A MULTI-SITE CASE STUDY EXAMING HOW IEP TEAMS DETERMINE THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE PLACEMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

by

Jennifer J. Hull

Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University

2024

A MULTI-SITE CASE STUDY EXAMING HOW IEP TEAMS DETERMINE THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE PLACEMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

by Jennifer J. Hull

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy

Liberty University, Lynchburg, VA

2024

APPROVED BY:

Gail Collins, EdD, Committee Chair

Joan Cox, PhD, Committee Member

Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria individualized education program (IEP) teams used to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the elementary school level. The theoretical framework of this study was Maslow's theory of human motivation, which described a hierarchy that should be in place for students to be ready to learn. Knowles's adult learning theory also guided this study as it described how the adults' experience shaped their decision-making. I collected data through direct observations, interviews, and focus groups. Utilizing a purposeful sampling of 10 participants, I included members from IEP teams in two public schools and one private school with students with ASD and a continuum of placements. The IEP team included intervention specialists, special education directors, parents, and a psychologist. The data were evaluated through a researcher-developed coding system utilizing Stake's multiple case study analysis. Finally, I analyzed the results through pattern matching and cross-case analysis. Data analysis revealed four overall themes: (a) appropriate placement, (b) prior experience, (c) levels of functioning, and (d) placement changes. The findings of this study showed that parents need to have a more meaningful part of the IEP meeting and actively participate in making LRE placement decisions. The findings also revealed that the IEP team must use data on students' academic levels, sensory processing, and behavioral concerns to make appropriate placement decisions.

Keywords: least restrictive environment, autism spectrum disorder, special education classroom, general education classroom, inclusion, general education teacher, intervention specialist

Copyright Page

Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to my daughter, Alyssa. Alyssa displayed strength and led me to be a special education teacher and then administrator, fighting for other children like her. Alyssa amazes me every day, and I will continue to learn from her as she transitions from high school to her career. I love you, Alyssa, and I pray that you continue to grow and be the strongest person I know!

This manuscript is also dedicated to the boys in my life; first, my husband, who has always believed in me and has been my rock and support team, saying, “Jenn, you can do this, and everything will be okay.” There have been many times through my schooling that something would happen medically with Alyssa, and I wanted to quit and be with her, but Mike was always there to push me through and give me the strength to continue. To my boys, John and Eddie, thank you for always understanding when I had homework and helping me with your sister and things around the house.

I love you very much and thank you for helping me to complete my dissertation.

Acknowledgments

First, I would like to thank God for showing me His presence and guidance throughout this process.

I want to thank my chair, Dr. Gail Collins, for her prayers and support and for being my cheerleader. I would also like to thank my committee member, Dr. Joan Cox, for her support and expertise in this field.

I would like to thank the IEP members who participated in my study. I appreciate you giving up your time and sharing your expertise with me. This study would not have been possible without you.

I want to thank Brittany for editing and reading through my dissertation and encouraging me along the way.

Lastly, I would like to thank my co-workers for their prayers and encouragement throughout.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)

Central Research Question (CRQ)

Continuum of placements (COP)

Critical disability theory (CDT)

Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA)

Free appropriate public education (FAPE)

Individualized education program (IEP)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA)

Least restrictive environment (LRE)

Obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD)

Restricted and repetitive behaviors (RRB)

Students with disabilities (SWD)

Sub-Question (SQ)

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria individualized education program (IEP) teams used to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the elementary school level. LRE is a part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 (Legislative Service Commission, 2020). This federal law requires school districts to consider the placement of students with disabilities with typical peers to the maximum extent appropriate for them (Bolourian et al., 2020). However, the law is unclear about the criteria for selecting the LRE placement for students with disabilities (SWD), leaving the decision to each state and school district (Giangreco, 2020). In this study, I examined how different schools in northeast Ohio make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD at the elementary level. Research shows that a lack of understanding of ASD makes finding the correct placement crucial to ensure student success academically and socially (Cosier et al., 2020; Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). The theories guiding this study were Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation and Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory. Maslow's theory was applicable to this study because it helped the IEP team determine if the students' hierarchy of needs were being met in accordance with his theory of human motivation. Knowles' adult learning theory helped understand how adults make decisions about LRE for students with ASD at the elementary level. This chapter includes the background and context of the study from historical, social, and theoretical concepts. This chapter also consists of the problem and purpose statements, the significance of the study, research questions, definitions of key terms, and a chapter summary.

Background

Since ASD is a complex disorder, students require an appropriate placement to provide support academically, socially, behaviorally, and with sensory disorders (Butera et al., 2020; Kauffman & Hornby, 2020). Yell et al. (2020) noted the gap in the literature about how students with ASD are affected by different placements, pointing out the importance of addressing and stating that this placement effect is a vital yet neglected topic. An inappropriate placement for a student with ASD may lead to increased social and behavioral issues and decreased academic achievement (Kawakami et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). This section includes the historical background and how the topic affects the social and theoretical contexts.

Historical Context

LRE was first introduced as a framework for SWD by providing a broad range of services (Reynolds, 1962). The concept of LRE began in the 1960s and was eventually incorporated into federal and state policy (Lim, 2020; Taylor, 2004). The policy of LRE has been evolving over the years through updates in federal law for special education (Yell et al., 2020). Yell et al. (2020) described placements within the framework as levels; the least restrictive levels are (a) most students in the general education classes serviced by the general education teacher with consultation from the intervention specialist and (b) the general education classroom plus resource room with the intervention specialist. The levels move from the general education classroom to a part-time or full-time special education classroom, special school, residential school, then hospitals and treatment centers (Yell et al., 2020). Edwin Martin, the Director of the Federal Bureau of Education for the Handicapped, helped Congress draft the Education for All Handicapped Children's Act (EAHCA) of 1975, which began the conversation of providing

support for SWD, as appropriate, in the general education classroom (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999).

The goal of the framework was to support students with minor impairments placed in the general education classroom, with the wording in the framework also stating the importance of providing students the special services when they are needed (Reynolds, 1962). The language of the federal law identified LRE as a continuum of services ranging from least to most restrictive (Taylor, 2004). The origin links back to legal actions such as due process, equal protection, and individual liberty (Taylor, 2004). In 1982, Biklen stated that the "principle of LRE is deceptively simple: The government must pursue its ends in a manner that least intrudes or infringes on individual rights" (as cited in Taylor, 2004, p. 42). Reynolds (1962) recommended reviewing the programs instead of relying exclusively on the classification of children.

The developer of the LRE principle, Reynolds (1962), seemed to favor the general education classroom but implied that the most restrictive placement may be appropriate for some SWD. The ambiguity of the language used to define LRE led to multiple, sometimes conflicting, interpretations (Taylor, 2004). Some interpret the LRE principle to demand full inclusion in the general education classroom, and many SWD do thrive in such placements; however, other students may devolve in this environment (Shaw, 2008). Inclusion was vaguely defined and embraced various concepts within the classroom, extracurricular activities, and the community (Francisco et al., 2020). School should be a place where each member is supported, and a location where each student's educational needs are met (Francisco et al., 2020; Garrick Duhaney, 1999).

The continuum of placements (COP) facilitates a relationship regarding the intensity of services and therapeutic interventions as a condition of the needs of SWD (Francisco et al.,

2020). The COP was developed to ensure the students' needs were met, but the law was never intended to confine students to a single environment (Francisco et al., 2020). School districts should have a plan for students on the whole spectrum, so the IEP team can make placement decisions that benefit the students (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). In addition, the education plan must include placing the students with ASD in an environment that will benefit them academically and socially (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999).

The levels of placements are still the same as in the 1960s, but now educators focus more on placing SWD in the general education classroom because of how the law is written (Brock, 2018). To comply with federal law, the IEP team should first consider the general education classroom and provide validation for choosing a different placement (Brock, 2018). Since LRE was included in Public Law 94-142 in 1975, the courts made some of the decisions for placement when the district and families disagreed on the appropriate placement (D. H. Stone, 2019). The courts reviewed appropriateness by looking at the steps the school district used to try to place the students in the general education classroom, the educational benefits the students would receive in a different placement, and the possible adverse effects of inclusion of the SWD in the general education classroom would have on the learning of other students (D. H. Stone, 2019). Because of how the federal law is written, some court cases have found SWD have been put in the general education classroom inappropriately, leading to a lack of educational gains for the students (D. H. Stone, 2019).

Social Context

When speaking about SWD, people should remember to use student-first language rather than identifying them by their disability (Collins & Ludlow, 2018). This word choice may help teachers see the student as a person first instead of just the characteristics of the label (Collins &

Ludlow, 2018). SWD require instructional practices to help reduce the gap between graduation, employment, and post-secondary goals (*John Doe v. State of Ohio*, 2020; Katowitz & Thurman, 2017). Teachers must provide differentiation in the classroom to meet the needs of all students, including those with ASD, in an inclusion setting (Lüddeckens et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2020). Students with ASD are highly susceptible to sensory overstimulation, which may result in the impedance of educational progress and the ability to cultivate relationships with their peers in an inclusion classroom (Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Quinn et al., 2022). Students with ASD similarly benefit from direct instruction and prompts with redirection on interacting with peers (Anastasiou & Keller, 2019; Gee et al., 2020). Students with ASD are vastly diverse and need a variety of educational practices to be successful in the classroom (Anastasiou & Keller, 2019; Cappe et al., 2017).

Different placements may provide more intensive or exceptional teaching resources than the general education classroom (Agran et al., 2020; Giangreco, 2020). A special education classroom provides students with ASD a safe place to address sensory, social, and academic needs within a smaller class size (Cappe et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2022). Students with ASD may struggle with cooperation, assertion, self-control, hyperactivity, or internalizing behaviors that may need to be addressed through direct instruction in a special education classroom (Quinn et al., 2022; Roberts & Webster, 2022). In a special education classroom, teachers could differentiate instruction and the classroom environment to meet the individual needs of students with ASD (Giangreco, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). Some modifications of the instruction and environment can be too disruptive to the peers of students with ASD in the inclusion classroom; therefore, a special education placement is more appropriate (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Cappe et al., 2017; Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Students in the special education classroom can

learn the skills needed in the cafeteria and hallway while making friends within their room (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Mirenda et al., 2024). Students should receive a meaningful educational experience in any classroom placement (Giangreco, 2020; Mirenda et al., 2024).

Theoretical Context

Maslow's theory of human motivation encompasses a hierarchy of needs that must be met before students will be motivated to learn (Maslow, 1943). Maslow's (1943) theory suggests that all physiological needs must be met first. Physiological conditions include the basic human necessities of air, water, and food. Next, personal safety needs must be met for the individual to advance to the next level of conditions, which is meeting the need for belongingness and love. Students must feel safe in a comfortable and secure classroom environment before being ready to learn. Third, students need a sense of belonging through building relationships with peers and teachers. Finally, increased esteem leads to self-actualization. Fourth, students with higher self-esteem will aspire to achieve and eventually reach the fifth level of self-actualization or fulfillment in their lives. In theory, students will be motivated at the same level as where their needs are being met; therefore, students should be fed, feel safe, and feel a sense of belongingness before students can be expected to learn (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Fisher & Crawford, 2020).

When students with ASD are in the wrong classroom placement, they may not feel safe in the classroom setting and may not experience a sense of belonging (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Some students with ASD have sensory concerns, and to them, the lights, sounds, and several people in the room may seem threatening or painful (Ansorger, 2021; Cappe et al., 2017; Fisher & Crawford, 2020; Kawakami et al., 2020). The lights may be too bright and hurt the students' eyes, and the sounds may be too loud or high-pitched, causing

pain (Ansorger, 2021; Butera et al., 2020; Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021). In a class of 20 students, a student with ASD may feel like the room is overcrowded and may struggle to concentrate on what the teacher is saying because of other students making noise or because of fear generated by so many people in the room (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Cappe et al., 2017).

Students with ASD may struggle to build peer relationships, leading to bullying. As a result, the student with ASD may not be able to develop relationships nor feel a sense of belongingness (Howell et al., 2021; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Students may not be ready to learn until the first three levels of the students' hierarchy of needs are satisfied, specifically physiological needs, safety, and love (Akoto et al., 2023; Webster & Roberts, 2022). Learning occurs best when the students move into the fourth level; therefore, the IEP team should consider how each placement will affect the students' physical and safety needs and socialization (Akoto et al., 2023; Webster & Roberts, 2022). For students with ASD to be ready to learn, the IEP team should select the proper placement to meet educational concerns according to the students' hierarchy of needs (Akoto et al., 2023).

Another theory guiding this study was the adult learning theory that Knowles established in 1970 (Knowles et al., 2020). Through his adult learning theory, Knowles (1980) explained how and why adults make decisions. Adults make meaning and understand concepts based on how they construct previous knowledge (Merriam, 2008). In addition, adults have experiences that create feelings, reflective observation, critical thinking, and active experimentation in their decision-making (Cox, 2015).

By examining the adult learning theory, I was able to understand how IEP team members make decisions concerning LRE placement. The IEP team members may have had previous experiences or thoughts about the continuum of LRE placements. The parents on the IEP team

may already have an LRE placement in mind and may not be open to listening to other placement decisions. Some may have preconceived notions about the more restrictive placements and not listen to other options. At times, there can be controversy regarding LRE placements, causing a member of the IEP team to make decisions based on the full-inclusion debate in society, not the individual student's needs in the classroom (Kauffman et al., 2020). Adult learning theory helped display an understanding of how the team made decisions based on their background and experiences.

Problem Statement

The problem is IEP teams in different school districts and states use different criteria to determine the appropriate placement of students with ASD. This can leave room for interpretation by IEP teams and could lead to an inappropriate placement for a student with ASD, adversely affecting their education (Giangreco, 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). Additional research is needed because a gap exists in how placement decisions are made, specifically for students with ASD, or how the wrong placement will affect the students (Cappe et al., 2017; Kleinert, 2020). The law of LRE is defined differently by the courts and varies among geographical areas (Williamson et al., 2020). Some schools make decisions about the law based on the availability of placements at the school, not on what is appropriate for the student with disabilities (Anderson et al., 2022; Carson, 2016). The placement of the student with disabilities should be individualized by finding the appropriate placement to meet the student's educational needs (D. H. Stone, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). When looking at LRE for a student with disabilities, IEP teams should consider each placement's academic and social consequences (Anderson et al., 2022; Cappe et al., 2017). With the correct LRE placement, students with ASD should make educational and social gains (Anderson et al., 2022; Cappe et al., 2017).

Some may interpret the law as saying all children with disabilities should be in the general education classroom regardless of appropriateness (Giangreco, 2020). Because of this misrepresentation of the law, some school districts may believe inclusion is appropriate for all students with ASD, leading to increased sensory and behavioral issues and loss of academic progress (Bolourian et al., 2020). Schools should not be a one-size-fits-all model because students with different learning styles and modalities may be left behind (Giangreco, 2020; Yell et al., 2020). SWD require an individualized education and may need re-occurring assessments of the placement to ensure the student is successful (Yell et al., 2020). Schools should create the best placement possible for students to make the most significant achievement. Choosing the correct LRE may help students with ASD make gains academically, behaviorally, and socially (D. H. Stone, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). The IEP teams may struggle with finding the appropriate placement because of the ambiguity in the law, and this research may help administrators and parents understand how local school districts make placement decisions for students with ASD.

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria IEP teams use to find LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level. LRE was defined under IDEIA, which requires that "each school district shall ensure that to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or nonpublic institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled" (Legislative Service Commission, 2020, p. 1). The theories guiding this study were the theory of motivation (Maslow, 1943) and Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory as they explain how children with disabilities have different needs, how a one-size-fits-all classroom does not work for all, and how the adults' experiences inform their decision making. IEP teams reviewed the

student's educational needs, sensory deficits, and social and behavioral concerns to place students with ASD in the most appropriate setting that will benefit and meet the student's needs (Cappe et al., 2017; Yell et al., 2020).

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study is that the findings may help members of the IEP team to understand how to make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. This section provides some direction on how IEP teams find appropriate placement for students with ASD while implementing practices to include parents in the decision. It is hoped that this study will support educators in making LRE placement decisions and influences from a theoretical, empirical, and practical perspective.

Theoretical Significance

The theoretical significance of this study is related to the students with ASD and how their hierarchy of needs affects their classroom placement (Maslow, 2012). Students may feel a sense of danger or fear from being in an inappropriate placement and may not move through the hierarchy of needs to be ready to learn (Maslow, 1943). The IEP team should know and understand the students' sensory needs when making placement decisions (D. H. Stone, 2019). SWD learn differently and need different learning environments to make gains (McCabe et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Adult learning theory helps provide an understanding of how and why the adults on an IEP team make decisions for the LRE for students with ASD; the prior experiences of the people on the IEP team could lead to decisions based on personal history instead of the individual needs of the student with ASD (Knowles et al., 2020).

Empirical Significance

This study has empirical significance because a gap exists in the literature about the outcomes of LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. The literature review examines different LRE placements but not how IEP teams make decisions or the outcome of inappropriate placement decisions except when these inappropriate decisions tie up the court system (Carson, 2016; Williamson et al., 2020). Making appropriate LRE placement decisions may lead to fewer due process hearings and may avoid leaving it up to the courts to decide the appropriate placement for a child with ASD (Kauffman et al., 2020, 2021). Thus, this study is significant for schools and families to save time and money from due process hearings (Kauffman et al., 2020, 2021).

Practical Significance

Students with ASD will not reach their goals in a one-size-fits-all model; therefore, schools should have other appropriate learning environments available for students to make gains academically, socially, and behaviorally (McCabe et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). The results from this study may be a resource for IEP teams to guide them on how to make LRE placement decisions and display how students gain the skills needed in school because of proper placement (Giangreco, 2020; Yell et al., 2020). Persons with disabilities need an education that will help strengthen their abilities to be productive members of society (Giangreco, 2020). I gained more information about how area school districts make LRE decisions to prepare me for making these decisions in my school. In my area, many schools only have full inclusion, which sometimes leads to families finding schools that specialize in ASD (Anderson et al., 2022). There are some schools beginning to add special education classrooms in their districts, and I wanted insight on how they were making these placement decisions. It is my desire to share the

findings of this research with area schools in the hope that there will be change in how placement decisions are made for students with ASD.

Research Questions

The following central research question and the research sub-questions guided this study. The answers to the research questions provided information on how schools determine placement for students with ASD and how schools interpret the LRE law. The educational research literature shows that the LRE law is vague and may cause confusion leading to the inappropriate placement of a student with ASD (Lim, 2020). Students with ASD need an individualized education that includes placement to have the most gains in achievement (Giangreco, 2020). From the research questions, I examined how the schools make these decisions and why they are making them.

Central Research Question

How do IEP teams determine the criteria for LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level?

Sub-Question One

How do IEP teams ensure the hierarchy of needs of the students with ASD are met as they make LRE placement decisions?

Sub-Question Two

How do the IEP team members' prior experiences change how they interpret the LRE law and select classroom placement for an elementary student with ASD?

Sub-Question Three

What motivating factors do IEP teams use to change LRE placements for students with ASD?

Definitions

1. *Autism spectrum disorder (ASD)* – ASD is a spectrum disorder that can affect a child's ability to communicate or interact with others and the world around them (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020).
2. *Continuum of placements (COP)* – This describes different levels of restrictive environments, from the general education classroom to a residential setting, for educational placement of SWD (Reynolds, 1962).
3. *General education classroom* – A general education classroom is where students without disabilities receive instruction from a general education teacher (Reynolds, 1962).
4. *General education teacher* – A general education teacher is a content or grade-level certified teacher of students without disabilities who teaches in the general education classroom (Reynolds, 1962).
5. *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA*) – The IDEIA is federal legislation that provides information on LRE placements (Legislative Service Commission, 2020).
6. *Intervention specialist* – An intervention specialist is a certified special education teacher who works with SWD in an inclusion or special education classroom (Ohio Laws & Administrative Rules, 2019).
7. *Least restrictive environment (LRE*) – LRE is a federal law that refers to the educational placement allowing the maximum extent appropriate for a student with disabilities to be included with students without disabilities in an educational placement (Legislative Service Commission, 2020).
8. *Specially-designed instruction (SDI)* – This type of instruction is specifically designed to meet the individualized needs of SWD (Riccomini et al., 2017).

9. *Special education classroom* – A special education classroom is where a small number of SWD go for all or some subjects to work with one or more intervention specialists (Reynolds, 1962).
10. *Students with disabilities (SWD*) – Students with a physical or mental impairment that restricts one or more life activities (USLegal, 2022).

Summary

Students with ASD require specially designed instruction and various instructional methods; therefore, finding an appropriate placement will benefit the student's education (Giangreco, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). LRE was introduced as a framework that became part of federal legislation in 1960 (Taylor, 2004). The federal law described a continuum of placements emphasizing the general education classroom but only if appropriate for students with ASD (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999). The theoretical context of Maslow's theory of human motivation helped to inform why finding the appropriate LRE placement is essential for students with ASD. Also, Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory helped to explain how past experiences shape the decisions made by adults. This study has theoretical, empirical, and practical significance as educators found appropriate ways to make LRE placements for students with ASD at the elementary level. The participants in this study found that ensuring placement of students in their appropriate LRE placements positively affected how students with ASD perform educationally.

The problem is that IEP teams in different school districts and states use different criteria to determine the appropriate placement of students with ASD because of a lack of clearly defined, appropriate criteria in the law, which leaves room for interpretation and could lead to the placement being decided in the courts (Agran et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). This study

helped me understand how the different IEP teams made LRE placement decisions for students with ASD in elementary school. The law guiding LRE does not give clear guidelines for what is appropriate for students with ASD; therefore, it is essential to make individualized decisions based on the student's needs. Many schools in my area are moving away from full inclusion and beginning to using special education classrooms. Through this study, I gained insight into how LRE placements for students with ASD affected them educationally and how other school districts made placement decisions. In addition, the results provided me with information about how and when LRE placement decisions were changed for students with ASD.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

A systematic review of the literature was conducted to explore the process for finding the least restrictive environment (LRE) placements for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). This chapter presents a review of the current literature related to selecting LRE placements for students with ASD. First, Maslow's theory of human motivation and Knowles' adult learning theory are discussed, followed by a synthesis of the research on holistic education and legal decisions that guided LRE placement decisions. Then, a review of the literature to understand current aspects of inclusion and special education classroom placements for students with ASD is conducted. Finally, the need for the present study is addressed by identifying the gap in the literature regarding the process the individualized education program (IEP) team uses to select individualized LRE placements for students with ASD.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework provides an organized approach to understand a topic (Claxton & Dolan, 2022). The theories help with understanding the phenomenon being studied and provide an explanation or description of the topic (Claxton & Dolan, 2022). The theoretical frameworks guiding this study were Maslow's theory of human motivation and Knowles' adult learning theory. These theories provided an understanding of why LRE placement decisions are made for students with ASD in elementary school and how prior experiences and motivations affected these decisions.

