

During the data collection process, a pattern emerged showing that the participants felt that, after receiving QoL training in high school, there were no improvements in social communication in interactions and was referenced by every participant. The theme of limited improvements in social communication interactions encompasses the idea of inadequate QoL training in speech therapy that would help young adults with AS feel socially interactive in

communication with all people in different settings and feel confident with dialogue. While all participants mentioned challenges in social communication since completing QoL training, their emphasis on the challenges experienced varied. Thus, the readiness for academic experiences at a university level in young adults with AS was impacted. Almost every participant reported in their surveys an unlikely improvement in academic experiences and social communication interactions after receiving QoL training in high school. Additionally, some participants such as Ryan and Tammy felt they were underprepared for academic experiences at the university level due to deficits in social communication interactions.

Ryan stated in his individual interview, “I had like fears when I started going to the university, I think it was because I was new and also I think was because I would say things that people would not get or understand, and I had a problem with speaking up for myself.” Tammy mentioned in her individual interview, “I wish I would feel more confident while conversing with other people and because I become nervous by the depth of the conversation due to not knowing how to respond.” Although, most participants received speech services through grade school, most reported graduating not feeling confident in starting a conversation with people due to fears of not feeling relatable to those around them.

Sub-theme: In-depth Social Communication with Others

The first emerging theme showed challenges in social communication interactions after completing QoL training in high school. Some participants felt outside influences other than QoL training received in high school helped with becoming socially communicative in interactions with others. While some of the participants felt that after completion of QoL training, which includes speech therapy, they learned some ways to be social communicative in interactions with others but still saw no improvements in being able to be interactive with different people and

environments. For instance, Ryan stated in both personal and focus group interview, “At first when I graduated from high school and started to attend the university, I felt so out of place people would ask me questions, I was so scared to give them response because I did not think I would be able to get my point across.”

Some participants felt that outside influences other than QoL training helped with feeling socially communicative in interactions with others in their communities. For instance, Johnathan who stated in his individual interview, “The speech therapy that I received in high school did not teach me how to relate to people and to be social; I learned by my parents who really kept me socially connected with my friends at church.” Johnathan also mentioned in his focus group interview that the QoL training he received in high school was more “textbook experiences, something you read in a book, QoL training did not teach me how to manage within my community or feel socially interactive.” Another participant named Tammy mentioned in her individual interview that she would become confused in the direction in the way the conversation was going; so, she disengaged in the conversation altogether. Tammy also stated from her personal and focus group interview, “I think by modeling with my speech teacher in initiating conversations and guiding a conversation, I feel it is not the same in talking to peers in my age group.”

The participants specifically brought out that the speech services they received in grade school proved not to be beneficial in the real-world context, thus creating a disconnect in feeling unrelatable or confident in holding conversations on various topics with people in different settings. For example, Marie stated in her individual interview, “My experiences in high school were way better in the treatment towards me; my only problem was being bold or confident enough to initiate conversations with people in my age group. “Yes, I received speech therapy,

but I don't think it prepared me to be able to converse with different people in all age groups."

Marie continued in her focus group interview; "I always have this feeling that when I am talking to people if they are trying to figure out where is this conversation going? At this point, my anxiety is at an all-time high and I am terrified of what to expect when I go to college." Thus, not receiving adequate speech services in QoL training can create a feeling of being overwhelmed in young adults with AS. Douglas stated during his individual interview, "When I graduated from high school it was a bit overwhelming for me."

Theme 2: Challenges in Academics

The second emerging theme showed challenges in academics after completing QoL training in high school. Some participants such as Brandy, Tammy and Christopher believed that after completing QoL training, even with special education services with support and accommodations in reading, writing, and mathematics, they still saw no improvements. For instance, Brandy who stated during her individual interview, "I had plans on going to a university in Georgia, I applied even though I knew they needed a minimum score between 1050 and 1250 on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) so I thought I would meet that score before they would pull my application, but my plan did not work." Brandy, Tammy and Christopher also mentioned that QoL training did not prepare them for the transitional phase, such as the types of supports and accommodations that would pertain to their individualized needs once they get into their desired university in what to expect academically when one begins attending a university or college. For instance, Christopher also stated during his individual interview, "When I got to the university, I was told that since I met the minimum requirements of having a 2.5 GPA, which is kind of low is how they explained it to me, I would have to take additional remedial courses to bring my GPA up to enter my program."

Christopher continued stating during his individual interview, “I feel like I have to jump through so many hoops just to get a degree, it’s like there are some many, like courses I need to take just to get into my program. My program requires a 3.2 Grade Point Average (GPA) or higher I only graduated with a 2.5 GPA so the classes that I’m registered for I would need to maintain a 3.0 GPA or higher and that stresses me out.”

Sub-theme: Academic Readiness for Postsecondary Education

Deficits in content areas of reading, writing, and mathematics in young adults with AS hindered some participants in moving forward in getting admitted at their desired university or college due to not being able to successfully meet the minimum score between 1050 and 1250 on the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) or having a low-grade point average (GPA), thus causing some to take additional remedial courses before entering into their program causing them to stay in college a little longer. The participants described their challenges in not feeling academically prepared for post-secondary settings in direct quotes such as Tammy who described her challenges in academics since completion of QoL training by stating during her individual interview, “I wish I was smart in all my subjects; I wish I could just go into a place and take a test and pass it but that’s not the case. I don’t think I was prepared enough to take the SAT.”

