A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES FACING
EDUCATORS OF STUDENTS WITH AUTISM SPECTRUM DISORDERS

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Doctor of Education

by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
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A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL JUSTICE ISSUES FACING
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presented by Adam John Stephens

a candidate for the degree of doctor of education,

and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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Adam John Stephens

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD within three public Midwestern school districts. Through the lens of social justice theory, this phenomenological study sought to further the understanding of the unique and varied needs of both the ASD student subgroup, and the multiple school stakeholders charged with providing equity within ASD education. The researcher examined the views and perceptions of special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals with regard to challenges and obstacles to ASD equity, and methods used to overcome those obstacles.

Participant responses demonstrated that the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011), are reflected in the practices of ASD educators at varying levels. However, within certain school personnel, a lack of knowledge and valuation of students with ASD is still prevalent. Therefore, the implications of this study demonstrate a need for K-12 school districts and higher education institutions to offer more opportunities for educators of students with ASD to learn about their unique traits and strategies the study findings and research have shown improve learner outcomes for students across the autism spectrum.

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Background

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are the fastest-growing group of serious developmental disabilities in the United States according to the National Autism Network (2013). This trend is buttressed by the Center for Disease Control's (CDC's (2014) report that 1 in 150 children had an ASD diagnosis in the year 2000, while this number rose to 1 in 88 in 2008 and 1 in 68 by 2010. In fact, there is little argument that the identification of children with autism who require special education services is on the rise (Boyd & Shaw, 2010; Hart, 2012).

The National Autism Network (2013) estimated the United States spends 135 billion dollars each year on treatments and accommodations associated with ASD and this figure is expected to rise significantly if current ASD diagnoses trends continue (CDC, 2014; National Autism Network, 2013). Special education of these students along with medical care and loss of parental productivity make up the bulk of this cost (CDC, 2014). Furthermore, 730,000 of the approximately 1.5 million individuals with ASD in the United States are between the ages of 0-21 years (CDC, 2014) and thus fall within the age range where public school is, or will soon be, a major component of their days. Notably, 90% of students with ASD between the ages of 6-21 are educated in public schools (United States Department of Education, 2013) making the understanding of which teaching methods promote successful and equitable student outcomes for the ASD subgroup an increasingly important realm of study.

Services designed to provide equity to students with ASD have evolved from predominantly exclusionary practices to progressively more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Hart 2012). This progression has been bolstered by educational legislation contained within the *Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act* (IDIA) of 2004 and the *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) Act of 2001, both of which made inclusion in regular education settings for students with disabilities a point of emphasis (Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2014). *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA, 2016) continues these themes for special needs students.

Concurrently, the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) as a provision of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) 1990, 1997, and 2004 mandated children with disabilities are educated to the greatest extent possible with their nondisabled peers (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2011). This expanded the number and variety of educators in different school positions that needed to be proficient in ASD specific strategies beyond the area of special education. Today, most school personnel, regardless of their specific assignment, will be accountable for equitable ASD education outcomes and their knowledge of evidence-based approaches that support the unique needs of students with ASD is critical (Marder & Fraser, 2012).

Unfortunately, the previously stated fact that 90% of students with ASD are served in general education classrooms (United States Department of Education, 2009) has not led to widespread instruction in evidence-based ASD specific education methods within teacher training programs (Baker, 2012; Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, 2011). Furthermore, not all schools provide the legal accommodations mandated by IDEA (2004) and other education legislation aimed at providing support to students with special

needs (Foster, Rude, & Grannan, 2012). These assertions become especially troublesome when one considers that the atypical cognitive and behavioral characteristics associated with ASD affect all aspects of the educational process (Burns, 2013).

Generally, ASD are characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors according to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Autism Speaks, 2012). However, the manifestations and severity of impairments varies greatly across the spectrum of individuals with ASD (Burns, 2013) and the development and implementation of successful modifications is a struggle as effective accommodations for one ASD student are frequently inapplicable to students with the same diagnosis (Burns, 2013). For example, in the critical school area of reading, many students with ASD comprehend text at an above average level while others struggle to grasp the intended meaning of anything they read (Styslinger, 2013). Another common atypical student behavior associated with students with ASD is a lack of observable displays of engagement, caring, and understanding (Gunn, 2013). Consequently, the frequently inconspicuous manifestations of ASD student disabilities are challenging for educators accustomed to visible recognition of the obstacles facing students within the special education communities (Chin, 2009; Hart 2012). This may in turn lead to educator misconceptions that students with ASD do not care about lessons, teachers, or fellow students (Gunn, 2013) and create settings where frustrated students with ASD with low communication skills are forced to use behaviors, both positive and negative, to communicate their needs (Hart & Whalon, 2011).

A case for inquiry into issues confronting educators today is reinforced by researchers such as Bellini, Henry, and Pratt, (2010) and Friedlander (2009) who

contended that students with ASD may represent the most challenging and potentially overwhelming category of students with disabilities currently within the United States educational system. Without training, it is unlikely that educators will comprehend the effects ASD have on students (Bashe & Kirby, 2005). In the same vein, Hart (2012) stressed the need for practical techniques applicable to the unique learning settings and Nickels (2010) identified inadequate training assistance, difficulty dealing with ASD traits, and the desire for more numerous and supplementary treatments as common impediments confronting educators attempting to meet the diverse needs of students with ASD. These contentions stem from the prevalence of untrained and uninformed educators who are frequently overwhelmed by the variety and nature of issues related ASD student education (Friedlander, 2009; Hart, 2012).

Fortunately, for educators, there are numerous practical techniques applicable to their unique learning settings (Hart, 2012). Certain treatments and interventions may be used in conjunction with ASD specific education strategies to alleviate and even remove many of the obstacles facing students with ASD (Foster et al., 2012). Research supporting ASD education strategies and treatments includes the use early intervention services to improve speech, mobility, and social interaction (CDC, 2014; Foster et al., 2012). Additionally, Palm (2012) championed the importance of creating lessons with unique ASD student strengths in mind within organized and predictable educational environments. These strategies can be coupled with other research supported methods including, providing choice (Ramsey, Jolivette, Patterson, & Kennedy, 2010), functional behavioral assessments (FBA) (Hart, 2012), and inclusion literature (Green, Mays, & Jolivette, 2011; Miller, 2013) to improve the educational experiences of ASD learners.

Emerging ASD education issues may represent one of the most perplexing challenges facing school district personnel (Burns, 2013). Yet educators have a professional and ethical obligation to meet student academic needs through research-based strategies (McLeskey, Rosenberg, & Westling, 2010) and they can demonstrate their respect for the rights of students with ASD by taking the time to learn and incorporate innovative ASD education methods that take into account social and language barriers (Gunn, 2012). Because when schools fail to promote positive identities for all their students, problems arise (Browne, 2012). Thus, Browne (2012) encouraged investigation into the amount of sustained professional development educators within school districts receive toward achievement of equitable educational outcomes. Concurrently, Goodman (2011) promoted the efforts of schools aimed at promoting diversity through increased understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of differences among their students. Moreover, she contended that, raising conscious promotes the breakdown of prejudice, stereotypes, and narrow mindedness and that breakdown is essential to forming a more just and caring world (Goodman, 2011) and further justification for the importance and timeliness of studies with an ASD education equity focus.

Conceptual Framework

Team leadership theory, social justice leadership theory, and social justice theory were each considered as theoretical frameworks for this study. The varied and complex nature of ASD education requires effective coordination of an increasingly large number of individuals and team leadership theories' applicability to analysis of this coordination seemed relevant. However, team leadership theory lacked the ethical focus (Northouse,

2010) the researcher deemed foundational to equitable education of students with ASD. Subsequently, social justice leadership theory was examined as a potential theoretical framework for its focus on the skill and commitment to marginalized and potentially marginalized groups a leader exhibits (Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, contentions by Riestler, Pursch, and Skrla (2002) and Scheurich and Skrla (2003) that there is minimal discussion of special education and inclusive practices in the body of literature on social justice leadership gave added guidance to the inquiry. However, social justice leadership may not highlight the voices of educators not in formal leadership positions who typically spend the greatest amount of time with students with ASD, thus this researcher chose to investigate ASD education in the broader context, using social justice theory as opposed to viewing those issues strictly from the leadership standpoint.

Support for the use of social justice theory as the conceptual framework for this study comes from both Rawls (1999; 2001) and Theoharis (2007) who advocated for the application of social justice theories in efforts to provide quality supports to potentially marginalized student populations such as the students with ASD central to this study. Likewise, Marshall and Ward (2004) argued that equal access to educational services and assurance that laws for individual rights are observed are fundamental components of social justice. Furthermore, Bogotch (2002) advocated for continuous social justice reform in education and contended that social justice only has meaning when engaged in social and academic discourse. Lastly, this study has an education focus and according to Rawls (1999) education's first virtue as a social institution is justice.

Additional justification for use of the social justice conceptual framework stems from the deficiencies in current studies described by Chin (2009), who maintained that

social justice studies have not given learning impairments the same attention as race, sexism, and poverty. Chin's sentiments are buttressed by Nussbaum (2006) who claimed justice to people with mental impairments remains an unresolved social justice issue, while Riester et al., (2002) stated there is minimal discussion of special education and inclusive practices in the social justice literature. In addition, Goodlad and Riddell (2005) championed the continued importance of the social justice discussion especially in the realm of the way society handles issues and needs associated with disability. Moreover, there is an inadequate research base and a lack of real-life models of social justice issues (Marshall & Ward, 2004) associated with ASD student outcomes. Notably, little of the inadequate equity research base is being used to provide socially just education (Browne, 2012; Gay, 2010) further exacerbating problems pertinent to the provision of socially just education to students with ASD.

In addition, Baker (2012) noted most educators receive no training on best educational practices for students with ASD despite their legal obligation to do so (Banshe & Kirby, 2005). According to Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, and Goodwin (2003) the training educators do receive is inadequate. Furthermore, the lack of physical manifestations of ASD learning and social disabilities is an added obstacle to social justice and supplementary validation for the use of the social justice conceptual framework for undertrained educators often judge ASD student behavior on normative standards that assume fully able status (Chin, 2009). Additional research findings indicate that the avoidant, withdrawn, and abnormal stimulatory behaviors of students with ASD regularly lead to increased stress levels of those charged with the care of students with ASD and poor staff retention rates (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003;

Lecavalier, Leone, & Wiltz, 2006) and less qualified replacement educators being accountable for the provision socially just ASD education (Zabel & Zabel, 2001).

Moreover, Browne (2012) described the attention the predominant education legislation NCLB (2001) gave to equity issues as “woefully inadequate” (p. 57) and while ESSA (2016) is being viewed as a small improvement (Autism Speaks) overall it offers little change (Nagel, 2016).

Statement of the Problem

As the number of students with ASD continues to rise (CDC, 2014), differentiated instruction needed to meet their educational needs is increasingly important (Ryan, et al., 2011). Moreover, students with ASD commonly necessitate unique forms of educational support (Schlosser, Blischak, Belfiore, Bartley, & Barnett, 1998) and “few educators can expect to fully understand the ramifications of autism spectrum disorders without some training” (Bashe & Kirby, 2005, p. 401). Furthermore, the possession of the skills and abilities necessary to effectively apply practical ASD teaching techniques within each individual learning environment is critical to educators (Hart, 2012). For although there are no cures for ASD, (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014) new ASD research promises improved education outcomes for students with ASD (Burns, 2013) and numerous practical techniques applicable to their various learning settings exist (Hart, 2012). Unfortunately, few educators receive the ASD education training needed for this promise to be realized (Baker, 2012; Hart, 2012) despite data showing that students with ASD are an ever-growing percentage of the special education student population regardless of school district location and demographics (CDC, 2014; Ryan, Hughes, Katsiyannis, McDaniel, & Sprinkle, 2011).

Consequently, untrained or undertrained educators frequently expect students with ASD with limited metacognitive awareness, verbal, and social skills to participate fully and appropriately within classroom settings that depend on language as the primary method of communication (Gunn, 2013). This is especially relevant as over one third of children with autism are nonverbal (Mesibov, Adams, & Klinger, 1997) making their expression of thoughts, feelings, struggles and the subsequent educator understanding and empathy central to the social justice in ASD education elusive (Chin, 2009). Furthermore, the social disabilities of students with ASD frequently cause problem behaviors that disrupt their learning and that of their peers (Hart, 2012) making training especially critical in ASD education.

Additional obstacles to successful management of ASD student traits include lack of training in supplementary treatments and teaching methods research has shown improve ASD student learning experience (Nickels, 2010). Although students with ASD with the same diagnosis often respond in markedly different ways to the same educational strategies, common ASD education methods and themes have proven effective (Burns, 2013). For example, instruction in metacognitive awareness (Gunn, 2013), cognitive behavioral therapy and instruction in self-monitoring techniques (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012), early intervention strategies (Foster et al., 2012; Handleman & Harris, 2000), and technology and visual supports (Cafiero, 2008; Hodgdon, 2000) have all demonstrated effectiveness in the improvement of ASD education outcomes.

Educators have responsibility to make every reasonable effort to help students with ASD succeed (Foster et al., 2013), and greater understanding of what support and

strategies need to be identified to address issues from various stakeholders is critical. Despite the inclusion and improvement mandated by legislation, (IDEA, 2004) educators and the institution they serve may still fail to take into account or learn to understand ASD learning and social disabilities (Chin, 2009). Without comprehensive training of all stakeholders, social justice for students with ASD will continue to be elusive.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD within three public Midwestern school districts. Through the lens of social justice theory, this phenomenological study sought to further the understanding of the unique and varied needs of both the ASD student subgroup, and the multiple school stakeholders charged with providing equity within ASD education. The researcher examined alignment among participant's perceptions with regard to challenges and obstacles to ASD equity, and methods used to overcome those obstacles. Of particular interest were barriers to student equity that were not overcome and various explanations from participants for the insurmountability of those barriers.

Goodman (2011) stressed the importance of group knowledge in fostering the empathy needed to meet the needs of marginalized groups. By coding for and analyzing emergent themes within interview transcripts, this study intended to create a full and rich description (Creswell, 2009) of the experiences of those charged with the task of educating students with ASD. In turn, educators seeking to examine and improve ASD student education within their own settings could use the findings of this inquiry to strengthen their ASD programs.

Research Questions

The study examined various social justice obstacles ASD educators encounter within secondary school settings. In addition, the researcher analyzed how these individuals develop the resilience to overcome resistance they face and how they are able to sustain their social justice work. The following research questions served as guided this study:

1. What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?
2. What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?
3. According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?
4. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?

5. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

Design of the Study

In order to answer the research questions within this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher explored in detail the experiences of diverse educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD. The principle sources of data were interviews, and historical documents. The researcher used semi-structured open-ended interview questions to focus and organize information while still allowing for natural spontaneous revelations from participants (Creswell, 2009). Interview data from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education directors, were collected, coded and analyzed by the researcher to identify themes and discover relationships across the spectrum of data (Hatch, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

In accordance with Mertens (2005), the researcher explored “multiple, socially constructed realities” (p. 9) and would “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Thus, a social constructivist viewpoint (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002) provided an appropriate perspective for this study and aligned with the data sources. Likewise, phenomenological research models seek to “identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13) and was consequently a suitable method of inquiry for the study.

Creswell (2009) asserted qualitative research is a valid method for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem”

(p. 4) and thus fit the studies goal of investigating how the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities are reflected in the training ASD educators receive and the education they provide students with ASD. Furthermore, a qualitative study is appropriate since little research has been done on this topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the lack of social justice research on issues of inclusion and other issues pertinent to students with ASD (Chin, 2009; Riester et al., 2002) created an appropriate setting for qualitative analysis.