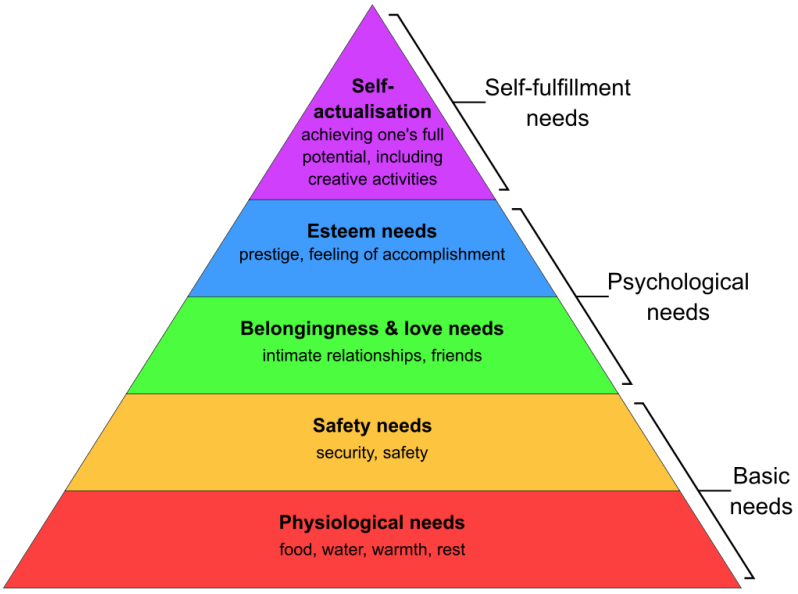
Maslow's Theory of Human Motivation

The theory guiding this study is Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation, helping educators understand how placement may affect a student in the classroom (Wexler, 2016).

Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation outlines a hierarchy of needs. Maslow developed the hierarchy of needs in 1943 because he believed the requirements are essential, natural, and can be applied to various situations, including education. The hierarchy is depicted in Figure 1, indicating progressive levels of need from the bottom of the hierarchy to the top. Maslow's (1943) theory suggested that human necessities begin with physiological conditions, the lower-order needs that include food, water, and air. The second level on the hierarchy is safety needs, where the student should feel safe from harm in a comfortable and nonthreatening environment (Maslow, 2012). To attain the third level, people need to feel a sense of belonging and build relationships with others (Maslow, 2014). Maslow (2012) described in his theory the fourth level of esteem as being related to achievement and the fifth and final level as self-actualization or doing what the person is meant to do in life. Maslow (2014) also stated people are not all motivated by all five needs simultaneously, but the needs may change based on the situation.

Figure 1

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



Note. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (2023, March 25). In *Wikipedia*. CC BY-SA 4.0 DEED. Retrieved March 25, 2023, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

When the lower levels of needs in the hierarchy are not met, the student may not have an interest in anything else. For example, regarding physiological conditions, if a student is hungry or thirsty, he may have limited ability to focus on learning (Maslow, 2012). Safety needs include the student's need to feel safe within the educational environment (Maslow, 2014). Students with ASD may feel anxious in a sensory-rich environment, which may overwhelm them, causing them to feel unsafe and hide to reduce stimulation and lose their curiosity for learning until a sense of safety is restored (Kawakami et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2022). Some students with ASD have issues with the lighting in the room, either being too bright or having the light color causes physical pain in their eyes (Akoto et al., 2023; Quinn et al., 2022). Other students with ASD may struggle with different sounds in the room. For example, the buzzing of the lights, the shuffling of children's shoes, the voices of students and teachers, the crumbling of paper, the tapping of

pencils may cause distractions (Akoto et al., 2023; Kawakami et al., 2020). Another sensory issue can be from being in a small-sized classroom with a large group of students, causing the student to want to hide or act out because of the anxiety produced (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2022).

Because of behaviors resulting from sensory issues and poor communication skills, students with ASD may also struggle with building a sense of belonging and relationships with peers, which is the third level in Maslow's hierarchy (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021). After meeting physiological and safety needs, the students should feel a sense of belonging and develop relationships with peers (Maslow, 2014). Some students with ASD may display stereotypical behaviors, such as restricted or repetitive behaviors (RRB) or behaviors related to sensory disorders; in addition to a lack communication skills, these behaviors could lead to peer harassment, causing the student not to feel safe (Kawakami et al., 2020; Quinn et al., 2022). Students with ASD may feel isolated from being unable to relate to peers and fear being in the classroom (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021). According to Adams et al. (2016), many students with disabilities, including ASD, never move past the second level of safety, preventing them from getting to Level 3 and beyond. Students with ASD may struggle with security and stability; thus, students will have a hard time building relationships. Students are not fully ready to learn until they reach Level 4; therefore, some students with ASD may never reach the optimal level necessary to learn new information (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Cappe et al., 2017). Some educators believe that students with ASD should be in an LRE placement that reduces their perceived safety threats by making accommodations for sensory needs, enabling them to work on peer friendships and feel a sense of belonging (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021).

Knowles's Adult Learning Theory

Malcolm Knowles (1980) developed the adult learning theory in the 1970s to provide guidance on how adults learn. The core principles from adult learning theory include what the learners need to know, their self-concept, learners' prior experience, readiness to learn, orientation to learning, and their motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2020). Adults may have previous assumptions about a topic and their prior assumptions guide their current decisions (Knowles et al., 2020). Knowles (1980) also connected Maslow's theory of human motivation to adult learning theory by showing how the hierarchy may affect how adults learn and make decisions because of prior experiences.

Parents participating in the IEP meetings may not have the prior experience or background to make a decision about LRE for their child with ASD. The parents' decision may be made purely based on their motivation to make the best decision for their child. The parents may stay quiet out of fear of not knowing what LRE is or because they are not comfortable speaking up in front of the professionals at the meeting (Knowles et al., 2020). Parents may also speak up about keeping their child in the general education classroom since they may have certain ideas about other classroom placements. Some members of the IEP team may or may not speak up at the IEP meeting since they may not want to speak against others or may not feel confident enough in their decision making (Knowles et al., 2020). This study will examine how prior experiences and motivation affects how the IEP team makes placement decisions for students with ASD at the elementary level.

Related Literature

This literature review aims to find information about current research on the LRE placements for students with ASD. This section begins with an explanation of what it means to

provide holistic education. Additional topics presented in this section include legalities, LRE, discussion of interpretations of LRE, discussion of most appropriate placement, ASD, and rethinking special education LRE.

Holistic Education

Educators should provide a holistic approach to education by concentrating on the student's emotional, physical, social, mental, and cognitive growth (Griffith & Slade, 2018; Miseliunaite et al., 2022). Educating the whole child matches Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation because teachers ensure students are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged (Gupta et al., 2022; Miseliunaite et al., 2022). Teachers can promote long-term development in all areas for their students by looking at the individual student (Griffith & Slade, 2018; Gupta et al., 2022). Students may need emotional support to help move them through their hierarchy of needs and may need educational support to help them emotionally before they are ready to learn grade level content in the classroom (Alghamdi et al., 2017; Maslow, 2012; Miseliunaite et al., 2022). Through a holistic view, educators must find the most appropriate ways to provide an education to the whole child with disabilities and find or create the right environment (Alghamdi et al., 2017; Roberts & Webster, 2022).

Despite the push to place students with disabilities (SWD) in the general education classroom, the placement has not significantly impacted SWD with graduation, vocation, college, and independent living skills compared to their nondisabled peers (Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Kauffman et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). Focusing on the quality of instruction in the general education classroom for SWD may lead to increased achievement (Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Some educators want to "fix" children with disabilities, assuming that children would then be able to operate without a disability

(Barrett et al., 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). Students are individuals; thus, they require an education to support learning at their individualized learning level (Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Students appropriately placed in the LRE may display improved confidence, less stress about school, and fewer negative behaviors in the classrooms; however, some data for LRE indicate the concept and implementation of the law are flawed (D. H. Stone, 2019). Furthermore, the law lacks guidance for teams regarding establishing criteria for selecting the LRE for SWD (Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Kauffman et al., 2020). Students with ASD need a holistic education to meet their individualized needs in the classroom (de Verdier et al., 2018; Roberts & Webster, 2022).

Autism Spectrum Disorder

IEP teams must understand the continuum of placements (COP) and appropriateness of each placement option for the individual student (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017; Cappe et al., 2017; Kauffman et al., 2020). Therefore, IEP teams should understand specific needs related to various diagnoses. ASD diagnoses have become more prevalent over the years, and instructional techniques have advanced to help these students in schools (Cappe et al., 2017; Gupta et al., 2022). The number of students in the United States diagnosed with ASD has tripled over the last 20 years (Cappe et al., 2017; Roberts & Webster, 2022; Webster & Roberts, 2022). ASD is characterized by a range of neurodevelopmental conditions, including difficulties in communication, social skills, and RRB (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; Jiujias et al., 2017). ASD affects each child differently, and because of the spectrum, some symptoms may be more intense than others (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). To be diagnosed with ASD, as specified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (5th ed.;

DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), children must display a minimum of three criteria, two from social impairments and one from RRB.

Students with ASD are different and should be considered individually when the team decides on the educational placement to meet LRE (de Verdier et al., 2018; Howell et al., 2021). Students with ASD require specially designed instruction, including high-leverage practices, explicit instruction, and intensive instruction (de Verdier et al., 2018; Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; Riccomini et al., 2017). Students may struggle with the demands of planning and organization, which will feasibly lead to increased challenging behaviors or a decline in academics (Howell et al., 2021; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Because ASD is a large spectrum, teachers should find the best methods for that student because one way may not work with all students (Agran et al., 2020; de Verdier et al., 2018; Love et al., 2020). Some students with ASD may require more intensive instruction than others within a special education classroom (Agran et al., 2020; Cappe et al., 2017; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Students with ASD may have a variety of factors affecting them in a classroom, such as academics, behaviors, sensory disorders, and poor social skills (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Love et al., 2020). When looking at LRE placement for students with ASD, the IEP team should consider how ASD affects the student's intellectual capabilities, social and communication skills, sensory disorders, and RRB (Kleinert, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). The latter issues of sensory and behavioral concerns need individual consideration from the IEP team (Love et al., 2020).

The goal for inclusion is for students with ASD to gain meaningful access to the general education curriculum (Barrett et al., 2020). Lack of effective instruction or teacher training should not be why students move from the general education classroom (Lüddeckens et al., 2021; D. H. Stone, 2019). A change of placement for a student with ASD should directly relate

to the appropriateness for the student, not the teacher; therefore, teachers should provide the personalized instruction needed before making placement decisions (McCabe et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019; Williamson et al., 2020). The educational setting should be individualized to the student, not the teacher (Barrett et al., 2020; Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017).

Sensory, Social, and Behavioral Concerns of Students with ASD

Sensory and behavioral problems may indicate an inappropriate LRE placement (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; Jiujias et al., 2017). Students with ASD may display different manifestations of sensory overload, such as restrictive, repetitive patterns of behavior, interests, and activities that may affect the classroom environment (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Students may display communication challenges, including being nonverbal or having a limited understanding of others (Cappe et al., 2017; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Suppose a student with ASD struggles to be in a room with several people. In that case, the functioning skills of this student may be dramatically reduced due to the stress of being in a room with 20 or more students in the general education classroom (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Lüddeckens et al., 2021).

RRB and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD) are common manifestations in students with ASD and may affect the student's functioning (Jiujias et al., 2017; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Repetitive or stereotypical movements may include hand flapping or spinning objects, as well as restricted interests, including an obsession with things or topics (Jiujias et al., 2017; Lin & Koegel, 2018; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). OCD is described as uncontrollable obsessions and compulsions that take much time and are considered a functional impairment (Jiujias et al., 2017; Losinski et al., 2017; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Stereotypical movements may also impede the learning of others in the classroom (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Losinski et al., 2017; Lüddeckens et al.,

2021). Depending on sensory input in the classroom, RRB and OCD behaviors may be increased because of the sensory processing coming from the classroom, such as too many people, claustrophobia, lights and sounds, or the feel of the chair (Jiujias et al., 2017; Lin & Koegel, 2018; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). RRB and OCD may affect how the student with ASD can function in the inclusion classroom (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). The student may require additional support from smaller class sizes to work on coping strategies to make academic gains (Agran et al., 2020; Jiujias et al., 2017; Losinski et al., 2017). Social issues, repetitive or restrictive concerns, and inflexibility may hinder successful inclusion in the general education classroom (Agran et al., 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018).

For some with ASD, sensory overload may affect their ability to function in an inclusion classroom, making that setting more restrictive for that individual student (Agran et al., 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018; Riccomini et al., 2017). This sensory overload precludes learning related to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, with the students with ASD needing to feel physically safe before moving up to the hierarchy to learn (Agran et al., 2020; Maslow, 2012; Shahrawat & Shahrawat, 2017). Teachers should recognize the student's sensory profile to incorporate sensory integration therapy in the classroom to support learning (Quinn et al., 2022). In stable sensory classrooms, the student with ASD can gain the information being taught; however, in an unstable sensory environment, the student may not be able to hear the information and may present with undesirable behaviors (Jiujias et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2022). Teachers can employ a variety of sensory integration therapy interventions that may help students with ASD function in any classroom (Losinski et al., 2017; Quinn et al., 2022).

Students with ASD may display hyper/hyposensitivity, leading to complications in the inclusion classroom (Agran et al., 2020; Losinski et al., 2017). Some students with ASD may

overcome the sensory overload to participate in the inclusion classroom, while others need to be in a more structured, smaller classroom with more intensive services (Agran et al., 2020; Riccomini et al., 2017). With certain students, a multisensory approach to instruction may overload the student because of the struggle to integrate into a plurality of diverse sensory experiences simultaneously (de Verdier et al., 2018; Kawakami et al., 2020). Students' acquisition of academic skills should not be sacrificed in the inclusion classroom (Behan, 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019). The educational environment must warrant gaining knowledge for all students (Behan, 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019).

Students with ASD may display abnormal reactions to sensory stimuli, affecting their learning (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Jiujias et al., 2017). A student with a sensory issue with loud noises or buzzing lights may start screaming or acting erratically (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Some students may hear sounds that go unnoticed by their peers or may suffer pain with relatively low sounds (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Jiujias et al., 2017). The light brightness may be excruciating for some students with ASD and lead to behavior issues, such as hiding from the light (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Students with tactile problems may struggle with holding a pencil without a sensory integration strategy (Gentil-Gutiérrez et al., 2021; Lin & Koegel, 2018).

Some students with ASD may have behaviors that diminish their ability to learn through typical teaching methods (Love et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). The behaviors and sensory issues of students with ASD may be challenging for teachers in all educational environments (Jiujias et al., 2017; Weiner & Grenier, 2020). Characteristics of ASD in school may manifest as aggression, depression, anxiety, opposition to change, intolerable sexual behavior, and self-harming behavior (Losinski et al., 2017; Weiner & Grenier, 2020). Students

may struggle with social interactions and have difficulty gaining knowledge, necessitating intensive social skills instruction (Ansorger, 2021; Love et al., 2020). Because of the problem with social interactions, students may be subjects of peer victimization in the inclusion classroom, which may lead to negative behaviors such as screaming, throwing things, or being physically aggressive with peers (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Love et al., 2020). The shortfalls in social interactions include nonverbal understanding and deficits in initiating a response, sharing, empathy, and comprehension; these may lead to poor academics, peer rejection, and social isolation and anxiety (Butera et al., 2020; Griffith & Slade, 2018) Reflecting on the theoretical framework of this study, these issues affect the student's progression up the hierarchy of needs, impeding authentic learning, and should prompt an IEP team to reconsider if the current placement is truly least restrictive and most appropriate.

ASD may present in various ways in school, such as the complexity of being able to socialize with peers (Akoto et al., 2023; Butera et al., 2020). Students with ASD may not have the skills to know how to engage with peers, leading to not acquiring friends and, thus, experiencing social isolation during noninstructional times at school (Ansorger, 2021; Butera et al., 2020; Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Students struggle with communication and interactions with their peers because of insufficient verbal and nonverbal communication (Ansorger, 2021; Butera et al., 2020; Fisher & Crawford, 2020). Some students with ASD may also lack understanding of displaying appropriate behaviors in different social contexts, trouble with imaginary play, sharing toys, or making friends (Ansorger, 2021; Griffith & Slade, 2018; Weiner & Grenier, 2020). Another deficiency in social skills is the ability to recognize the emotions of others through facial expressions (Butera et al., 2020; Griffith & Slade, 2018). Teachers should teach students how to interpret different facial expressions; as a result, they may better understand their

peers and read cues for when to stop a conversation (Butera et al., 2020; Griffith & Slade, 2018). The goal would be to understand all of these traits in the student with ASD and find the placement to meet his or her educational needs (Love et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020).

Holistic Education for Students with ASD

When teaching the whole child with ASD, educators must look at Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs and understand how to meet the student at each level (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Improper placement may cause students with ASD to feel like they are not safe, are socially awkward, or do not belong (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Love et al., 2020). Some teachers believe students with ASD are the most puzzling students to educate (Love et al., 2020). Students with ASD may respond with an emotion such as anger or annoyance because of the environment in which they are being educated (Draper, 2020; Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020). When looking at the whole child with ASD, teachers need to understand they may need structure, may need to incorporate sensory integration or sensory removal, and may need support for communication, social skills, and making friends (Draper, 2020; Jiujias et al., 2017)

For students with ASD, teachers should modify the environment, related services, curriculum, and material delivery in all settings (Cappe et al., 2017; Love et al., 2020). When students with ASD are in the wrong placement, the classroom environment may be stressful for them, their peers, and their teachers and may lead to poor coping strategies (Cappe et al., 2017; Draper, 2020). When students with ASD are in the appropriate placement, they should progress toward goals while meeting their sensory needs and making gains through the curriculum (Love et al., 2020). "The time a child spends in school is precious and should ensure all aspects of a

child's well-being are addressed, including the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual aspects" (Ohio Department of Education, 2018, p. 7).

Legalities

Federal legislation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) called for school districts to provide a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) in the students' LRE for SWD (McCabe et al., 2020; McKenney, 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019). Previously, SWD were excluded from public education because of their disability; thus, federal legislation was implemented to guarantee that SWD received FAPE (D. H. Stone, 2019). IDEA identified special education as a service, not a place where instruction must occur (Connor, 2018; Kauffman et al., 2021; McCabe et al., 2020). IDEA mandated first that SWD are educated alongside their nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate, and second, that changes to placement are based on assessment if education with supplementary aids and services cannot be satisfactorily applied in the general education classroom because of the severity of the disability (Bateman & Yell, 2019). The federal law does not just specify the LRE; the law also says most appropriate, and the definition of appropriate is based on the individual's IEP under the law, not on the philosophy of the school (McKenney, 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019). Congress never meant full inclusion; rather, the focus was meant to delivering meaningful education for SWD (D. H. Stone, 2019). Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) requires school districts to have a COP for SWD or agreements with other educational agencies to create alternatives for providing a COP (Bateman & Yell, 2019).

When IDEIA was reauthorized in 2004, school district personnel may have expected more clarity on LRE, but the law was still written in the same way, leaving LRE up to interpretation (McCabe et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). The inclusion movement became the

service delivery option for many school districts; however, the law never meant full inclusion, but placements should be individualized for the student based on criteria from the IEP (D. H. Stone, 2019). The law gave IEP teams the authority to determine how much time SWD are in the general education classroom and how and what the students learn (Bolourian et al., 2020). Considerations for SWD to be educated with nondisabled peers should be made based on academic and nonacademic settings (Alghamdi et al., 2017; Kauffman et al., 2021). IEP teams have a variety of ways for SWD to participate with nondisabled peers, as in an academic setting of the general education classroom if appropriate, or with nondisabled peers in lunch or specials (art, music, gym, etc.) as appropriate to follow the LRE mandate (Bolourian et al., 2020).

Court Litigation

Most cases in special education litigation are held in federal courts and have significant implications for special education decisions (Bateman & Yell, 2019). The LRE placements have overshadowed special education litigation even with the 1997 provisions of IDEIA amendments (Bateman & Yell, 2019; McKenney, 2017). “Whether the hypothetical hearing officer acted in compliance with the IDEA depends on one’s interpretation of the LRE requirement” (Carson, 2016, p. 1399). In other words, the law can be applied according to various interpretations and inadvertently affect the student negatively (Carson, 2016; D. H. Stone, 2019). The courts lack the knowledge and experience to determine educational policies such as LRE (Bateman & Yell, 2019; McCabe et al., 2020). With a lack of clarity in LRE policy, LRE may vary from district to district and state to state (Bolourian et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). Administrators and IEP teams need more understanding of making effective placement decisions for SWD, so placements are not determined by courts (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020).

School districts are required by IDEA to have options within the school district but are not required to have the whole continuum (Bateman & Yell, 2019). LRE court rulings follow the general rules: the school personnel should make the placement decision based on individual needs, and placement decisions should not be made solely on factors such as the disability category, services available, or administrative convenience (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Carson, 2016). The courts also ruled in favor of the parents being included in the decision of LRE placement for their child (Bateman & Yell, 2019; D. H. Stone, 2019). The IEP team should decide on the special education services needed by the student and develop the IEP to determine the best placement to meet the student's educational needs (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Kauffman et al., 2021). The last general rule mandated by IDEA is that SWD should be educated with students without disabilities whenever possible (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Riccomini et al., 2017).

Hill et al. (2011) studied special education litigation for students with ASD. School districts struggle to include parents in the educational decision-making, including placement determinations (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Blackwell & Blackwell, 2015). Blackwell and Blackwell (2015) found the following: (a) school districts lack procedural requirements in creating the IEP; (b) the IEP usually is not individualized toward the student, and (c) parents do not play a meaningful role in the development of the IEP. Parents not being involved in the decision-making for LRE placements adds to due process hearings and litigation (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Blackwell & Blackwell, 2015). Special education cases make up the most litigation hearings for education (Behan, 2017; Blackwell & Blackwell, 2015).