Theme 3: Challenges in Employment

The third emerging theme showed challenges in employment after completing QoL training in high school. Most of the participants were so excited to get the job that even though they did not thoroughly understand their job roles, some were afraid to speak up to ask questions for fear they might get in trouble, fired, or looked upon as not capable of holding the job. Some participants thought that employment was difficult to keep up with multi-step directions, which made it confusing to understand the overall process of job operations. Some participants such as

Ellie, Ashley, Jennifer, and Christopher thought they should focus on college and worry about getting the skills and experience on a job after graduation. For instance, Ellie who mentioned during her focus group interview, “I feel I should just focus on college right now and then when I graduate worry about getting a job.” Christopher mentioned in his focus group interview, “I could not work and go to school at the same time it kind of became a lot for me, so I just quit my job to focus on school fulltime.” Some also believed there were challenges in what to expect during an interview in the type of questions asked, and how to respond to those questions. Amber mentioned during her focus group interview she had to research on the computer in the type of questions that were asked during an interview to feel more prepared. Some participants, such as Ellie, Jennifer and Christopher found it difficult to keep up with the demands and expectations required from the job and thus eventually quit. Another participant mentioned not being thoroughly trained as a cashier and, as a result, being terminated due to the drawer coming up short.

Sub-theme: Obtaining and Maintaining Employment

In examining the direct quotes, it was clear that some participants found it difficult to keep up with the demands and expectations required from the job, thus, eventually quit. One participant mentioned not being thoroughly trained as a cashier and, as a result, being terminated due to the drawer coming up short. The direct quotes from participants who experienced challenges in employment were as follows: Ellie stated during her focus group interview, ‘When I started the job, she trained me, but I still did not understand the functionality of the buttons on the register, I wanted to speak up, but I was afraid the manager would not think I could hold the job.’ Ashley described her challenge in keeping up with the demand by stating during her focus group interview, “The challenge that I faced is when I worked part-time as a waiter the restaurant

that I worked at would be slow, which I loved because I didn't have to wait on anyone and just get paid but when it became to be so busy my anxiety would be at an all-time high." Jennifer also stated during the focus group interview, "The problem with being a cashier is remembering the buttons that go with certain orders." Christopher stated during the focus group interview, "I have a hard time remembering that one thing at the end of my shift, which was forgetting to clock out at the end of my shift my supervisor had to manually clock me out or adjust my time."

Some participants such as Ellie, Ashley, Jennifer, Tammy and Christopher thought their experiences in QoL training of obtaining employment consisted of a vocational textbook filled with real-world job functions and interview questions, thus unrealistic. Ashley stated in her focus group interview, "I want to get another job so bad I'm so tired of asking my parents for money but I start thinking if I get another job I would be so scared that I may not give the customer the correct change back as a cashier, plus it's kind of hard to juggle school and a job at the same time." Additionally, some participants wished there was a program that would help them get a job to gain hands-on experience while attending high school so that they would feel confident in getting and working at a job. Some participants qualified for state vocational rehabilitation programs after graduating from high school and had the option to allow the agency to help them obtain a job or help them pay tuition for college. One participant by the name of Tammy qualified for the state vocational rehabilitation program and stated during her individual interview, "I wish I got qualified for that program when I was in the 11th grade, because it would allow them to help me look for a job and then have experience working and I would make my own money."

Theme 4: Challenges in Self-Sufficiency

The fourth emerging theme showed challenges in self-sufficiency after completing QoL training in high school. Amber, Douglas, and Peter all expressed during their focus and individual interviews that they wanted to live independently but feared that they might not make enough money to live independently to live in this economy. All participants except Peter reported on their surveys it is unlikely that they received QoL training in high school that would allow them to live a self-sufficient life. Peter, Douglas, Tammy, and Ashley mentioned during their individual and Ashley lived with their parents or lived on campus to offer them structure, food, and housing. Douglas stated during his focus interview, “Rent is pretty high, even with living on campus is expensive, I would love to live on my own but looking at how the economy is, I think when I graduate and get a house or apartment, I’m gonna need a roommate to help out with the bills because bills makes me nervous.” Ashley mentioned in her individual interview, that her parent/s had fears of her living on her own as most parent/s thought she would not have control of her living environment and maybe would be taken advantage of by her friends, so most parents created a learned helplessness syndrome and advised for her to continue to live at home. Ashley stated in her focus group interview, “It’s not that I’m afraid of living on my own its just being able to pay bills like rent, car note, lights things like that on my own.” Coincidentally, Peter felt QoL training received from high school prepared him to live self-sufficiently on their own.

Sub-theme: Self-Regulation Toward Self-Sufficiency

The direct quotes showed that the participants focused on the success of getting into college or finishing their undergraduate degree and finding a job that would offer a good salary to live on their own. Some of the participants told me their parents preferred to stay with them

until they either found a good paying job or married someone so that someone would look after them. Amber stated during her individual interview, “Hopefully, when I get my degree and get a good paying job, I think I can make it on my own; maybe if I found a good man and get married.”

The direct quotes demonstrate an uncertainty in how some of the participants perceived QoL since completing QoL training. For example, Douglas stated during focus group interview: “The university provides me food and structure, I cannot even begin to think about paying rent on my own.” Tammy also stated during her individual interview, “I would really love to move out of my parents’ house, but I need a job first to see if, I would make enough but even then, my mom doesn’t feel I could live on my own; she says I’m too nice to people and would be taken advantage of.” Peter stated during his focus group interview, “In this economy, rent and houses are expensive so I will stay at home as long as my parents would allow me until I can be able to live on my own.”

Tammy, Christopher, Ellie, and Amber thought they were just following the protocol or tradition of graduating from high school and going to college. The data strongly showed an imprint on self-confidence issues as the main theme. Some participants such as Ellie, Jennifer and Douglas experienced anxiety and self-confidence with just the thought of living independently, as they felt incapable. Tammy, Ellie, and Amber mentioned in their individual interviews that they felt there was not enough community-based curriculum for training in grocery shopping, using a debit card, or managing finances.