Limitations and Assumptions of the Study

Assumptions pertinent to the researcher's role in the study include a background as a 6th-8th grade public school science teacher. The researcher had experience in providing ASD modifications within the classroom. Additionally, the researcher attended many meetings involving parents, counselors, special education teachers, administrators, regular education teachers, and students with ASD. Consequently, the researcher began the study with many preconceived ideas and experiences related to issues of social justice within ASD education. The researcher's experiences observing and participating in efforts to provide ASD student equity most certainly shaded his view on the research subject with regard to viewing ASD education as an equity issue. However, regardless of these bias, the researcher analyzed data free of bias by allowing study participants to evaluate accuracy of themes created by the researcher and by using triangulation and member-checking (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Sharpe & Faye, 2009).

Contribution to Practice and Significance of the Research

The significance of this study stems from the influence an inclusion model of social justice has to improve the world not only for the marginalized, but for all of us

(Sapon-Shevin, 2003). Marshall and Ward (2004) contended equal access to educational services and ensuring that laws for individual rights are observed are fundamental components of social justice. They maintained that real-life models demonstrate how social justice leadership is possible. Through qualitative inquiry, this study sought to create real-life models of the experiences of educators.

Furthermore, Theoharis (2007) advocated for the inclusion of various stakeholder perspectives, in creating true models of social justice. Thus, the data from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education directors, painted a more comprehensive picture of ASD education issues than research specific to educators in leadership positions alone. These models and experiences can be studied and modified by a variety of educators in different roles seeking to improve their understanding and practice regarding promoting equity and justice for students with ASD.

Design Controls

The researcher heeded Creswell's recommendations (2009) and detailed his role in the research with regard to the background in the topic area, potential bias, and connections between researcher and subjects. In order to increase validity and reliability the researcher triangulated data (Creswell, 2009) from interviews, field notes, and historical documents and data. The selection of the phenomenology as the method of inquiry, within this qualitative study, allowed the researcher to authentically process subjective data, from a limited number of purposefully selected study participants (Bednall, 2006). Hatch (2002) stated, "whenever possible take stories back to those who contributed to them so they can clarify, refine, or change them" (p. 205). Thus the researcher incorporated member checking and peer debriefing (Creswell, 2009; Hatch,

2002). Additionally, interviewees were informed they were free to pass on any question they felt uncomfortable answering. Furthermore, audiotapes were transcribed and shared with participants who had the option to clarify content which the researcher subsequently updated in transcripts and notes (Creswell, 2009). In addition, the researcher used thick, rich description in order to assist the reader in determining how closely their situation matched the situation studied in order to promote transference (Merriam, 1998) and natural generalizations (Creswell, 2009) to further research credibility (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005).

Definitions of Key Terms

The following terms were used within the study to guide in the understanding of the key concepts.

Autism spectrum disorders are a group of developmental disabilities characterized by social impairments, communication difficulties, and repetitive behaviors according to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) (Autism Speaks, 2012; Hutton & Caron, 2005).

Distribution in accordance with social justice theory refers to the equitable allocation of rewards and resources (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) an assessment conducted by a team of educators who gather information about both a student's behaviors and the context in which they most frequently occur in order to develop interventions that replace negative behaviors with positive ones (Hart, 2012). The FBA team subsequently evaluates whether change is occurring and modifies improvement strategies as needed in a timely manner (Conroy, Boyd, Asmus, & Madera, 2000; Hart, 2012).

High School typically involves grades nine through twelve of secondary level of education that (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992).

High School Teacher is typically an educator of students in grades 9-12 within secondary schools.

Paraprofessionals are typically educators of special education students in public school settings that spend a significant amount of time in the classroom working directly to assist and support special education students and their regular classroom teachers. They play an increasingly important role in decisions concerning instructional content and practice (Tews & Lupart, 2008).

Opportunities as an essential component of social justice theory ensure an equal chance for individuals in efforts to improve their circumstance regardless of their differences from societal norms (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) is an augmentative communication system created for individuals who are nonverbal or have few communication skills. It has demonstrated effectiveness in the use visual supports to assist students with ASD with the rapid acquisition of a functional means of communication (Harris, 2012).

Recognition as a critical component of social justice theory refers to valuation and appreciation of all cultures and ways of being (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Secondary ASD educator is defined within this study as an educator with current professional experience educating students with ASD in grades six through twelve.

Social justice leadership theory Theoharis (2007) grounded his social justice leadership definition in the daily realities faced by of school leaders who center their

vision and practice on issues of disability by addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools through inclusive school practices and stated that socially just leadership may be expressed through the skill and commitment to meeting the needs of marginalized student subgroups a leader exhibits.

Social justice theory is defined as the mechanism by which society assigns responsibilities within our cooperative social efforts (Rawls, 1999) and disrupts and subverts arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes (Gewirtz, 1998).

Teacher of students with ASD is defined as an educator within public school settings that is involved in the planning, development, and implementation of educational strategies designed to meet the needs of students with ASD.

Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children (TEACCH) develops an individualized learning program around an ASD child's unique skills, interests, and needs and has helped thousands of ASD individuals as well as their families through provision of diagnostic evaluations, parent training, support groups, social play and recreation groups, individual counseling for higher-functioning clients, and supported employment (Harris, 2012).

Summary

This research began by examining issues in the education of students with ASD that make research into this topic important, timely, and worthy of investigation. Problems associated with those issues that were central to the research included rising populations of students with ASD and challenges in meeting their needs within an

inclusive public school setting. Furthermore, sources citing the lack of educator training in strategies specific to providing ASD student equity were shared.

Additionally, the researcher cited current sources that described gaps in social justice literature on students with learning disabilities and explained how exploration of the experiences of ASD educators would be central to the purpose of the study. Research questions guiding this social justice inquiry were shared. Conceptual underpinnings holding the study together stemmed from a social constructivist viewpoint and a phenomenological research model used to examine the experiences of ASD educators.

The researcher subsequently detailed components of their qualitative study. A social justice conceptual framework organized the study design and method of data analysis used to answer the research questions. Assumptions foundational to the study and relevant the applicability of findings were described. In conclusion, the researcher identified key terms from within the research questions and shared details supporting the significance of the study.

In Chapter Two, a review of related literature is presented relevant to the present study, while contained in Chapter Three is a description of the research design and methodology used in the study. Subsequently, presented in Chapter Four is the analysis of the data collected by the researcher. In conclusion, presented in Chapter Five are the discussions of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW RELATED LITERATURE

Introduction

Autism spectrum disorders (ASD) are a group of developmental disabilities characterized by social impairments, communication, language, and relationship difficulties, and repetitive behaviors according to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013). Adolescents with ASD constitute an ever-growing percentage of the special education student population (Billingsley, 2003; Center for Disease Control (CDC), 2014; Ryan, Hughes, Katsiyannis, McDaniel, & Sprinkle, 2011) and the growth in the number of students with ASD represents an emerging challenge for school districts (Riehl, 2000; Yell, Katsiyannis, Drasgow, & Herbst, 2003). Services designed to provide equity to the aforementioned special education students have evolved from predominantly exclusionary practices to progressively more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Crockett, 1999; Mittler, 2000; United States Department of Education, 2009). However, as Baker (2012) noted, few teachers receive any training on evidence-based practices for students with ASD. While Scheuermann, Webber, Boutot, and Goodwin (2003) concurred much of the training educators receive specific to ASD learners is inadequate, lacking both depth and scope.

Likewise, Marshall (2004) and Baker (2012) stated training specific to marginalized populations in leadership preparation programs is lacking. Yet without training it is unlikely educators will grasp the ramifications ASD symptoms have on students (Bashe & Kirby, 2005) and educators have a professional and ethical obligation to meet student academic needs through research-based strategies (McLeskey et al.,

2010). Training is especially critical in ASD education as the physical manifestations of their learning and social disabilities often are inconspicuous and overlooked by educators who then judge their behavior on normative standards that assume fully able status (Chin, 2009). Relatedly, Mesibov, Adams, and Klinger, (1997) noted over one third of children with autism are nonverbal, making their expression of thoughts, feelings, struggles and subsequent educator understanding and empathy especially problematic (Chin, 2009). Consequently, educators at all levels face significant challenges in providing equitable education services that meet specific ASD student needs within least restrictive environments (Merchant, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003).

Justice to people with mental impairments remains an unresolved social justice issue (Nussbaum, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this inquiry was in making a contribution to the literature on social justice studies which according to Chin (2009) have not given learning ability impairments the same scholarly attention as race, sexism, and poverty. Additionally, Browne (2012) and Gay (2010) shared very little equity research is implemented. Subsequently, this study sought to illuminate social justice issues in ASD education through rich and detailed descriptions of the challenges various ASD education stakeholders interviewed seek to overcome each day. Furthermore, this study strived to ascertain the extent to which common themes throughout literature on effective ASD education practices are understood and implemented by educators seeking to fulfill their moral imperative to meet ASD student academic needs through research-based strategies (Foster et al., 2012; McLeskey et al., 2010). As Bogotch (2002) supported the notion that social justice only has meaning when there is engaged social

and academic discourse and this study engaged paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and directors in such discourse.

This review of literature will first detail symptoms and various types of ASD. Statistics related to the growth of and prevalence of the ASD population as well as potential causes will then be outlined. Important issues related to ASD education will also be considered and the various theoretical lenses considered relevant to the study will be explored, as they are funneled down to the conceptual framework of social justice theory.

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

According to the APA, a diagnosis of autism is defined by deficits of social and communication skills, and restricted or repetitive patterns of interests and behaviors (APA, 2013; Burns, 2013; CDC, 2014). However, Autism is only a part of a larger group of conditions and disorders known as ASD (CDC, 2014). Individuals diagnosed with ASD may exhibit certain homologous symptoms. However, each condition differs in terms of specific symptoms, the severity of symptoms, as well as the stage of an individual's life in which the conditions manifest themselves (APA, 2013; Autism Speaks, 2012; CDC, 2014). ASD also include neurodevelopmental disorders diagnosed through clinical observations of impaired social, communication, and behavior development, as well as abnormal intellectual functioning in areas of learning, attention, and sensory processing (APA, 2013; Burns, 2012; CDC, 2014).

The CDC (2014) described three different types of ASD: Autistic Disorder, Asperger Syndrome, and Pervasive Developmental Disorder – Not Otherwise Specified (PDD-NOS; also called "atypical autism"). People with autistic disorder frequently have

intellectual disabilities, significant language delays, social and communication challenges, and unusual behaviors and interests (APA, 2013). Concurrently, individuals with Asperger Syndrome often have social challenges and unusual behaviors and interests; however, they are usually less severe and not accompanied by language or intellectual disabilities (APA, 2013). Individuals who only struggle with appropriate social interaction and communication and have fewer or milder symptoms, may be diagnosed with PDD-NOS (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014).

Specific examples of ASD characteristics include not pointing at objects to show interest or looking at objects when another person points at them (CDC, 2014). ASD individuals often lack reciprocity within social interaction and have excessive problems with organization and scheduling changes (APA, 2013). Furthermore, some students with ASD may struggle to read while others master the ability to decode letters but still lack true reading comprehension (Burns, 2013). Burns (2013) postulated many individuals with autism have no useable speech and others may use their speech in abnormal ways. In connection, many ASD individuals have trouble understanding other people's feelings, verbalizing their own feelings, and avoid eye contact while demonstrating a lack of interest in other people and preference for solitude (CDC, 2014). However, it is difficult to know for certain if an ASD student who seems to prefer solitude is in fact very interested in people, but lacks the ability to organize thoughts or knowledge of how to appropriately relate to peers through speech or play (CDC, 2014; Gunn, 2013). Additional behaviors demonstrated by ASD individuals include aversion to physical contact, difficulty adapting to routine changes, and atypical reactions to common sensory experiences (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014).

Prevalence of ASD

Autism is currently the fastest growing disability in the United States occurring in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (CDC, 2014). In 2007, CDC's Autism and Developmental Disabilities Monitoring (ADDM) Network first reported about 1 in 150 children had an ASD. In 2009, the ADDM Network reported autism prevalence had risen to one out of every 110 children. The estimated prevalence of ASD rose 78% from the year 2002 to the year 2008 (CDC, 2014). Similarly, The United States Department of Education (2013) reported a 23% increase in ASD diagnosis since 2006 and a 78% increase in diagnoses since 2002. Recently, the CDC (2014) increased their estimated prevalence rate for ASD from one in 88 children in 2012 to one in every 68 children. Although a portion of this rapid increase may be due to increases in diagnosis under a broader ASD definition, a true increase in the number of people with an ASD is probable (CDC, 2014).

Etiology (Causes) of ASD

Naturally, the rapid increase in the prevalence of individuals with ASD has stirred much debate and inquiry into potential influences and causes. However, for most people with ASD, the cause remains uncertain, although scientists and researchers believe that both biological and environmental factors play a role (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014; Huquet, Ey, & Bourgeron, 2013; Singh, 2014). Gender is also a significant factor as ASD is four to five times more likely to occur in boys than in girls (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014). According to Huquet, Ey and Bourgeron (2013) a genetic cause can be identified in up to 25% of cases. Children who have a sibling with ASD are at a higher risk of also having ASD (Durkin et al., 2008; Singh, 2014; Sumi, Taniai, Miyachi, & Tanemura, 2006).

Additionally, certain genetic variations present within one to two percent of the general population and unaffected siblings of individuals with ASD are ten times as likely to occur in individuals with ASD (Huquet et al., 2013). Furthermore, Huquet et al., (2013) and APA (2013) discovered the risk of developing ASD increases with parental age; however, firstborn offspring of two older parents were three times more likely to develop autism than were third- or later-born offspring. In light of this conflicting data, Huquet et al., (2013) postulated that toxins built in a mother's breast tissue throughout her life are released to first-born children but are gone by later offspring. This idea, coupled with the inclination of parents with an ASD child to cease further procreation, could explain a portion of the increase in ASD prevalence among first-born versus later-born children (Huquet et al., 2013).

According to Burns (2013), researchers believed for decades that brain processing abnormalities were a cause of ASD, however, early brain imagery did not show these predicted differences. Furthermore, Bauman and Kemper (1994) stated the small variability within motor cortex regions researchers did find did not provide any direction for educational intervention, as it did not explain the high level of diversity witnessed within the ASD population. Conversely, recent advances in brain imaging technology provided researchers (Burns, 2013) an understanding of the inner workings of the ASD brain and showed the heterogeneity evidenced by the countless variations in the behavioral manifestations of ASD brain differences could be connected to the same underlying biological brain differences (Burns, 2013). This in turn created the potential for better treatments and new educational strategies to promote ASD student success within their varied educational settings.

Furthermore, Burns (2013) noted abnormal development of the long fiber tracts typically used by the brain to integrate and process complex information across various regions of the brain in individuals with ASD. Anderson et al. (2001) supported this assertion through their description of cortical under connectivity within the ASD brains they studied. Burns (2013) further argued this brain biology abnormality could impede an individual's connection of sight to sound, sound to meaning, and /or one thought to another. On a related inquiry, Wass (2011) studied short brain fiber tracts within the ASD brain and discovered these fibers were over-connected, a potential cause of non-purposeful repetitive behaviors often associated with ASD.

An important limitation to the previously described biological models of ASD causation was described by Sing (2009) who stated:

An inherent flaw in the biological argument is the inability to establish causation. This means that a single gene responsible for autism had yet to be discovered, and merely correlation can be suggested. This in part is due to the diversity of genes discovered, and suggests that autistic disorder is not completely dictated by genetic factors; thus, environmental factors must also be taken into consideration.

(p. 3)

In expanded efforts to determine ASD causes, the CDC (2014) is sponsoring the Study to Explore Early Development (SEED) as an attempt to expand knowledge related to ASD causes through researching many potential risk factors for ASD, including genetic, environmental, pregnancy, and behavioral factors. As a result of the rapidly increasing diagnosis of ASD (Billingsley, 2003; CDC, 2014) and subsequent increasing challenge

these students present school districts (Riehl, 2000; Yell et al., 2003) ASD education research will be increasingly critical and is thus the focus of the next section.