History of Court Cases That Changed Parameters for LRE Placements

Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education occurred in 1989 in Texas and was heard by the U.S. Court of Appeals (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Daniel had Down syndrome, and his parents

wanted him placed with nondisabled peers (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The school district put him in a half-day general pre-kindergarten and a special education classroom for the rest of the day (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Daniel could not participate without one-on-one support and did not master the content being taught, so the school district moved him back to special education classrooms and provided the opportunity to participate with nondisabled peers at lunch and recess (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The parents requested a due process hearing because they disagreed with this change of placement for Daniel (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995).

In *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* (1989), the court found the kindergarten class was too much because Daniel could not keep up with the curriculum and received little educational benefit. The court found the curriculum would have to be modified as much as 90%–100% for the general classroom. The court used a two-part test. The first part was whether the child achieved adequately in the general education classroom with supplemental aids and services. If not, then the student with the disability should be moved to a special education classroom (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The second part of the test was "whether the school has mainstreamed the child to the maximum extent appropriate" (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995, p. 4). The two-part test was subsequently used for other courts determining LRE for SWD (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995).

In 1991, *Greer v. Rome City School District* in Georgia also involved a student with Down syndrome (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Gruenhagen and Ross (1995) laid out what happened in the court case; when Greer's parents tried to enroll her in a neighborhood district school, the school officials wanted to assess her, and the parents refused, concerned the district would place the child in a special education classroom. The parents again enrolled her in kindergarten when she was 7, but the school again requested an evaluation. As a result of the

review, the school district recommended placing her in a special education classroom. The parents refused based on the placement, and the case was appealed to the 11th Circuit Court. The student remained in the kindergarten program of her neighborhood school even though the courts did not hear the case for 2 years because of the "stay-put" clause in IDEA. In *Greer v. Rome City School District* (1991), the court favored the student's current placement because she had made progress, and the school district did not consider the full scope of supplemental aids and services. The special education director testified that the IEP goals could not be addressed in the general education classroom, even with the supplemental aids and services. The courts did add to their findings a statement that this placement may not be appropriate for the student in the future (*Greer v. Rome City School District*, 1991). The court used the two-part test from *Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education* to create its version of the test, adding three criteria: (a) comparing the educational benefits with supplemental aids and services in the special education classroom, (b) consideration of the accommodations for the child with disabilities affecting the education of the other students, and (c) comparison of the supplemental aids and services needed to satisfactorily educate the SWD in the general education classroom (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). This test became the basis for the court's placement decisions (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995).

In a 1993 case, *Oberti v. Board of Education,* Rafael Oberti was a student with Down Syndrome. The IEP team recommended that he be placed in a special education classroom in another school district based on his evaluation before kindergarten (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). His parents refused the special education placement option, so the district placed Rafael in the general education classroom within the district in the morning and the special education classroom out of the district during the other part of the day (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The student made some academic and social progress in the general education classroom, although he

displayed some serious behavioral issues. Eventually, the parents agreed to a full-day special education classroom while the district explored options for mainstreaming (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The student made academic and behavioral progress in the special education classroom, but he did not have profound contact with nondisabled peers, leading the parents to request a hearing (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995).

The court ruled in *Oberti v. Board of Education* (1993) that the district did not provide adequate supplementary aids and services and found the methods used in the special education classroom could be implemented in the general education classroom. The court found the district did not provide sufficient evidence of his peers' learning being disrupted and did not take the steps needed to manage his behavior in the classroom. The court again added to the test above, saying the school must review the full assortment of supplemental aids and services, also considering a resource room and itinerant instruction, a comparison of educational benefits in educational placements, and the possible adverse effects on the nondisabled peers (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The court puts the burden of proof on the school district to show how they upheld the law of IDEA (see *Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No. 3,* 1994).

Sacramento City Unified School District, Board of Education v. Rachel Holland (1994) was another case heard by the Ninth Circuit about LRE (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Rachel was 11 years old, had an IQ of 44, and was in a special education classroom until the parents requested her to spend more time in the general education classroom (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The district said they would include Rachel with nondisabled peers in nonacademic settings, so the parents requested a due process hearing (Disabilities Rights Education & Defense Fund, 1990). The court agreed with the parents' placement of Rachel into a kindergarten class at a private school. The court found the district inflated the cost of putting her in the general

education classroom (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). This court used a four-part test that included (a) educational benefits compared to special education classroom, (b) nonacademic benefits of being with nondisabled peers, (c) the effect on the teacher and peers of having the student with disabilities in the placement, and (d) cost of mainstreaming the student (Disabilities Rights Education & Defense Fund, 1990). The district asked the court to clarify the role of educational professionals in assessing appropriate placement and if the school district must continue to subject the student to repeated mainstreaming before moving to special education classroom, but the court refused to hear the case, and the questions were not answered (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995).

Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No. 3 (1994), decided by the U.S. circuit court, focused on Ryan, a 15-year-old student with Tourette's syndrome and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Ryan was in the general education classroom, but he frequently disrupted the class through name-calling, profanity, insults directed towards teachers, sexually explicit language, and aggressive behaviors in the school (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Ryan received a few suspensions for punching and assaulting other students and emergency expulsion for assaulting a teacher (*Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No. 3,* 1994). After Ryan attacked a teacher, his parents initially agreed to remove him from an off-campus special education program called Students Temporarily Away from Regular Schools (STARS; *Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No. 3,* 1994). However, they changed their minds and requested a due process hearing.

In *Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No.* 3 (1994), Ryan's parents alleged procedural violations of IDEA against the school district because the school did not contact them before hiring an educational aide. The court agreed with the school district in the off-campus special

education placement, using the four-part test from the Holland case (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). The courts stated Ryan received no educational benefit in the mainstream placement; he did not model the behaviors of his nondisabled peers; he had a negative effect on the other students and teachers; and the cost was not an issue in this case (Gruenhagen & Ross, 1995). Educational placement decisions should be a collaborative process for the student's best interest because litigation takes too long and is too costly.

Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District (2017) was a court case deciding the appropriate FAPE for a student with ASD (McKenney, 2017). Endrew was in the inclusion classroom and showed little to no progress in the classroom. The parents argued that the district should provide achievement and a level of independence "substantially equal" to students without disabilities (McKenney, 2017, p. 11). The court ruled that this standard would be impossible to measure and to enforce. The parents moved Endrew to a private school where he received rigorous instruction that swiftly increased his skills. The Supreme Court ruled that school districts are responsible for doing more than the minimum to service students with disabilities but not the same level as private school (McKenney, 2017). The increased number of students diagnosed with ASD led to an increase of litigation over instructional strategies for students with ASD (Hill et al., 2011). The courts rule in favor of the districts with a ratio of 2:1, and there are a significant number of cases that end up tied between parents and the districts (Hill et al., 2011).

Ohio's Lawsuit

Recently, Ohio was part of a class-action suit because of how SWD are being educated and are not being prepared for academics, graduation, postsecondary education, employment, and functional skills; some say these failures are partially related to incorrect LRE placement

(*John Doe v. State of Ohio*, 2020). Eleven large Ohio urban school districts were named in the lawsuit (Brannan-Smith & Rosenthal, 2018). These school districts had low achievement scores and high segregation numbers for SWD (Brannan-Smith & Rosenthal, 2018). Because of the lawsuit, Ohio initiated a strategic plan to reach the whole child, including teaching students in their appropriate environment (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). The State of Ohio needed to measure achievement to see how well SWD are being educated in the school districts across the state (*John Doe v. State of Ohio*, 2020).

Students who are several grade levels behind require intensive instruction to gain those deficit skills to succeed in the classroom (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). This plan includes improving reading instruction, improving support for graduation, informing parents that SWD can receive instruction through age 22, and providing more professional development for teachers to help progress achievement (*John Doe v. State of Ohio*, 2020). The lawsuit was intended to create opportunities for SWD in the 11 school districts and across the state of Ohio schools to ensure all students receive an equitable education (MacArthur & Rutherford, 2016). Hence, all improve academically to reach their fullest potential (MacArthur & Rutherford, 2016). A further review of the specifics of LRE will continue to inform current and future IEP teams in making placement decisions for these academic improvements.

Least Restrictive Environment

COP for SWD is comprised of (a) inclusion, (b) special education classrooms, (c) specialized schools, (d) home-based instruction, or (e) hospitals and institutions (D. H. Stone, 2019). The IEP team should make the placement decision to determine which of these options on the COP is least restrictive for the individual student, following the process to determine the placement that is to the maximum extent appropriate for the student with disabilities (Bolourian

et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). The IEP team should include the parents, a general education teacher, a special education teacher, a representative from a local agency, related service personnel, and the student, if appropriate (Bolourian et al., 2020; Brock, 2018). The team should deliberate how and if the student's needs were met in the general education classroom (Brock, 2018). The LRE law also requires districts to provide proper staff training to work with SWD (Barrett et al., 2020; Bolourian et al., 2020). Therefore, as IEP teams consider placement decisions, they need to weigh staff training and experience related to the student's disability and individual educational needs.

The goal of LRE is to provide an appropriate education for SWD, but the legal aspect of LRE was developed without support from research or a theoretical basis (Bolourian et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018). The LRE law was never meant to be interpreted that all SWD should be in the general education classroom, as seems to be the current norm (Kurth et al., 2018; D. H. Stone, 2019; J. P. Stone et al., 2016). For example, students should be placed in general education classrooms when they can succeed (Agran et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018; D. H. Stone, 2019). LRE was identified as the COP to meet the student's unique needs, with the least restrictive placement being the general education classroom and the most restrictive being an institution or home-bound instruction (Barrett et al., 2020). In providing instruction in special education, teachers perceive "that what is fair is not necessarily equal" (J. P. Stone et al., 2016, p. 3). When looking at LRE, the same placement will not work for all SWD because the general education classroom is unfair to all students (D. H. Stone, 2019; J. P. Stone et al., 2016). The IEP team should review the student's individual needs to decide on the most appropriate LRE placement (Barrett et al., 2020).

For IEP teams to make placement decisions, they must understand the definitions of each option on the COP and the interpretations of LRE, which was not meant to be a specific setting (Bateman & Yell, 2019). Instead, LRE should be read as an appropriate placement to provide a meaningful benefit for a student with disabilities, whether in the general education classroom or a special education setting (Yell, 2019). IDEIA (2004) does not provide clear criteria for selecting the LRE for SWD, thus causing confusion and ambiguity in how IEP teams make these decisions (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018; Kauffman et al., 2021). LRE decisions should be determined by the individual functioning of the student and the classroom environment that least restricts the students with their academic, sensory, and behavioral needs (Love et al., 2020).

Discussion of Interpretations of LRE

For IEP teams to make placement decisions, they must understand the definitions of each option on the COP and interpretations of LRE. LRE is not meant to be a specific setting; instead, LRE should be read as an appropriate placement to provide a meaningful benefit for a student with disabilities, whether in the general education classroom or a special education setting (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell, 2019). IDEIA does not provide clear criteria for selecting the LRE for SWD, which causes some confusion and ambiguity in how IEP teams make these decisions (Barrett et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). Placement decisions should be based on the individual student, not the disability category (Kauffman et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2018). LRE placement decisions should be founded on the educational benefits, the nonacademic benefits, and the degree of disruption to the education of other students (Love et al., 2020; McKenney, 2017). The law states placement should be individually determined based on the student's ability and needs, not exclusively made because of the severity of a disability, the configuration of the delivery system, available space, or administrative convenience (McKenney, 2017; D. H. Stone,

2019). Some students with ASD may not function within the general education classroom, while others excel in the general education classroom (Agran et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019; Weiner & Grenier, 2020).

LRE decisions should be determined by the individual functioning of the student and the classroom environment that least restricts the student's academic, sensory, and behavioral needs (Lin & Koegel, 2018; Weiner & Grenier, 2020). Two differing ideologies from opposing perspectives are noted in the literature related to the LRE law. People with contrasting ideologies define LRE as the placement where the student can receive the most critical education (Agran et al., 2020; Gee et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). People with this perspective encourage teams to consider the appropriateness of other settings (Agran et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). People with the opposing view believe the LRE law in IDEIA means all SWD should be placed in the general education classroom (Behan, 2017; Weiner & Grenier, 2020); however, others believe inclusion may not be the idyllic classroom placement for some SWD (Agran et al., 2020; Behan, 2017).

General Education Placement

The general education classroom is the first placement option on the COP, generally regarded as the least restrictive; select SWD may benefit from being in the inclusion classroom with individualized supports (Barrett et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). A comprehensive inclusion program requires educators to utilize visual learning, individual work stations, and structured daily schedules to help students with ASD (Connor, 2018; Lim, 2020). The teachers provide a differentiated classroom to meet the needs of the students with ASD in the inclusion classroom (Lim, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Students with ASD will similarly benefit from direct instruction and prompts with redirection (Gee et al., 2020). Students with ASD are vastly

diverse and need various educational practices to succeed in the classroom (Gee et al., 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018).

Teachers may find strategies to help students with ASD increase their comprehension of the grade-level content and cope with their disability (Butrymowicz & Mader, 2018; Gee et al., 2020). Inclusion should be considered a process to be implemented through the collaboration of administrators, general education teachers, and intervention specialists (Lim, 2020; Thompson et al., 2018). Inclusion should be meaningful through making gains academically, and the students must be actively engaged in instructional practices, acquiring new skills (Barrett et al., 2020). Inclusive education should include vision, acceptance, leadership, resources, and support (Barrett et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Special education services in the general education classroom may include consultation with a special educator or push-in services with a special educator co-teaching in the regular classroom (Barrett et al., 2020). For inclusion to be successful, students with ASD should have access to the removal of barriers, opportunities for active engagement, and provision of support for teachers and administration to gain information on working with students with ASD, such as professional development and coaching in the classroom (Howell et al., 2021; Roberts & Webster, 2022).

Partial Inclusion Placement

Partial inclusion may include a combination of inclusion, a resource room, and the special education classroom (Gee et al., 2020; McCabe et al., 2020). Student service delivery models may look different depending on the type of services the students need per content, time of day, and sensory and behavior concerns (Barrett et al., 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Students with ASD may stay in the inclusion classroom and receive support from a special education teacher but may also be pulled to the resource room where the teacher provides remedial support

for students to help them understand the general education content (Barrett et al., 2020). The resource room may also help reteach specific skills the student lacks to succeed in the grade-level curriculum (Barrett et al., 2020). The resource room may help students improve their knowledge of content and gain more instruction time for comprehension skills while also providing a sensory break for the student (Barrett et al., 2020).

A resource room may be a scheduled time (i.e., daily or weekly) or be utilized any time the student needs reinforced instruction (Neves et al., 2019). Teachers should be vigilant about using the resource room to ensure the students continue to receive instruction in the general education classroom (Neves et al., 2019). The instruction in the resource room should augment rather than supplant the content provided by the general education teacher in the general education classroom (Barrett et al., 2020; Bolourian et al., 2020). The resource room allows some students to participate in the general education classroom, where they may not have been otherwise (Barrett et al., 2020; Bolourian et al., 2020). The teacher providing instruction in the resource room should attend to individual education needs within the inclusion classroom (Bolourian et al., 2020).

Special Education Classroom Placement

In the special education classroom, instruction occurs in a low student-to-teacher ratio, can be provided at a level appropriate for each student, and reduces comparison with general education peers; it may also relieve pressure that can lead to lower self-esteem (Giangreco, 2020; Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Kurth et al., 2018). A special education classroom provides students with ASD a safe place in smaller class sizes, providing more flexibility for teachers to address students' academic, sensory, and social needs (Giangreco, 2020; Katowitz & Thurman, 2017). Specific to students with ASD educational needs, the special education classroom teacher may

address skill deficits to help some students gain the skills needed to be in the inclusion classroom (Bolourian et al., 2020; Katowitz & Thurman, 2017; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Educator–student connections in the smaller classroom should help improve student outcomes (Giangreco, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). The special education classroom provides an environment in that students with ASD are less likely to be victimized by bullies than in the inclusion classrooms while also receiving explicit instruction for social skills necessary to interact with typical peers (Barrett et al., 2020).

More Restrictive Environmental Placements

The more restrictive placements on the COP include a specialized school, home-bound instruction, hospital setting, or institutions (Barrett et al., 2020). These are considered more restrictive per the COP but could be less stringent for the student's actual learning or ability to work through the lower levels of Maslow's hierarchy of human motivation (Akoto et al., 2023; Ansorger, 2021; Maslow, 2012). Some schools specialize in serving students with ASD, accepting only students diagnosed with ASD (D. H. Stone, 2019). The students in the specialized schools are usually parentally placed based on (a) needs not being met in the inclusive school, (b) specific medical concerns, or (c) the parents are looking for a specialized skill set (D. H. Stone, 2019). With the increasing prevalence of ASD, comparing the current number of students in a more restrictive setting is more complex than in previous generations (Brock, 2018; McCabe et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022; Webster & Roberts, 2022). Students in these placements predominately have low-incidence disabilities such as vision and hearing, dual-sensory, significant cognitive impairment, ASD, and multiple disabilities (Kauffman et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018).

Students in more restrictive settings need highly specialized staff to help them gain concentrated skills and knowledge (Kauffman et al., 2020; Kurth et al., 2018). Some school districts do not have more restrictive placements and may need to send students outside their district to find the appropriate placement (McCabe et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018). Due to a severe medical condition, a student with ASD may need to be placed at home or in a hospital to gain an education without compromising their health (Kauffman et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018). The students placed at home or in a hospital due to chronic medical conditions will demand a sense of security and learning stability (Cosier et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018).

Students suffering from threatening mental illness may also be placed in a hospital or institutional environment (D. H. Stone, 2019). Students with behavioral and emotional issues may be placed in an institution or hospital setting to increase the safety of the student, other students, and their families (Kauffman et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018). D. H. Stone (2019) noted these more restrictive placements on the COP are a last recourse for the students because some placements may foster isolation, and the student might not gain access to live in the community.

Discussion of Most Appropriate Placement

The law specifies that SWD placements must be least restrictive and most appropriate. Therefore, IEP teams must understand the most appropriate placement to aid them in making placement decisions (D. H. Stone, 2019). Most often, students with mild disabilities benefited from being in the general education classroom, but mainstreaming was unsuccessful, particularly for students with moderate to severe disabilities, emphasizing the importance of finding the appropriate placement (Kauffman et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Decisions regarding LRE, according to IDEIA (2004), should be made by persons who understand the law, are familiar with the student's evaluation, and are aware of the LRE options at the student's school

district (Bateman & Yell, 2019). Federal law gives this guidance in finding the appropriate placement (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). The decision for placement is made during the IEP process after the IEP has been developed (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). The IEP team should make placement decisions based on the student's educational aspirations and review the student's goals, objectives, special education and related services, and supplementary aids and services (Agran et al., 2020; Kauffman et al., 2020).

Placement decisions are based on various assessments such as aptitude, achievement, and social skills and behaviors (Agran et al., 2020; Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). Supplementary aids and services include interventions, consults, behavior plans, educational aides, resource room, assistive technology, professional development for staff, and additional supports as required (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). When deciding on the appropriate placement, the IEP team should not rely on just one criterion but look at various assessments and observations of the student (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020).

The IEP team should make placement decisions where the students with ASD can obtain an appropriate education (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). Placing a student outside the general education classroom would only occur if the student cannot achieve an appropriate education in that placement (D. H. Stone, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). IDEIA (2004) favors the general education classroom but acknowledges some students with ASD need a more restrictive environment to provide FAPE (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020). The IEP team should start by considering the least restrictive option, then go down the continuum until determining the placement for students with ASD where their needs are met (Lim, 2020; McCabe et al., 2020).

More research is needed regarding placement decisions because the absence of clear guidelines has led to several court cases (McKenney, 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019). The law of LRE is defined differently in various courts and geographical areas (Roberts & Webster, 2022; Williamson et al., 2020). All students deserve a quality education, but the needs of all students with ASD may not be met in the general education classroom (D. H. Stone, 2019). Furthermore, not educating students with ASD in the most appropriate setting may hurt the instruction for all students (Lim, 2020). Some schools make decisions about the placement of students with ASD based on the availability of the programs or resources at the school rather than considering what is appropriate for the student (Lim, 2020). IDEIA (2004) requires more inclusive placements for students with ASD, as appropriate, including the general education classroom (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017; Williamson et al., 2020).

Rethinking Special Education Least Restrictive Environment

The law of LRE may lead to the marginalization of students with ASD (D. H. Stone, 2019; J. P. Stone et al., 2016). Students with ASD should be part of the school community, although, for some students with ASD, the inclusion classroom may adversely affect them academically (D. H. Stone, 2019; J. P. Stone et al., 2016). Within the inclusion classroom, teachers should be able to meet the needs of all students, including those with disabilities (Barrett et al., 2020; J. P. Stone et al., 2016). Tkachyk (2013) stated some research-supported inclusion for all students with ASD; however, Tkachyk noted other research that showed the harmful effects on students. The inclusion classroom may be more restrictive for some students, leading to decreased learning and negative behaviors (Agran et al., 2020; Giangreco, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Placement in the general education classroom should be academically and

socially meaningful, but research shows students with severe disabilities do not make academic or social gains in such a placement (Agran et al., 2020; Kauffman et al., 2020).

Some IEP teams have misinterpreted the law of LRE to mean full inclusion for all students because of the wording in the law: educated with nondisabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate (Carson, 2016; D. H. Stone, 2019). Students with ASD should receive access to quality education based on standards-based instruction regardless of placement (Howell et al., 2021; Kauffman et al., 2020). Full inclusion may be more restrictive for some students with ASD, while others can excel in an inclusive setting (Agran et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). Within a typical school setting, a student with disabilities may be in a special education classroom and still integrate "with nondisabled peers in elective classes, extracurricular activities, or at lunch" (Carson, 2016, p. 1399).

Students with ASD can be included in areas that suit their needs; for instance, students may enter an inclusion classroom for an individual subject or join a team of interest (Carson, 2016; D. H. Stone, 2019). Most students with ASD should make educational gains in the general education setting (Carson, 2016; D. H. Stone, 2019). Students with ASD should be in the inclusion classroom if they make academic gains with the content and if it is appropriate for the student both behaviorally and with sensory demands (D. H. Stone, 2019). Some students with ASD need more intensive support, and the general education classroom may adversely affect the student academically (Carson, 2016; Giangreco, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018). Various issues have been raised about the quality of education for some in the inclusion classroom (D. H. Stone, 2019).