Outlier Data and Findings

This section contains an unexpected theme, understanding readiness for the real world after completing Quality of Life (QoL) training from high school. During the individual

interviews and the focus group discussion, most participants felt challenges based on four themes in this study: social communication, academic, employment, and self-sufficiency. However, only one participant, Peter, felt that since completing QoL training in high school, he expressed that he is currently living his best QoL. According to Peter, he stated during his individual interview, he felt prepared for the real world, since graduating from high school. Peter also mentioned he was able to make friends with a lot of students on campus and was able to get a part-time job through one of the friends that he met on campus. Therefore, based on this unexpected finding, it showed Peter completing QoL training in high school and having been successful in social communication and making new friends on campus. He had no problem in finding employment. Thus, there is a lot to consider, such as the participant's external factors outside of receiving QoL training, such as home environment and being part of a social group that may have contributed to feeling prepared for the real world. Johnathan stated in his interview, "If I wasn't raised within a social setting, I feel, I would be worse off than I am today. Therefore, in considering this question, could family involvement and social groups outside of QoL training influence young adults with AS in their perception of living their best QoL; there is a possibility.

Research Question Responses

There were direct narrative answers from the central research question and the two sub-questions of the study. The central research questions and the two sub questions identified primarily four themes developed in the previous section. The selected participant quotes were appropriate to support the responses to the research questions, thus helping clarify my findings and allowing the participants to be heard. Thus, research question responses also helped the research to identify the continued challenges and experiences of young adults with AS.

Central Research Question

What are the lived experiences of young adults with AS completing or completing QoL training in high school? Through the individual interviews and the focus group session, insight was gained regarding the participants' experiences in social communication, academics, employment, and self-sufficiency since completing QoL from high school. The data provided by the participants showed they are still experiencing challenges since completing QoL training in high school. These challenges were divided into four themes: theme one was social communication, which received the most negative responses as most participants received speech services through grade school, thus most reported graduating and not being able to feel confident in initiating a conversation with people due to fears of not feeling relatable and not knowing what to say to those around them; such as Ryan who stated in his individual and focus group interviews, "I think the speech therapy that was given to me taught me how to communicate academically but the focus in training, I feel; wasn't in being socially responsive to others."

Theme two was academic, which showed a challenge for some participants. However, some realized their reading, writing, or mathematics deficits and were fully aware of their IEP. Still, some struggled to pass the program admission assessments and the deadline to gain college/university admission. Brandy stated during her interview, "they sent me a denial letter because I did not successfully meet the minimum score requirements for admission for the program that I wanted to get into."

Theme three was employment. Some participants thought employment was difficult to keep up with because of multi-step directions, which became confusing when trying to understand the overall process of job operations. For instance, Christopher stated during the

focus group interview, “I have a hard time remembering that one thing at the end of my shift; which was forgetting to clock out at the end of my shift my supervisor had to manually clock me out or adjust my time but eventually I quit because it was impacting my school, I was so tired when I went to class.” Theme four was self-sufficiency in their lives once they graduated from high school or college. Some participants commented voluntarily about moving into a graduate program right after obtaining an undergraduate degree to avoid attempting to be self-sufficient in the real world due to fears of facing reality. For instance, Douglas stated during focus group interview: “After I get my undergraduate degree and I am going right into a graduate school the realities of getting a job and living on my own is scary.”

Sub-Question One

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their academic experiences? Through the individual interviews and the focus group session, insight was gained regarding the participants that after completion of QoL training, some still experience challenges in academics as some feel they struggled all through grade school with deficits in reading, writing, or mathematics only to find they would have to climb another mountain to reach academic success at the postsecondary level. Brandy stated during her interview: “Like even though I was in special education and received services in math it only worked on my weaknesses, I don’t think it prepared me to be inclined in math to pass the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT).” Tammy stated during her individual interview, I think the focus in receiving special education services was in grade level standards in reading, writing and math that I was behind in only helped me to stay afloat in general curriculum, but it didn’t prepare me for the SAT or for college.” Furthermore, some participants had a delayed start in their program at the university due to deficits in academics, such as Christopher, who stated

during his individual interview, When I got to the university, I was told that since I met the minimum requirements of having a 2.5 GPA, which is kind of low is how they explained it to me, I would have to take additional remedial courses to bring my GPA up to enter my program.”

Sub-Question Two

How do young adults with AS who are completing or have completed QoL training in high school describe their social experiences? This question prompted a response by the participants regarding completing QoL training in high school in still experiencing challenges in social communication while attending a university with other students and faculty members. In fact, some avoided interacting with people based on the fear of being misunderstood or confused within the conversation's overall depth. For instance, Brandy stated during the focus group interview, I always have this feeling that when I am talking to people if they are trying to figure out where is this conversation going? Douglas stated during his individual interview, When I arrived at the college ‘baby’ it was extremely difficult to get my point across with my instructors. I was misunderstood on several occasions, whether it was about an assignment or just me personally. Tammy stated in her survey and during individual interview, I would become confused in the direction in the way the conversation is going; so, I disengage in the conversation altogether.

Summary

The purpose of Chapter Four was to present the data collected and provide a synthesis and summary. Data were collected using the survey instrument (Appendix A) and individual and focus group interviews (Appendix B and Appendix C). Information gathered from the three data sources was used to understand the lived experiences of people with AS who completed or had completed QoL training in high school. The analysis revealed four overarching themes: in

understanding that after completing QoL training, there were still challenges in (a) social communication, (b) academics, (c) employment, and (d) self-sufficiency. Findings from this study aligned with previous research and theories such as Klin and Volkmar(2003), who noted increased anxiety and stressful situations present for young adults with AS while attending postsecondary settings, thus, illustrating a problem in the lack of formal DLS and vocational training while in high school. Specifically, findings from this research provided data that support improvements in QoL training received in high school that would help those with AS to feel capable of being social, academically prepared, confident to take direction, and build skills while employed and feel confident to one day live on their own.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to describe the shared experiences of young adults with AS as they transition out of high school after completion of QoL training. The central research question used to guide the study served to understand the lived experiences of young adults with AS who completed QoL training in high school. Chapter Five consists of five discussion subsections: (a) interpretation of findings, (b) implications for policy and practice, (c) theoretical and methodological implications, (d) limitations and delimitations, and (e) recommendations for future research. Finally, this chapter concludes with a summary to review the important conclusions drawn from the study.