Education of students with ASD

This section of the paper will describe important statistics related to ASD education while also detailing education methods research has shown to be shared common among successful ASD education programs. Specifically, certain classroom structures (Palm, 2012), early intervention strategies (Handleman & Harris, 2000), Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) (Hart, 2012), and technology and visual supports (Cafiero, 2008; Hodgdon, 2000) have shown promise in the improvement of ASD education outcomes. These strategies will be outlined in order to paint a rich and detailed picture of the current ASD educational setting according to research.

There is little argument that the identification of children with autism who require special education services is on the rise (Bitterman et. al., 2008; Boyd & Shaw, 2010; Hart, 2012). Approximately 1.5 million individuals in the United States have autism and 730,000 of those individuals are between the ages of 0-21 years (CDC, 2014) and thus fall within the age range where public school is typically a major component of their days. In fact, 90% of autistic students between the ages of 6-21 are educated in public schools (United States Department of Education, 2013). Furthermore, the occurrence of ASD is reported in all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups (CDC, 2014). Consequently, ASD education is an increasingly important issue for most school districts regardless of their location or the socioeconomic and racial characteristics of the students they serve.

Despite the previously stated fact that 90% of students with ASD are served in general education classrooms (United States Department of Education, 2009) few general education teachers receive any training on evidence-based practices for students with ASD (Baker, 2012; Hart, 2012). In addition, much of the school equity research is prefaced with the admission that it is not being implemented in most school settings (Browne, 2012; Gay, 2010). This assertion becomes especially troublesome when one considers that most students with autism require unique strategies, equipment, and other forms of educational support to reach their potential (Schlosser, Blischak, Belfiore, Bartley, & Barnett, 1998) as the atypical cognitive and behavioral characteristics associated with ASD affect all aspects of the educational process (Burns, 2013).

There is currently no cure for ASD (APA, 2013; CDC, 2014) and the development and implementation of successful modifications is a struggle as effective accommodations for one ASD student are frequently inapplicable to students with the same diagnosis (Burns, 2013). However, recent research into ASD learning has provided greater insight into root causes of various ASD manifestations (Burns, 2013) and early intervention treatment services have been shown to improve a child's development (Handleman & Harris, 2000). Specifically, early intervention services can improve speech, mobility, and social interaction (CDC, 2014). Similarly, The National Research Council (2001) identified early and intensive intervention, low student to teacher ratio, and planned teaching opportunities as essential elements of successful ASD education programs. This knowledge can be coupled with Palm (2012) who espoused the importance of creating lessons with unique ASD student strengths in mind within organized and predictable educational environments. Similarly, Iovannone et al. (2003)

listed individualized support services for students and families, systematic instruction, structured environments, specialized curriculum content, functional approaches to problem behaviors using applied behavior analysis, and family involvement as common successful ASD education themes within current literature. According to Stromer (2006), activity schedules, a type of visual support, and computer technology also bolster ASD education.

Technology and Visual ASD Education Supports

Classroom factors create or negate many of the negative behaviors typical among the ASD student population (Conroy, Boyd, Asmus, & Madera, 2007). However, for students with limited verbal and social skills, tantrums, defiance, self-injury, and aggression may be the only methods of self-expression they have been able to employ to communicate their needs and create desirable outcomes from previous frustrating situations within their school settings (Hart, 2012). Research has shown assistive technology (AT) can improve the performance of many students with ASD in mainstream educational settings (Lacava et al., 2007). Myles (2005) highlighted this is a consequence of the improvements in areas of emotional recognition frequently shown by students with ASD using AT. Nevertheless, AT educational supports are still in their infancy and consequently much of their potential to provide for social justice and equality in ASD education is unrealized (Engel, 2011); therefore, “The development of equitable technology programs designed to provide individualized support to students with special needs remains a necessity” (Engel, 2011, p. 1).

According to Hodgdon (2000), visual supports, when implemented correctly, provide students with autism the freedom to engage in life, regardless of impairment.

Likewise, Palm (2012) advocated going visual whenever possible, while Rao and Gagie (2006) and Harris (2012) indicated that educators have noted that when visual schedules are posted, the amount of stress, anxiety, and behavioral outbursts are significantly reduced. Visual supports also are effective in reducing the latency time between activities and improving independent transition skills. Further, a visual schedule can empower students with ASD to appropriately direct their own behavior throughout a work period (Harris, 2012). Coupled with the provision to students with ASD of small individual replicas of the information presented on the boards, visual supports increase engagement and foster the maintenance of group focus (Harris, 2012). Concurrently, Goodman and Williams (2007) stated, “By being shown pictures of premade structures of such items as interlocking cubes, blocks, and train tracks, student who have difficulty developing and executing original ideas are provided a model to copy” (p. 56-57).

Harris (2012) elaborated further on examples of visual supports with descriptions of the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS) and Treatment and Education of Autistic and Related Communication Handicapped Children out of the University of North Carolina (TEACCH-UNC). PECS is an augmentative communication system created for individuals who are nonverbal or have few communication skills. It has demonstrated effectiveness in the use visual supports to assist students with ASD with the rapid acquisition of a functional means of communication (Harris, 2012). TEACCH develops an individualized learning program around an ASD child’s unique skills, interests, and needs and has helped thousands of ASD individuals as well as their families through provision of diagnostic evaluations, parent training, support groups, social play and recreation groups, individual counseling for higher-functioning clients, and supported

employment (Harris, 2012). Engel (2011) shared iPad benefits by describing how “a child with autism can use pictures and voice recordings and the touch technology to communicate” (p. 1). Noteworthy is the fact that while iPads and other AT may be cost prohibitive, educators can use simple and inexpensive materials to create and implement pieces of TEACCH, PECS, and other visual support systems (Harris, 2012).

In summary, visual supports reduce anxiety and improve ASD student behavior (Harris, 2012; Rao & Gagie, 2006) and help students with ASD express thoughts and understand abstract concepts (Harris, 2012). Students with autism require more visual supports than individuals without autism; however, not all students with autism require the same level of visual support. Just as autism is a disability that varies in degree from student to student, the program that best meets the needs of students with autism should vary from student to student (Harris, 2012). The heterogeneity exhibited by the ASD student population and subsequent need for unique individualized educational accommodations poses a challenge to many schools (Burns, 2012). However, many ASD educational improvement options for any budget are available (Harris, 2012; Stromer 2006) and schools must meet these challenges in order to provide legally mandated equity within ASD education. The following section will describe legal supports pertinent to ASD education improvement devices, strategies, and methods.

Legal Support for ASD Accommodations

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 focused on the intent of improving accessibility of federally funded educational programs to various subgroups that had been underserved and/or discriminated against in the past due to physical or mental disabilities (Yell, Rogers, & Lodge Rogers, 1998). Later laws passed applicable to the study of

student equity and social justice for potentially disadvantaged groups included *IDEA of 1988* (Amended 1990, 1997, 2004), *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA, 1990), the *Assistive Technology Act* (ATA) of 1998, reauthorized in 2004. Each of these important legal statutes related to provision of needed resources to disabled students such as those with ASD are outlined in this section.

IDEA (1988) was a revision of *The Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (EHA) which required collaboration between schools and parents in the design of educational plans based on individual student observations that would seek to create homogenous educational experiences for the disabled and non-disabled students if schools were to receive federal funding (IDEA, 1988). Importantly, IDEA (1988) decreed that,

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities (p. 1154).

Specifically, IDEA mandated that students with disabilities had the right to due process within contended educational disputes and placement in the least restrictive educational environment possible (Yell et al., 1998). In connection, IDEA (1988) mandated that public schools provide procedures to parents and legal guardians of disabled children who disputed decisions made about their children's education in order to address these potential threats to social justice and equality in education. The intent of this due process clause was to provide for fair and unbiased hearings to mitigate and resolve

disagreements between the parents and guardians of disabled children and the public schools that they are enrolled in (IDEA, 1988).

Currently, students with disabilities such as ASD often fail to fully benefit from the provisions of the IDEA (1988) and other related laws due to lack of educator training in the use of innovative research supported ASD education strategies (Chin, 2009; Hess et al., 2008; National Research Council, 2001). Consequently, this absence of sufficiently trained ASD educators (Browne, 2012) has been successfully contested under IDEA (Yell et al., 2003). Furthermore, IDEA (1988) supported the use equipment, products and systems toward the improvement of special education and inclusive education. Yet, President Bush and other legislative members did not request any funds for the educational support items IDEA (1998) advocated for when they passed the ATA into law in 2004 (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). Consequently, social justice and equality in ASD education remains elusive to those students who are not receiving the individualized educational services that would allow them to reach their fullest potential (Marshall & Ward, 2004; Nussbaum, 2006).

Legal supports outlined in IDEA (1988) are buttressed by the ADA (1990) and AT Act (1998). The ADA (1990) extended full civil rights and equal opportunities to people with disabilities in both the public and private sectors. Specifically, the ADA (1990) prohibited discrimination based on a physical or mental disability in public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications. Importantly, this law supported its intent by providing federally enforced standards aimed at ending discrimination against people with disabilities and redirected fiscal resources to assist in this effort (ADA, 1990; Crow, 2008).

Most students with autism require unique strategies, equipment, and other forms of educational support to reach their potential (Schlosser, Blischak, Belfiore, Bartley, & Barnett, 1998). Moreover, research has demonstrated the effectiveness of assistive technology (AT) supports in improving the performance of students with ASD in mainstream educational settings (Lacava et al., 2007), partially due to the improvements in areas of emotional recognition frequently shown by students with ASD using AT (Myles, 2005). In support of these students and other individuals with unique needs, Congress enacted the Assistive Technology Act (ATA) of 1998 with the intent of helping state governments address the needs of the disabled through the use of AT. According to Baily (2000), examples of assistive technology include: computer modifications to increase accessibility, and electronic devices that make communication possible.

Congress reauthorized the *AT Act of 1998, Public Law 105-394*, during the 108th Session of Congress (2002-2004) (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). The AT Act of 2004 takes further steps to directly place needed AT in the hands of those who can benefit from it most (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005) through provision of state grant programs (AT Act, 2004). Furthermore, the *AT Act* (2004) supported the goals of the ADA (1990) by advocating for increased access to the specialized equipment needed by many students with ASD to reach their fullest potential within school settings (Schlosser et al., 1998).

In summary, many educational laws work together to ensure that people with disabilities have full participation in educational systems (Crow, 2008). Although educators lack sufficient training specific to ASD student needs (Baker, 2012; Gay, 2010) and equity research is rarely adequately implemented in school settings (Browne, 2012)

the law does address these issues. Specifically, IDEA (1988) may be applied in conjunction with other aforementioned educational laws to provide special education services that guarantee decisions about services to disabled students are fair and appropriate through specific guidelines and provision of federal funds (Crow, 2008). Coupling key tenants pertaining to equality and education in the *AT Act* (2004) and the ADA (1990) may assist in creating a legal foundation for intentional efforts involving significant resource investment in creating educational environments that allow students with ASD to reach their fullest potential.

Conceptual Underpinnings for the Study

According to Ravitch and Riggan (2012) a conceptual framework involves a researcher's argument for why their topic matters and how their research methods align with their goals. It may address a gap in current research related to a theory that the researcher is attempting to fill (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Likewise, described within this section are the gaps within the theoretical frameworks considered for this study and explain why the topic of justice in ASD student education is both important and timely. In addition, team leadership and social justice leadership theories as frameworks with applicability to the study are discussed, however, both were determined not to meet the expectations of a conceptual framework and reasons for this contention will be described. In conclusion, the explanation and argument for the use social justice theory as the conceptual lens best fitting this inquiry will be presented.

Team leadership

As services designed to provide equity to students with ASD have evolved from predominantly exclusionary practices to progressively more inclusive models (Carter &

Hughes, 2006; Crockett, 1999; United States Department of Education, 2009), the number of individuals working in teams needed to create and implement effective individualized educational plans for students with ASD has grown. Thus, effective management of teams within ASD education is increasingly critical and team leadership theory provides a timely lens through which to view ASD education issues, for Northouse (2010) stated, “Leadership in organizational groups or work teams has become one of the most popular and rapidly growing areas of leadership theory and research” (p. 241). Moreover, Marquardt (2011) stressed the connection between collaboration and organizational success and championed the increasingly important role teams’ play within organizations due to their ability to efficiently transfer knowledge among themselves and throughout their organizations. Furthermore, these teams learn to generate new knowledge through collective analysis of complex issues and consequently, are able to solve problems in innovative ways (Marquardt, 2011). Solansky (2008) indicated teams with shared leadership have advantages over single leader groups, and Parker (2009) contended innovation and creativity were increased by the use of teams over individuals. Unfortunately, many of the most effective team models for improving ASD education are rarely implemented within current education settings (Conroy et al., 2000).

ASD education often creates the frustrating and complex problems that necessitate the innovative solutions potentially stemming from application of team leadership theory, as strategies implemented for one ASD student are frequently ineffective when applied to other students with ASD (Burns, 2013). Additionally, many research supported ASD education strategies relate to the use of technology combined

with innovative teaching methods that few educators are trained in (Baker, 2012; Gay, 2010; National Research Council, 2001; Scheuermann et al., 2003). Furthermore, many of these new methods potentially enable rather than empower the students with learning disabilities they are designed to help (Chin, 2009). Therefore, ASD education may benefit from the innovation and creativity (Parker, 2009) as well as the knowledge generation and problem solving created by effectively lead teams (Marquardt, 2011).

Additionally, team leadership tenants are relevant to ASD education due to lack of direction most educators receive from their leadership on effective methods to mitigate and improve disruptive class behaviors exhibited by the students with ASD (Hart, 2012). According to Hart, “Challenging behaviors pose one of the most difficult aspects of teaching children with autism” (2012, p. 25). However, these behaviors are often one of the few communication methods available to ASD learners who need to express their frustration with certain school situations (Hart, 2012; Mesibov et al., 1997). In connection, the absence of teachers sufficiently trained in research-supported best practices for students with ASD (Baker, 2012; Gay, 2010; National Research Council, 2001; Scheuermann et al., 2003) means current best ASD education practice methods are rarely used (Hess, Morrier, & Heflin, 2008) and situations occurring in classrooms and other school settings which led to the aforementioned ASD problem behaviors persist. The absence of incorporation of best ASD education practices should not come as a surprise as most education programs responsible for training school teachers and administrators provide little training in evidence supported effective ASD educational strategies (Baker, 2012; Marshall, 2004; Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, 2011; Scheuermann, et al., 2003). Subsequently, application of team leadership theory toward the expansion and

transfer of group knowledge related to the education of students with ASD in order to solve problems in new and creative ways (Marquardt, 2011) is critical.

Furthermore, Goodman (2011) stressed the importance of group knowledge in fostering the empathy needed to meet the needs of marginalized groups, while West, Jones, and Stevens (2006) described collaboration as a fundamental component to supporting educators of many student subgroups. Consequently, team leadership theory holds potential application to school leaders seeking to promote empowerment and decrease marginalization within their schools. This potential stems from team leadership theories' framework for the organization of ASD educator teams and its ability to foster connectedness of individual educators (Northouse, 2010) to ASD education issues.

Similarly, team leadership tenants relate closely to one rarely implemented team collaboration method useful in improving ASD student behaviors and educator outcomes called a functional behavior assessment (FBA) (Conroy et al., 2000). Research has shown FBA can reveal root causes of inappropriate ASD student behavior and provide solutions to make a better learner environment for both teachers and disabled and nondisabled learners (Conroy et al., 2000; Hart, 2012). When conducting a FBA a team of educators gathers information about both a student's behaviors and the context in which they most frequently occur in order to develop interventions that replace negative behaviors with positive ones (Hart, 2012). The FBA team subsequently evaluates whether change is occurring and modifies improvement strategies as needed in a timely manner (Hart, 2012).