A student with a significant cognitive disability may be in the general education classroom but not learning the content being taught because of a significant cognitive delay,

causing a loss in academic gains because of the lack of developmentally appropriate instruction (D. H. Stone, 2019). D. H. Stone (2019) reported an increase in students with ASD in the general classroom; however, questions often remain unanswered about the quality of learning in this classroom situation. Teachers and parents question whether full inclusion of students with ASD for social benefits happens at the cost of the learners' individual needs in the classroom (McCabe et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018). Students with a mild cognitive disability could struggle with a grade-level curriculum more than a student with a learning disability (Agran et al., 2020; Kauffman et al., 2020). Students with a learning disability could achieve grade-level content with accommodations, but a student with a cognitive disability may struggle with grade-level content because of problem-solving and reasoning delays (Liebfreund & Amendum, 2017; McCabe et al., 2020). A differentiated classroom facilitates instruction to meet the needs of different learners in the classroom while making the grade-level content accessible (Kauffman et al., 2020; Roberts & Webster, 2022). Students with cognitive disabilities may require a modified curriculum that cannot be met in the general education classroom (Kauffman et al., 2020).

IEP teams may read this law as putting the student with disabilities into the general education classroom because that is the interpretation of the most appropriate placement (D. H. Stone, 2019). The IEP team should recognize the importance of ensuring each student with disabilities receives the best possible education in the classroom that helps the student grow academically, socially, and behaviorally (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). The LRE approach should support the LRE needed for each student with ASD to receive the best possible educational setting (Carson, 2016; Giangreco, 2020; McKenney, 2017).

The IEP team should calculate the appropriateness during the student's IEP meeting to make placement decisions (D. H. Stone, 2019). Some SWD, including those with ASD, require a

smaller classroom environment with low student–teacher ratios, behavioral support, social skills training, communication support, and therapeutic support, including sensory integration (Jiujias et al., 2017; D. H. Stone, 2019). The law is vague, and schools struggle with interpreting LRE; likewise, the courts lack the knowledge to make informed decisions for students with ASD placement (Agran et al., 2020; Bateman & Yell, 2019; McCabe et al., 2020). IEP teams should be deliberate when looking for the appropriate placement for students with ASD because, besides academic ramifications, the wrong decision may lead to litigation and the courts making placement determinations (Bateman & Yell, 2019; D. H. Stone, 2019). Procedural mistakes should be avoided when developing the IEP, and the team must ensure parents' rights are not violated during the meeting, including determining placement (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020).

Summary

This literature review provides a theoretical framework and a discussion of literature related to LRE for SWD, specifically ASD. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study were Maslow's theory of human motivation and Knowles' adult learning theory. Maslow's theory of human motivation is a crucial part of this study, as inappropriate placement may affect how a student with ASD can function in the classroom or facility (Flannery & Wisner-Carlson, 2020; Lin & Koegel, 2018; Maslow, 2012). Ideas from adult learning theory can explain how previous experiences and motivation affect how the IEP team makes LRE placement decisions (Knowles et al., 2020).

Teaching the whole child means addressing the individualized needs of SWD and determining the best way to provide an education (Ohio Department of Education, 2018). The lack of specificity in the verbiage of the law of LRE is the reason for the influx of LRE cases

going to litigation (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Carson, 2016). Various court cases have guided the LRE placements for SWD (Bateman & Yell, 2019).

The school districts must offer a COP to comply with federal legislation (McCabe et al., 2020; D. H. Stone, 2019). The COP ranges from least restrictive in the general education classroom to more restrictive placements in a hospital or other facility (Barrett et al., 2020). Because of the lack of guidance from the IDEIA (2004), differences exist across school districts and states regarding how LRE placements are selected and what appropriate means (Barrett et al., 2020; Bolourian et al., 2020; Yell et al., 2020). Students with ASD have many different symptoms that create a unique situation in finding a suitable placement; therefore, IEP teams should make placement decisions based on the whole child with ASD (Love et al., 2020). A gap exists in research for understanding the process used by IEP teams in determining appropriate individualized LRE placements for students with ASD—thus, the importance of this study. The theoretical frameworks and related literature affirm the need for further study on LRE for students with ASD.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria individualized education program (IEP) teams used to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the elementary school level. A case study design allowed me to gain insight into how and why the schools used the same or different criteria for placement decisions for students with ASD and the teams' interpretations of LRE law. Using triangulation, I collected the data through direct observations, interviews, and focus groups. To preserve confidentiality, I removed any identifying information about the students with ASD by using pseudonyms for students, teachers, and schools. I analyzed the data using computer coding to display pattern matching and completed cross-case synthesis. I showed trustworthiness throughout the research to uphold credibility, transferability, dependability, confirmability, ethical considerations, and concluded this chapter with a summary.

Research Design

Qualitative research is an alternative to quantitative research as a way to find thoughts and feelings from the participants about a topic in a natural setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The differences between qualitative and quantitative research include the researcher either has a personal role or impersonal role (Stake, 2010). A qualitative descriptive multiple-case study allows the researcher to investigate a phenomenon in the real-world context in a personal role (Yin, 2018). This section reviewed why I believe that qualitative research design and a case study was appropriate for the topic of selecting LRE placements for students with ASD at the elementary level. The type of case study used for this topic is also described.

Research Method

Qualitative research is conducted in a natural setting and displays the meaning people bring to a certain phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In qualitative research, the researcher is a human instrument looking to explore a particular topic (Stake, 2010). A qualitative method was appropriate for this topic because I sought to understand how prior experiences and motivations affect LRE placement decisions within the real-world context of schools during an IEP meeting. Through qualitative research, I gained insight into how schools make placement decisions for students with ASD while shedding light on how schools interpret the law of LRE (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I was the human instrument because I completed the direct observations and conducted the interviews and focus groups. Through data collection and analysis, I gained information about the participants' thoughts and feelings about LRE placements.

Research Design

A case study was a popular design in psychology with researchers such as Freud in medicine, law, and political science (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Creswell and Poth (2018) stated case studies were used across multiple disciplines, such as social sciences through anthropology and sociology. A case study should be significant and informative to those participating, and the case should be described in depth and detail (Patton, 2015). "The purpose of your case study would be to develop new knowledge about these processes and outcomes" (Yin, 2014, p. 258). Using a multiple case study design, the researcher should illustrate a single set of cross-case conclusions (Stake, 2010). Yin (2018) noted case studies could be used to explain the links in the real world that are too complex for survey or experimental methods. Case studies are a pathway to describe an intervention and the real-world context where it took place (Yin, 2018). Through a case study, the researcher may experience the cases in real-life situations to display patterns and

understanding of the case (Stake, 2006). According to Yin, the researcher can illustrate specific topics within an evaluation to enlighten situations where the evaluated intervention has no clear, single set of outcomes. Through the case study, the researcher answers questions about the how or why of the topic (Stake, 2010). A multi-case study provides a description of a quintan, or how the phenomenon is viewed differently in a variety of situations or locations (Stake, 2006).

A multiple case study was appropriate to examine the issue of how schools make placement decisions for students with ASD because I sought to understand how and why schools make these decisions at differing school districts. A case study research design gave me the ability to identify and see how schools make placement decisions for students with ASD. I used this technique because I gained insight into the similarities and differences between the participants and school districts to help with the understanding of the quintan (Stake, 2006). Through a case study, I learned how people understand and experience the studied topic (Patton, 2015).

Research Approach

Case studies may be exploratory, descriptive, or explanatory, and the researcher may bring different assumptions (Yin, 1981). This case study was a descriptive multi-site case study, as I sought to understand how and why schools made placement decisions based on the LRE law. I used a multi-site approach for my study and learned how IEP teams in various settings made placement decisions. A descriptive case study describes a phenomenon within the real-world context (Yin, 1981). For this study, I used a descriptive case study to describe a phenomenon in a real-world context of multi-sites (Yin, 2018).

A descriptive study was appropriate because I was able to explain how the schools made placement decisions for students with ASD by finding the answers to the research questions

presented in the next section of this chapter. A multi-site case study may show the different contexts and prior experiences that are involved with decision making (Stake, 2006). I gained an understanding of common relationships and decision making across multiple cases (Stake, 2006). This study showed how IEP teams make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

How do IEP teams determine the criteria for LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level?

Sub-Question One

How do IEP teams ensure the hierarchy of needs of the students with ASD are met as they make LRE placement decisions?

Sub-Question Two

How do the IEP team members' prior experiences change how they interpret the LRE law and select classroom placement for an elementary student with ASD?

Sub-Question Three

What motivating factors do IEP teams use to change LRE placements for students with ASD?

Setting and Participants

Qualitative research takes place in the natural environment where the problem or issue occurs instead of in a lab or experimental setting (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this study, three schools in northeast Ohio were chosen based on having a continuum of LRE placements, a mix of ethnicities, and a combination of male/female students with ASD. The schools were selected in northeast Ohio because about 15 years ago, this area had a movement of full inclusion in the

public schools, increasing the need for parents to look for specialized schools for students with ASD. Since that time, schools in eastern Ohio mainly used a full inclusion model, where all students with disabilities were included in the general education classroom all day. However, in the past few years the school districts have moved away from full inclusion and started incorporating special education classrooms. This study illuminated how LRE placement decisions are now made for students with ASD. The study included two public schools and one private school to describe how and why the different sites made placement decisions.

Setting

I used purposeful sampling to select the schools that have a continuum of placements (COP) and have students with ASD enrolled. I procured permission to conduct this research in two public schools and one private school. The public school district, Lincoln City Schools (pseudonym), has around 1,989 students, with 89.1% of the population considered low-socioeconomic status; the ethnic status includes African American 5.3%, Caucasian 83.3%, Hispanic 2.3%, and multiracial 8.4% (Ohio Department of Education, 2021). Within this public school district, 20.2% of the students have disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2021). The school district offers a continuum of services from co-teaching inclusion classrooms to special education classrooms and refers out of the district for home instruction or hospital if needed.

The public school district, Scholars Academy (pseudonym), has a population of 895 students, with 14.9% having disabilities (Ohio Department of Education, 2021). In this district, 25.6% of the students are economically disadvantaged, with 92.3% being Caucasian, 3.6% Hispanic, and 2.7% multiracial (Ohio Department of Education, 2021). The district provides co-taught inclusion classrooms, a resource room, and a special education classroom. The district

will recommend other schools in other districts if they do not have the services to accommodate students according to their unique needs.

According to 2021 data provided on their website, the private Christian school, Eagle Christian (pseudonym), has 730 students, with 76% of students of low socioeconomic status, 83% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 12% Caucasian. In this school, students with disabilities make up 18.5% of the student population. The school has three different LRE placements in kindergarten through 12th grades and the option of a resource room for remediation. The school has three special education classrooms with two intervention specialists as co-teachers. The elementary classroom has six students in kindergarten through second grade, the middle-level classroom has 12 students in Grades 3 through 8, and the high school classroom has 12 students in Grades 9 through 12. The rest of the students with disabilities are in inclusion classrooms and receive additional instruction in the resource room. The inclusion classrooms are co-taught with a general education teacher and an intervention specialist. The inclusion classrooms have four to six students with disabilities per grade level.

Participants

I selected participants based on their involvement in IEP meetings for students with ASD. The IEP teams' experiences can inform how and why placement decisions are made. The IEP team may include general education teachers, intervention specialists, parents, special education directors, principals or other administrators, and related service personnel such as speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, or psychologists (Beck & DeSutter, 2020). I targeted the special education director, general education teacher, intervention specialist, parents, and related service personnel at each school district.

Researcher Positionality

The researcher's positionality may influence the research through the researcher's interpretive framework and philosophical assumptions (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My interpretive framework was through a social constructivist view to fully understand how IEP teams made LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. The following sections begin with interpretive framework, philosophical assumptions, and then the researcher's role. There is a description of how the ontological, epistemological, and axiological philosophical assumptions affected me as the researcher. This study gave me a better idea of how different school districts made LRE placement decisions for students with ASD.

Interpretive Framework

Interpretive frameworks are beliefs the researcher brings into the research or guides their practices (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My paradigm is a social constructivism approach, which helped make sense of the data (Patton, 2015). I displayed the views of the participants while bringing their meaning into the study to reveal a complete picture through their answers to the research questions (Yin, 2018). As the researcher, I need to be upfront about my past and present experiences regarding LRE in my personal and professional life and report the findings from the participants without my assumptions influencing the data collected from the participants. I kept a researcher reflexive journal (Appendix N) to reflect on the experiences, recording my thinking to make the research transparent (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Philosophical Assumptions

Philosophical assumptions are essential because they direct the goals and outcomes; the assumptions are ingrained in our training and are the basis of the evaluative criteria (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Three philosophical assumptions (ontological, epistemological, and axiological) are

expanded in this study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ontological assumptions are how the research relates to the nature of reality and the characteristics of the research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Epistemological assumptions mean the researcher immerses themselves with the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Axiological assumptions are when the researcher details their values and biases based on the research topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ontological Assumption

Ontological assumptions connect to the nature of reality and the features of reality (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The researcher should discuss how each participant experiences the phenomenon differently (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The ontological assumption for this qualitative case study was the views of LRE placements for students with autism. Some participants may feel that all students with ASD should be in the general education classroom, while others may view LRE,\ or other placements such as partial time in resource room or a special education classroom as the appropriate placement for a student with ASD. Many school districts in northeast Ohio moved to full inclusion about 15 years ago. Recently, the districts started to include a continuum of LRE placements so the participants may agree or not agree with the changes.

Epistemological Assumption

Epistemological assumptions are when the researcher works alongside the participants to help understand the context where the research is being conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The longer the researcher studies the phenomenon, the more familiar they will become with the topic (Creswell & Poth, 2018). However, I limited my distance from the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My epistemological assumption is I have a deep knowledge of the topic and am

immersed in the culture, which added to accurate data collection and understanding of the culture (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I conducted the interviews, observations, and focus groups directly.

Axiological Assumption

Axiological assumptions are when the researcher is upfront about their biases and role in the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018). My axiological assumption is students with ASD should be looked at individually by the IEP teams to make the most appropriate LRE placement decision based on all the student's needs, not just academics, to safeguard their education, whether the placement is in the general education classroom or a more restrictive placement. Even though this is my belief, I reported the data accurately regarding how the participants reported the information gathered.

Researcher's Role

I have many years of experience, professionally and personally, in special education, specifically with ASD, that provides me with certain assumptions and biases. I am a former Director of Special Education at a private school and current Principal. I made the decisions with a team for the placement of students with disabilities (SWD), including ASD. I am also a parent of a child with ASD and have had to battle school officials over her placement decisions. In my experience, I have seen how the placement could help or hurt a student with ASD. I have worked with many students with ASD who are successful in the general education classroom because it is appropriate for them. I believe appropriate placement may unlock doors for students with ASD and give them access to a successful education. When conducting the research and interview questions, I did not display my beliefs through the questions or additional information about my experiences, especially those with my daughter, to prevent participants from changing their answers based on my beliefs or changing an answer if I brought my thoughts or feelings into the

research. When conducting the interviews and focus groups, I reported the information without adding to the situation with my opinion.

I took on the role of a human instrument in the data collection and understood the process because of my experiences (Patton, 2015). I conducted the interviews and completed the observations and focus groups. I kept assumptions and biases out of the data collection so that the findings were truthful and patterns emerged free from interference. I used a researcher reflexive journal to reflect on my experiences, record my thinking, and help make the research transparent (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I also completed the analysis of the data collected and created the codes for synthesis myself. I remained objective when reporting the data and provided enough evidence so the reader can come to the same conclusion.

Procedures

The procedures began with gaining approval from three different school districts to begin research. Once permission was granted for conducting the study in the school districts, I sought Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval before gaining consent from participants and data collection. After I had IRB approval, I completed a pilot study.

Permissions

To ensure that this study was conducted in school districts that have a COP and have students with ASD enrolled, I used purposeful sampling to identify suitable school districts. I then acquired a letter of permission from each of the district superintendents where I planned to conduct this research. I first received letters of permission from three school districts and then received IRB approval (Appendix A).

After I gained IRB approval, I conducted a pilot study using the first few individuals who signed their consent forms and agreed to be in this study. This allowed me to make small tweaks

to the research methods or questions before proceeding with recruiting additional individuals as participants. The purpose of the pilot study was to practice the data collection methods and ensure that the collected data would answer the research questions. Once I completed the pilot study, I updated the interview and focus group questions as needed.

Recruitment Plan

For this study, purposeful sampling helped to determine potential participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposeful sampling shows different perspectives of a problem or process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The IEP team making placement decisions for students with ASD provided the most valuable information needed to answer the research questions about placement decisions. I gathered data from various types of schools to learn more about how the IEP teams in these settings make placement decisions for students with ASD. Since I had already acquired written permission to conduct this research in three school districts, after I acquired IRB approval, I asked the superintendents of each district whom I should contact to send the recruitment letter. I emailed a recruitment letter (Appendix B) to the identified school representative to email to the IEP team for students with ASD, including the students' parent(s), in their school. Included in the recruitment email was a link for a screening survey (Appendix C) for interested individuals to fill out and return to me. This screening survey helped me identify individuals who were on an IEP team for a student with ASD in elementary school.

After reviewing the screening surveys, I emailed those IEP members who met the study criteria and agreed to participate in this study (Appendix D). The email sent to the selected participants included a hyperlink to the IRB formatted Consent form (Appendix E). I had three participants from Lincoln City Schools, four participants from Scholars Academy, and three participants from Eagle Christian Schools for a total of 10 participants. I also emailed those who

completed the screening survey but were not selected as a participant (Appendix D). After I received the signed consent forms, I began data collection.

Data Collection Plan

In qualitative research, proper data collection procedures help increase the study's reliability (Patton, 2015). The researcher needs to use multiple forms of evidence, create a case study database, maintain a chain of evidence, and be careful in using data from electronic sources with all forms of data collection (Yin, 2018). Data collection procedures included at least three sources to provide triangulation and increase the study's trustworthiness (Patton, 2015). The data collection methods for this study included direct observations, interviews, and focus groups. I collected all the data at one site before moving to the next school. I chose to observe the IEP meetings first because the interview and focus questions directly related to the meeting where the LRE placement decisions were made. The process for deciding on LRE placement was fresh in the participants' minds because the team had recently held the meeting.

Direct Observations

Direct observations provided a way to assess the behaviors of the IEP team during the meeting and gain insight into the participants' actions while in the meeting (Yin, 2018). The direct observations helped me understand how each participant on the team provides information to make placement decisions. Direct observations display strength in the immediacy of the case's context (Yin, 2018). The direct observations helped me understand the conversations of the IEP team for placement decisions in the school's natural setting. I documented the discussion about making placement decisions without adding confidential information from the meeting by completing the observation form in Appendix F at each site during the IEP meeting. I completed direct observations at each school site for student(s) with ASD within their district. IEP meetings

typically lasted 45 minutes to an hour. I attempted to observe each participant in an IEP meeting.

Direct Observations Data Analysis Plan

The information from the direct observations was transcribed into a Word document. The form for the direct observations was put in the document using pseudonyms to ensure confidentiality. I reviewed the information for common patterns from direct observations. Coding is one way to analyze the data from the case study. A code is usually assigned a word or short phrase that assigns a summative or attributive subtext for a portion of language-based or visual data (Saldaña, 2016). The codes help translate the data and provide meaning to the researcher to help with pattern detection and categorization (Saldaña, 2016).

I created a chart to organize the data collected from each individual participant and school. I started with the Research Question Organizer (Appendix I) to organize the data from the direct observations by the research questions, created some initial codes, and included my initial thoughts and notes. I provided a summarization of each case, documented the findings, and developed preliminary themes. The information was organized by which question the data answered. For example, all the data that answered the central research question (CRQ) were placed in one column and repeated for Sub-Question 1 (SQ1), Sub-Question 2 (SQ2), and Sub-Question 3 (SQ3). I then completed Stake's (2006) Worksheet One (Appendix J), that has analyst's notes to display preliminary themes that became prominent and expected utility of the data for developing the final themes. I also noted any differences between direct observations within the same meetings and sites. The data were reduced or eliminated by removing nonrelevant information from the observation.

Interviews

The strength of conducting interviews is that the participants may provide meaningful insight into the topic (Yin, 2018). I completed the interviews at Eagles Christian in person. The participants at the other two districts preferred Zoom for interviews. The interview took 45 minutes to an hour. After the interviews, I transcribed them immediately so I could send the transcription to the participant to review. The questions were posed to avoid preconceived notions and inaccuracies (Yin, 2018).

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What is the continuum of placements your district has to offer? (CRQ)
3. Please walk me through how the IEP team makes placement decisions for students with ASD. (CRQ)
4. What criteria does the team use to make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD? (SQ1)
5. How does the IEP team individualize placement decisions for the student with ASD? (SQ1)
6. How often is a placement changed mid-school year? Moreover, why does this placement change? (SQ3)
7. What differences exist in the inclusion and special education classes? (SQ1)
8. How do the instructional practices in the inclusion classrooms differ from the general education classrooms without students with disabilities? (SQ1)
9. How do academic concerns affect classroom placement? (SQ1)
10. How do the student's sensory issues affect classroom placement? (SQ1)

11. How does the student's behavior affect placement? (SQ1)
12. How does your school district define LRE? Why? (CRQ)
13. How do you define LRE? (CRQ)
14. How is the instruction different in inclusion and special education classrooms? (SQ1)
15. What accommodations are made for students with ASD in the inclusion and special education classrooms? (SQ1)
16. What are your views on placement for students with ASD? (SQ2)
17. What is your prior experience with selecting LRE for students with autism? (SQ2)
18. Have you ever experienced conflict when being part of an IEP team making placement decisions? (SQ2)
19. Have you disagreed with a LRE placement? Why? (SQ2)
20. What were the student's academics, behavior, sensory, and social concerns prior to the IEP meeting? Did these concerns change when the student with ASD was moved to an appropriate LRE placement? (SQ3)

Question 1 is a knowledge question (Patton, 2015). The question was intended to be relatively straightforward and nonthreatening and to help develop rapport between the participant and me (Patton, 2015). The remaining questions were adjusted by me, as necessary for each participant, based on the responses from the IEP team members.

Questions 2 through 4 helped me to discover the continuum placements the schools offered and how decisions for utilizing these placements are made at the district level. Different types of LRE placements for students with ASD incorporate inclusion, special education classroom, specialized school, home instruction, or hospitals and institutions (McCabe et al., 2020). Interview Questions 2 through 4 helped to provide information about how the district

made placement decisions (McCabe et al., 2020; Yell et al., 2020). LRE placement is one of the most prolific causes of legal action in education, tying up the courts because school districts and families disagree (Barrett et al., 2020; Yell et al., 2020).