Discussion

The findings in this study support the theoretical and empirical literature about lived experiences in young adults with AS after completion of QoL training in high school. Previous research noted from Kuder and Accardo (2018) suggested that young adults with AS/HFA are unable to complete their postsecondary education due to deficits in social communication and difficulty in interpersonal interactions, as they often do not have the necessary support and accommodations implemented to help with these deficits after high school. The theoretical framework for this study was based on Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning theory and Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors. Data from this study showed themes that emerged, which showed challenges that impacted social communication, academic, employment, and self-sufficiency outside of high school.

Summary of Thematic Findings

Information gathered from the three data sources of survey instrument, individual and focus group interviews was used to understand the lived experiences of people with AS who completed or had completed QoL training in high school. Therefore, the thematic findings revealed four overarching themes: in understanding that after completing QoL training, there were still challenges in (a) social communication, (b) academics, (c) employment, and (d) self-sufficiency. Thus, findings from this research provided data that is interpreted to provide suggestions that support improvements in QoL training received in high school that would help those with AS to feel capable of being social, academically prepared, confident to take direction, and build skills while employed and feel confident to one day live on their own.

Interpretation of Findings

After analyzing the data responses to the survey, the individual interviews, and the focus group, four overarching themes emerged/were identified. These themes include (a) challenges in social communication interactions, (b) challenges in academics, (c) academic readiness for postsecondary education, (c) challenges in employment, and (d) challenges in self-sufficiency. These themes are discussed within the greater context as described by four interpretations.

Social Conversations with Depth

In social communication some participants felt that after completion of QoL training, which includes speech therapy, they learned some ways to be socially communicative in interactions with others but still saw no improvements in being able to hold conversations with depth. Most of the participants indicated that being able to self-advocate had posed a challenge in young adults with AS, which meant they lacked QoL training to help them to appropriately speak up for themselves and to be clearly heard. The lived experiences of young adults with AS face in

social communication in this study was consistent with prior work of Howlin et al., (2004), who notes deficits in social communication compromise the possibility of longevity in employment; consistently attending colleges and universities affects their QoL. Ultimately, participants suggested embedding a peer social group within speech services, which would help them feel inclusive and relatable and help them build conversation with depth, as this would help keep up with the direction of the conversation.

College Readiness

The participants in this study felt they were not prepared for college entrance readiness by not passing the college admission assessment such as the SAT or ACT. This meant limited exposure to a college prep curriculum in QoL training for individuals with AS. Participants experienced academic difficulties after high school graduation, and they desired additional support to succeed in post-secondary settings. The underlying problem being that those with AS experienced academic difficulties, a phenomenon that the participants in the current study could speak to. Retherford and Schreiber (2015) who previously note inequities in service delivery for young adults with AS in the authors' community prompted families to seek out options for meeting the needs of their children as they transitioned to independent living and postsecondary settings such as academic, employment, and recreation. What supports may be available could vary widely in the literature, with recommendations ranging from helping staff better recognize those with AS (M.J. Taylor, 2005) to implementing peer mentoring programs (Welkowitz & Baker, 2005). Thus, the participants felt embedding a college prep curriculum in QoL training over time in high school would help prepare them to take both the SAT/ACT.

Employment Readiness

Participants in this study expressed a desire to seek assistance to gain employment because they had difficulty finding a job on their own. Moreover, not only did participants have difficulty in finding employment, but also, they struggled with keeping up with the demands on the job. Hurlbutt and Chalmers (2004), noted HFA individuals are a group who are more likely to be unemployed or underemployed in jobs that underutilize their knowledge, skills, and experience. Even further compounding these difficulties was the fact that in many cases, those with Asperger's simply had difficulties understanding complex job application materials; 'thinking on their feet' in an interview; acclimatizing to new procedures and routines; remembering and following instructions (Robertson, 2010). Stankova and Trajkovski (2010) further noted that even once employed, young adults with AS were more likely to struggle in busy or noisy environments, such as fast-food restaurants and factories. Therefore, embedding a job-based training program into QoL training would allow individuals with AS to learn how to take and receive directions from supervisor/managers, time management and stress management while maintaining employment.

Training in Self-regulation Coping Skills

Many participants expressed that they experienced anxiety following high school. This could be interpreted as not receiving proper self-regulation coping strategies and training that have contributed to their apprehension, meaning that their lack of true self-sufficiency made them fear being taken advantage of in the real world. The participants also expressed fears and anxieties regarding self-sufficiency that was consistent with concerns noted in the literature. Wehmeyer, M. L. et al. (2010) note that educators should encourage students who are on the spectrum to self-advocate for their strengths and needs, to improve their self-regulation and

flexibility, set realistic goals that can be achieved and to exercise their decision-making skills whenever possible, as all are important for independent living in adulthood. Therefore, embedding community-based instruction (CBI) within QoL training would help prepare them to feel familiar within their communities. Participants also felt a CBI program would help teach them how to shop and understand the concept of transactions, as some believed it would help prepare them for future jobs in utilizing a register as a cashier.