Unfortunately, few teachers have been a part of the FBA team experience and created the ASD improvements needed despite that fact that the FBA is considered

standard professional practice in many educational settings (Conroy et al., 2000).

However, Hart (2012) stated general education teachers could collaborate with special education teachers to learn more about FBA and other research supported ASD strategies. Northouse (2010) concurred organizational structuring and intervention supported by team leadership theory could promote such collaboration.

A further benefit of team leadership theories' application is the connectedness to problems it fosters (Northouse, 2010). For Johnson (2006) contended that people rarely make a positive impact without clear recognition of how a problem connects to them. Notably, many current school leaders moved out of the classroom before the rapid growth in ASD student numbers (Billingsley, 2003; CDC, 2014; Ryan et al., 2011). Therefore, these leaders may lack the emotional connectedness that often motivates a leader to learn and develop the skill set necessary to improve student equity within ASD education (Johnson, 2006). In contrast, connectedness is central to the team leadership model, as decisions and consequences are spread throughout the group, and the leader and employee's successes and failures are mutual (Northouse, 2010). Thus, its application holds potential benefits in this area as teams of learners creating; modifying and improving ASD education strategies are needed but are not currently in place (Hart, 2012).

Marquardt (2011) espoused the benefits of placing responsibility at the level nearest to the point of action. However, the notion of the leader as part of the whole is a mindset shift for many leaders accustomed to a more hierarchical organizational structure within their schools (Northouse, 2010). Currently, equitable ASD education necessitates skilled teams of parents, classroom teachers, paraprofessionals, counselors, special

education teachers and directors, as well as administrators collaborating as a team to assess and improve the behavior and related academic performance of their ASD student populations (Hart, 2012). Subsequently, application of team leadership theory tenets could be useful in resolving some of these ASD education logistical problems through promoting the rapid creation, learning, sharing, and decimation of this new knowledge (Senge, 2006) on effective ASD education to multiple stakeholders in a coordinated effort. Leaders who effectively recognize, analyze and understand the interconnectedness and complex nature of the network of ASD education stakeholders stand greater chance of success (Marquardt, 2011). Specifically, leaders can correct structural deficiencies and fix environmental problems that impede the sharing necessary for group achievement (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Furthermore, team leadership theory offers a guide to potential corrections, both large and small, that create, improve, and maintain the teamwork (Northouse, 2010) essential to providing a more fully inclusive and just education to students with ASD.

The increase in the number of students with ASD (Billingsley, 2003; CDC, 2014; Ryan et al., 2011) and effective implementation of new ASD education strategies each represent emerging challenges for school districts (Riehl, 2000; Yell et al., 2003). The complex nature of challenges of this type is met through a well-organized team effort (Parker, 2009; Senge, 2006, Solansky, 2008). Thus, the tenets of team leadership theory are applicable to analysis of the topic of study. However, its focus on sets of actions a leader may take to promote effective teamwork (Northouse, 2010) may fail to highlight the voices and roles of educators who are not in formal leadership positions. Capturing and coding the human experiences (both the failures and successes) of those who work

most closely with students with ASD each day is a critical. The inclusion of the knowledge from these overlooked educator voices may well be an untapped resource needed to effectively promote equity and justice within ASD education which team leadership does not specifically target (Northouse, 2010). Furthermore, upon detailed analysis of the literature available, it was deemed by this researcher that team leadership theory did not provide as relevant of a lens with which to frame the primary focus of this study, justice in ASD education. Lastly, team leadership theory lacked the ethical focus (Northouse, 2010) close to the root of the morality issues foundational to efforts in equitable education of students with ASD. Therefore, team leadership theory was not chosen as the conceptual framework needed for this inquiry, resulting in social justice leadership theory next being examined.

Social Justice Leadership

Marshall and Ward (2004) and Theoharis (2007) contended that promoting equality and justice is an essential and critical component of school leadership. Concurrently, Theoharis (2007) stated socially just leadership may be expressed through the skill and commitment to meeting the needs of marginalized student subgroups a leader exhibits. Furthermore, Chin (2009) postulated social justice should not only be a focus of the powerless but rather a critical consciousness that needs to be instilled in leaders with power and privilege in order to produce needed change. However, training specific to marginalized populations within leadership preparation programs is lacking (Baker, 2012; Marshall, 2004). In addition, principals encountering resistance to promoting social justice through their school leadership have little research on which to turn to advance their goals, as there is minimal discussion of special education and

inclusive practices in the body of literature on social justice leadership (Riester, et al., 2002; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003). New research is needed to correct current attempts to produce social justice that often centered on differences as deficits and the use of technology to enable rather than empower (Chin, 2009).

Theoharis (2007) grounded his social justice leadership definition in the daily realities faced by school leaders who center their vision and practice on issues of disability by addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools through inclusive school practices. Similarly, Bogotch (2002) emphasized that social justice leadership cannot be separated from practice. In the same vein, Marshall and Ward (2004) discussed the importance of real-life models of social justice leadership in schools as opposed to mere education theory. They maintain that these real-life models demonstrate how social justice leadership is possible. Equity in ASD education is promoted by leaders who “Advocate for and keep at the center of their practice and vision issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States” (Theoharis, 2008, p. 5). For this reason, the changing of the current central themes of many leadership preparation programs is essential in order to provide students a broader knowledge and skill base in areas essential to advancing social justice such as special education, race, poverty, the use of data, presentation skills, differentiation and teaming, and the development of a global perspective (Theoharis, 2007).

Equity and justice are foremost in the conscious of those who lead for social justice (Theoharis, 2007). However, these leaders should work within the constricted fiscal landscape of public education. Their commitment to socially just leadership is

tested by ASD student populations that increase teacher stress (Beck & Gargiulo, 2011) and have an adverse impact on staff retention rates and increase the incidence of staff burnout (Jennett, Harris, & Mesibov, 2003). Replacement teachers are often less qualified, resulting in decreased levels of special education services (Zabel & Zabel, 2001). The subsequent searching, hiring, and training of educators with the skills and desire to work tirelessly for equity in ASD education may drain fiscal resources (West, et al., 2006). Therefore, socially just leaders should be skilled in finding ways to address threats to the economical use of resources available (West, et al., 2006) if they are going to make the necessary investments in programs and staff needed to improve ASD outcomes.

A study focused on how leaders overcome barriers to social justice in ASD education would be a valuable addition to literature needed for school leaders to promote social change. However, Theoharis (2007) contended that studies ought to look deeper at social justice leadership, and include various stakeholder perspectives, creating true models of the experiences of those attempting to enact social justice. Consequently, the research sought not only to examine social justice issues in ASD education from the standpoint of those in leadership positions but sought also to include the voices of those working more directly each day with ASD learners. Although social justice leadership theory is a timely and relevant lens through which to view ASD education, its leader-focused approach (Northhouse, 2010) may not specifically highlight the voices of educators not in formal leadership positions. Thus this researcher chose to investigate ASD education in the broader context, using social justice theory as opposed to viewing those issues strictly from the leadership standpoint.

Social Justice Theory

Rawls (1999) described the mechanism by which society assigns responsibilities and distributes benefits and burdens of our cooperative social efforts as the core of social justice theory while Gewirtz (1998) defined social justice as a response to disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes. Likewise, Goldfarb and Grinberg (2002) contended those who extend equality to those who have lost it exemplify work in social justice and they promote the changing of institutional and organizational power structures as a means toward achieving this goal. Similarly, Rawls (1996) claimed social and economic inequalities should benefit the least advantaged members of society and that “each person has the same infeasible claim to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties” (Rawls, 2001, p. 42). Furthermore, Goodlad and Riddell, (2005) championed the continued importance of the social justice discussion especially in the realm of the way society handles issues and needs associated with disability.

Social Justice in Education

Education is a social institution and consequently, its first virtue is justice (Rawls, 1999). Unfortunately, examples of unjust treatment of students with disabilities are historically common within the public education system with: 33% of children with disabilities are suspended or expelled (Chin, 2009). The chance of those students graduating thereupon falls to 35% while their chance of being arrested within five years rises to 75% (Chin, 2009). The students with ASD central this study fall into those groups; however, few conclusions specific to their subgroup can be drawn, for The Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE, 2015) does not

subdivide ASD performance data amongst the special education population in the same manner of more thoroughly studied subgroups. Consequently, ASD education improvements often lack the statistical support typical of other historically disadvantaged student subgroups. Some assertions pertinent to ASD education drawn from researchers such as Marshall (2004) who stated students with ASD have diminished social capital stemming from different abilities rather than disabilities. Concurrently, Goodman (2011) contended diversity efforts typically promote understanding, acceptance, and appreciation of cultural differences and autism is both culture that should be valued and respected and a disability requiring treatment. However, further research data supporting what specifically these prescribed treatment and appreciation efforts entail is needed (Goodman, 2011).

Further support of the use of the social justice framework for this study comes from both Rawls (1999; 2001) and Theoharis (2007) who supported the application of social justice theories in efforts to provide quality support to marginalized student populations. Similarly, for Marshall and Ward (2004) equal access to educational services and assurance that laws for individual rights are observed were seen as fundamental components of social justice. Moreover, Bogotch (2002) advocated continuous social justice reform in education and contended that social justice only has meaning when engaged in social and academic discourse.

Additional justification for use of the social justice framework stems from the deficiencies in current studies described by Chin (2009), who maintained that social justice studies have not given learning impairments the same attention as race, sexism, and poverty. Chin's sentiments are buttressed by Nussbaum (2006) who claimed justice

to people with mental impairments remains an unresolved social justice issue, while Riestler, Pursch, and Skrla (2002) stated there is minimal discussion of special education and inclusive practices in the social justice literature. Lastly, Goodman (2011) cited “patience, flexibility, and open-heartedness as necessary elements for social justice in education” (p. 180). The focus will be on how to develop and sustain the patience, flexibility, and open-heartedness needed for social justice in education; for according to Goodman (2011), “In order for people to live together in a caring and just world, this is important work” (p. 180).

Educator ASD Training

Inclusion can be mandated and small improvements within ASD education may be made however, without comprehensive training for all stakeholders, social justice for this subgroup will remain elusive (Chin, 2009). Browne (2012) and Gay (2010) emphasized only a small amount of the previously described inadequate equity research base is actually being used to provide socially just education despite research stating that students with ASD typically require unique individualized strategies, support, and equipment to reach their fullest potential within educational settings (Schlosser et al., 1998). In order to provide for the educational needs of students with ASD all school personnel need to be knowledgeable of research supported ASD education methods (Marder & Fraser, 2012). Even educators who do not have students with ASD in their classrooms are likely to interact at some point with students with ASD and many may be unaware and insensitive to the unique behaviors often associated with students with ASD due to the frequently inconspicuous manifestations of their disabilities (Chin, 2009; Hart 2012). Consequently, educator training is especially critical in ASD education due to the

absence of physical manifestations of their learning and social disabilities, which are subsequently overlooked by educators, who then judge their behavior on normative standards that assume fully able status (Chin, 2009).

As Baker (2012) noted, few teachers receive any training on evidence-based practices for students with ASD. Subsequently, Scheuermann et al., (2003) asserted much of the training educators do receive specific to ASD learners is inadequate is especially troubling. Further concerns arise when these contentions are coupled with research findings indicating students with ASD are often educated primarily by populations of educators that suffer from above average rates of burnout and below average retention rates (Jennett et al., 2003). In support of this assertion, Lecavalier et al., (2006) discovered correlations between the avoidant, withdrawn, and abnormal stimulatory behaviors associated with ASD learners and the aforementioned lower staff retention rates and increased stress levels of those charged with the care of students with ASD. As a result, less qualified replacement educators are hired, resulting in decreased levels of special education services (Zabel & Zabel, 2001) and additional problems for schools seeking to retain quality personnel needed for effective implementation of special education programs that utilize current research supported best ASD education practices (Carter & Hughes, 2006).

In spite of the many previously described obstacles ASD educators face, successful programs do exist and research has shown certain classroom structures (Palm, 2012), early intervention strategies (Handleman & Harris, 2000), Functional Behavior Assessments (Hart, 2012), and technology and visual supports (Cafiero, 2008; Hodgdon, 2000) to be common themes among successful ASD education programs. Educators

trained in the effective use of instructional technology in classrooms are a critical component necessary for social justice within special education (Swain & Edyburn, 2007). Regrettably, there has been minimal exploration into the use of technology supports to meet the varied needs of students with learning disabilities (Edyburn, 2003). However, research data supported their ability to foster problem solving-solving skills within students (Babbitt & Miller, 1996) and promote higher-order thinking (Paolucci, 1998). Moreover, Engel (2011) shared that the use of voice recordings, touch technology, and pictures on an iPad can significantly improve the educational experience of students with ASD.

Unfortunately, funding intensive special education programs for specific and smaller special education groups is difficult for many school districts (Browder & Cooper-Duffy, 2003). Luckily, TEACCH, PECS, and other visual support systems shown to enhance processing and social skills in children with ASD, can be developed from inexpensive materials when iPads and other AT are cost prohibitive (Harris, 2012). Importantly for the provision of social justice within ASD education, correct implementation of these new methods has been shown to empower rather than enable students (Chin, 2009) granting the social institution that is education a chance to uphold its first virtue, justice (Rawls, 1999).

Summary

This review of literature began by detailing issues in the education of students with ASD that make research into this topic important, timely, and worthy of investigation. Descriptions of various types of ASD were given and potential causes of ASD were shared. Next, the researcher described problems associated with ASD

education central to the research included rising populations of students with ASD and challenges in meeting their needs within an inclusive public school setting. The researcher then described research supported methods and technologies that educators may be trained to improve ASD outcomes. However, sources citing the lack of educator training and implementation of these technologies, strategies, programs, and methods specific to ASD student equity were also detailed. Additionally, the researcher examined legal supports relevant to ASD education.

Next, the researcher described the relevance of team leadership theory and social justice leadership theory to the topic of study. However, both frameworks were deemed to be a poorer fit into an exploration of the experiences of ASD educators' central to the purpose of the study than was social justice theory. In conclusion, the researcher detailed social justice theory and its relevance to the topic ASD education.

The research questions, design, and methodology will be explored in Chapter Three along with the research subjects, and methods of data collection and analysis. Presented in Chapter Four are the results and analysis of the research data. Detailed in Chapter Five are the discussion of research findings, conclusions, implementations for practice, along with recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Introduction

ASD are the fastest-growing group of serious developmental disabilities in the United States (National Autism Network, 2013) and through the support of legislation contained within IDIA (2004), NCLB (2001), and ESSA (2016) school services designed to provide equity to students with ASD have progressed toward more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Hart, 2012; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2014). Consequently, the number and variety of educators accountable for ASD learning outcomes has increased and created a greater need for practical techniques educators could apply to their unique learning settings in order to help students with ASD overcome skill deficiencies that frequently encumber many aspects of the learning process (Bashe & Kirby, 2005; Burns, 2013; Hart, 2012). However, research has not shown that this need has led to widespread instruction in evidence-based ASD specific education methods within educator training programs (Baker, 2012; Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, 2011). Nor have schools provided adequate training assistance in the numerous practical research supported methods and treatments shown to improve ASD student outcomes despite their legal obligations to do so (Banshe & Kirby, 2005; Nickels, 2010).

Furthermore, while Zeichner (2009) contended students in specialized programs are more likely to be marginalized, little is known about the obstacles educators attempting to include students with ASD as full participants in the classroom encounter (Lindsay, 2013). This study sought to examine the resulting gap within the research through the lens of social justice theory. Specifically, this phenomenological study will

examine the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD with a goal of addressing deficiencies described by Chin (2009) who stated that social justice studies have not given ability status the same attention as race, sexism, and poverty. Also included in Chapter Three is a statement of the research questions, the rationale for the use of a qualitative study design, a description of the design methods, participants, as well as a description of the researcher's own biases and assumptions.