Questions 5 through 11 identified how the placement decisions are individualized for the student. Students with ASD have varying needs, and some placement decisions, if not appropriate, may disrupt learning for both the students with ASD and their peers (de Verdier et al., 2018).

Questions 12 and 13 showed how the law of LRE is defined differently by the courts and geographical areas (Agran et al., 2020; Barrett et al., 2020). The questions helped with understanding the perceptions of both teachers and administrators regarding inclusion and working with students with ASD (Kirby, 2017; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Teachers and administrators need professional development to support students with ASD in the inclusion classroom (Kirby, 2017; Lüddeckens et al., 2021). Questions 14 to 20 answered specifically how the placement affects the students academically, socially, and behaviorally, how instruction is delivered, and the thoughts and prior experiences of the participants and the district about LRE placement decisions.

Interview Data Analysis Plan

I audio recorded the interviews, then transcribed the interviews to make sure I accurately reported all the information given. Because the interviews were recorded, I used transcription software to transcribe the individual interviews. I then listened to the interviews and read the transcriptions to ensure they were accurate. I utilized member checking to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. Member checking is having the participants read the transcribed interviews to ensure accuracy (Stake, 2006). I gave the participants 1 week to review the

transcribed interview and to send back any clarification or changes. I sent an email with the transcription with the deadline for review.

After completing member checking, I used Stake's (2006) analysis worksheets to organize the data collected from each individual participant and school. I started with the Research Question Organizer (Appendix I) to organize the data from the interviews by the research questions, created some initial codes, and included my initial thoughts and notes. I provided a summarization of each case, documented the findings, and developed preliminary themes. The information was organized by which question the data was answering. I then completed Stake's (2006) Worksheet One (Appendix J) that shows the analyst's notes to display preliminary themes that became prominent and expected utility of the data for developing themes. After I completed all the interviews from a single school, I noted any differences between the response of the IEP members at each school.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are designed for a small group of participants to discuss the study problem and gain insight on the views of each person (Yin, 2018). Focus groups may reveal new perspectives of the participants because of the conversation (Stake, 2006). The data collected from the focus group showed a collective understanding about finding LRE for students with ASD at the elementary school level (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Focus groups can be helpful when participants are hesitant to speak on their own, but all participants should be encouraged to speak up (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

I audio recorded the focus groups, so I requested that the participants say their name before speaking so I could identify each participant as they talked. I completed the focus groups with three people at Lincoln City and Eagles Christian and four people at Scholars Academy.

The focus groups were held in person at Eagle Christian, and the participants in the other two districts preferred a Zoom session. The focus groups took 45 minutes to an hour. After the focus groups, I transcribed them immediately so I could send the transcription to the participants to review.

Focus Group Questions

1. Introduce yourself and your role on the IEP team?
2. Describe what the law of LRE means to you? Does anyone else share this description or have a different description? (CRQ)
3. How are you involved in the LRE placement decisions in the IEP meeting? (CRQ)
4. What is your prior experience with making LRE decisions? (SQ3)
5. Do you feel like the IEP team takes into consideration your thoughts about the child? (SQ3)
6. Describe your experience in the IEP meeting regarding the LRE decision? Does anyone have a similar situation or a different experience? (SQ3)
7. Do you feel like you have a voice in the IEP meeting? (SQ2)
8. How do different LRE placements affect the child? (SQ1)

Question 1 gave information about the different roles in the IEP meeting. Question 2 provided more information about how the participants interpret LRE and sparked some conversations about the different views in the focus group. Questions 2 through 6 explored the participants' background and prior experiences for making LRE decisions. These questions also revealed the criteria used to make the LRE placement decisions for the student with ASD. Question 7 provided insight on how the various roles on the IEP team are heard during the

meeting. Question 8 helped to explain how the LRE placement affects the student with ASD and meets their hierarchy of needs.

Focus Group Data Analysis Plan

I audio recorded the focus groups, then transcribed the focus groups to make sure I accurately reported all the information given. Because the focus groups were recorded, I asked the participants to state their first name each time they contributed to the focus group discussion. I used transcription software to transcribe each focus group. I then listened to the focus groups and read the transcriptions to ensure they were accurate.

I utilized member checking to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study. I gave the participants 1 week to review the transcribed focus groups and to send back any clarification or changes. I sent an email with the transcription with the deadline for review. Then after the participants had each checked the transcript of their part of the focus group for accuracy, I changed the participants' names to their pseudonym before I began analyzing the data.

After completing member checking, I used Stake's (2006) analysis worksheets to organize the data collected from each focus group and school. I started with the Research Question Organizer (Appendix I); I organized the data from the focus group by the research questions, created some initial codes, and included my initial thoughts and notes. I provided a summarization of each case, documented the findings, and developed preliminary themes. The information was organized by which question the data answered. I then completed Stake's (2006) Worksheet One (Appendix J) that shows the analyst's notes to display preliminary themes that became prominent and expected utility of the data for developing themes. I also noted any differences between the focus groups within the same schools and sites.

Data Synthesis

After all the data were collected and individually analyzed, I synthesized all the data collected at the three sites. The data were reduced or eliminated by removing nonrelevant information from the worksheets. I completed Worksheet Two (Appendix K) to combine the data from all three data collection methods for each school.

Pattern matching provided the initial "hows" and "whys" of the case study (Yin, 2018). The data analysis displayed the answers to the research questions: How do IEP teams determine the criteria used to find LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level? How do IEP teams ensure the hierarchy of needs of the students with ASD are met through making LRE placement decisions? How do IEP teams change LRE placements for students with ASD when their hierarchy needs are unmet? Some schools misinterpret the law, and because of this, LRE may have different meanings across school districts (Kauffman et al., 2020, 2021). I used pattern matching to look for patterns across the other schools for similarities and differences in placement decisions by completing Stake's Worksheet Three (Appendix L).

Cross-case synthesis is used for multiple case studies, where the researcher synthesizes within-case patterns across the study while retaining the integrity of the entire research (Yin, 2018). Using this technique, a within-case pattern emerged, and the patterns added to the study results (Yin, 2018). The cross-case synthesis showed the similarities and differences among the different schools and helped display the criteria used for placement decisions across the schools.

Trustworthiness

The research practices I used for this study are trustworthy, ethical, and professional. As a researcher, I sought input from the participants to obtain confirmability throughout this research process. Seeking information from the participants is similar to gaining validation and

being transformative in the research process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Firsthand experiences are more likely to be accurate, thus adding to the trustworthiness of the case study than would be secondhand information (Yin, 2018). The qualitative researcher also gains trust by owning the biases they bring to the research and reporting the data accurately without letting biases affect the analysis (Patton, 2015). Trustworthiness involves credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility

Credibility is similar to validity in a research study, and I systematically searched for opposing explanations and interpretations (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). Credibility is achieved through multiple data collection methods to triangulate the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility depends on systematic in-depth fieldwork, organized and conscientious examination of data, the credibility of the inquirer, and reader and user belief in the value of qualitative inquiry (Patton, 2015). Member checking is another way to ensure credibility of the data (Stake, 2006). I asked the participants to review the transcribed interviews to ensure their accuracy. Another way to gain credibility is through prolonged engagement between me and the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement is acquired by spending enough time with participants to build trust and gain an understanding of the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement was secured through the amount of time I spent observing the IEP meetings, in the interviews, and in the focus groups.

Transferability

Transferability is how the research context can be applied to other contexts of importance to the reader (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I needed to provide a rich and in-depth portrayal of the participants' beliefs and experiences during the duration of the study (Lincoln & Guba,

1985). Transferability is also achieved through abundant and prolific data and analysis descriptions (Patton, 2015). Transferability may also be achieved through an audit trail (Appendix O) that includes keeping careful records and displaying my reasoning throughout the research (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). This process increases the reliability of the study because the participants should draw the same conclusions as the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). If this is not achieved, it may change the study's results (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Transferability is a way to external validity and adds rigor to the study (Patton, 2015).

Dependability

Dependability is similar to gaining reliability in quantitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Dependability is achieved through auditing the data to see if the same results are achieved (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Bloomberg and Volpe (2016) referred to using an auditor to complete a peer review to ensure dependability. They discussed that this process is undertaken when the researcher verifies the findings as consistent and able to be replicated. I selected two peer reviewers to examine the raw data and to see if they came to the same conclusions. The two peer reviewers reached the same conclusions as I did, although one reviewer suggested I look at the LRE law versus appropriate placement.

Confirmability

Confirmability is displayed when the researcher reports enough evidence, enabling the reader to come to the same conclusions from the data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Researcher bias should not change the study results, and the researcher should remain neutral throughout the process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability can be displayed through reflexivity when the researcher remains subjective in reporting the study results and remains true to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This process may increase trust in the results because the researcher

uses reflective thinking throughout the study to help the reader understand why the study is essential and how the results were reported (Creswell & Poth, 2018). I completed a Reflexive Journal (Appendix N) to increase the confirmability of the results. In this journal, I wrote about the research process and my biases as I moved through data collection and analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Ethical Considerations

Identifying information about a person with a disability could negatively affect the student, parents, researcher, and school; therefore, I used pseudonyms for all participants with identifiable names only known to me (Patton, 2015). I used a codebook to organize the original names with the pseudonyms and stored it in a locked cabinet separate from the data (Saldaña, 2016). Adverse impacts could affect the researcher and the study if the researcher does not remain objective; hence, I made every effort to stay objective throughout the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016). I gained approval from the IRB by following their guidelines with informed and written consent from the IEP teams, parents, and teachers. Information collected in physical form was inputted into a password-protected electronic database. The data collected in physical form will be kept in a locked filing cabinet for 3 years and then shredded and disposed of. The confidentiality of all participants and settings was upheld by assigning pseudonyms to all participants and schools withholding all other identifying information (Patton, 2015).

Summary

A qualitative descriptive multi-site case study provided me with the data needed to show how LRE placements are defined and how the placements are made in different schools in northeast Ohio. For this case study, I reviewed the data from each of the school districts to examine how they interpreted the law of LRE and how placement decisions were made. The data

were collected through direct observations of IEP team meetings, interviews, and focus groups with the IEP team members. Data analysis gave me the answers to the inquiry of the study (Patton, 2015). Using Stake's (2006) worksheets, I used pattern matching and cross-case synthesis to understand and display how the schools interpreted the law and made placement decisions for students with ASD. The data analysis revealed how IEP teams made placement decisions and how the schools interpreted the law of LRE. Throughout the research process, I took the necessary steps to conduct a trustworthy and credible study and reported accurate results.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria individualized education program (IEP) teams used to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the elementary school level. This chapter describes the participants in this study and the themes that emerged from the data analysis. I recruited 10 participants for this study from three different sites. The sites were chosen based on purposeful selection because of the district's continuum of placements (COP) for students with autism. I randomly selected pseudonyms for the three school districts and each participant. This chapter begins with a description of the participants given as participant profiles to help the reader become acquainted with each of them. Then, this chapter describes the overall themes and subthemes based on the data that the participants provided from my direct observations of the IEP meetings, individual interviews, and focus groups. This chapter describes the overall themes and subthemes based on the data collected from the participants.

Participants

There were 10 participants in this study from three different schools. The 10 participants were all involved in the IEP meetings and completed the interviews and focus groups. Two of the parents from the study did not know enough about LRE to add to the focus groups. They answered questions based on how their child was doing in school. A description of each participant is listed in Table 1, and then a profile of each participant is provided.

Table 1

Participants

Participants	School District	Years in Education	Highest Degree Earned	Position	Grade Level
Mary	Lincoln City	10	Masters	Special Education Director	K–12
Olivia	Lincoln City	4	Bachelor	Special Education Classroom Teacher	K–2
Chloe	Lincoln City	0	Associates	Parent	
Kimberly	Scholars Academy	15	Doctorate	Special Education Director	K–2
Ashley	Scholars Academy	5	Masters	Inclusion Teacher	K–4
Lisa	Scholars Academy	24	Masters	County Psychologist	K–12
Melanie	Scholars Academy	0	None	Parent	
Tina	Eagle Christian	7	Masters	Special Education Director	K–12
Patty	Eagle Christian	12	Bachelors	Special Education Classroom Teacher	K–12
Mike	Eagle Christian	0	None	Parent	

Mary

Mary has been a special education director at Lincoln City Schools for the last 3 years. She has been working in special education for 10 years, 7 years being a special education teacher. When she first came to this school district, many students were in more restricted

environments. She has worked over the last 3 years to help students with disabilities be in less restrictive environments.

Olivia

Olivia has worked in education for 4 years as a special education classroom teacher. Her classroom has students in kindergarten through second grade. Olivia is passionate about working with students with ASD and finding how they learn best in the school. She said she is very good with students with problematic behaviors, so students who need more behavioral support are placed in her classroom. Olivia advocates for her students educationally to ensure they feel a part of the school community.

Chloe

Chloe is a stay-at-home mom with three children. Her son was diagnosed with ASD when he was 2 years old. She said John did not hit the milestones like the other children when he was a baby. She expressed that his teacher has been excellent in helping her navigate being a parent of a child with ASD. John's teacher, Olivia, gives her strategies to try with him at home. Chloe admitted that she tends to let John get away with a lot, to avoid temper tantrums.

Kimberly

Kimberly has been working in special education for 15 years. This is her second year at Scholars Academy as the special education director. Before being a special education director, she was an inclusion teacher in middle school. Kimberly received her doctorate in educational leadership and uses that to help her in her current position with making sure students are receiving an appropriate education.

Ashley

Ashley has worked in the inclusion classroom for students in kindergarten through fourth grade for the last 5 years. She received her master's degree in ASD and stated that "her education helped her understand how to support students with ASD in the general education classroom."

Lisa

Lisa has been the county school psychologist for the last year. She enjoys this position because she gets to test students with disabilities at various schools. Lisa has been a school psychologist for 14 years, but this is her first year working in a county position. Lisa has a master's degree in school psychology and has been waiting for a county position for a few years.

Melanie

Melanie is a parent of two boys who are both diagnosed with ASD. Her older son, Ryan, is 8 and has also been evaluated for being gifted. His little brother, Jason, who is 5, is in a self-contained classroom. Mom stated that her older son started in a special education classroom because of his behavior, so she hopes his younger brother will be the same. She is a stay-at-home mom who says the boys take up much of her time. She is impressed by how much Ryan has grown since he has been at the school. Melanie stated that Jason has many behavior problems, making things difficult at home.

Tina

Tina has been working in education for 7 years. She initially received her bachelor's degree as a middle school general education teacher but then returned for her master's degree in special education. Tina was an inclusion teacher for 3 years and has been a special education director for 3 years. IEP meetings are handled a little differently because they are at a private

school. The public school district of residence is responsible for the IEPs, so Tina attends all the meetings with the public school district.

Patty

Patty has been a special education classroom teacher for 12 years. She loves what she does and would never want to change the classroom setting she teaches. Patty teaches math, science, and Bible for Grades 3–5 and 6–8. She has taught and built strong relationships with the students in the classroom for multiple years.

Mike

Mike is the parent of Sofia, who was diagnosed with ASD at the age of 3. He has four other daughters and one son; his son and daughter have been diagnosed with a specific learning disability. Mike and his wife recently separated, which has caused Sofia to have behavioral problems because he moved out of the house. Mike is pleased with the private school that Sofia attends because he has seen growth with her over the years. She is now in fifth grade and has been at the school since second grade. Before Eagle Christian, Mike hired a lawyer and worked with an advocate to sue the public district where they lived because he believed school personnel mistreated his daughter and she was in an inappropriate classroom placement. Mike felt that Sofia had so many aggressive behaviors because of the classroom environment, but the school district refused to move her to a special education classroom.

Results

The results of this study were analyzed through Stake's (2006) Worksheets One, Two, and Three (see Appendices J–L). Data were collected through direct observations, interviews, and focus groups; then the data were coded for key themes and subthemes. This information was

entered on Stake's Worksheet One and Two for each individual school; then themes were examined for cross-case synthesis for all three schools on Stake's Worksheet Three.

Theme Development

This next section describes the major themes and subthemes in detail, along with direct quotations from the participants. The first major theme is appropriate placement with the subthemes of (a) the LRE law and (b) the learning environment. The next major theme is prior experiences with the subthemes of (a) thoughts and opinions about special education and (b) voice in the IEP meeting. The third major theme is levels of functioning with subthemes of (a) cognitive abilities, (b) sensory concerns, and (c) behavioral concerns. The final major theme is placement changes with (a) increased or decreased academic skills, (b) behavioral challenges, and (c) sensory challenges. Table 2 below displays vital words and phrases to support the themes from this study.

Table 2

Theme Development

Key Words and Phrases	Subtheme
Major Theme 1: Appropriate Placement	
LRE law maximum extent appropriate, differences in understanding appropriate, law versus personal view, interpretations of the law	LRE Law
Small class size, inclusion with appropriate support, resource room	Learning Environment
Major Theme 2: Prior Experiences	
Perspectives of special education, teachers' perspective of inclusion, previous experiences	Thoughts and Opinions about Special Education
Parent's voice, when disagreements occur, who make the final decision	Voice in the IEP Meeting

Key Words and Phrases	Subtheme
Major Theme 3: Levels of Functioning	
Academic ability, changes in support needed	Cognitive Abilities
Number of students in class, lighting, noise	Sensory Concerns
Ability to control behavior, affect placement in inclusion class, built-in supports to improve behavior	Behavioral Concerns
Major Theme 4: Placement Changes	
Changes in academic ability, maybe in one content or all, accommodations or modifications to support academics	Increased/Decreased Academic Skills
Disruption of the inclusion classroom, hurting others, disrespect to teachers	Behavioral Challenges
Lighting, noise, or number of students	Sensory Challenges

Appropriate Placement

The first theme describes the participants' thoughts about appropriate placement versus the LRE law. Seven out of 10 participants believed the law meant having students in general education classrooms with nondisabled peers, but there was some confusion about what the term appropriate means. The participants seemed to agree that finding a placement where the student learns best is essential. Kimberly, the special education director from Scholars Academy, stated in her interview: "LRE means that the student is in the environment where they are best able to learn while having the maximum opportunity to interact with their peers."

LRE Law. The LRE law states that having the students in the general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate is necessary. The concern is that the school district officials try to comply with the law, but seven out of 10 participants interpreted the law as saying students should be educated alongside their nondisabled peers. In her interview, Mary said: "We

view the idea of the maximum extent possible as the environment where the student has the most opportunities to be educated with nondisabled peers."

Learning Environment. The learning environment may affect placement for students with ASD. The students may have sensory concerns such as the number of other students in the room, the classroom's lighting, and the room's loudness. Most students with ASD in this study were in the inclusion classroom with appropriate support or spent some time in the resource room. Olivia stated in the focus group: "LRE placements can be the main factor in whether a child is successful or not in the learning environment."

Prior Experience

Prior experience and personal biases can affect placement as suggested by Mike, Kimberly, Patty, Tina, Mary, Olivia, and Ashley in their interviews. I observed that other participants feel that students should be educated alongside their nondisabled peers because of various perceptions. Tina, Ashley, Patty, Mary, and Olivia discussed in their interviews how they have seen the differences in how students learn when they are in the appropriate placement. Kimberly stated in her interview: "We look at their individual needs and then examine what setting meets those needs."

Thoughts and Opinions About Special Education. Thoughts and opinions about special education may affect placement. Some parents refuse to accept their child being placed in the special education classroom. The parent's thoughts and ideas about special education may cause them to think the placement will stigmatize their child. The parents who participated in this study accepted their child's placement. Still, Mary and Lisa discussed experiences with parents who refused to agree to any placement except the general education classroom, and these led to the court deciding on placement.

Voice in the IEP Meeting. All three interviewed parents said they did not feel they had a voice in the IEP meeting regarding LRE placement. They stated the placement was already selected prior to the IEP meeting and that they were informed of their child's placement when they came to the meeting. During his interview, Mike explained that when he tried to challenge the placement of his daughter at her previous school, "The school district said that I didn't have any say in the placement, and she would remain in the current placement." Mike said that he had to get a lawyer and fight the district about placement, and then he removed his daughter from the school, and she was placed in a special education classroom at her new school.

Levels of Functioning

Levels of functioning are one of the major themes when deciding on placement for a student with ASD. When making placement decisions, school employee participants in the study stated that they collect data on the student's academic, behavioral, and sensory functioning. They used the data to decide the appropriate placement for a student with ASD. In the focus group, Tina stated: "The team examines all areas of development: academic, social-emotional, and sensory. We then examine what environment meets the student's needs the best." Ashley explained, "Some students may have a split placement based on strengths and weaknesses."

Cognitive Abilities. The special education directors and teachers all said they review the students' cognitive abilities when looking at placement. The IEP team said they review academic, behavior, and sensory data to see if they can provide support in the general education classroom for the students to succeed. If they cannot offer support in the general education classroom, educators then look at the least restrictive to more restrictive placements, such as time in a resource room and the special education classroom, to see what they feel best meets the child's needs. According to Tina in her interview:

> Academic concerns are a criteria for classroom placement. We take whether the students' academic needs are being met in their environment very seriously. If our goal is to educate students, we must ensure that students are learning to their potential in their current environment.

Sensory Concerns. Sensory concerns can affect how students with ASD function in their classroom placement. Some students are successful in the general education classroom with sensory breaks, but others may need a different placement to support their sensory needs. During his interview, Mike stated: "My daughter's behaviors in the general education classroom are solely because of her sensory issue. Her behavior practically disappeared when placed in the special education classroom at the new school."

Behavioral Concerns. Based on the participants' responses, behavioral concerns can affect placement in the general education classroom. Some behaviors are so distracting to the nondisabled peers in the classroom that the student with ASD must be placed in the special education classroom. Lisa stated in her interview: "Behavior is one of the biggest factors for placement changes because of the distractions to others." The placement may also cause behaviors. According to Patty in her interview:

> Student behavior can affect student placement. It is important for the team to consider the effect placement will have on student behavior. If there are behavior concerns, it is important that the team considers the cause/root of the concerns and then determines if they can be addressed in the proposed placement.