Implications for Policy or Practice

Because of various policy initiatives and the increased rate of students diagnosed with AS becoming qualified to receive special education and speech services, thus general curriculum education in inclusive classrooms has become diverse. Young adults with AS are placed within an inclusive environment to receive a general curriculum. However, they find it extremely challenging to feel socially and academically included. However, as policymakers continue to encourage inclusion, general education teachers and speech pathologists struggle to implement inclusive teaching techniques that would help those with AS socially and academically prepare for QoL outside post-high school.

Implications for Policy

Due to inadequate QoL training, young adults with AS face challenges to be adaptive or understood within their communities and in postsecondary education settings. There are several suggestions for programs that could be embedded into QoL training in high school, as this would help them make a smooth transition post-high school, thus creating self-regulation toward self-sufficiency. Moreover, it would be suggested that local school district administration create an actual curriculum-based instruction vocational training program that would consist of peer groups activities to help them to be socially interactive and develop peer relationships, a college

preparatory course to help them with college program admission assessment that would help them pass state-approved college entrance assessments such as SAT and ACT and pre-college courses in high school as this would help with college readiness. Additionally, it would be also suggested for stakeholders to collaboratively work in implementing a community-based instruction (CBI) to help young adults with AS feel confident within their communities. It would also be suggested to see if the qualifications process for a vocational rehabilitation agency could be done one year before graduation, as this would allow the agency to assist in matching them with a job based on capabilities if qualified. Therefore, embedding community-based instruction within QoL training would help prepare students with disabilities for success in life after school (National Information Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities, 2002).

The Georgia Department of Education should consider authorizing funds to develop partnerships with local small business owners who would come into high schools to help model skills to succeed. The vocational skills training would consist of a small business allowed on a high school campus to set-up a small shop during at-home games, which would allow young adults with AS to work alongside small business owners to gain working experience and possibly earnings. School administrators should erect formal in-house peer-to-peer mentorship programs between speech and general curriculum education in strategies and techniques to help with social communication. School administrators should also provide young adults with AS an opportunity to discuss the benefits of developing healthy collaborative relationships with local businesses within their community, general education and special education teachers, speech pathologists, and school administrators.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study point to implementing new or revised policies as a prudent addition to QoL training. However, if those policies do not include changes in common practices in receiving speech services and classroom instruction strategies, students with AS may not be prepared to transition into a postsecondary education setting and live self-sufficiently independently. Thus, developing a vocational transition program that curriculum and instruction that have a practical approach would help to shape the learning environment. Therefore, there is a continued need for vocational training programs in high school to offer young adults with AS to feel included and prepared for postsecondary education and the real world. Additionally, a vocational training program would reduce anxieties and provide methods that would improve social communication in young adults with AS to advocate for themselves inside and outside of the community. Hence, assisting young adults with AS with employment would help them to develop or maintain a specific skill, as the subskills help build through drill and practice, thus creating building blocks for more meaningful learning in understanding the role of their job responsibilities and understanding directions given by supervisors and managers (Lim et al., 2012). The practical approach used in this vocational training program would also help create academic college readiness and CBI courses to help self-regulation toward self-sufficiency in students who have AS/HFA. Moreover, school districts should incorporate a vocational training program on a larger scale, and to be specific; this vocational training program should be used with more students who may have other disabilities other than AS.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Young adults with AS experience challenges and deficits in social communication that impact their self-regulation toward self-sufficiency. Kaufman and Larson (2005) noted that

individuals with AS have difficulty with social interactions and a restricted range of interests. Ivan Pavlov's theory in classical conditioning closely aligns strategic methods that would beneficially improve social communication techniques. Based on the data collected through surveys, interviews, and focus groups in this study, social communication is beneficial in QoL training. According to Ivan Pavlov's theory of behaviorism in classical conditioning, the adage can illustrate it, "Practice makes perfect." Behaviorists see learning as an observable change in behavior because of experience and repetition (Clark, 2018). Implementing a QoL training program with a communication-related curriculum that would allow individuals with AS to be socially communicative with their peers inside and outside of school would create the experience and repetition that Pavlov's theory touts. That practice and repetition would help individuals with AS build dialogue in conversations they have with individuals in different environments and help build self-confidence. The increase of self-confidence then creates an observable change in behavior in social communication.

Examining Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM is considered an instructional method, Baron-Cohen et al. (1997) found that, despite having above-average intelligence, adults with AS were impaired on a subtle test of ToM. For instance, by failing to account for others' perspectives, persons with AS can misinterpret messages or talk at length about their topic of interest without regard to their listening partner's social cues/social needs (Tager-Flusberg, 2000). Therefore, using Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM would not be suitable for instructional methods. However, using Pavlov's theory in creating social peer groups while attending high school would create repetitious practice, and continued training in being socially responsive with others in different environments and groups would help young AS adults feel confident and connective with those around them.

Based on the participants' surveys, interviews, and focus group responses, embedding more rigorous academic training would be beneficial. Some participants complained of difficulty passing the program admission assessment to enter their desired university and program. Some participants also complained that upon entering the university, they had to take additional courses before entering their desired program. Pavlov's behaviorism theory notes that lecturing and recalling the facts would help young adults with AS, especially for college readiness. Therefore, embedding a thorough but rigorous college preparatory assessments course for SAT or ACT in QoL training would create successful passing rates and prepare students to be successful in postsecondary settings.