Research Questions

According to Hatch (2002) the aim of research questions is to provide direction to the topic of study and limit the scope of the investigation. Furthermore, qualitative research questions stem from the researcher's theoretical orientation (Hatch, 2002) and "Committed qualitative researchers tend to frame their questions in such a way that the only manner in which they can be answered is by doing qualitative research" (Corbin & Strauss, 2014, p. 5). Therefore, to highlight the various obstacles facing educators within secondary educational settings, the resistance they face in that work, and the resilience they develop to sustain their social justice work, the following research questions used for this study:

1. What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?
2. What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?

3. According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?
4. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?
5. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

Rationale for Use of a Qualitative Phenomenological Study

When selecting a method for a research study, the researcher must consider the problem studied and the audience (Creswell, 2009) while also drawing guidance from related research investigated in the literature review (Lee & Smith, 2012). Importantly, the researcher should critically review and determine which method or methods would be best suited to answer their research questions rather than selecting a method based on personal preference (Creswell, 2009). For the respective philosophical assumptions and foundations aligned with quantitative and qualitative research, methods tend to align with different research methods and types investigations within different areas of inquiry (Hatch, 2002). Quantitative research stems from a positivist research paradigm and is a means for testing objective theories and hypotheses by examining relationships among predetermined variables (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002) and its findings support broad

generalizations (Marshall, 1996). Within quantitative studies, the researcher is typically removed from the setting as their aim is to objectively analyze whether correlations or causality exist between variables and validity, reliability, and transferability of data are all threatened by the introduction of the researcher as a non-controlled variable within a quantitative study (Creswell, 2009).

Conversely, within qualitative research paradigms the researcher is often a key instrument in the study (Creswell, 2009) and their involvement in the research settings seeks to create a deeper and more comprehensive understanding and description of the context and social realities pertinent to their investigation (Flick, Kardorff, & Seinke, 2004). Further, qualitative studies often have an emergent design that is continually refined by the researcher as they learn what and who to ask (Lee & Smith, 2012). Moreover, qualitative research strives to co-create and construct human meanings (Cleary, Horsfall, & Hayter, 2014) and focuses on the lived experiences of its subjects (Merriam & Associates, 2002) as multiple realities exist within qualitative paradigms and meaning is individually and socially constructed (Heppner & Heppner, 2004).

Notably, qualitative research favors depth over breadth of knowledge (Ambert, Adler, Adler, & Detzner, 1995) as researchers seek thick and rich description within qualitative study narratives (Merriam, 1998) as they attempt to explain behaviors, experiences, social contexts, and the interactions therein without the use of statistical procedures (Fossey, Harvey, McDermott, & Davidson, 2002). Furthermore, qualitative study participants are studied within their natural settings by researchers seeking to understand the world from their perspectives (Hatch, 2002). Additional characteristics of qualitative research include the collection of multiple perspectives and the use of a

theoretical lens through which the researcher examines the problem or topic of the study (Creswell, 2009).

While quantitative and qualitative methods represent different ends of a continuum rather than dichotomous opposites within fields of research (Newman & Benz, 1998), mixed method research fits into the middle of the aforementioned continuum due to its synthesis of these research methods (Creswell, 2009). The objective of the synthesis of quantitative and qualitative methods is to increase the overall strength of the study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007) through consideration of multiple perspectives (Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007). The researcher often collects both qualitative and quantitative data at site visits and may concurrently review findings using triangulation, and embedded or transformative designs while determining the weight or emphasis to place on data collected through each method (Creswell, 2009).

In selecting the research method, the researcher determined that the use of statistical representations to answer closed-ended questions within quantitative research did not provide for the spontaneous revelation of new ideas and revelations from participants (Creswell, 2009) he sought. Moreover, the aim of quantitative research is often to test pre-determined hypotheses (Marshall, 1996) which the researcher deemed a poor fit for study seeking to identify themes and discover relationships across the spectrum of data (Krueger & Casey, 2009) gleaned through a flexible interview process centered on open-ended questions. Consequently, a qualitative research design was selected for this study for both theoretical and paradigm alignment and research collection methods contained therein.

Additional justification for the use of qualitative research methods within this study stems from Nelson and Quintana (2005) and Bogdan and Biklen (2007) who asserted that qualitative research is an established practice within education research. Moreover, Creswell (2009) asserted that qualitative research is a valid method for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4) and thus fit the studies goal of investigating how the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities are reflected in the training ASD educators receive and the education they provide students with ASD.

Concurrently, Hatch (2002) posited, “qualitative research seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it” (p. 7) and since the study sought to explore varied perspectives of individuals currently involved in the education of students with ASD by capturing “their perceptions of the realities that surround them” (Hatch, 2002, p. 7) a qualitative approach was justifiably selected. The use of qualitative research methods also allows a researcher to be immersed in the research process and consider all possible meanings of the data (Atkinson, Health, & Chenail, 1991) and provides for in-depth description and understanding of context and subtle nuances of settings (Ambert et al., 1995; Fossey et al., 2002). In addition, qualitative study is appropriate if little research has been done on the topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Therefore, the lack of social justice research on issues pertinent to students with ASD (Chin, 2009; Riester et al., 2002) created an appropriate setting for qualitative analysis.

While many qualitative research studies are rooted to some extent in phenomenological principles as they typically focus on the lived experiences of subjects (Merriam & Associates, 2002) particular kinds of inquiry can be classified as

phenomenological studies (Hatch, 2002). According to Taylor, Bogdam, and DeVault (2015) phenomenological research models are appropriate for studies seeking to identify the essence of human experiences through direct collection of descriptive data from participants. This research study sought to explore “multiple, socially constructed realities” (Mertens, 2005, p. 9) and would “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Consequently, a phenomenological research model was a suitable method of inquiry.

Limitations of a Qualitative Study

Every research study contains limitations that are important to acknowledge (Connelly, 2013) and it is imperative for researchers to describe their influences, positions, and bias prior to qualitative data collection (Hatch, 2002). This provides readers of qualitative studies to consider how the settings, researcher bias, and researcher presence affected data collection and subsequent analysis and findings as they evaluate applicability to their own settings. However, qualitative researchers and readers of qualitative studies need not merely focus on removal of limitations but should rather reflect upon how limitations influence and shape a study (Creswell, 2009).

For example, the researcher’s use of social justice as a theoretical lens certainly created a different picture of the settings and daily realities facing study participants as did his background as a public school educator charged with the task of implementing ASD modifications within the classroom in efforts towards the provision of equitable education outcomes. Moreover, the many meetings involving a range of school educators, parents, and their students with ASD built within the researcher preconceived ideas related to issues of social justice within ASD education. However, “Qualitative

researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things” (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 8). Consequently, the aforementioned connections may be viewed as an asset to the study.

Reflexivity is the recognition of how a researcher’s background effected the study (Kuper, Lingard, & Levinson, 2008) and also pertains to the influence the researcher’s presence has on data collection (Kuper et al., 2008) as interviewees may hold or display bias related to the presence of the researcher (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). For the study, information was not collected in the natural fields setting and this may inhibit the accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, research has shown increases in stress levels of educators of students with ASD (Carter & Hughes, 2006) and the mood of participants at the time of data collection had the potential to influence responses and subsequent coding and themes developed by the researcher limiting what can be explicitly known or said to be true of findings.

The researcher mitigated potential research limitations by allowing study participants to evaluate accuracy of themes created by the researcher using member-checking and peer debriefing (Sharpe & Faye, 2009) while also describing in detail their bias and role within the research. The use of bracketing to isolate the researcher’s early interpretations, feelings, and thoughts from participant data further limited bias (Hatch, 2002) as did the routine usage of thick and rich description (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Associates, 2002) to provide readers detailed context (Flick et al., 2004) in order for them to determine the homogeneity and subsequently transferability of study findings.

Settings

Data from interviewees was limited to three purposely-selected Midwestern school districts and a small sample limits generalizability of findings. However, a large sample size is not practical in most qualitative studies and they are especially rare in doctoral research due to the characteristically scarce availability of time and fiscal resources (Seidman, 2006). Therefore, according to Krueger and Casey (2009) the researcher sought to balance what they would ideally do with what was practical considering the resources available to them. With that in mind, the researcher purposely selected a small number of participants believed to possess in-depth knowledge and experience (Ambert et al., 1995; Nelson & Quintana, 2005) gleaned through extensive interactions with students with ASD.

The researcher selected the three school districts for the study based on several criteria. First, the researcher sought to balance the benefits of the focus a homogenous sample would provide to the study with the increased applicability found in a more heterogonous setting sample. With that in mind, the researcher narrowed the settings to one state in order to compare and analyze data from educators working under the same state education mandates and with similar state demographics and funding. Furthermore, it was deemed valuable to consider social justice issues from school districts of various size but comparable demographics, thus each school was located in a suburban setting.

Next, the researcher considered the size of each school, its ASD student population, and its ASD student population relative to the total student population. Overall student populations of each school, the specific numbers of students with ASD from each district, as well as their percentage relative to the total student population were

collected from the Missouri Department of Education's (DESE, 2015) special education district profiles. Districts within the region selected that possessed fewer than seventy students with ASD were first eliminated as the study necessitated that each district studied had an ASD student population large enough that each district would have the number of educators the researcher deemed necessary to create comprehensive picture of ASD education through descriptions from multiple educator perspectives. Furthermore, it was critical that each educator had sufficient experience working with a variety of students with ASD. Therefore, paraprofessional participants and special education teachers possessed at least one year of experience working with students with ASD and special education directors possessed at least three years of experience working with students with ASD. The researcher considered setting the minimum number of years educating students with ASD higher. However, the researcher sought to attain knowledge related to current levels of ASD learning occurring within university systems and in order to gather this data it was important new teachers of ASD were in the research sample.

The school districts selected for the study came from three population categories. The smallest school district had fewer than 5000 total students, the second district had between 10,000-15,000 students, the largest district in the study had over 15,000 students (DESE, 2015). ASD student populations varied as the smallest district had between 70-80 students with ASD and the larger districts over 160 students with ASD (DESE, 2015).

The average school in the state of Missouri has an ASD student population 1.09% that of its overall student population (DESE, 2015). The percentage of students with ASD relative to the total student population of the school with the smallest overall

population was the highest at 1.7%, the ASD student percentage was 1.6% for the second largest school and .93% for the largest district. Additionally, each district selected had a special education director willing to participate in the study and at least three special education teachers reporting to their special education director and three paraprofessionals working closely with the three special education teachers that were also willing to be interviewed for the study.

Participants from each of the following staff categories who had direct experience and knowledge related to ASD education participated in the study: three paraprofessionals per district, three special education teachers per district, and one special education director per district.

Participants

The selection of the phenomenology as the method of inquiry, within this qualitative study, allowed the researcher to authentically process subjective data, from a limited number of purposefully selected study participants (Bednall, 2006). Marshall (1996), stated a purposeful sampling method provides a qualitative researcher to select the most fruitful research population sample in order to efficiently and effectively answer their research questions. Likewise, Vishnevsky and Beanlands (2004) advocated for the inclusion of only those participants with extensive experiences related to the central phenomena of a qualitative study and as a consequence the researcher is able to maximize the depth and richness of the data collected (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Nelson & Quintana, 2005). Additionally, Creswell (2009) advocated the incorporation of study participants who share common characteristics relevant to the central aim of the study and according to Cleary (et al., 2014) these homogenous groups hold the potential to

extend existing knowledge through their in-depth responses and related elaborations concerning the research and interview questions.

Participants and Sampling Procedures

Merriam held that the researcher should seek to “Select a sample from which the most can be learned” (1998, p. 61). These participants were chosen due to their possession of knowledge from their lived experiences and for their relevant likenesses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) associated with their extensive work with the ASD student population central to the study. In accordance with Ambert (et al., 1995), Marshall (1996), and Merriam and Associates (2002) the study sampled a limited number of participants in order to examine complex issues in-depth rather than produce a large amount of generalizable data.

Specifically, the study sought to collect qualitative information on the various obstacles facing educators attempting to promote education equity and social justice for students with ASD and detail the methods they use to overcome some of these barriers as well as their explanations for the insurmountability of others. Notably, peer collaboration and group knowledge are crucial to fostering the empathy needed to meet the educational needs of marginalized groups (Goodman, 2011; West, et al., 2006) of which students with ASD are a component. Therefore, a variety of stakeholders at different leadership levels (Theoharis, 2007) were interviewed in order to gain knowledge related to collaboration and alignment of views with regard to the topic of study. Of particular interest are the various roles special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their

respective school districts. Participant selection included educators that could provide comprehensive information on how the principles of social justice are reflected in the ASD specific training of educators and the daily lessons and methods used to improve the school experiences of students with ASD.

With that in mind, interview data were collected from twenty-one purposefully selected educators in varying positions within three Midwest School Districts. Participants from each of the following staff categories who had direct experience and knowledge related to ASD education participated in the study: three paraprofessionals per district that possessed at least one year of experience working with students with ASD, three special education teachers per district that possessed at least two years of experience working with students with ASD, and one special education director per district that possessed at least three years of experience working with students with ASD. The district gatekeeper, special educator directors, special education teachers and building principals collaborated in the selection and approval of research participants. The participants themselves made the final decision with regard to whether or not to participate in individual interviews. Each school district contained over seventy students with ASD in order to assure participants would have diverse and in-depth ASD education experience.

Special Education Administrators

Three special education administrators from public schools were chosen to participate in this study due to their possession of knowledge from their professional experiences associated with their extensive work with the ASD student population central to the study (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These administrators supervised

secondary special education programs tasked with the education of students with ASD for at least two years. Administrators were chosen from three different settings in order to paint a detailed picture of ASD education issues from a variety of perspectives (Creswell, 2009). Additionally, the researcher ensured that there were also special education teachers and paraprofessional participants from the same school district available for the study and that each special education director possessed at least three years of experience working with students with ASD.

Special Education Teachers

Selection of nine special education teachers for study participation stemmed from their direct experiences with the phenomena being studied (ASD education) (Vishnevsky & Beanlands, 2004). Three different schools were chosen for their possession of a large enough enrollment of students with ASD to warrant the employment of three or more special education teachers and that the participants would have an in-depth experience base related to the topic of study. The agreement of a special education administrator from the district to participate in study was also a requirement. A total of nine (three from each of the three sites) special education teachers who had experience with ASD student education were selected. Each special teacher possessed at least one year of experience working with students with ASD.

Paraprofessionals

Nine paraprofessional educators were selected for the study due to their experiences with the phenomena studied (Marshall, 1996). The voices of educators not in formal leadership positions who typically spend the greatest amount of time with students with ASD seemed to have been overlooked in much of the literature associated

with the topic of study. The inclusion of the voices of paraprofessional educator participants provided an in-depth and unique viewpoint to the study. A total of nine (three from each of the three sites) paraprofessional educators who had experience with ASD student education were selected. Each paraprofessional teacher possessed at least one year of experience working with students with ASD.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

A social constructivist lens provided the rationale for the use qualitative data collection instruments and a phenomenological research model provided direction for the study design (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). Understanding people from their own frames of reference is central to the phenomenological perspective of qualitative research. Creswell (2009) championed a phenomenological research model appropriateness for studies seeking to “identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). Mertens (2005), described the “interactive links between the researcher and the participants” (p. 9). Thus, the selection of the phenomenology as the method of inquiry within this qualitative study provided the researcher to authentically process subjective data from a limited number of purposefully selected study participants and for the incorporation of the researcher’s own experiences in order to enhance the significance of the study (Bednall, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2014).