Placement Changes

Placement changes can happen for various reasons and are based on collecting data and the IEP team meeting to discuss the appropriate placement. Changes in placement may be

because of academic changes or behavioral or sensory challenges. Patty suggested in her interview:

> A placement is very rarely changed mid-school year. It can be a difficult transition to make mid-year, so it is avoided unless the team has deemed that it is absolutely necessary. A placement may be changed mid-year if a student is struggling significantly and all other supports have been exhausted and are not working. Either way, this must be approached cautiously and with full support of all people involved so that it can be successful. It also should have a well-organized plan that all parties are aware of more frequent check-ins with the teacher, keeping families apprised of how things are going, etc.

Increased/Decreased Academic Skills. A student with ASD may display changes in academic skills, which may lead to the IEP team changing placement. Although mid-year changes are less common, changes showing a student's progress may result in moving a student to a more restrictive or less restrictive setting. Patty stated, "A placement may also be changed mid-year if the team agrees the student is ready to try a less restrictive environment (i.e., start going to a general education class for one content area)."

Behavioral Challenges. Some students with ASD display serious behavioral concerns. These behavioral concerns can cause severe disruptions to the classroom and may lead to a classmate getting hurt or self-harm to the student with ASD. In her interview, Ashley described a student from Scholars Academy who started in the special education classroom in kindergarten because of behaviors and was moved to the inclusion classroom in second grade because behaviors improved. She explained that now changes are rarely needed:

> The only way that I could possibly see myself pulling him out is if he's having a really rough, like, social, emotional kind of day. This is when he's starting to get sick. For instance, if he's getting sick, it's the end of the world. And so there's a lot more like crying distractions to other students, things like that. He'll go up. The first thing we try is like calming down in the classroom. The second thing I'll try is the sensory room. We created a sensory room at our building this year; it is fantastic. And he will go up there for 5 minutes. He'll swing in the swing, and then he comes back down. And this year he has, like, a completely different child. So we always try to do those things before we come into my room and just do things in here.

Sensory Concerns. Each student with ASD may have different sensory concerns; some can be accommodated in the classroom, while others may need a change of placement. Kimberly stated in her interview that they will try to use sensory tools to support the student in the general education classroom if possible. In Tina's interview, she stated:

> We cannot expect students to learn if they are so overwhelmed by the sensory input in their placement. We do have some students who academically could be in an inclusion setting, but due to their sensory needs, they do not thrive nor learn to their potential in that placement. As a result, they receive instruction in the special education classroom.

Sometimes, the IEP team does not know how sensory input will affect a student with ASD until the student is placed in a classroom setting. Classroom placement changes are needed to support the appropriate learning environment for the student.

Research Question Responses

This section offers the reader concise answers to this study's research questions. The central research question helped me to understand how the IEP teams decided on LRE placement

for a student with ASD. The sub-questions show how the prominent theories emerged through the study of Maslow's theory of human motivation and Knowles' adult learning theory. The answers to the overall central research question emerged from the four themes to provide more understanding of selecting LRE for students with ASD.

Central Research Question

How do IEP teams determine the criteria for LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level? The IEP team reviews criteria from multiple data sources to make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. Most participants said they reviewed data about academics, sensory input, and behavioral concerns. Ashley stated in her interview:

> I think that there is no "one size fits all" placement for students with ASD. The team needs to consider the student's strengths and weaknesses then discusses what supports the student needs to be successful. Sometimes, there is a conversation about seeing if there is any way to do a split placement, meaning that the student is able to be in the general education classroom for their strongest class(es) but then receive other core classes within the self-contained room.

The participants also discussed whether the students could be successful with support in the general education classroom and then move from least to more restrictive.

Sub-Question One

How do IEP teams ensure the hierarchy of needs of the students with ASD are met as they make LRE placement decisions? Students with ASD hierarchy of needs are displayed through sensory and behavioral concerns. The participants talked about how the needs of most students with ASD can be met in the general education classroom through sensory fidgets and breaks. In contrast, others may need a change of placement to support their sensory needs in the

classroom. According to Lisa in her interview,

> We will try to bring sensory items to the students in inclusion. But some of our more severe students, if their sensory needs are so overwhelmed by people, crowds, or large groups, that obviously is a huge, sensory reason to have somebody in a more self-contained. But the rest of the things, whether they need like deep pressure as we can, we can build those breaks into their day so they can, you know, we have a couple of students now that are on like a sensory diet type throughout the day, and they do heavy lifting tasks. They can do a trampoline. They can have different items that they want to feel, and those are usually be able to accommodate it in general education settings pretty easily.

One parent and seven educators all said they have observed how concerns with sensory input can cause negative behaviors in the classroom.

Sub-Question Two

How do the IEP team members' prior experiences change how they interpret the LRE law and select classroom placement for an elementary student with ASD? Two special education directors, three teachers, and the psychologist began their interviews by saying they felt students with ASD should be educated with nondisabled peers; then, as they continued answering questions, they discussed why students need to be in a more restrictive placement. Members of the IEP team discussed how their prior experiences helped to make placement decisions for students with ASD based on varying levels of functioning.

Sub-Question Three

What motivating factors do IEP teams use to change LRE placements for students with ASD? The primary motivating factors that IEP teams use to change LRE placements for students with ASD are academic changes or sensory or behavioral concerns in the classroom that cannot

be addressed with support or accommodations. Tina suggested in her interview that placement changes do not happen often but can occur when a student experiences extreme amounts of distress. When this happens, the IEP team will meet to suggest moving the student to a more appropriate placement. Two of the special education directors and two teachers discussed that when some students with ASD show increased academic skills, they may make a partial placement change in the content area of strength.

Summary

This chapter gave rich details about each participant, the main themes and subthemes for the study, and concise answers to the research questions. Stake's (2006) worksheets helped to develop the overall themes and subthemes. The four major themes that arose from the study were (a) appropriate placement, (b) prior experiences, (c) levels of functioning, and (d) placement changes. I noted that all three parents who participated did not feel like they had a voice at the IEP meetings, and the LRE decision had already been made before the meeting. The data collected from the study arrived at the answers to the central research questions and the three sub-questions.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

Overview

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive, multi-site case study was to determine the criteria individualized education program (IEP) teams use to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) at the elementary school level. This chapter encompasses the interpretations of the findings for this study, a discussion of the results' implications for LRE policy and practices, and theoretical and methodological implications. This chapter concludes with limitations, delimitations, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion

The findings emerged into four main themes based on direct observations, interviews, and focus groups using Stake's (2006) worksheets. The four themes helped me to understand the criteria the IEP teams employ to make LRE decisions for students with ASD and how the theories of Maslow's theory of human motivation and Knowles' adult learning drive LRE decisions. The four themes that surfaced from the data analysis are (a) appropriate placement, (b) prior experiences, (c) levels of functioning, and (d) placement changes.

Summary of Thematic Findings

As described above, four major themes emanated from the data analysis for this study. In this study, I sought to understand how IEP team members make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. Four overall major themes emerged from the data analysis. Appropriate placement can look different to each participant because each person may have a different understanding of the appropriate placement for a student with autism. There is some debate about how the law is written, so I asked for interpretations of the LRE law in my data collection.

The participants debated whether the law meant all students should be in the general education classroom or if other placements were appropriate. I found that the data in this study showed that understanding how the learning environment affects students with ASD is essential when making placement decisions.

The participants' prior experiences may affect how placement decisions are made. The educators all used their experience with placements from other students to make placement decisions for students with ASD. The data gathered to make placement decisions leads to the levels of functioning of students with ASD. Information regarding a student's academic levels, sensory processing concerns, and behavioral concerns is needed to make placement decisions for students with ASD. The following section provides an interpretation of the theme findings.

Interpretation of Findings

This study examined the criteria the participants of the IEP teams used to make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. The data collection process targeted understanding the experience of various roles on the IEP team. The study began with direct observation of the IEP meeting at each school, followed by individual interviews and focus groups at each location. Each data collection method provided a unique understanding of how the different roles function on the IEP team.

Roles on the IEP Team

Through the data collection methods, I determined how the people on the IEP team interacted during the meeting in their different roles. The special education directors made the final decisions on placements, but the teachers and psychologists provided the data to guide the final decision. Parents did not have a say in this part of the IEP because it was written before the IEP meeting. More insight goes into making placement decisions than just collecting data about

the student's academic level, sensory concerns, and behavioral concerns. Prior experiences of the educators helped them make decisions for students with ASD. The three special education directors, three teachers, and the psychologist said they would review the data individually for each student. However, their prior placements for students with ASD with similar academic skills, sensory input, and behavior concerns helped guide placement decisions. Knowles' adult learning theory explains how adults make decisions based on previous experiences (Knowles et al., 2020). Based on the participants' experiences, they perceive how students will perform educationally in the different LRE placements. The parents of the students with ASD had different prior experiences with LRE placement than the educators.

Three parents participated in this study, and none of them felt they could provide input on their child's LRE placement. Parents did not have the opportunity to participate or hear why the LRE placement was made for their child. The teachers read over that part of the IEP quickly and did not allow asking questions for that section. Two parents did not know what LRE placement meant, so they would not know what questions to ask or how to advocate for their child.

Another parent had a poor experience with his daughter's LRE placement at a previous school. He did not speak up during my study about LRE placement because his daughter is in a special education classroom and is successful in this placement. Parents should have a role on the IEP team and be allowed to speak and advocate for their children. Because the general education classroom was inappropriate for Mike's daughter, he learned more about other options. He ended up pulling his daughter from the school district and placing her in a private school. According to Knowles' adult learning theory, some parents may not be comfortable speaking up in the IEP meeting (Knowles et al., 2020). In this study, only one out of three parents said they spoke up during an IEP meeting.

LRE Law Versus Appropriate Placement

As I conducted the research, it was noted that all the interviews of the educators started with favoring the placement of students with ASD in the general education classroom. There seems to be some conflict with the law because it is often interpreted as putting students with disabilities in the general education classroom; however, the LRE law states that students with disabilities should be educated in the general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate, but some educators are confused on what the maximum extent appropriate means. They try to follow the law and try to comply with putting students in the general education classroom, but they also realize this setting does not work for all students with ASD. The special education directors, intervention specialists, and the psychologist in all three districts in this study discussed that there is little guidance on what appropriate means and how they ensure they are following the law.

The educators in this study want the students to be in an LRE placement where students thrive and flourish academically. Appropriate placement does not look the same for everyone and needs to be individualized for the student with ASD. The goal is to understand the appropriate placement for a student with ASD. There was an overall theme in this study of finding the best placement for the students with ASD that meets their hierarchy of needs. Maslow's theory of human motivation helps to understand why students have sensory or behavioral changes in an inappropriate placement. According to Maslow (1943), students must move through each level of the hierarchy of needs before they are ready to learn. An appropriate placement can affect the student's learning ability in the classroom.

Placement Decisions

The educators who participated in the study discussed three areas they reviewed to make placement decisions: academic levels, sensory concerns, and behavioral challenges. All three special education directors expressed the necessity of collecting data on academic, sensory, and behavioral concerns before making placement decisions. The IEP team must interpret how these areas affect placement and the importance of finding an appropriate placement. Academic concerns may affect how well the student performs in the general education classroom. The data to support academic level is IQ score and achievement levels, and then the IEP team reviews the support the students will need to be successful. If the required support is more significant than the intervention specialist can provide in the general education classroom, they will look at a more restrictive placement.

Sensory input was another area the educators in the study reported as a primary factor in placement changes for students with ASD. There are a variety of tools educators can use to support sensory input in the general education classroom. Most students' needs can be met in the classroom with various sensory tools. Educators can use various sensory tools in the general education classroom to support sensory needs, such as using flexible seating, fidgets, heavy lifting, or breaks in the sensory room. The IEP team will try to implement various strategies to support students with ASD in the general education classroom, but this does not work for all students.

Students with ASD may struggle with noises, too many people in one room, or visual stimuli and may need a special education placement to decrease sensory input. Some sensory issues can impact the student's learning in the general education classroom. The description of how Mike's daughter felt in the general education classroom showed that her hierarchy of needs

was unmet in the general education classroom placement. Once her placement was changed to the special education classroom, her sensory concerns were met, and she was ready to learn. Students with ASD may need to be in the special education classroom because they are overwhelmed by people or need sensory breaks throughout the day. Understanding the student's sensory needs will help educators know and find the appropriate placement for students with ASD.

Based on the findings from this study, behavior is the most significant reason for placement changes for students with ASD. A student with ASD's sensory concerns may turn into behavioral issues and cause many disruptions in the classroom. Behavior specialists or related service personnel such as occupational therapists can help make placement decisions. Behavior affects placement when it is the mode students use to communicate their academic and sensory needs. From the interviews, behavior may be the effect of an inappropriate placement. If behaviors are so severe that the general education classroom is being disrupted, the IEP team needs to collect data to see if a change of placement is required to improve behaviors or find the cause.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

Data analysis from this study holds implications for the phenomenon's empirical and theoretical elements for finding the appropriate LRE placement for students with ASD and the participants' prior experiences. The participants' experiences were detailed in the data collection process through direct observations, interviews, and focus groups. The study revealed empirical implications through data collection.

Theoretical Implications

The theoretical framework for this study was based on two theories: Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation and Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory. Maslow's theory of human motivation helps to understand the hierarchy of student needs that must be met before students are ready to learn. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory has five levels: physiological, safety, belonging, love, esteem, and self-actualization. For students with ASD, their physiological and safety needs may be affected by their sensory processing. All the special education directors and teachers in this study discussed how sensory processing is one of the most significant factors affecting students with ASD in the classroom. For some students, there was not the kind of support that teachers in the general education classroom needed to help with their students' sensory needs. Some students struggle with too many people being in the room, loud sounds, or lighting concerns (all issues that are beyond what the general education teacher can change), which may make the students feel like their physiological and safety needs are not met, causing them to be unable to learn. The educators in this study discussed how the students may feel if their sensory needs are not met and the behaviors they may display in the classroom. Mike's daughter is an example of behaviors developing because she feared being in the classroom with so many people in one room.

Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation was the correct theory to guide this study based on the participants' experiences. Understanding how sensory input can affect the students with ASD's hierarchy of needs can help the IEP team find the appropriate LRE placement to meet those needs. The IEP team members can use this information to help make LRE placement changes for students with ASD. This information can help find the appropriate placement so students with ASD may be successful in school.

Knowles' (1980) adult learning theory was the second theory to guide this study. According to Knowles' adult learning theory, adults make decisions based on five beliefs: (a) self-concept, (b) learner's prior experiences, (c) readiness to learn, (d) orientation to learning, and (e) their motivation to learn (Knowles et al., 2020). The educators in the study used their prior experience to help them evaluate the data and make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD. This experience taught them how students perform in each placement based on academic, sensory, and behavioral concerns. Nevertheless, each of the educators noted that it was essential to individualize placements for students with ASD. Two parents did not know about LRE placement, which may have led to them not asking questions. The one parent's prior experience shaped his perception of this topic and IEP teams. He said he feels defensive when attending IEP meetings even though he had no concerns at the new school.

Knowles' adult learning theory was the correct theory to guide this study because it helped me to understand the participants' motivation. This study revealed how prior experiences guide the participants and how their perceptions shape their thoughts and feelings toward the meetings. The two parents who did not have prior experiences said they would appreciate learning more to be better advocates for their children in the future.

Empirical Implications

Previous research on LRE placements for students with ASD does not explicitly discuss the criteria for finding an appropriate placement or the outcomes of an inappropriate placement. This study's results agree with the findings of some researchers but oppose other research about LRE placement decisions. The participants said having a continuum of placements (COP) is important because placement needs to be individualized to the student. Previous research seems to agree that students with disabilities should be included fully in the general education

classroom. However, several previous researchers mentioned that ASD in every student may look different, making LRE placement decisions difficult for school districts (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017; Cappe et al., 2017; Kauffman et al., 2020). Because the number of students identified with ASD has tripled in the last 20 years, it is vital for school districts to know and understand how to make placement decisions for these students (Cappe et al., 2017; Roberts & Webster, 2022; Webster & Roberts, 2022). Based on the findings from this study, sensory and behavioral concerns appear to be the most significant factors that affect LRE placement for students with ASD. Educators should have resources available to make LRE placement decisions based on criteria and the available data. The findings of this study agreed with the McCabe et al. (2020) study that found that when school districts use data to ensure LRE placement decisions, the placement will likely be appropriate for the student.

Previous research is also limited to parental involvement with placement decisions; available research focuses on parents taking the school districts to court over LRE placement decisions. In this study, I found that the parents did not actively participate on the IEP team. Best practices say parents should be a part of the IEP team and participate in a collaborative process between them and the school district in writing the IEP for their child (Bateman & Yell, 2019; D. H. Stone, 2019). The parents in this study shared that the IEP was done before the meeting and read to them at the IEP meeting. They could ask questions, but none questioned anything about the IEP. When parents are more involved in the IEP process, there will be fewer disagreements between them and the school district, which may help prevent the court making the placement decisions (Bateman & Yell, 2019). The educators and parents should work together when making LRE placement decisions so that students have the greatest possible outcome in school.

Implications for Policy or Practice

This multi-site case study revealed that educators at school districts find appropriate placements for students with ASD by collecting data on their academic skills, sensory input, and behavioral concerns. Two of the three parents did not know what the term LRE placement meant, and all three parents did not have a voice in their child's LRE placement. The implications for policy and practice are essential for special education law to clearly provide an understanding of the criteria for finding LRE placement for students with ASD. There are also implications for involving parents in awareness of the LRE placement continuum and being more involved in the placement decision.

Implications for Policy

The federal law for LRE placement requires schools to educate students with disabilities in the general education classroom to the maximum extent appropriate (Yell et al., 2020). The current problem is that there is no definition for appropriate, and some schools moved all students with disabilities to the general education classroom even if it is not the appropriate placement (Yell et al., 2020). Two special education directors and three teachers discussed in their interviews that they work at school districts that moved to full inclusion, which did not work for some students with disabilities. All the educators agreed that most students with disabilities are successful in the general education classroom, but a small percentage need to be educated in a different setting. A classroom placement for a student with ASD should be meaningful and improve the student's success in the classroom (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell, 2019). Schools should use guidelines for discovering academic levels, sensory processing, and behavioral concerns to find the appropriate placement for students with ASD. Both the participants in this study and prior research agree that placements should not be based on the

disability category but on the student's level of functioning (Kauffman et al., 2021; Thompson et al., 2018). The law should use language that encourages educators and students to learn in the environment where they will be the most successful academically.

The policy should also require educators to explain the different policies in the IEP meeting, as in the case of LRE placement. Only one parent in this study knew about the LRE placement law because his daughter had issues in her placement in kindergarten, and the other two parents did not know the law they were being asked about. Parents should understand the different sections in the IEP law and be active participants in making decisions for their child. Parents should actively participate in the IEP meeting and help make the LRE placement decisions (Bateman & Yell, 2019). When parents are part of the decision process, there may be fewer disagreements and fewer court cases on special education policy.

Implications for Practice

The three teachers who participated in the study stated they noticed the practices of making the LRE placement for students with ASD tend to change based on the perceptions of the administrators in charge. The teachers did not feel that the school had something in place for the special education directors to follow, and their perceptions would drive the decisions for special education practices. Common policies should be in place that educators can follow at each district to ensure that best practices are followed instead of one person's philosophy (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020).

All the teachers in the study said that their current special education directors in their districts are outstanding and work to find the appropriate placement for students with ASD. All three special education directors also discussed similar situations before they were in their positions. School districts should have practices in place in their school districts for guidelines on

the criteria to use to select the LRE placement for students with ASD. All three districts had similar practices in reviewing data on the student's academic level, sensory processing, and behavioral concerns. School districts should use standard practices to find the LRE placement where students with ASD will thrive and succeed academically (Bateman & Yell, 2019; Yell et al., 2020).

Additionally, practices should be in place to educate parents and involve them in the LRE decision-making process. Parents should be equal team members on the IEP team because they can give valuable insight into their children (McCabe et al., 2020; Weil et al., 2018). None of the parents in this study felt like they were part of the LRE decision-making process. The educators in this study said the LRE placement is primarily decided before the IEP meeting. School districts should implement standard practices to make parents feel like team members at the IEP meeting. Parents should actively participate in the IEP meeting and help make the LRE placement decisions (Bateman & Yell, 2019). Parents may inform the IEP team of some sensory or behavioral concerns they see at home to inform the LRE placement decisions.

Limitations and Delimitations

This study has limitations and delimitations to make the multi-site case study more manageable. Limitations are possible weaknesses of this study that the researcher could not control. Delimitations are limitations that the researcher chooses to implement when conducting the research. In this section, I explain and describe the limitations and delimitations of this study.

Limitations

This study was conducted with the IEP team members for students with ASD in elementary school. First, this study was limited because there were only 10 participants, which is only a small representation of students with ASD in elementary schools. Not every member of

the IEP teams agreed to participate in the study due to time constraints. Another limitation of this study is that it was conducted in only three school districts in a tiny area of one state. To thoroughly understand how LRE placements are made, a study must be conducted across states and include more school districts.

Another limitation of this study is my personal bias. I am a mother of a child with ASD who had a poor experience with a LRE placement. Most of my experience in education is as a special education teacher, a special education director, and currently a principal. I was responsible for making LRE placement decisions for students with ASD for many years, and I still participate in those decisions as a principal. I purposefully did not share my personal story or experiences with the participants. I completed a reflexive journal (Appendix N) to document my thoughts and biases as I completed the interviews and focus groups. A reflexive journal allows the researcher to reflect on the results reported while completing the study (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Delimitations

A delimitation was placed on this study, as data were collected around the experiences of 10 participants from three different school districts. The research focused on the IEP teams for a student with ASD in an elementary school. The IEP teams for students with other disabilities were excluded from participating in this study. This decision was made to ensure the study would be manageable, and typically, the initial decisions for different placements happen in elementary-aged students. This study focused on the placements for four students with ASD but did not describe how LRE placement decisions for other students with ASD are made in the three districts. This case study was designed to understand the experiences and criteria the IEP team uses to make placement decisions for students with autism. Another delimitation is that the study

focused on students with ASD because of the sensory and behavioral concerns. Utilizing different IEP team members or different data collection methods may show different results.

Recommendations for Future Research

I completed a case study on the lived experiences of the members of the IEP team for students with ASD in elementary school. Because this is such a small sample with only 10 participants, future research should be completed to expand the number of participants and to include students with ASD in middle and high school. Ongoing research can find how the IEP team makes LRE placement decisions, how and when LRE placement changes, and parent involvement in the LRE placement decisions. Another case study can be conducted in a different geographical location to compare how LRE placement decisions are made by the IEP teams.