Participants in this study expressed challenges concerning employment. Some thought they needed assistance finding a job to help them build a skill set and experience in taking and understanding directions. Pavlov's classical conditioning theory supports this suggestion by participating in drill and practice exercises (Clark, 2018). Therefore, drill and practice exercises in on-the-job skills would help the participants acquire knowledge through systematic training through multiple repetitions, practice, and engaging in a rehearsal to learn or become proficient. In reviewing the surveys, interviews, and focus group responses from the participants, challenges were still experienced in self-sufficiency, therefore suggesting an instruction that would help them feel self-confident in attempting to live independently. In considering both Ivan Pavlov and Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM in predictive behaviors related to suggestions provided by the participants. The participants expressed the challenges of not feeling confident or capable of living independently. Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning techniques implemented within a QoL training included creating procedures and expectations to manage the classroom, using rewards as incentives to achieve academic and behavioral goals, and using punishments

(e.g., loss of privileges, withholding of rewards) effectively and sparingly to change learners' behaviors (Clark, 2018). Adam Morton's (1980) theory-theory/ToM proposed that our everyday understanding of human psychology constitutes a kind of theory by which we try to predict and explain behavior in terms of its causation by beliefs, intentions, emotions, and traits of character (Baron-Cohen et al., 1985).

Morton's (1980) theory-theory views how structured, acquired, and deployed concepts would create mental representations implicated in higher thought processes that deploy a concept in a cognitive task in theoretical reasoning. Moreover, embedding either Pavlov's or Morton's theory-theory/ToM community-based instruction within QoL training would create ToM in predictive behaviors that would increase self-confidence and provide familiarity within their communities, therefore, creating a higher thought process that deploys a concept in a cognitive task in theoretical reasoning to self-regulate in self-sufficiency.

In reflecting and reviewing surveys, interviews, and focus group data, most with AS understand their challenges and, thus, know they would have to work harder to keep up with their peers socially and academically. Additionally, they may experience significant difficulties with skills supporting independence, future employment, and positive social relationships. Any of these difficulties may interfere with completing their postsecondary education (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). Therefore, in response to Retherford and Schreiber (2015), a follow-up response was expressed within this transcendental phenomenological study from surveys, individual and focus group interviews from participants with AS. The result in this study shows the continuous challenges and experiences in effective program interventions for those with ASD are relatively scarce, particularly those focused on adolescents and young adults for whom few services exist post-high-school transition (Turner-Brown et al., 2009). Moreover, young adults

with AS are expected to know and are assumed to know the routines, rules, and social expectations of college classes and college life. Yet, these rules and routines are never explicitly taught (Retherford & Schreiber, 2015). These expectations are referred to as the “hidden curriculum” and are another source of challenge for this population of students (Myles, 2014). According to Burgess and Cimera (2014), services and support for individuals with AS and related conditions with social communication challenges who are transitioning to young adulthood are inconsistent, inadequate, or nonexistent. Services provided by speech-language pathologists can help young adults with AS to ensure a successful transition to employment, postsecondary education or training, independent living, and community participation (McCarty, 2013).

Limitations and Delimitations

Several limitations existed in this study: sample size, sample location, the use of, and researcher bias. The sample size was limited to 12 participants, which is a limitation. Although this sample size fell within the recommendations of Creswell (2013) of five to 25 participants for a phenomenological study, it was on the lower end of his recommendation scale. The data collected were nontransferable and did not represent all young adults with AS, as not all participants were specifically diagnosed with AS. Some were diagnosed with other higher forms of autism. Therefore, being diagnosed with other higher forms of Autism than AS could create differences in opinions and perceptions in QoL, thus may create inconsistent or skewed data. Third, the participants’ responses could have been biased. The eight participants in the group attended the same university, and the four high school participants all attended the same public high school. They may have had conversations preceding their interviews or the small group discussion. Additionally, participants’ answers could have been influenced by personal,

institutional, or system-related factors instead of participants recalling specific details from their experiences receiving QoL training, as for some, it had been long ago.

The delimitations of this research include that I purposefully selected the participants and the site for five reasons to allow the phenomenon to be examined. First, the participants have all attended high school and completed QoL training, which provides individual insight. Second, all study participants received a general education curriculum and were taught within an inclusive classroom setting. Therefore, they were all able to provide insight into experiences. Third, the participants received special education services and had IEPs. Fourth, all participants have been diagnosed with AS or other higher forms of Autism, which helped examine the phenomenon. Fifth, I have a rapport with participants. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), "The researcher and the participant approach equality in questioning, interpreting, and reporting" (p. 173). The rapport helped the participants feel comfortable providing rich and thick descriptive details about QoL training and the lived experiences after completion.

Recommendations for Future Research

A recommendation for future research is to conduct a qualitative case study with more participants to provide a representative sample of young adults specifically diagnosed with AS. Conducting research with a larger pool of participants would reduce the risk of accidental extreme or biased groups. Participants selected for this future research should be young adults diagnosed with AS only at the university level. Selecting participants from a university who have completed their first year in college would provide various perspectives and experiences if QoL training prepared them for postsecondary education, as suggested by Creswell and Poth (2018). A greater sample size of general and special education teachers could be interviewed and provided a survey with closed-ended questions for comparative analysis of the phenomenon.

It will also be important to analyze faculty members' perspectives who provide instruction to young adults with AS to understand support and accommodations. This study focused on young adults' lived experiences and perspectives with AS. However, a recommendation for future research is a study examining the inclusive environment at a university level from the perspective and experiences of students with AS. Conducting a study where students with AS are the participants would provide a rich perspective of the inclusive environment and insight into how instructors and professionals could assist by providing appropriate support and accommodations at the university level. Examining the inclusive environment from the perspective and experience of students with AS would also provide insight and pinpoint the challenges associated with social communication and interactions.