Qualitative researchers empathize with their study participants as they set aside their own views and seek deeper understanding of the meanings those they study attach to their lived experiences (Taylor et al., 2015). Therefore, the researcher sought to explore “multiple, socially constructed realities” (Mertens, 2005, p. 9) and in doing so would “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied”

(Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Consequently, semi-structured open-ended interview questions were an appropriate instrument useful to focus and organize information while also permitting organic spontaneous revelations from participants (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). The focus of the data collection was flexible to allow inclusion of issues discovered through the interview process (Creswell, 2009). This flexibility aligned with both the social constructivist research paradigm and inductive nature of data collection and analysis (Hatch, 2002).

“In reference to research designs, validity is defined as the extent to which the outcomes accurately answer the stated research questions of the study” (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2013, p. 3). In order to answer the research questions within this qualitative study, the researcher collected data from a diverse group of educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD. Through the lens of social justice theory, this phenomenological study sought to find and understand potential barriers to ASD student equity and to understand the role various ASD educators play in the development and incorporation of researched supported ASD learning methods. Ultimately, the researcher planned to use data collected to paint detailed and a comprehensive picture of ASD education within specific settings.

Data collection

In-depth interviews that collect rich and detailed descriptive data about phenomena experienced by study participants are one of the central research methods used by phenomenologists (Taylor et al., 2015). It was through this method this study collected data from purposefully selected public school educators of students with ASD. In order to increase value and transferability of data and findings a diverse collection of

participants from multiple sites were sought (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Interview data from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education directors from three Midwestern school districts was collected and coded (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

During data collection the researcher “refer[ed] back to research questions to keep their observations on track” (Hatch, 2002, p. 81). Data detailing the size and demographics of the individual schools, the school districts, and their communities was also collected. Lastly, the researcher contacted the district gatekeepers of three school districts whose ASD student populations according to DESE (2015) were large enough, greater than seventy students, that they contained a representative sample of students with ASD and educators sufficient for data collection purposes. Furthermore, interviewees were likely to possess in-depth knowledge (Ambert, et al., 1995; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) gleaned from extensive work with a sufficient number of students with ASD.

Instrumentation

The primary method of data collection was semi-structured interviews consisting of open-ended questions (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002) with the ASD educators participating in the study. This prevalent qualitative data gathering process allowed for authentic verbal communication between the researcher and participants (Fossey et al., 2002). The time frame for each interview was no longer than 60 minutes (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). In accordance with Hatch (2002) transcription and organization of audio data and field notes collected began immediately following each interview in order to improve and enhance data analysis.

Interview Protocols

Interviews were conducted with twenty-one purposefully selected educators in varying positions within three Midwestern School Districts. Participants from each of the following staff categories who had direct experience and knowledge related to ASD education participated in the study: three paraprofessionals per district, three special education teachers per district, and one special education director per district. The researcher obtained permission (see Appendix A) for those educators to participate in the study from district gatekeepers. A letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) with attached interview questions (see Appendix B), and a letter of confirmation confirming times and dates were subsequently mailed to individual study participants. This allowed them ample time to review and reflect upon on the interview questions in order to elicit a comprehensive account of ASD education within their respective settings (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Potential follow up questions were asked in a manner that enabled interviewees to respond in their own voice and provide context within their responses (Qu & Dumay, 2011).

Interviews were conducted using sixteen to twenty-one semi-structured open-ended questions that aligned with the research questions and were rooted in social justice concepts and themes central to the literature reviewed. Special education directors and teachers of schools districts comparable to those in the study participated in a pilot study of all interview questions that assisted the researcher with structure, wording and order of questions, and confidentiality issues (Kruegar & Casey, 2009; Teijlingen & Vanora, 2001). All interview questions (Appendix B) examined the various ways each interviewee and school district defined and exemplified social justice for students with

ASD within their education settings (Rawls, 2001; Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, barriers to social justice were investigated with a focus on training of educators and incorporation of research supported ASD education strategies as the research consistently pointed to those as major hurdles to socially just education for students with ASD (Goodman, 2011; Hart, 2012). Following interview, transcripts were sent to participants to allow for member checking.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness is an essential element of both data collection and analysis within qualitative research (Glesne, 1999). Trustworthiness was a central focus within this study and was achieved through use of a variety of methods and procedural safeguards.

Preceding the data collection, permission to conduct research was obtained from The Human Subjects Review Committee of the University of Missouri – Columbia (see Appendix C) and the research gatekeepers of each school district (Appendix A) that study participants worked in. Furthermore, gatekeeper letters (Appendix A) to school leaders within each district explained in detail the purpose of the research.

An additional element necessary to trustworthiness within a research study is that of the researcher explicitly detailing the intent of the study (DiDicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) and through use of informed consent (Appendix A) the researcher met this goal. No interview data was collected without signed letters of informed consent detailing the voluntary nature of the study and the rights of participants to ask questions and withdraw from the study at any time (Creswell, 2009). Furthermore, the research heeded Creswell's (2009) recommendations and detailed their role within the research concerning their background in the topic area, potential bias, and steps taken to gain

access to subjects. Additionally, the use of field notes by the researcher allowed for valuable reflection after the interview data collection (Nelson & Quintana, 2005).

Essential to research ethics and trustworthiness is the protection of the confidentiality of the participants and the use of pseudonyms (Theoharis, 2007) for each participant. Furthermore, in order to protect confidentiality, the researcher did not identify schools by name or reveal details that would allow readers to identify the settings described. Moreover, during the course of interview data collection the researcher made an effort to bracket all of their thoughts, impressions, assumptions, early interpretations, feelings, and reactions in order to keep them separate from participant data a limit bias (Hatch, 2002).

Additional safeguards included member-checking which was incorporated by the researcher in order to enhance accuracy and add credibility to the study while also alleviating subject anxiety (Sharpe & Faye, 2009). The member-checking served to enhance dependability of the researcher and findings of the study (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005). Hatch, (2002) stated, “whenever possible take stories back to those who contributed to them so they can clarify, refine, or change them” (p. 205). Therefore, the researcher sent copies of interview transcripts to participants along with invitations for follow-up interviews or conversations (Creswell, 2009). Participants were allowed to clarify transcriptions and evaluate accuracy of themes created by the researcher (Creswell, 2009) and notes written during the initial interviews were subsequently updated.

Data Analysis

“Data analysis is a systematic search for meaning. It is a way to process qualitative data so that what has been learned can be communicated to others” (Hatch, 2002, p. 146). Qualitative data analysis involves the organization of data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, discover relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2014), identify themes, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate theories (Hatch, 2002). In searching for patterns, researchers continuously move from the abstract to the concrete asking questions and making comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). In studying social justice, the data were coded and analyzed using the research questions as a starting place. The data analysis process required the development of themes specific to research questions (Hatch, 2002) thus allowing the researcher to recognize the connections between the data collected and the research questions (Fossey et al., 2002). Interviews were interpreted and analyzed by the researcher in order to identify themes and discover relationships across the spectrum of data (Krueger & Casey, 2009).

First, in order to develop themes, audio-taped interviews were transcribed into a written script. Corbin and Strauss (2014) recommended reviewing all data before analysis in order “to enter vicariously into the life of participants, feel what they are experiencing, and listen to what they are saying through their words or actions” (p. 86). The researcher then began using inductive analysis for data coding and categorizing (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Hatch, 2002). Hatch (2002) described the researcher’s process for inductively analyzing qualitative research data as moving from “specific to the general” as individual pieces of data are composed into “a meaningful whole” (p. 161).

Additionally, field notes were concurrently interpreted in relation to the findings in the transcriptions to provide triangulation (Creswell, 2009).

As key concepts, patterns, and issues arose, an open coding process identified categories and subcategories (Nelson & Quintana, 2005). The researcher then used axial coding in order to relate categories to subcategories (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The open-ended nature of the research questions guiding this study created a research setting where data analysis was improved by being conducted immediately after collection (Hatch, 2002). In summary, data analysis cannot be concluded until the research questions are answered and a complete story be told (Hatch, 2002). With that in mind the researcher employed the aforementioned data analysis processes and methods until a richly detailed picture of the participants and their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005) in relation to social justice issue associated with ASD education could be painted and readers could appreciate and comprehend the lived experiences of study participants (Kuper et al., 2008).

Summary

Presented in Chapter Three was a detailed account of the procedures and methods used in design of the data collection, instrumentation, analysis, and methodology used to investigate issues associated with social justice within ASD education. Research questions were presented and justification for the use of certain data collection methods and the use of a phenomenological research model was included. The research study participants were also described. Within Chapter Four, the data analysis and research findings are presented. Contained in Chapter Five is a summary and discussion of the

research findings, limitations of the study, conclusions, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER FOUR

PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF DATA

Introduction

Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) are the fastest-growing group of serious developmental disabilities in the United States (National Autism Network, 2013) and through the support of legislation contained within IDIA (2004), NCLB (2001), and ESSA (2016) school services designed to provide equity to students with ASD have progressed toward more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Hart, 2012; Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, 2014). Consequently, the number and variety of educators accountable for ASD learning outcomes has increased and created a greater need for practical techniques educators could apply to their unique learning settings in order to help students with ASD overcome skill deficiencies that frequently encumber many aspects of the learning process (Bashe & Kirby, 2005; Burns, 2013; Hart). However, research has not shown that this need has led to widespread instruction in evidence-based ASD specific education methods within educator training programs (Baker, 2012; Morrier, Hess, & Heflin, 2011). Nor have schools provided adequate training assistance in the numerous practical research supported methods and treatments shown to improve ASD student outcomes despite their legal obligations to do so (Banshe & Kirby, 2005; Nickels, 2010).

Furthermore, while Zeichner (2009) contended students in specialized programs are more likely to be marginalized, little is known about the obstacles educators attempting to include students with ASD as full participants in the classroom encounter (Lindsay, 2013) and social justice studies have not given ability status the same attention

as race, sexism, and poverty (Chin, 2009). Therefore, this phenomenological study sought to examine the resulting gap in ASD education research through the lens of social justice theory through intensive and detailed examination of the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD.

Specifically, the researcher explored the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD within three public Midwestern school districts by collecting qualitative interview data. The researcher examined alignment among participant's perceptions with regard to challenges and obstacles to ASD equity and methods used to overcome those obstacles. Of particular interest were barriers to student equity that were not overcome and various explanations from participants for the insurmountability of those barriers. Additionally, Goodman (2011) stressed the importance of group knowledge in fostering the empathy needed to meet the needs of marginalized groups and the researcher sought to examine how group knowledge was collectively created by educators in different roles in the districts contained in the study. Furthermore, by coding and analyzing emergent themes within interview transcripts, this study intended to create a full and rich description (Creswell, 2009) of the individual and shared experiences of those charged with the task of educating students with ASD. In turn, educators seeking to examine and improve ASD student education within their own settings could utilize study findings to strengthen their ASD programs.

Presented within chapter four is a review of the study design, data collection methods, conceptual underpinnings, research questions, and process of data analysis. In addition, detailed descriptions of research settings and educator participants will be presented. Emergent themes and sub-themes from analysis of the interview data will be

discussed in the second section of chapter four. A presentation of the summary of findings will conclude this chapter.

Design of the Study

In order to answer the research questions within this qualitative phenomenological study, the researcher explored in detail the experiences of diverse educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD. The principle sources of data were interviews and historical documents. The researcher used semi-structured open-ended interview questions to focus and organize information while still allowing for natural spontaneous revelations from participants (Creswell, 2009). Interview data from paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education administrators were collected, coded, and analyzed by the researcher to identify themes and discover relationships across the spectrum of data (Hatch, 2002; Krueger & Casey, 2009).

In accordance with Mertens (2005), the researcher explored “multiple, socially constructed realities” (p. 9) and would “rely as much as possible on the participants’ views of the situation being studied” (Creswell, 2009, p. 8). Thus, a social constructivist viewpoint (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002) provided an appropriate perspective for this study and aligned with the data sources. Likewise, phenomenological research models seek to “identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (Creswell, 2009, p. 13) and was consequently a suitable method of inquiry for the study.

Creswell (2009) asserted qualitative research is a valid method for “exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4) and thus fit the studies goal of investigating how the social justice principles of

distribution, recognition, and opportunities are reflected in the training ASD educators receive and the education they provide ASD educators and students. Furthermore, a qualitative study is appropriate since little research has been done on this topic (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Creswell, 2009). Therefore, the lack of social justice research on issues of inclusion and other issues pertinent to students with ASD (Chin, 2009; Riestter et al., 2002) created an appropriate setting for qualitative analysis.

Data Collection and Methods

In-depth interviews that collect rich and detailed descriptive data about phenomena experienced by study participants are one of the central research methods used by phenomenologists (Taylor et al., 2015). It was through this method this study collected data from purposefully selected public school educators of students with ASD. In order to increase value and transferability of data and findings a diverse collection of participants from multiple sites were sought (Merriam & Associates, 2002; Seidman, 2006). Interviews were conducted with twenty-one purposefully selected educators in varying positions within three Midwestern School Districts. Participants from each of the following staff categories who had direct experience and knowledge related to ASD education participated in the study: three paraprofessionals per district, three special education teachers per district, and at least one special education administrator per district.

The researcher obtained permission (see Appendix A) for those educators to participate in the study from district gatekeepers. A letter of informed consent (see Appendix A) with attached interview questions (see Appendix B), and a letter of confirmation confirming times and dates were subsequently mailed to individual study

participants in order to provide them ample time to review and reflect upon on the interview questions in order to elicit a comprehensive account of the education of students with ASD within their respective settings (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Additionally, the researcher completed the University of Missouri-Columbia Institutional Review Board application by providing information about the participants, settings, and purpose of the study. Following University approval (see Appendix C), the researcher presented informed consent to each study participant (see Appendix A). The researcher took field notes during the interviews to reflect observations, thoughts, and make notes for further in-depth and clarifying questions related to participant responses.

Interviews were conducted using sixteen to twenty-one semi-structured open-ended questions that aligned with the research questions and were rooted in social justice concepts and themes central to the literature reviewed. Interview questions (Appendix B) examined the various ways each interviewee and school district defined and exemplified social justice for students with ASD within their education settings (Rawls, 2001; Theoharis, 2007). Furthermore, barriers to social justice were investigated with a focus on training of educators and incorporation of research supported ASD education strategies as the research consistently pointed to those as major hurdles to socially just education for students with ASD (Goodman, 2011; Hart, 2012).

Conceptual Underpinnings

Social Justice Theory was the lens through which this study examined the lived experiences of ASD educators. Rawls (1999) described social justice theory as the mechanism by which society assigns responsibilities and distributes benefits and burdens of our cooperative social efforts while Goodlad and Riddell, (2005) championed the

continued importance of the social justice discussion especially in the realm of the way society handles issues and needs associated with disability. Additionally, Rawls (2001) and Theoharis (2007) supported the application of social justice theories in efforts to provide quality supports to marginalized student populations.

The frequently inconspicuous or misunderstood manifestations of ASD disabilities by educators (Chin, 2009; Hart 2012) create an educational environment in which unfair judgment of students with ASD by normative standards is an all too common occurrence (Chin, 2009). Subsequent removal of students with ASD from the least restrictive educational environment lies near the core of social justice as described by Gewirtz (1998) as a response to disrupting and subverting arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes. Furthermore, this access to education for students with ASD is central to the three basic principles of social justice: distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011).