Another area for future research would be conducting a study with students with other disabilities. Such a study could examine how other IEP teams make placement decisions and whether they use the same criteria of academics, sensory processing, or behavior concerns for these decisions. Exploring other disability categories can help another researcher understand more about how the IEP team makes or changes LRE placement decisions.

Conclusion

The purpose of this multi-site case study was to determine the criteria IEP teams use to find the LRE placement for a student with ASD. Based on the results of this study, school districts must establish policies and practices to collect data and use this information to make LRE placement decisions. One practice that school districts should implement is to provide parents with information about LRE placements and include the parents in the decision-making process. Parents need education on special education policies before they will be equipped to

help make placement decisions. Parents should be an invaluable part of the decision-making process for students with ASD and be a meaningful part of the IEP team.

This study examined how IEP teams make appropriate LRE placement decisions. There is little guidance from the LRE law to guide IEP teams in making appropriate placement decisions. The law does not describe what appropriate means; therefore, school districts need some direction on finding the appropriate placement for students with ASD. Knowing and understanding Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs will help the IEP team find appropriate placements for students with ASD. The IEP team needs to review data for the student's academic level, sensory processing, and behavioral concerns to find an appropriate placement for a student with ASD. School districts must implement these practices to ensure students with ASD receive the best possible education. From my experience and the data collected in this study, I believe that students with ASD will thrive in school in their appropriate LRE placement.

References

Adams, R., Taylor, J., Duncan, A., & Bishop, S. (2016). Peer victimization and educational outcomes in mainstreamed adolescents with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *46*(11), 3557–3566. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-016-2893-3

Agran, M., Jackson, L., Kurth, J. A., Ryndak, D., Burnette, K., Jameson, M., Zagona, A., Fitzpatrick, H., & Wehmeyer, M. (2020). Why aren't students with severe disabilities being placed in general education classrooms: Examining the relations among classroom placement, learner outcomes, and other factors. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 4–13. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919878134

Akoto, Y., Nketsia, W., Opoku, M., & Opoku, E. (2023). Factors motivating students with disabilities to access and participate in university education in Ghana. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *42*(2), 261–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2022.2052818

Alghamdi, A., Ernest, J., & Hafiz, F. (2017). Teaching sustainable practices as part of a holistic education in the Saudi context. *International Journal of the Whole Child*, *2*(2), 29–40.

American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.books.9780890425596

Anastasiou, D., & Keller, C. (2019). Cross-national differences in special education. In *Handbook of special education* (pp. 911–923). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315517698-71

Anderson, E. J., Brock, M. E., & Shawbitz, K. N. (2022). Philosophical perspectives and practical considerations for the inclusion of students with developmental disabilities. *Education Sciences*, *12*(7), 478. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci12070478

Ansorger, J. (2021). An analysis of education reforms and assessment in the core subjects using an adapted Maslow's hierarchy: Pre and post covid-19. *Education Sciences*, *11*(8), 376. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci11080376

Barrett, C. A., Stevenson, N. A., & Burns, M. K. (2020). Relationship between disability category, time spent in general education and academic achievement. *Educational Studies*, *46*(4), 497–512. https://doi.org/10.1080/03055698.2019.1614433

Bateman, D., & Yell, M. (2019). *Current trends and legal issues in special education*. Corwin. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781071800539

Beck, S. J., & DeSutter, K. (2020). An examination of group facilitator challenges and problem-solving techniques during IEP team meetings. *Teacher Education and Special Education: The Journal of the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children*, *43*(2), 127–143. https://doi.org/10.1177/0888406419839766

Behan, D. (2017). *Taking sides: Clashing views in special education* (7th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Bicehouse, V., & Faieta, J. (2017). Idea at age forty: Weathering common core standards and data driven decision making. *Contemporary Issues in Education Research (CIER)*, *10*(1), 33–44. https://doi.org/10.19030/cier.v10i1.9878

Blackwell, W. H., & Blackwell, V. V. (2015). A longitudinal study of special education due process hearings in Massachusetts: Issues, representation, and student characteristics. *SAGE Open*, *5*(1), 215824401557766. https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244015577669

Bloomberg, L. D., & Volpe, M. F. (2016). *Completing your qualitative dissertation: A road map from beginning to end* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Bolourian, Y., Tipton-Fisler, L., & Yassine, J. (2020). Special education placement trends: Least restrictive environment across five years in California. *Contemporary School Psychology*, *24*(2), 164–173. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-018-00214-z

Brannan-Smith, S., & Rosenthal, J. (2018, November 8). *Disability rights–Ohio - disability rights Ohio and partners reach ground-breaking settlement agreement with State of Ohio in special education class-action lawsuit*. Disability Rights of Ohio. Retrieved May 27, 2022, from https://www.disabilityrightsohio.org/news/disability-rights-ohio-and-partners-reach-ground-breaking-settlement-agreement-with

Brock, M. E. (2018). Trends in the educational placement of students with intellectual disability in the United States over the past 40 years. *American Journal on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, *123*(4), 305–314. https://doi.org/10.1352/1944-7558-123.4.305

Butera, C., Ring, P., Sideris, J., Jayashankar, A., Kilroy, E., Harrison, L., Cermak, S., & Aziz-Zadeh, L. (2020). Impact of sensory processing on school performance outcomes in high functioning individuals with autism spectrum disorder. *Mind, Brain, and Education*, *14*(3), 243–254. https://doi.org/10.1111/mbe.12242

Butrymowicz, S., & Mader, J. (2018). The U.S. education system is failing special needs students. *The Education Digest*, *83*(8), 26–35.

Cappe, E., Bolduc, M., Poirier, N., Popa-Roch, M.-A., & Boujut, E. (2017). Teaching students with autism spectrum disorder across various educational settings: The factors involved in burnout. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, *67*, 498–508. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2017.07.014

Carson, C. (2016). Rethinking special education's "Least Restrictive Environment" requirement. *Michigan Law Review*, *113*(8), 1396–1426.

Claxton, B. L., & Dolan, C. L. (2022). *A step-by-step guide to writing a literature review for doctoral research*. Kendall Hunt.

Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District No. 3, 35 F.3d 1396 (9th Cir. 1994). https://www.leagle.com/decision/1994143135f3d139611244

Collins, B. C., & Ludlow, B. L. (2018). Best practices for students with moderate and severe disabilities: A rural retrospective. *Rural Special Education Quarterly*, *37*(2), 79–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/8756870518764636

Connor, D. J. (2018). Contemplating teachers' disposition and pedagogical skills within inclusive classrooms: Responsibilities of, and implications for, teacher education programs and in-service professional development. *DDS – Die Deutsche Schule*, *110*(1), 75–86. https://doi.org/10.31244/dds/2018.01.06

Cosier, M., Sandoval-Gomez, A., Cardinal, D. N., & Brophy, S. (2020). Placement of students with extensive support needs in California school districts: The state of inclusion and exclusion. *International Electronic Journal of Elementary Education*, *12*(3), 249–255. https://doi.org/10.26822/iejee.2020358218

Cox, E. (2015). *Transforming adults through coaching*. Wiley Professional Development.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Crockett, J. B., & Kauffman, J. M. (1999). *The least restrictive environment: Its origins and interpretations in special education* (28th ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410603722

Daniel R.R. v. State Board of Education, El Paso Independent School District, 874 F.2d 1036 (5th Cir. 1989). Justia Law. Retrieved June 3, 2022, from https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/F2/874/1036/382507/

de Verdier, K., Fernell, E., & Ek, U. (2018). Challenges and successful pedagogical strategies: Experiences from six Swedish students with blindness and autism in different school settings. Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 48(2), 520–532. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-017-3360-5

Disabilities Rights Education & Defense Fund. (1990, June 13). *Sacramento City Unified School District Board of Education v. Rachel H.* Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://dredf.org/1994/06/13/sacramento-city-unified-sch-dist-bd-of-educ-v-rachel-h/

Draper, E. A. (2020). Teaching students with autism spectrum disorder: Strategies for the music classroom. *General Music Today*, *33*(2), 87–89. https://doi.org/10.1177/1048371319880874

Fisher, M. F., & Crawford, B. (2020). "From school of crisis to distinguished": Using Maslow's hierarchy in a rural underperforming school. *The Rural Educator*, *41*(1), 8–19.

Flannery, K. A., & Wisner-Carlson, R. (2020). Autism and education. *Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, *43*(4), 647–671. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psc.2020.08.004

Francisco, M., Hartman, M., & Wang, Y. (2020). Inclusion and special education. *Education Sciences*, *10*(9), 238. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10090238

Garrick Duhaney, L. M. (1999). A content analysis of state education agencies' policies/position statements on inclusion. *Remedial and Special Education*, *20*(6), 367–378. https://doi.org/10.1177/074193259902000611

Gee, K., Gonzalez, M., & Cooper, C. (2020). Outcomes of inclusive versus separate placements: A matched pairs comparison study. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(4), 223–240. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796920943469

Gentil-Gutiérrez, A., Cuesta-Gómez, J., Rodríguez-Fernández, P., & González-Bernal, J. (2021). Implication of the sensory environment in children with autism spectrum disorder: Perspectives from school. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *18*(14), 7670. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18147670

Giangreco, M. F. (2020). "How can a student with severe disabilities be in a fifth-grade class when he can't do fifth-grade level work?" Misapplying the least restrictive environment. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 23–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919892733

Greer v. Rome City School District, 950 F.2d 688 (11th Cir. 1991). https://www.leagle.com/decision/19911638950f2d68811518

Griffith, D., & Slade, S. (2018). A whole child umbrella: Social-emotional learning starts with a focus on the whole child. *Educational Leadership*, 36–38.

Gruenhagen, K. A., & Ross, G. S. (1995). Least restrictive environment and case law: What the courts are saying about inclusion. *Council for Exceptional Children*, 1–11.

Gupta, N., Vrat, P., & Ojha, R. (2022). Key drivers that impact the quality of education—A holistic approach. *Journal of Advances in Management Research*, *19*(3), 488–510. https://doi.org/10.1108/jamr-08-2021-0287

Hill, D., Martin, E., & Nelson-Head, C. (2011). Examination of case law (2007–2008) regarding autism spectrum disorder and violations of the individuals with disabilities education act. *Preventing School Failure: Alternative Education for Children and Youth, 55*(4), 214–225. https://doi.org/10.1080/1045988x.2010.542784

Howell, M., Bailey, T., Bradshaw, J., & Langdon, P. E. (2021). The preliminary validity and reliability of the assessment of barriers to learning in education – autism. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, *116*, 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2021.104025

Jiujias, M., Kelley, E., & Hall, L. (2017). Restricted, repetitive behaviors in autism spectrum disorder and obsessive–compulsive disorder: A comparative review. *Child Psychiatry & Human Development*, *48*(6), 944–959. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10578-017-0717-0

John Doe v. State of Ohio, 2:91-cv-00464 (S.D. Ohio 2020). https://casetext.com/case/doe-v-ohio-4

Katowitz, D. S., & Thurman, K. (2017). A critical examination of the implicit assumptions in special education: Introduction to the special section. *Child Youth Care Forum*, *46*(2), 157–160. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-016-9385-7

Kauffman, J. M., Ahrbeck, B., Anastasiou, D., Badar, J., Felder, M., & Hallenbeck, B. A. (2021). Special education policy prospects: Lessons from social policies past. *Exceptionality*, *29*(1), 16–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/09362835.2020.1727326

Kauffman, J. M., & Hornby, G. (2020). Inclusive vision versus special education reality. *Education Sciences*, *10*(9), 258–271. https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10090258

Kauffman, J. M., Travers, J. C., & Badar, J. (2020). Why some students with severe disabilities are not placed in general education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 28–33. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919893053

Kawakami, S., Uono, S., Otsuka, S., Yoshimura, S., Zhao, S., & Toichi, M. (2020). Atypical multisensory integration and the temporal binding window in autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *50*(11), 3944–3956. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-020-04452-0

Kirby, M. (2017). Implicit assumptions in special education policy: Promoting full inclusion for students with learning disabilities. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *46*(2), 175–191. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10566-016-9382-x

Kleinert, H. L. (2020). Students with the most significant disabilities, communicative competence, and the full extent of their exclusion. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *45*(1), 34–38. https://doi.org/10.1177/1540796919892740

Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Rev. and updated ed.). Follett Pub. Co.

Knowles, M. S., Holton, Elwood F., III, Swanson, R. A., & Robinson, P. A. (2020). *The adult learner: The definitive classic in adult education and human resource development* (9th ed.). Routledge.

Kurth, J. A., Ruppar, A. L., McQueston, J. A., McCabe, K. M., Johnston, R., & Toews, S. (2018). Types of supplementary aids and services for students with significant support needs. *The Journal of Special Education*, *52*(4), 208–218. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466918791156

Legislative Service Commission. (2020, June 25). *Rule 3301-51-09 - Delivery of services*. Ohio Laws & Administrative Rules. http://codes.ohio.gov/oac/3301-51-09

Liebfreund, M. D., & Amendum, S. J. (2017). Teachers' experiences providing one-on-one instruction to struggling readers. *Reading Horizons, 56*(4), 1–44.

Lim, S. (2020). The capabilities approach to inclusive education: Re-envisioning the individuals with disabilities education act's least restrictive environment. *Disability & Society*, *35*(4), 570–588. https://doi.org/10.1080/09687599.2019.1649119

Lin, C., & Koegel, R. (2018). Treatment for higher-order restricted repetitive behaviors (H-RRB) in children with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, *48*(11), 3831–3845. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-018-3637-3

Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. SAGE.

Losinski, M., Cook, K., Hirsch, S., & Sanders, S. (2017). The effects of deep pressure therapies and antecedent exercise on stereotypical behaviors of students with autism spectrum disorders. *Behavioral Disorders*, *42*(4), 196–208. https://doi.org/10.1177/0198742917715873

Love, A. A., Findley, J. A., Ruble, L. A., & McGrew, J. H. (2020). Teacher self-efficacy for teaching students with autism spectrum disorder: Associations with stress, teacher engagement, and student IEP outcomes following compass consultation. *Focus on Autism and Other Developmental Disabilities*, *35*(1), 47–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/1088357619836767

Lüddeckens, J., Anderson, L., & Östlund, D. (2021). Principals' perspectives of inclusive education involving students with autism spectrum conditions – a Swedish case study. *Journal of Educational Administration*, *60*(2), 207–221. https://doi.org/10.1108/jea-02-2021-0022

MacArthur, J., & Rutherford, G. (2016). Success for all? Re-envisioning New Zealand schools and classrooms as places where "rights" replace "special." *New Zealand Journal of Educational Studies*, *51*(2), 157–174. https://doi.org/10.1007/s40841-016-0066-8

Maslow, A. H. (1943). A theory of human motivation. *Psychological Review*, *50*(4), 370–396. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0054346

Maslow, A. H. (2012). *A theory of human motivation* (eBook ed.). Start Publishing LLC.

Maslow, A. H. (2014). *Toward a psychology of being* (eBook ed.). Rediscovered Books.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. (2023, March 25). In *Wikipedia*. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maslow%27s_hierarchy_of_needs

McCabe, K. M., Ruppar, A., Kurth, J. A., Mcqueston, J. A., Johnston, R., & Toews, S. (2020). Cracks in the continuum: A critical analysis of least restrictive environment for students with significant support needs. *Teachers College Record*, *122*(5), 1–28. https://doi.org/10.1177/016146812012200511

McKenney, E. L. W. (2017). *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District*: Implications for teams serving students with autism spectrum disorder. *Professional Practice, 46*(2), 11–14.

Merriam, S. B. (2008). Adult learning theory for the twenty-first century. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, *2008*(119), 93–98. https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.309

Mirenda, P., Zaidman-Zait, A., Cost, K., Smith, I. M., Zwaigenbaum, L., Duku, E., Kerns, C., Georgiades, S., Vaillancourt, T., Elsabbagh, M., Bennett, T., & Szatmari, P. (2024). Educators describe the "best things" about students with autism at school. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders, 54,* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10803-022-05761-2

Miseliunaite, B., Kliziene, I., & Cibulskas, G. (2022). Can holistic education solve the world's problems: A systematic literature review. *Sustainability*, *14*(15), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.3390/su14159737

Neves, L., Rahme, M., & Ferreira, C. (2019). Special education policy and the challenges of an inclusive perspective. *Educação and Realidade*, *44*(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1590/2175-623684853

Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon School District, 995 F.2d 1204 (3d Cir. 1993). https://pubintlaw.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Oberti-Third-Circuit-Opinion.pdf

Ohio Department of Education. (2018). *Each child our future: Ohio strategic plan for education 2019-2024*. Retrieved June 2, 2022, from https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED594758.pdf

Ohio Department of Education. (2021). *Ohio school report cards*. Retrieved April 12, 2023, from https://reportcard.education.ohio.gov/

Ohio Laws & Administrative Rules. (2019, December 20). *Rule 3301-24-05 - Ohio administrative code*. https://codes.ohio.gov/ohio-administrative-code/rule-3301-24-05

Patton, M. Q. (2015). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods: Integrating theory and practice* (4th ed.). SAGE.

Quinn, J., Pedlow, K., & Bleakley, C. (2022). What is the current level of knowledge and confidence of mainstream school SENCOs in sensory integration theory and using sensory strategies within education? *Support for Learning*, *37*(1), 80–90. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9604.12396

Reynolds, M. C. (1962). A framework for considering some issues in special education. *Exceptional Children*, *28*(7), 367–370. https://doi.org/10.1177/001440296202800705

Riccomini, P. J., Morano, S., & Hughes, C. A. (2017). Big ideas in special education: Specially designed instruction, high-leverage practices, explicit instruction, and intensive instruction. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, *50*(1), 20–27. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059917724412

Roberts, J., & Webster, A. (2022). Including students with autism in schools: A whole school approach to improve outcomes for students with autism. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *26*(7), 701–718. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1712622

Saldaña, J. (2016). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers* (3rd ed.). SAGE.

Shahrawat, A., & Shahrawat, R. (2017). Application of Maslow's hierarchy of needs in a historical context: Case studies of four prominent figures. *Psychology*, *8*(7), 939–954. https://doi.org/10.4236/psych.2017.87061

Shaw, S. R. (2008). An educational programming framework for a subset of students with diverse learning needs. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, *43*(5), 291–299. https://doi.org/10.1177/1053451208314735

Stake, R. E. (2006). *Multiple case study analysis* (2nd ed.). Guilford.

Stake, R. E. (2010). *Qualitative research: Studying how things work* (Illustrated ed.). The Guilford Press.

Stone, D. H. (2019). The least restrictive environment for providing education, treatment, and community services for persons with disabilities: Rethinking the concept. *Touro Law Review*, *35*(1), 523–590.

Stone, J. P., Sayman, D. M., Carrero, K., & Lusk, M. E. (2016). Thoughts on Dewey's democracy and (special) education. *Journal of Thought*, *50*, 3–17.

Taylor, S. J. (2004). Caught in the continuum: A critical analysis of the principle of the least restrictive environment. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, *29*(4), 218–230. https://doi.org/10.2511/rpsd.29.4.218

Thompson, J. R., Walker, V. L., Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2018). Expanding inclusive educational opportunities for students with the most significant cognitive disabilities through personalized supports. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities*, *56*(6), 396–411. https://doi.org/10.1352/1934-9556-56.6.396

Tkachyk, R. (2013). Questioning secondary inclusive education: Are inclusive classrooms always best for students? *Interchange*, *44*(1-2), 15–24. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10780-013-9193-z

USLegal. (n.d.). *Disabled students law and legal definition*. Retrieved November 12, 2002, from https://definitions.uslegal.com/d/disabled-students/

Webster, A., & Roberts, J. (2022). Implementing the school-wide autism competency model to improve outcomes for students on the autism spectrum: A multiple case study of three schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *26*(8), 796–814. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2020.1735540

Weil, L. G., Kisiel, C., & Jordan, N. (2018). Chronic illness, placement stability, and hospitalizations within child welfare: The role of initial living arrangement. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, *27*(3), 1002–1012. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-017-0918-y

Weiner, B., & Grenier, M. (2020). Sensory balancing strategies for students with autism spectrum disorder. *Journal of Physical Education, Recreation & Dance*, *91*(8), 21–28. https://doi.org/10.1080/07303084.2020.1798308

Wexler, A. J. (2016). Re-imaging inclusion/exclusion: Unpacking assumptions and contradictions in arts and special education from critical disability studies. *The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*, *36*, 32–42.

Williamson, P., Hoppey, D., McLeskey, J., Bergmann, E., & Moore, H. (2020). Trends in LRE placement rates over the past 25 years. *The Journal of Special Education*, *53*(4), 236–244. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022466919855052

Yell, M. L. (2019). *The law and special educa*tion (5th ed.). Pearson.

Yell, M. L., Katsiyannis, A., Losinski, M., & Bateman, D. (2020). Making legally sound placement decisions. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, *52*(5), 291–303. https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920906537

Yin, R. K. (1981). The case study crisis: Some answers. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *26*(1), 58–65. https://doi.org/10.2307/2392599

Yin, R. K. (2014). How to do better case studies: (With illustrations from 20 exemplary case studies). In *The sage handbook of applied social research methods* (pp. 254–282). SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483348858.n8

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research and applications: Design and methods*. SAGE.

Appendices

Appendix A: IRB Approval Letter

LIBERTY UNIVERSITY.
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

May 24, 2023

Jennifer Hull
Gail Collins

Re: IRB Exemption - IRB-FY22-23-1524 A MULTI-SITE CASE STUDY EXAMING HOW IEP TEAMS DETERMINE THE LEAST RESTRICTIVE PLACEMENT FOR STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDER AT THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEVEL

Dear Jennifer Hull, Gail Collins,

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Appendix B: Recruitment Letter

[Date]

[Recipient]
[Title]
[Company]
[Address 1]
[Address 2]
[Address 3]
Dear [Recipient]:

As a graduate student in the School of Education at Liberty University, I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a doctoral degree in Special Education. The purpose of my study is to understand how the individualized education program (IEP) team determines the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with autism in elementary school. I am also looking for answers on how the student's hierarchy of needs are met with LRE placements. I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

Participants must be part of the IEP team determining the LRE placement for a student with autism in elementary school. Participants, if willing, will be asked to allow me to observe the IEP meeting and participate in an interview and a focus group. It should take approximately one hour for the interview and one hour for the focus group with other participants from your school. The IEP meeting observation will take approximately 60 minutes. After the interview and focus groups are completed, I will create a transcript of our conversations. I will ask participants to review the transcript of their interview and their part of the focus group which should take approximately 15 minutes. Names and other identifying information will be requested as part of this study, but the information will remain confidential.