Conclusion

There are various policy initiatives and an increased rate of students diagnosed with AS becoming qualified to receive special education and speech services. Moreover, it would be suggested that local school district administration create an actual curriculum-based instruction vocational training program that would consist of peer groups activities to help them to be socially interactive and develop peer relationships, a college preparatory course to help them with college program admission assessment that would help them pass state-approved college entrance assessments such as SAT and ACT and pre-college courses in high school as this would help with college readiness. It was also suggested to see if the qualifications process for a vocational rehabilitation agency could be done one year before graduation, as this would allow the agency to assist in matching them with a job based on capabilities if qualified. Theoretical and Empirical Implications were guided by both Ivan Pavlov's classical conditioning and Adam Morton's (1980) theory of mind in predictive behaviors. Data collection results generated themes

in social communication, academic, employment, and self-sufficiency about young adults who had AS and completed quality-of-life training with the help of effective transitional planning. This study included 12 participants, 6 males and 6 females, diagnosed with AS and HFA. All the participants had experience in receiving QoL training in high school teaching. Information from the three data sources (i.e., the survey, individual interviews, and the focus group discussion) was used to answer the research questions regarding the lived experiences of young adults with AS who completed or completed QoL training in high school.

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Appendix A

Perceptions of Quality of Life and The Training Received in High School

The focus group data collection approach used within this phenomenological qualitative research consists of conducting surveys provided to following high school students, college students (Moustakas, 1994). The focus participants will be given a link to their emails to log on and answer the survey questions by providing comments (250 words) to each question.

Survey Questions

1. How often do you still experience challenges in your academic and social communication interactions, once completion of QoL training? (Dropdown menu: Likely or Unlikely)
2. Do you believe you are receiving or have received adequate QoL training in high school that would allow you to live a self-sufficient life? (Dropdown menu: Likely or Unlikely)
3. Have you experienced any improvements in social communication interactions due to QoL training provided to you in high school? (Dropdown menu: Likely or Unlikely)
4. Do you believe you are receiving or have received adequate QoL training in high school that would allow you to live a self-sufficient life? (Drop down menu: Likely or Unlikely)
5. Experts suggest that a person is often unaware of their worldview and its influence on their life and choices. How aware are you of your worldview toward what you perceive as quality-of-life? Comment: 150 words

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

When interviewing participants about their perceptions of quality of life and the training received in high school, the following interview protocol will be utilized (Hindman, 2004).

Time of Interview	
Date	
Interviewers	
Interviewers—Pseudonym will be used	

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself and provide your name and age.
2. What grade level are you currently in? (high school) or what year are you in while attending college or university?
3. In your opinion what was your best experience in receiving quality-of-life training in high school.
4. Please describe any improvements in academic and social communication because of your quality-of-life training.
5. What are some examples of positive relationships with your peers, teachers, and administrators you have had since you completed the quality-of-life training?
6. Since the completion of quality-of-life training, which would you say has still been the most significant challenge for your academic or social communication? Why?
7. Have you seen improvements in academic or social communication, since completing the quality-of-life training in high school? Why?
8. What impact have your teachers and parents had on the support in receiving the quality-of-life training?

9. When you hear the term “quality of life,” what does this mean to you?
10. What do you think are your parents’ perspectives of what your quality of life should be?

This question relates to

11. Do you think receiving quality-of-life training would help with the transition into postsecondary education with your academic or social communication interactions?

Why?

Appendix C

Informed Consent by Agreement to Participate Form

IRB - Approved

Title of the Project: A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF QUALITY-OF-LIFE TRAINING IN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

Principal Investigator: Traci Maynard Doctoral Candidate School of Education at Liberty University

Co-investigator(s): Karla Swafford, EdD, Committee Chair

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, a college student who has completed at least 30 credit hours, etc. 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.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research. What is the study about and why is it being done?

The purpose of the study is to describe the experiences of young adults who are diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism and are transitioning or have transitioned into adulthood from high school into postsecondary education or living. The interest is in those who are either completing or have completed the quality-of-life training, which will consist of vocational training, daily living skills, community-based instruction, etc. based on their transition planning listed on their individualized education plans (IEP) received in high school to prepare those for postsecondary education or to live independently. I am writing to invite you to participate in my study.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

1. Participants will be asked to complete a five-question survey that will take 15-40 minutes to complete.
2. Participants will be asked to answer 11 questions in the interview that would take 45-60 minutes to review interview questions (including demographic information). Please note the participants have an option to participate in the interview in person or on Microsoft Teams.
3. Participants will be asked to join an online focus group to answer five research questions.

The online focus group would last 15-30 mins and would consist of other participants used within this research. 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, they may receive a direct benefit if the study procedures involve a teaching or therapy

intervention, the opportunity to obtain training they would not receive if they did not participate, etc. What risks might you experience from being in this study? The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks your child would encounter in everyday life. I am a mandatory reporter.

During this study, if I receive information about child abuse, child neglect or intent to harm self or others, I will be required to report it to the appropriate authorities. 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[s] will have access to the records.

Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to allow your child to participate will not affect your or his/her current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to allow your child to participate, she/he is free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

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

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

Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study? The researcher conducting this study is Traci Maynard. 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, Karla Swafford, 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[s], you are encouraged to contact the IRB.

Our physical address is Institutional Review Board,
1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845,
Lynchburg, VA, 24515;
our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is irb@liberty.edu. Disclaimer:

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

Your Consent By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher[s] will keep a copy with the study records.

If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above. I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

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

Printed Subject Name
Signature & Date

Appendix D

IRB Approval

[External] IRB-FY22-23-1268 - Initial Initial - Expedited

do-not-reply@cayuse.com <do-not-reply@cayuse.com>

Thu 5/4/2023 8:43 AM

To: Swafford, Karla Nadean Lairsey (School of Education) <knswofford@liberty.edu>; Maynard, Traci Lamar <tmaynardageman@liberty.edu>

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

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 4, 2023

Traci Maynard-Ageman

Karla Swafford

Re: IRB Approval - IRB-FY22-23-1268 A TRANSCENDENTAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF QUALITY-OF-LIFE TRAINING IN SELF-REGULATION SKILLS OF YOUNG ADULTS WITH ASPERGER'S SYNDROME

Dear Traci Maynard-Ageman, Karla Swafford,

We are pleased to inform you that your study has been approved by the Liberty University Institutional Review Board (IRB). This approval is extended to you for one year from the following date: May 4, 2023. If you need to make changes to the methodology as it pertains to human subjects, you must submit a modification to the IRB. Modifications can be completed through your Cayuse IRB account.