Research Questions

The study will examine various social justice obstacles ASD educators encounter within secondary school settings. In addition, the researcher will analyze how these individuals develop the resilience to overcome resistance they face and how they are able to sustain their social justice work. The following research questions served as guideposts for this study:

1. What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?

2. What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?
3. According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?
4. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?
5. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

Process of Data Analysis

In this study data analysis was done in a manner that allowed for the identification of themes and development of explanations, interpretations, and critiques (Hatch, 2002). The researcher organized data into patterns in order to discover relationships (Corbin & Strauss, 2014). Triangulation and member-checking (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002; Sharpe & Faye, 2009) were used to improve accuracy and reliability. All study participants received an informed consent letter detailing the research study and their

rights during the research process. Audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

All data were examined and assigned the following codes (see Appendix D): Special Education Administrator 1 (A1), Special Education Administrator 2 (A2), Special Education Administrator 3 (A3), Special Education Teacher 1 (T1), Special Education Teacher 2 (T2), Special Education Teacher 3 (T3), Special Education Teacher 4 (T4), Special Education Teacher 5 (T5), Special Education Teacher 6 (T6), Special Education Teacher 7 (T7), Special Education Teacher 8 (T8), Special Education Teacher 9 (T9), Paraprofessional Educator (P1), Paraprofessional Educator 2 (P2), Paraprofessional Educator 3 (P3), Paraprofessional Educator 4 (P4), Paraprofessional Educator 5 (P5), Paraprofessional Educator 6 (P6), Paraprofessional Educator 7 (P7), Paraprofessional Educator 8 (P8), Paraprofessional Educator 9 (P9). Multiple transcript readings enhanced accuracy and coding consistency.

Settings

Data from interviewees was limited to three purposely selected Midwestern school districts. The researcher selected each school districts based on several criteria. First, the researcher sought to balance the benefits of the focus a homogenous sample would provide to the study with the increased applicability found in a more heterogonous setting sample. With that in mind, the researcher narrowed the settings to one state in order to compare and analyze data from educators working under the same state education mandates and with similar state demographics and funding. Furthermore, it was deemed valuable to consider social justice issues from school districts of various size

but comparable demographics and economic circumstances, thus each school was located in a suburban setting and had a growing student population (DESE, 2015).

The school districts selected for the study came from three population categories. The smallest school district had fewer than 5000 total students, the second district had between 10,000 and 15,000 students, while the largest district in the study had over 15,000 students (DESE, 2015). All school districts within the study offered programs targeted at meeting the unique and varied needs of students with ASD in order to assure sufficient numbers and ASD education experience of participants. Additionally, the average school district in the state of these school districts had an ASD student population that was 1.09% of its overall student population (DESE, 2015) and each district fell near this average.

A description of each is provided.

Site 1: Oakmont School District. The first site of the study will be referred heretofore as Oakmont School District (pseudonym). Oakmont School District serves students in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade on several campuses in addition to the central office building. Their total school population is fewer than 5000 total students (DESE, 2015). Oakmont School District serves between 70-80 students with ASD. The percentage of students with ASD relative to the total student population of Oakmont School District was the highest of all study settings at 1.7%. Students from five smaller neighboring districts partner with Oakmont School District and send their students with ASD to participate in their ASD specific programming. These schools are up to forty-five miles away from Oakmont School District.

Site 2: Jefferson School District. The second study site will be referred heretofore as Jefferson School District (pseudonym). Jefferson School District (pseudonym) serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. The total school population is between 10,000-15,000 students (DESE, 2015). Over 160 of the students at Jefferson School District (pseudonym) have an ASD diagnosis and the ASD student percentage relative to total student population was 1.6% (DESE, 2015).

Site 3: Lakewood School District. The final site for this qualitative study will be referred heretofore as Lakewood School District (pseudonym). Lakewood School District (pseudonym) serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Lakewood School District is largest district in the study with over 15,000 students (DESE, 2015) and .93% of those students have an ASD diagnosis. Lakewood School District has recently created new programs to meet the needs of their students with ASD.

Participants

Creswell (2009) supported the use of study participants who share common characteristics relevant to the central aim of the study. Furthermore, Cleary (et al., 2014) contended that these homogenous groups hold the potential to extend existing knowledge through their in-depth responses and related elaborations concerning the research and interview questions. Study participants were selected based on their possession of knowledge from their lived experiences and for their relevant likenesses (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006) associated with their extensive work with the ASD student population central to the study. A variety of stakeholders at different leadership levels (Theoharis, 2007) were interviewed from each of the three school districts in order to gain knowledge related to collaboration and alignment of views with regard to the provision of social

justice within the educational experiences of students with ASD within the research settings. Importantly, the selection of three different settings allowed the researcher to examine the issue of social justice in ASD education from a variety of perspectives (Cresswell, 2009). Additionally, participant selection processes sought to include and highlight the voices of varied educators that possessed extensive knowledge and experience how the principles of social justice are reflected in the ASD specific training of educators and the daily lessons and methods used to improve the school experiences of students with ASD.

Within each of the three school districts studied, three educators that possessed at least one year of experience working as a paraprofessional with students with ASD, three special education teachers that possessed at least one year of experience working with students with ASD, and one special education administrator that possessed at least three years of experience working with students with ASD were selected. The district gatekeeper, special educator administrators, special education teachers, and building principals collaborated in the selection and approval of research participants. The participants themselves made the final decision with regard to whether or not to participate in individual interviews. Each school district contained over seventy students with ASD in order to assure participants would have diverse and in-depth ASD education experience. Notably, many participants had a child or sibling with special education diagnosis, often ASD.

Special Education Administrators. The first administrator, Paul Mullins (pseudonym) had served as deputy superintendent in charge of special services at Oakmont School District for four years. He worked with all special education teachers as

well as building administrators in pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade on several campuses in addition to the central office building. Paul Mullins' experience related to students with ASD was entirely from an administrative standpoint. He did not work with students with ASD as a regular education teacher and did not have any experience as a special education teacher. At the Oakmont School District he oversaw the education of 70-80 students with ASD. Oakmont School District had strong special education programs that families moved into the district to access. Furthermore, students from five smaller neighboring districts up to forty-five miles away partner with Oakmont School District and send their students with ASD to participate in their ASD specific programming. Notably, this was Paul Mullins' last year with Oakmont School District as he was taking a similar position at nearby district.

The second administrator, Nancy Miller (pseudonym) held the title of director of special services for Jefferson Public Schools and served over 160 students with ASD in addition to other special education students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth. Her role focused on coordinating programs and organizing professional development. Her original educational background was focused on psychology and school psychology, she later obtained degrees in school leadership. Nancy Miller began her educational career as school psychologist before moving into a role as coordinator of education programs at a children and adolescent psychiatric hospital in the early 1990s. Her role focused on evaluations of students, discussion of interventions, and consultation of various stakeholders associated with a large number of special needs students in many different states. She was exposed both personally and professionally to a large number of students on the autism spectrum early in her career.

The third administrator, Sue Watson (pseudonym) held the title of director of special services for Lakewood School District which serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through twelfth grade. Lakewood School District is largest district in the study with over 15,000 students (DESE, 2015). Sue Watson started her education career twenty-five years ago. Her first experience with students with ASD was seven years into her teaching career and the student who was high functioning. The accommodations incorporated did not have names at the time but were related to research supported strategies used today. When Sue moved to Lakewood School District approximately fifteen years ago she noted a substantial increase in the number of students with ASD and subsequently collaborated with her peers to collect data on this trend. Collectively, they concluded there was a significant difference between their lower functioning life skills students with ASD and those students with sufficient cognitive abilities whose lack of social skills was disrupting their learning and they set out to design a program to meet their needs. Language and social concerns are the focus of this new program that serves students across the range of the autism spectrum.

Special Education Teachers. The special education teacher participants in general had extensive experience related to all aspects of ASD education. Many possessed graduate degrees and had served under a variety of different job titles related to special education. For example, Oakmont School District educator Madeline Roe (pseudonym) was a cross-categorical teacher with nine years of experience in that role and prior experience as a paraprofessional in a private school. Her degrees were in speech and hearing science as a precursor to speech and language pathology and she had a Masters in

special education. Her colleague, Shelly Larsen, had been the process coordinator Oakmont High School 24 years and was also a behavioral interventionist.

Within Jefferson Public Schools, Sharon Weaver (pseudonym), Angela Jones (pseudonym), and Abby Williams (pseudonym) all possessed graduate degrees and extensive experience related to the various aspects of ASD education. Likewise, the special education teachers interviewed at Lakewood School District, Jaime Blocker (pseudonym), Karleen Beemer (pseudonym), and Sally Cross (pseudonym) were veterans in the field of ASD education and possessed graduate degrees at the level masters and Ph.D. The noteworthy exception was Kelly Black (pseudonym) who had just finished her first year as a special education teacher. She was hired over FaceTime as a recent graduate with a special education degree.

Paraprofessional Educators. Paraprofessionals interviewed had a wide variety of backgrounds. Most of the less experienced paraprofessionals interviewed were recent university graduates with degrees in or related to special education. Many of the more experienced paraprofessionals possessed little to no formal training in ASD education prior to being hired for their jobs. In fact, May Martin (pseudonym) stated that she did not know what a paraprofessional was when she was offered a job as one. Her primary work experience prior to her role as a paraprofessional was at the water department. May described her first year as “sink or swim”. She was a focus room paraprofessional for four years at a school district prior to Oakmont and worked in a focus room on behavioral interventions for individual students for no longer than nine weeks while the district developed a plan for a student. During gap periods, she would float between different roles and often worked in classrooms for students with behavioral disorders. May’s

experience was typical among interviewees as most frequently changed assignments and many were often in charge of one student at a time.

Themes

Stemming from the research data, predetermined codes, and aligned with the research questions, the following themes emerged: 1) *Obstacles to Equity* with the subthemes of: a) *ASD Student Inclusion*, b) *The role of Law and concern for the future of ASD Education*, and c) *Educator Training*; and 2) *Advancement of ASD education* with the subthemes of: a) *Development and implementation of ASD Education*, b) *Strategies that improve ASD education* and 3) *The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation* with the subthemes of: a) *Distribution Disparity of Resource Allocation*, b) *Recognition of students with ASD* and c) *Opportunities for students with ASD*. Collectively, these themes create a timely, relevant, and comprehensive stakeholder account of the state of ASD education and its social impact on students.

Obstacles to Equity

ASD Student Inclusion. Social justice disrupts and subverts arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes (Gewirtz, 1998) and services designed to provide equity to special education students have evolved from predominantly exclusionary practices to progressively more inclusive models (Carter & Hughes, 2006; United States Department of Education, 2009). However, little is known about the obstacles educators attempting to include students with ASD as full participants in the classroom encounter (Lindsay, 2013). Within the theme of *Obstacles to Equity*, study participants spoke at length about ASD inclusion efforts. Inclusion to the greatest extent possible in all settings was a central to goal of many of the educators in this study

as evidenced by Jaime Blocker who stated, “our goal is to get them back into their home schools.” Jamie was referencing the outsourcing to for private educational institutions or removal to isolated school settings within their local campuses that was a common practice within all study settings. Similarly, Shelly Larsen stated, “we try and do inclusion as much as possible...and we get that done because we do a lot of accommodations...we meet the students where their needs are.” The review of literature supported Larsen’s sentiments that stressed importance of creating lessons with the unique strengths of students with ASD strengths in mind (Palm, 2012).

However, participants also extensively elaborated upon the obstacles impeding their inclusion goals for students with ASD whose limited verbal and social skills often lead to tantrums, defiance, self-injury, and aggression (Hart, 2012). Mesibov, Adams, and Klinger, (1997) noted over one third of children with autism are nonverbal and study participants repeatedly contended that obstacles to the inclusion of students with ASD into mainstream settings often stemmed from communication and subsequent behavior difficulties. Fiona Gable described the communication struggles of a student with ASD and ensuing behaviors such as frequent lashing out and repeated biting of Fiona. In order to address the cause of the behavior rather than the behavior itself, Fiona taught this student some sign language. Now this student was able to communicate their wants, and their removal from regular education settings became much more infrequent. Kelly Black added that socialization is a significant inclusion barrier and “behavior training is all I do and sometimes it feels we never get anywhere, but it is an important life skill.” Her sentiments were echoed by Karleen Beemer who added, “their [students with ASD]

self-regulation skills are so low that it's frustrating...even when we have the materials the behavior gets in the way.”

Stories of success like Mallory's were common as barriers to inclusion were not described as insurmountable by any participant. Rather, these educators collectively stated regular classroom teachers were already stretched so thin that it is difficult for them to give a student or students with ASD the attention they need and as a consequence these students are not placed in the least restrictive environment. These sentiments were explicitly stated by Sue Watson, “our regular classroom numbers are so high that the needs of our students can't be met although that is the best place for many of them.” Shelly Larsen described additional inclusion obstacles such as difficulties funding inclusion devices and time to continuously write grants and seek out other alternative funding sources that will allow students with ASD to be included to the greatest extent.

Furthermore, many participants described education settings that they were previously in or had direct knowledge of, in which the cost of creating and implementing programs to effectively meet the needs of students with ASD was deemed too great. Consequently, these schools sent their students with ASD to larger school districts or to for profit private educational institutions with programs more specifically tailored to their students' needs. Collectively, interviewees shared that this removal was not inherently damaging however, most participants admitted several negative issues associated with this exclusionary practice, the first of which was student travel time. Oakmont school district received students with ASD from several smaller school districts that were often quite far away. Sally Cross stated: “they ride over an hour each way to school...that is a significant portion of the day and an obstacle that most students do not face.” Abby

Williams outlined the complexities of her districts inclusion efforts:

If you have a student in the middle of the hallway that's charging adults and yelling profanities and stuff like that, you don't want to expose, repeatedly, your entire student population to that. They [outside education agencies] just have a better place and way of managing those behaviors...typically, it involves either self-injuries or significantly aggressive types of behaviors that we're looking at. The other, the foul language and stuff like that, it just kind of makes matters worse. You know? It's alarming to some students. It's alarming to some teachers and it's alarming to parents who are walking in and out of the building. There are cases like that where we may need to do that, temporarily or in some cases, more long term. We do stay in touch regularly. We have somebody who manages just that caseload that is going out, so that we are always looking at when are they ready to come back. We've transitioned several [students with ASD] back last year, successfully. Hopefully it stays that way.

Inclusion obstacles were outlined in a different way by special education directors who described the tipping point number at which it becomes more cost effective to educate your students with ASD in district. Oakmont educators described their school cooperative as a good program with financial benefits for all districts involved and service benefits for the students; though most admitted transpiration time could be excessive in some cases. Notably, school personnel transporting these students have no training on the unique traits and needs of their students with ASD and paraprofessional Beatrice Murphy contended that many students were already off track for their school day at arrival due to a negative incident on the bus. Additionally, special education

directors shared that many school leaders utilize for profit agencies in lieu of creating their own programs as these institutions may often offer services that schools with smaller populations or underdeveloped programs for students with ASD do not provide. However, they admitted concern over situations in which fiscal motivations become a significant driver of education for student with ASD. Moreover, despite taking the first step toward inclusion by creating programs for students with ASD, each district in study this struggled improve the settings in which their services were offered. For instance, the special education director at Oakmont School District Paul Mullins stated:

One of the things that is really frustrating that we have is called the passage house, it's a separate building for kiddos and...it doesn't feel good and I want them out of there full time...to get those kiddos more with their peers...it just doesn't feel good where they are at.

Despite these obstacles, all participants described gains related the inclusion of students with ASD within their respective school districts. For example, Paul Mullins' district, Oakmont, was able to pass a bond issue to get their students out of their aforementioned exclusionary settings. However, the school districts in this study possessed above average fiscal resources, leaving the researcher and participants to consider the increased challenges to inclusion of students with ASD facing neighboring school districts operating under increased fiscal constraints. Relatedly, many participants shared that in the past within their school districts and currently in many neighboring schools districts, exclusion continues to be the norm for students with ASD. Jaime Blocker of Lakewood School District stated: "some of our students have been contracted out to private institutions before and we have tried to pull them back into our program

since we have this [new programs for students with ASD] now.” These transitions are difficult for many students with ASD whose struggles with even minor changings were repeatedly emphasized by participants as the source of major education setbacks. This assertion is evidenced by Mallory Jones who worked one-on-one with a student for whom it was decided that forgoing the middle school level entirely was the best option as data showed major losses in verbal and academic skills during prior setting transitions.