To participate, please click here to complete the attached screening survey, and return it by submitting the Google Form. After reviewing your submitted Screening Survey, I will contact you to let you know if you have been chosen to participate in this study. If you are selected to participate in this study, I will attach a Consent Form to the selection email and tell you how to sign it and return it to me. If you choose to participate, you will need to sign the consent document and return it to me at the time of the IEP meeting at [redacted].

Sincerely,
Jennifer Hull
Doctoral Student
[redacted]

Appendix C: Screening Survey

Link to Screen Survey Form:

Screening Survey for LRE placements.

This screening survey is to gather the types of LRE placements you have at your school and if your school community has a student with autism at the elementary level where I can attend the IEP meeting as a nonparticipant observer but where I can take notes only using pseudonyms. Your name and the name of your school district is requested here for data gathering purposes, but to protect the confidentiality of everyone, all names will be replaced with pseudonyms in my dissertation and any other published reports.

Thank you for considering participating in my study.

* Required

Name

*

School District

*

What is your preferred email for communication regarding this study?

*

LRE Placements at your school or that you utilize. Check all that apply.

*

- o Inclusion with 100% in general education classrooms
- o Inclusion with partial placement in the general education classroom and time in a resource room.

- Inclusion with partial placement in the general education classroom and time in a special education classroom.
- Special Education Classroom Placement
- Specialized School Placement
- Homeschool Placement
- Hospital Placement
- Other:

Will you be participating in an IEP meeting for a student with autism in elementary school?

*

No

Yes

Are you willing to participate in an individual interview and a focus group with other IEP team members? And are you willing to allow me to observe an IEP meeting for a child with ASD at your school?

*

No

Yes

Appendix D: Notification Emails

Acceptance Email:

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study titled: A Multi-Site Case Study Examining How IEP Teams Determine the Least Restrictive Placement for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Elementary School Level. Based on the screening survey responses, you have been selected to participate in the study. Please sign the electronic consent form that will be emailed to you through Adobe Sign. Here is a link of the consent form for you to review until it is sent through Adobe Sign Consent-IEP team 1.docx. If you have any questions, please contact me at [redacted].

Sincerely,
Jennifer Hull
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Rejection Email:

Dear Potential Participant,

Thank you for your interest in participating in the research study title: A Multi-Site Case Study Examining How IEP Teams Determine the Least Restrictive Placement for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder at the Elementary School Level. You have not been chosen to participate in the study. Thank you for your willingness to participate. If you have any questions, please contact me at [redacted].

Sincerely,
Jennifer Hull
Doctoral Candidate, Liberty University

Appendix E: Consent Form

Title of the Project: A Multi-Site Case Study Examining How IEP Teams Determine the Least Restrictive Placement For Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder At the Elementary School Level

Principal Investigator: Jennifer Hull, Doctoral Candidate, School of Education, Liberty University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be a member of an individualized education program (IEP) team for a student with autism in elementary school. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

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

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

The purpose of the study is to determine the criteria IEP teams use to find the least restrictive environment (LRE) placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level. I am also looking for answers on how the student's hierarchy of needs are met with LRE placements, the motivating factors, and prior experiences for the participants on the IEP team, and I am writing to invite eligible participants to join my study.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

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

1. Invite me to observe an IEP meeting(s) for a student with autism at the elementary level.
2. Participate in an audio-recorded interview lasting 45-60 minutes.
3. Participate in an audio-recorded focus group with other IEP members from your school. This focus group should last for 45-60 minutes.
4. Review the transcripts from your interview and the focus group for accuracy. This may take approximately 15 minutes.

How could you or others benefit from this study?

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study. However, you may benefit from taking part in a collaborative conversation during a focus group with other members of an IEP team who are tasked with finding the LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary level.

Benefits to society include understanding how the IEP team selects LRE placement for students with autism at the elementary level and how this placement affects the student's hierarchy of needs.

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 you would encounter in everyday life.

How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing their names and the names of the schools with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in focus group settings. While discouraged, other members of the focus group may share what was discussed with persons outside of the group.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer in a locked file cabinet. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher is the only person who will have access to these recordings.

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

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

Is study participation voluntary?

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

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

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

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

The researcher conducting this study is Jennifer Hull. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact her at [redacted]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Gail Collins, at [redacted].

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

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the 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 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 me as part of my participation in this study.

_____

Printed Participant Name

_____

Signature & Date

Appendix F: Direct Observation Form

School pseudonym: Lincoln City Schools
Grade Level of student with ASD for which this IEP meeting is taking place: Kindergarten
IEP team participant roles: Teacher, Special Education Director, Parent

Topic	Participant Role	Discussion
Academic Strengths	Teacher	The student is in kindergarten and struggles academically. He is on the extended standards and takes the alternative state assessment. He received PT, OT, and SLP.
Academic Weaknesses	Teacher	He needs to improve in reading, spelling, math, and communication. The teacher is working on basic skills for him in all areas.
Behavioral Concerns	Teacher	He has many behaviors that affect him in the classroom. He is working towards rewards using a sticker chart and trying a token economy. He has tantrums when teachers try to get him to complete his work. The teacher is working on getting him to complete a task, then he receives a sticker and works toward a break.
Sensory Concerns	Teacher	He struggles with loud noises and wears earmuffs to drown out the sound. The teacher builds sensory breaks for him to keep him on task. The teacher also uses flexible seating.
Previous Placement	Special Education Director	He has always been in a special education classroom.
New/Current Placement	Special Education Director	Special education classroom.
Reasoning for Placement	Special Education Director	He is in this placement because of low academics, being in the extended standards, and behavior.
Conversation about LRE	Special Education Director	His mom agreed with the placement.

School pseudonym: Scholars Academy
Grade Level of the student with ASD for which this IEP meeting is taking place: 2nd Grade
IEP team participant roles: Director of Special Education, Intervention Specialist, Psychologist, Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist, Speech and Language Therapist

Topic	Participant Role	Discussion
Academic Strengths	Psychologist and teacher	The student has a full-scale IQ of 125, but his achievement was 99 for reading. The teacher described him as very intelligent.
Academic Weaknesses	Psychologist and teacher	He has no academic weaknesses except that he gets bored during his classes.
Behavioral Concerns	Teacher	He previously had severe behaviors where he would hit and throw things. Because of his behaviors, he was in the kindergarten and first-grade special education class. He is now in the inclusion classroom because of improvements in behavior. Now, his only concern is that he will yell out in class. He is rewarded by going to the special education classroom for good behavior at the end of the day.
Sensory Concerns	Teacher	The student can use the sensory room throughout the day as needed. The teacher knows when he needs a break and takes him to the sensory room. He likes to jump on the trampoline and use the weighted vest to get back on track.
Previous Placement	Director of Special Education	For kindergarten and first grade, he was in the special education classroom.
New/Current Placement	Teacher	This is their first year in the inclusion classroom; he has been doing well except for the occasional outburst.
Reasoning for Placement	Teacher	He is in the general education classroom because he is considered gifted and needs to be challenged academically.
Conversation about LRE	Parent	The parent was happy that the student was moved from the special education classroom to the general education classroom.

School pseudonym: Eagle Christian
Grade Level of the student with ASD for which this IEP meeting is taking place: 5
IEP team participant roles: Special Education Director, Intervention Specialist, and Parent

Topic	Participant Role	Discussion
Academic Strengths	Teacher	The student has academic strengths in reading fluency and comprehension.
Academic Weaknesses	Teacher	She struggles with math and spelling.
Behavioral Concerns	Teacher	The student will have behavioral concerns when asked to do an assignment when it is difficult for her. The teacher believes she does this to avoid completing the assignment.
Sensory Concerns	Teacher	She struggles with loud sounds and when too many students are in the classroom. She needs sensory breaks built into her schedule.
Previous Placement	Special Education Director	Inclusion classroom
New/Current Placement	Special Education Director	Special Education Classroom
Reasoning for Placement	Special Education Director	When in the inclusion classroom at a previous school, she would display behaviors of yelling, kicking, hitting, and throwing furniture. She would also try to escape the classroom. At one point, her behavior was so bad that an aide in the classroom dragged her down the hallway to the office because she refused to go to the office. The more severe behaviors stopped after starting at Eagle Christian and being placed in the special education classroom. The teachers are working through her refusal to work and tantrums only.
Conversation about LRE	Special Education Director	Dad was very thankful for Eagle Christian and how well his daughter is doing at Eagle Christian.

Appendix G: Interview Questions

Individual Interview Questions

1. Please introduce yourself to me.
2. What is the continuum of placements your district has to offer? (CRQ)
3. Please walk me through how the IEP team makes placement decisions for students with ASD. (CRQ)
4. What criteria does the team use to make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD? (SQ1)
5. How does the IEP team individualize placement decisions for the student with ASD? (SQ1)
6. How often is a placement changed mid-school year? Moreover, why does this placement change? (SQ3)
7. What differences exist in the inclusion and special education classes? (SQ1)
8. How do the instructional practices in the inclusion classrooms differ from the general education classrooms without students with disabilities? (SQ1)
9. How do academic concerns affect classroom placement? (SQ1)
10. How do the student's sensory issues affect classroom placement? (SQ1)
11. How does the student's behavior affect placement? (SQ1)
12. How does your school district define LRE? Why? (CRQ)
13. How do you define LRE? (CRQ)
14. How is the instruction different in inclusion and special education classrooms? (SQ1)
15. What accommodations are made for students with ASD in the inclusion and special education classrooms? (SQ1)

16. What are your views on placement for students with ASD? (SQ2)
17. What is your prior experience with selecting LRE for students with autism? (SQ2)
18. Have ever experienced conflict when being part of an IEP team making placement decisions? (SQ2)
19. Have you disagreed with a LRE placement? Why? (SQ2)
20. What were the student's academics, behavior, sensory, and social concerns prior to the IEP meeting? Did these concerns change when the student with ASD was moved to an appropriate LRE placement? (SQ3)

Appendix H: Focus Group Questions

1. Introduce yourself and your role on the IEP team?
2. Describe what the law of LRE means to you? Does anyone else share this description or have a different description? (CRQ)
3. How are you involved in the LRE placement decisions in the IEP meeting? (CRQ)
4. What is your prior experience with making LRE decisions? (SQ3)
5. Do you feel like the IEP team takes into consideration your thoughts about the child? (SQ3)
6. Describe your experience in the IEP meeting regarding the LRE decision? Does anyone have a similar situation or a different experience? (SQ3)
7. Do you feel like you have a voice in the IEP meeting? (SQ2)
8. How do different LRE placements affect the child? (SQ1)

Appendix I: Research Question Organizer

Central Research Question How do IEP teams determine the criteria for LRE placement for a student with ASD at the elementary school level?		
Keywords	Common Themes	Quotes/Examples
Academics	Placement	The IEP team has to determine if the student is capable of functioning academically in the general education classroom.
Sensory	Placement	Can supports or accommodations meet the needs in the general education classroom? If not, then we need to look at the next level.
Behaviors	Placement	Are the student's behaviors affecting other students? Can support and accommodations improve behaviors in the classroom?
Previous placements	Prior experience	From prior experiences, participants stated that they know how students will function in each placement compared to other students.
Sub-Question One How do IEP teams ensure the hierarchy of needs of the students with ASD are met as they make LRE placement decisions?		
Sensory	Levels of Functioning	Some students have sensory concerns that affect being in the general education classroom. Students may feel as if they are being harmed in certain environments.
Behavior	Placement Changes	Behavior is usually caused by sensory input or unmet needs in the placement.
Sub-Question Two How does the IEP team members' prior experiences change how they interpret the LRE law and select classroom placement for an elementary student with autism?		
Perspectives of participants	Prior experience	Some participants seemed to say general education classroom because of what they believed was the correct

		answer. Their answers changed as they continued the questions.
Voice of participants	Voice in the meeting	The parents did not feel they had a voice at the meeting, and the decision was already made prior to the meeting.
Thoughts about special education	Thoughts and opinions	Some of the IEP members had prior experiences with parents that felt like special education was bad.
Sub-Question Three What motivating factors do IEP teams use to change LRE placements for students with ASD?		
Academics	Change of Placement	Increased or decreased academics can lead to a placement change to meet the student's needs.
Sensory	Change of Placement	Sensory input may lead to a student being moved to a general education classroom.
Behavior	Change of Placement	Behavior that is disruptive or can cause harm to others may lead to a change of placement.

Appendix J: Stake's Worksheet One

Lincoln City Schools

Theme 1	Appropriate placement is different for each student with autism
Theme 2	Prior experiences
Theme 3	Behavior affects placement
Theme 4	Personal beliefs versus LRE law
Theme 5	Sensory Concerns

Scholars Academy

Theme 1	Appropriate placement is where the student with autism learns best
Theme 2	Levels of functioning
Theme 3	Space in different placements
Theme 4	Prior experiences
Theme 5	Change of Placement

Eagle Christian

Theme 1	Appropriate placement is where the student with autism learns best
Theme 2	Levels of functioning
Theme 3	Space in different placements
Theme 4	Prior experiences
Theme 5	Change of Placement

Note. These worksheets were adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 2, p. 43.

Appendix K: Stake's Worksheet Two

Stake's Worksheet Three

<table>
<tr><td>Synopsis of case:
Lincoln City Schools is a public school in northeast Ohio with around 1,989 students, and 89.1% are considered low-socioeconomic status. Of those students, 20.2% have been identified as students with disabilities. The school offers a continuum of services with inclusion, three types of special education classrooms, and online instruction. The three special education classes include one for behavior, a step-down class from the inclusion class, and one for students on the extended standards. The school district was founded in 1851.</td><td rowspan="2">Case Findings:
I. In the interviews, everyone said they thought students with disabilities should be educated in the general education classroom. However, later on in the interview they started saying inclusion was not appropriate for each student.
II. Behavior is one of the biggest concerns that affects placement.
III. The student from the case improved behavior and could be moved to the inclusion setting with sensory breaks.
IV. Some students with ASD begin school in the inclusion room in elementary school, but as the academics get harder, they may need to use the special education classroom as a resource room.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Uniqueness of case situation for phenomenon:
Lincoln City is unique because of having three different types of special education classrooms.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Relevance of case for cross-case themes:
Theme 1: Appropriate placement is different for each student with autism.
Theme 2: Prior experiences
Theme 3: Behavior affects placement
Theme 4: Personal beliefs versus LRE law
Theme 5: Sensory Concerns</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 3, p. 45.

<table>
<tr><td>Synopsis of case:
Scholars Academy is a public school district with around 895 students, with 25.6% of the students considered low socioeconomic status. Of those students, 14.9% have a disability. The school offers a continuum of services with inclusion, a resource room, a special education classroom, and placements in other school districts. The school has intervention specialists who push into the inclusion classroom and pull students out to the resource room. The school district was founded in 1917.</td><td rowspan="2">Case Findings:
I. Most participants started the interview by saying students should be in the general education classroom. As they continued answering questions, they said they believed they should be in the appropriate place for the students to learn.
II. Some students spend partial time with an intervention specialist and the rest of the time in the resource room with the same intervention specialist.
III. The special education director only worked there for 2 years and tried to shift the teachers' mindset to want most students with disabilities in the special education classroom or resource room.
IV. The student in the case was twice-exceptional because he was gifted and had autism.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Uniqueness of case situation for phenomenon:
The student was gifted and started in kindergarten and first grade in a special education classroom and was moved to the inclusion classroom in second grade after behavior improved.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Relevance of case for cross-case themes:
Theme 1: Appropriate placement is where the student with autism learns best.
Theme 2: Levels of functioning
Theme 3: Space in different placements
Theme 4: Prior experiences
Theme 5: Change of Placement</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 3, p. 45.

<table>
<tr><td>Synopsis of case:
Eagle Christian is a private school in the northeastern part of Ohio. They have over 700 students from kindergarten through 12th grade. Eagle Christian is an urban Christian School with about 95% of the students being considered low-income and 18% of the students having a disability. The school offers inclusion classes with an intervention specialist that pushes into the English language arts and math classes. The school also has elementary, middle, and high school special education classes. The school was founded in 1975.</td><td rowspan="2">Case Findings:
I. Students with autism should be educated in a placement where they learn best.
II. Sensory concerns affect placement.
III. Out of 15 students in special education classes, eight came to Eagles Christian because they had a special education class. Their district would only consider inclusion placement.
IV. The parent collaborates with the school on placement concerns.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Uniqueness of case situation for phenomenon:
Being a private school, they can place students in the special education classroom because they do not need to report to the state.</td></tr>
<tr><td>Relevance of case for cross-case themes:
Theme 1: Appropriate placement is where the student with autism learns best.
Theme 2: Levels of functioning
Theme 3: Space in different placements
Theme 4: Prior experiences
Theme 5: Change of Placement</td><td></td></tr>
</table>

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

Appendix L: Stake's Worksheet Three

Estimates of Manifestation of MultiCase Themes in Each Case

W=highly unusual situation, u=somewhat unusual situation, blank=ordinary situation

M= high manifestation, m= some manifestation, blank= almost no manifestation

Ordinariness of this Case' situation:	Case A: Lincoln City	Case B: Scholars Academy	Case C: Eagles Christian
Original Multicase Themes			
Appropriate placement is where the student with autism learns best.	M	M	M
Levels of functioning	M	M	M
Space in different placements	M	M	M
Prior experiences	M	M	M
Change of Placement	m	M	M
Behavior affects placement	M	M	M
Personal beliefs versus LRE law	M	M	M
Sensory Concerns	M	m	M

Note. Adapted from *Multiple Case Study Analysis* by Robert E. Stake, 2006, Worksheet 4, p. 51. Copyright 2006 by Guilford Press. Used with permission (see Appendix M).

High manifestation means that the Theme is prominent in this particular case study. A highly unusual situation (far from ordinary) is one that is expected to challenge the generality of themes. As, indicated, the original themes can be augmented by additional themes even as late as the beginning of the cross-case analysis. The paragraphs on each Theme should be attached to the matrix so that the basis for estimates can be readily examined (Stake, 2006, p. 51)

Appendix M: Permission to Use Copyrighted Material

Dear Jennifer Hull,

Thank you for your request.

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

Permission fee due: No Charge

This permission is subject to the following conditions:

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

2. Permission is granted for one-time use only as specified in your request. Rights herein do not apply to future editions, revisions or other derivative works.3. This permission does not include the right for the publisher of the new work to grant others permission to photocopy or otherwise reproduce this material except for versions made by non-profit organizations for use by the blind or handicapped persons.4. The permission granted herein does not apply to quotations from other sources that have been incorporated in the Selection.5. The requestor warrants that the material shall not be used in any manner which may be considered derogatory to this title, content, or authors of the material or to Guilford Press.

6. Guilford retains all rights not specifically granted in this letter.

Best wishes,
Angela Whalen
Rights and Permissions

Guilford Publications, Inc.
370 Seventh Avenue, Suite 1200
New York, NY 10001-1020

Appendix N: Researcher's Reflexive Journal

Date	Notes
02/11/2023	My daughter Alyssa has autism and she began her school career in a special education pre-school classroom. Alyssa did really well in preschool and always listened to her teachers. When Alyssa was ready to start kindergarten, she was placed in an inclusion classroom because our school district was full-inclusion. After kindergarten started, I began getting calls from the school because Alyssa was hiding under her desk, screaming, and displaying self-injurious behaviors in the classroom. At first, I was not sure why her behavior changed so drastically. I went to college around the same time for a degree as an intervention specialist so I learned about how LRE placements could affect students with disabilities. I tried to talk to the IEP team about changing her placement and the IEP team told me I was breaking the LRE law by requesting that her placement be changed to a special education classroom. I ended up coming back to the meeting with a lawyer; then Alyssa ended up going to a specialized school that focused on autism. Alyssa's negative behaviors dissipated and then she was able to learn. Alyssa was in the specialized school until seventh grade and then we transferred her to a private school that provided her a special education classroom. At the private school, Alyssa received the education in the environment appropriate for her and then included with peers in the areas of her strengths. Alyssa excelled so much in this environment. Because of Alyssa experience, when I was a special education teacher, I tried to look at each student as an individual and supported their needs accordingly. Over my career, I have seen students with ASD in the special education classroom that should have been in the general education classroom. I have seen the growth and increased academic outcome for students with ASD when in their appropriate LRE placement. Most students at my school with ASD are thriving in the general education classroom but a smaller percentage needs instruction in the special education classroom. My experience as a mother of a child with ASD and as a special education director led me to want to learn more about how school districts make LRE placement decisions for students with ASD.
11/28/2023	I noticed at IEP meetings that the IEP team did not really discuss the LRE placement for each of the students. At two of the meetings, the LRE placement was not even discussed at all. Parents did not seem to have a lot of input in any part of the IEP. One parent forgot about the meeting and was at a doctor's appointment and called in for the IEP meeting.
01/26/2024	Many of the participants started the interviews trying to favor inclusion for students with disabilities but as they continued the interview would say that inclusion is not for all students. Many of the participants really believed students should be in a classroom setting that helped them to be successful in the classroom.

01/31/2023	As I completed the interviews and focus groups, it seemed the participants were trying to give the answer they thought I was looking for with the beginning questions. They all started by answering as they were pushing for full-inclusion for all, but then that changed as they answered more specific questions.
02/15/2024	As I am completing the data analysis, I am finding the participants all feel very similar about LRE. Many want to see students in a placement where they can be most successful. There seems to be a struggle with what the district wants and trying to follow the LRE law.
02/16/2024	I enjoyed completing the data analysis. Many participants share the same thoughts and feelings as I do. It was sometimes challenging to keep my personal bias to myself because the participants would ask questions about why I was doing this study.

Appendix O: Audit Trail

Date	Action
2/14/2023	Approval from Private School, Eagles Christian Schools
3/23/2023	Approval from public School, Scholars Academy
04/12/2023	Approval from public School, Lincoln City Schools
05/23/2023	IRB approval
08/21/2023- 11/15/2023	Participants completed survey and consent forms
10/17/2023- 11/01/2023	Conducted Pilot study and received results and questions
10/17/2023- 11/29/2024	Completed observations of IEP meetings at each school district
10/26/2023- 01/17/2024	Completed interviews and member checking of transcripts
11/15/2023- 1/23/2024	Completed focus groups
1/26/2024	Began data analysis
3/03/2024	Completed Stake's Worksheets