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

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

Your stamped consent form(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.

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

Sincerely,

G. Michele Baker, PhD, CIP
Administrative Chair
Research Ethics Office

Appendix E

Five-Day Reminder Notice Sent

Hello and thank you again for sharing your thoughts and experiences about QoL. The week for returning your answers is almost over, so please send your valuable responses within the next two days. You are the expert in this situation, and your answers are sorely needed. Let your voice be heard!

Appendix F

Seven-Day Reminder Notice Sent

The week for returning responses for this study has passed, but I really want to learn from you. Please send your responses within the next 48 hours. If I have not received them by that time, I will presume you have decided not to participate and will not contact you again. I look forward to reading your answers, but I fully respect any decision to withdraw from the study. Whatever you decide, thank you for your time and effort and best wishes for your future success.

Appendix G

Follow-up Questions

Follow-up Questions

I greatly enjoyed learning from your experience. I am curious about some of your answers and want to know more. Please answer these follow-up questions within the week. I will send a reminder in five days if I have not heard from you. Thank you so much for sharing!

Appendix H

Member Check

It has been some time since we last communicated. In that time, I studied your answers and the answers of other participants who also chose to share their knowledge. At this point, I believe I have a draft of my dissertation ready for your review. Remember, you are the expert. I would greatly appreciate your time to review my interpretation. Please read the attached section of my dissertation. If you find that I have misinterpreted something you intended to say, please send me the corrections. Above all, I want to hold true to your knowledge. If I have not heard from you within the week, I will presume you have found no errors or areas of disagreement. Thank you again for all your wisdom!

Appendix I

Focus Group Interview Questions

When interviewing the focus group about their experience since graduating from high school the following interview protocol will be utilized (Hindman, 2004).

Time of Interview	
Date	
Interviewers	
Interviewers—Pseudonym will be used	

The focus group questions are as follows:

1. What are the types of challenges you have experienced since graduating from high school?
2. What are the types of challenges you have experienced since attending college?
3. Since graduating high school, do you feel you have developed a strong work ethic on a job based on your experiences from QoL training? (CRQ).
4. Since attending college have you been able to develop relationships with individuals on or off campus?
5. Do you feel if provided with the necessary resources you would be able to live independently on your own?

Appendix J

Two-Day Consent Form Reminder Notice Sent

Hello and thank you again for considering participating in this research. The 36 hours to reply to the consent form is almost over. You will have until tomorrow to complete the consent form. You are the expert in this situation, and your answers are sorely needed. Let your voice be heard!

Appendix K

Recruitment Communication

Dear Potential Participants:

As a doctoral student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctor in Education in Instruction and Curriculum degree. The purpose of my research is to describe the experiences of young adults who are diagnosed with Asperger's syndrome or high-functioning autism and is transitioning or have transitioned into adulthood from high school into postsecondary education or living. The interest is in those who are either completing or have completed the quality-of-life training, which will consist of vocational training, daily living skills, community-based instruction, etc. based on their transition planning listed on their individualized education plans (IEP) received in high school to prepare those for postsecondary education or to live independently, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be age 16-21. To participate in this research, your child must have a diagnosis of ASD and receive special education services, as well as be considered AS/HFA. Participants, if willing, will be asked to do the following:

- Complete a five-question survey that will take 15-40 minutes to complete.
- Answer 11 questions in the interview that would take 45-60 minutes to review interview questions (including demographic information). Please note the participants have an option to participate in the interview in person or on Microsoft Teams. This interview will be audio- and video-recorded.
- Join an online focus group to answer five research questions. The online focus group would last 15-30 mins and would consist of other participants used within this research. This focus group will be audio- and video-recorded.

Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate in the survey, please have your child click on this link

<https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/HRP98MV> and complete the online survey once both you and your child have read and signed the consent form online. Additionally, once the survey is completed, I will reach out to you via the email address you provide in the survey to schedule the interview. Please contact me at [REDACTED] if you have any questions or would like more information.

A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey. The consent document contains additional information about my research. If your child would like to participate, please read the consent form with your child. Once you have confirmed that they would like to participate,

please type your name as a signature, and then have you child do the same. Doing so will indicate that you have read the consent information and would like to take part in the study.

Participants will receive a \$50 gift card to Amazon or Target with the completion of the survey, interview questions and online focus group participation.

Sincerely,

Traci Maynard
Doctoral Candidate

A solid black rectangular box used to redact the signature of Traci Maynard.

Appendix L

Audit Trail

Date	Research Study Audit Trail
May 4, 2023	IRB Approval
May 5, 2023	Attempting to recruit participants
May 15, 2023	Research study Approved by University
June 6, 2023	Research study declined by School District
June 6, 2023	Attempting to recruit more participants
June 16, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 1 (Ryan)
June 16, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 2 (Marie)
June 16, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 3 (Brandy)
June 21, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 4 (Ashley)
June 21, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 5 (Ellie)
June 21, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 6 (Jennifer)
June 22, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 7 (Douglas)
June 22, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 8 (Tammy)
June 23, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 9 (Peter)
June 23, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 10 (Johnathan)
June 23, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 11 (Amber)
June 26, 2023	Zoom interview with Participant 12 (Christopher)
June 26, 2023	High school focus group via Zoom
June 26, 2023	College Group via Zoom
June 26, 2023	Downloaded NVivo; began learning the platform
June 27 – June 29, 2023	Uploaded files and edited transcriptions; coded transcriptions
June 29- July 1, 2023	Described findings and details in Chapters 4 and 5