For the benefit of all. Thus far, the researcher has expounded upon the inclusion subtheme as it related to equity obstacles from the perspective of the benefits it holds for students with ASD. However, the story would be incomplete with sharing and considering the value inclusion holds for all students. Most interviewees championed this value despite it not being specifically elicited by interview protocol questions. Participants shared detailed and sometimes emotional descriptions of the development of character and cultural sensitivity skills regular education students who partnered with students with ASD gained. These mutually beneficial interactions are not possible without inclusion and work best when directly facilitated by educators. For example, Beatrice Murphy as paraprofessional and Karleen Beemer as a special education teacher, collaborated with their peers in purposeful selection of students from regular education classrooms to partner with students with ASD. They described this as a powerful tool that improved the educational experience of both students. Their efforts were mirrored by Sally Cross who shared:

We have twelve kids specifically trained on how to interact and play with them [her students with ASD] so my kids are not on the playground alone. Everyone needs at least one friend to be successful...and research supports that too, and we

have a ton of kids here who are running around out there and don't have one friend.

Furthermore, and not emphasized in the review of the literature but described by participants, is the correlation between student and teacher exclusion. Participants noted that when students are excluded so are their teachers. Karleen Beemer stated: "as a special education teacher here in your own little world it's really hard if you don't have anybody. I feel like we are on our own." She described positive and negative aspects of this situation. "I look at it as we have a lot of freedom to try new things...not collaborating with the higher ups...if something isn't working, we can quickly change." Educators at all levels face significant challenges in providing equitable education services that meet specific ASD student needs within least restrictive environments (Merchant, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003) and rapid adaptability to meet individualized student needs was a critical component of inclusion efforts described by participants. Yet, participants in general described a need for peer support in their efforts to meet the unique needs of their ASD learners.

The role of Law and concern for the future of ASD Education. Laws passed applicable to the study of student equity and social justice for potentially disadvantaged groups included *IDEA of 1988* (Amended 1990, 1997, 2004), *Americans with Disabilities Act* (ADA, 1990), the *Assistive Technology Act* (ATA) of 1998, reauthorized in 2004. Each of these important legal statutes related to provision of needed resources to disabled students such as those with ASD central to this study and the impact of each law was a common theme described by research participants. Abby Williams stated, "it [school law] very much drives what we do" while Kelly Black concurred "without it [school law]

I wouldn't have a job.” Several participants contended that in particular the I.E.P. [Individualized Education Program] determinations what they do. In continuation, May Martin shared:

I know a lot of people didn't agree completely with the No Child Left Behind. But I think that it has kind built up that every student has a right to a free and fair education...offer the strategies and the accommodations to ensure that those laws are being met.

While Shelly Larsen stated in response to school law questions “I think there's always a hoop to jump through.” Abby Williams added that the complex bureaucracy often drives people out of special education.

Research has demonstrated the effectiveness of assistive technology (AT) supports in improving the performance of students with ASD in mainstream educational settings (Lacava et al., 2007), partially due to the improvements in areas of emotional recognition frequently shown by students with ASD using AT (Myles, 2005). Study participants were divided on their opinions on AT; some championed their AT department's ability to find new strategies to meet the needs of their students with ASD while others cited deficiencies in their assistive technology as obstacles to equity for ASD students. Shelly Larsen, “high school is probably lacking in assistive technology.” Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1988) supported the use equipment, products and systems toward the improvement of special education and inclusive education. Yet, the president and other legislative members did not request any funds for the educational support items IDEA (1998) advocated for when they passed the ATA into law in 2004 (Council for Exceptional Children, 2005). This was evident in the research as many

educators central to the study relied on grants and partnerships to provide needed services to students with ASD. Notably, participants stressed the difficulties which stemmed from the time intensive nature of repeated grant applications.

As mandated by school law, standardized tests were another major theme elaborated upon by most interviewees. In particular, teachers and paraprofessionals administering the tests, had greatest concerns about the standardized testing process. As the coordinator of modified standardized testing in her school, Shelly Larsen stated, “we have real strict guidelines...the majority of my students taking the [modified standardized test] have no business taking it.” Abby Williams concurred, “We have some nonverbal students taking the test and they’re using twitches and we will try to interpret what they actually mean. It’s kind of silly. So in my opinion it is still very rigid.” Jaime Blocker added:

My students may not even physically be able to understand or indicate a response. And all those EOCs [end of course assessments], when you're in a life skills functional classroom it is...sad. I have students with an IQ of 45, and they're asking them to graph equations because with the [modified standardized test], it just keeps going and going and they’re maybe guessing an answer that throws them into questions that they have no business trying to answer. So it's painful. [Modified standardized test] is painful not only for the students but for the staff as well.

Abby Williams offered that [modified standardized test] was more of an assessment of the teacher than it was of the student although she added that this assessment has made positive changes in the last few years. Frustrated students often start to make “design

bubbles” and students rarely get a scribe. Moreover, participants lamented the misalignment between what they are teaching their students as part of their I.E.P. goals and what is being tested. Expanded upon by Kelly Black, “Most of my kids have social skills...social goals...so they don't have reading writing or math...but they are tested on it. In support, Beatrice Murphy stated, “No way our students will know the answers to the [standardized test] or the [modified standardized test], socialization is more important to their life long happiness.”

Lastly, the word “fear” was repeatedly used by interviewees when concluding their thoughts on school law and its relationship to ASD education. Madeline Roe shared that currently legislative initiatives “scare” me. Shelly Larson concurred:

I think that this is kind of a scary time. So I think that it's really important that we all listen and read what's going on, and make your voice be heard by writing letters. Our superintendent is really good at keeping us all informed of new legislation. I myself read a lot of the new legislation.

Angela Jones added, “I worry a little bit about that...that what we have in place now might fade. I think maybe this group would be more the first to be effected by that. It's pretty cost intensive.” Williams’ concerns are supported by special education director Paul Mullins “We put a ton of money into these [ASD] programs”

Moreover, insurance law was an unintended subtheme common among special education teacher responses. They shared that the medical and educational diagnoses for ASD differ. This becomes very important when these educators are trying to help the parents of ASD students find ways to afford treatment for their children. Abby Williams detailed:

I think we've made quite a few gains in terms of health care initiatives for coverage for ABA [applied behavior analysis] services and things like that. Part of that is just having the patience to let the insurance companies, to let everybody learn. My prayer is that it doesn't go away...that it actually maybe, improves...I do think it's been important to families. I wish it was covered better. There are only certain insurance groups that have coverage. Some insurances don't cover it and don't have to.

Educator Training. Chin (2009) contended that without comprehensive training for all stakeholders, social justice for students with ASD remain elusive. Students with disabilities such as ASD often fail to fully benefit from the provisions of the IDEA (1988) and related laws due to lack of educator training in the use of innovative research supported ASD education strategies (Chin, 2009; Hess et al., 2008;) and this absence of sufficiently trained ASD educators (Browne, 2012) has been successfully contested under IDEA (Yell et al., 2003). Abby Williams shared, “There’s not an absence of good materials.” Her sentiments were supported by other participants who also stated that the resources were out there but the time to learn and effectively implement them is absent from ASD education improvement equation.

University systems unsurprisingly provided little to no instruction the education of students with ASD in the years many of the more experienced educators within the study were in attendance. As a veteran educator, Karleen Beemer shared, “back then there wasn’t a lot of talk about kids with autism, in fact I don’t remember learning about it at all. In retrospect, I had some experience working with kids with autism but they were not labeled.” Another participant with extensive experience working with special

education students, Veronica Smith stated, “I’ve never had formal training [within her degree programs]”. For educators within the study who graduated within the last five years ASD education was a brief and mostly overlooked topic of training and study. The researcher was surprised that special education teacher Kelly Black, who had just concluded her first year of teaching a class of mostly students with ASD also received little to no ASD training within her special education degree program.

Most participants included inadequate ASD training for regular classroom teachers as an inclusion obstacle. In order to develop empathy for students with ASD among staff, most districts had recently implemented new training efforts. However, many of these initiatives were still in their infancy and had not spread widely across the settings within the study nor to other area school districts as evidenced by Abby Williams, “as far as I know we are one of only two schools in state doing this [training].” Nancy Miller expanded upon the issue of educator training and inclusion of ASD students:

They [regular education teachers] have to understand how that child [with ASD] perceives information and how they learn in order to be more effective in working with them. They [regular education teachers] may perceive something as being disrespectful, noncompliant, but it is really not. It’s really, “I’m taking you literally and I don’t really understand.” So many of our students are able go into regular classrooms but sometimes when there is an issue teachers are quick to be judgmental or place a label on them.

Fiona Gable added:

Our regular education teachers struggle with student first language...students with ASD are viewed differently. We offer a three-day course that is open for anyone. Parents of students also attended...[we] are learning together. I had a very limited understanding of ASD. The sensory needs are a huge part of it.”

Lastly, Abby Williams shared, “I teach it [ASD programming] the way I expect it to be run, it’s just not always followed through that way.”

Concurrently, the training of paraprofessionals and training in management of teams of paraprofessionals for special education teachers were seen as keys to providing equity for students with ASD. Kelly Black and Jaime Blocker both felt unprepared to manage their respective teams of paraprofessionals and stated that paraprofessional management should be part of every special education teacher training program.

Paraprofessionals are the educators that often spend the greatest amount of time working directly to assist and support special education students and their regular classroom teachers. Additionally, they play an increasingly important role concerning decisions related to instructional content and practice (Tews & Lupart, 2008) as evidenced by Kelly Black, “I bounce stuff off my paras all the time”, Kelly’s colleagues concurrently elaborated on their own extensive collaborations with their paraprofessionals.

However, many paraprofessionals lack education training as evidenced by May Martin who applied for another position within a school district and was asked during her interview about filing a role as a paraprofessional despite not know the meaning of the term. Paraprofessionals with degrees in fields related to special education within this study had little work experience with special education students. Additionally, Karleen Beemer emphasized that, “Paras are not paid very much.” Thus, it is especially critical

that they feel valued and are professionally developed so they have the tools to effectively support equitable and inclusive education of their students with ASD despite their often severe behavior and social impediments.

Advancement of ASD Education

Development and Implementation of ASD Education. The goal for this study was in part to paint a current and richly detailed (Creswell, 2009) picture of ASD education. In doing so the researcher sought to synthesize data from the research settings and participants in a way that would be useful to educators seeking to advance ASD education within their own unique surroundings. To that end, the second theme of the research will provide in-depth descriptions of current programs, personnel, and strategies study participants utilize and recommend to others while also describing the gaps in their needs.

Sally Cross described the complex nature of the development and implementation of ASD education:

It's not like there is an extremely good program that's affordable that you can just implement and the teachers can us take off and run with it. It's really hard, and it's hard for the teachers to parse out what they need to do when it comes to school social skills.

While Karleen Beemer described the setting she came into when arriving starting work in her current role:

They [Lakewood] did not have a good reputation in the past. I have only been working here for five years, since they started the new program. I think they are

doing a great job starting the new program but there is still that reputation from the past.

Viewed from her role as special education director for Lakewood, Sue Watson espoused the necessity of the support from the superintendent and the board of education as she attempted to implement the programs tailored to meet the individualized needs of learners with ASD in which Karleen Beemer worked as a special education teacher. On of Karleen's paraprofessional colleagues, Beatrice Murphy described the implementation process and in doing so illustrates the patience and dedication needed for any program to produce improvements for students with ASD:

I was skeptical of the program but now I can see its value. At first there was a lot of scuffling and kids fighting. Their behaviors are lessening. We spent a lot of time carrying them out to an area that was safer...letting them be under the tables...they just didn't want to learn. I think it comes from when they were in early childhood, whenever they would have a behavior people would leave them alone...Now he can verbally tell us what he wants...he used to be like a little kitty-cat under the desk scratching at you.

Beatrice Murphy and her colleagues described Lakewood's program diversity which included a:

Life skills program for students with low IQ and another program for kids whose IQ's are normal or high but their social ability is really low and they are "trying to socially get them ready to go into other classrooms." Abby Williams championed the necessity of their Essential Skills curriculum as it forms the foundation for the rest of their efforts. "They may not be learning as many new skills, but they are building a foundation

that will help them meet learning targets at much faster rate later...patience, being flexible.”

The advanced of ASD education was partially predicated up certain positions that focused on instructional strategies for this group. Shelly Larsen as the process coordinator and transition coordinator for the Oakmont High School described several other roles filled by her colleagues that were essential to their districts development and implementation of effective ASD education. These roles included: behavior interventionist, assistive technology director, and IDAC consultants. Special education teachers Abby Williams and Kelly Black spoke of their autism consultant and Board Certified Behavior Analyst [BCBA] as an essential assets; while special education director Sue Watson contended that Lakewood’s autism behavior specialists and Process Action Teams made of teachers and specialists assess ASD student needs to drive programming.

Transitions were an increasing important theme within the education of students with ASD according to multiple study participants. Shelly Larsen described:

Transition became really big. Our Transition Coordinator group meets twice a month. We're constantly giving each other new information about new programs in order to help individuals. So I gain my knowledge there. There is a transition fair here that our co-op puts on and we get all those outside agencies involved in here, and currently we have thirty-five vendors and we are trying and expand it more. I go around and I talk to them and we have people present on certain topics and I get information from them. My main goal has always been to work myself out of a job. We do a lot of train the trainer in our district. We will get knowledge and

then we will come back and we will train people, we will go into their classrooms and talk to them. Anytime that we see a deficit some place, we go and help. So if that means that somebody from the elementary school is coming up to talk to me or I'm going down to talk to them, we'll do it.

Much of this programing is the exception, not the rule. For example, Abby Williams provided their aforementioned Essential Skills curriculum, as far as she knew, they were one of only two schools in the state doing this program to give the students with ASD foundational learning skills.

Strategies that improve ASD education. The researcher was curious if the myriad of research supported strategies that improve education for students with ASD were making it into the classroom. The review of literature cited instruction in metacognitive awareness (Gunn, 2013), cognitive behavioral therapy and instruction in self-monitoring techniques (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012), early intervention strategies (Foster et al., 2012), Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) (Hart, 2012), certain classroom structures (Palm, 2012), and technology and visual supports (Cafiero, 2008) among others as strategies shown to demonstrate effectiveness in the improvement of ASD education outcomes. The alignment between participant responses and the data from the review of literature was a theme stemming from interview data. Each district to some extent or another incorporated these strategies into their ASD programming.

In order to create the buy-in needed to incorporate strategies that supported ASD education, districts had to show the need for improvement. Efforts to this end were discussed by many participants. Nancy Miller cited a good example, “We brought in a speaker and it was great because he spoke what it was like to be a student in the school

system and growing up and it kind spoke to those misperceptions.” Shelly Larsen described other examples of events and collaboration meetings that created buy-in and gave training knowledge to attendees who in turn trained their peers within that own settings:

PowerUp was a State Conference...Missouri Assistive Technology asked that [us] to go and present all the good things that we're doing. [Furthermore] we formed this co-op, so that everybody can be trained by one person. Then that has morphed into behavior. So we started training. Then we noticed lack in behavior management skills, so we went to that in data collection...and right now our co-op is being used for transition, so post-secondary students get help. We get together twice a month. We plan things. Special education directors get together quarterly and talk about things. One of their events is paraprofessional development...we do that once a year...actually get together and talk about...what are our needs are and how can we get better and what are the needs of your district and can we help you in your district...we're all hungry for new knowledge

Visual supports reduce anxiety and improve ASD student behavior (Harris, 2012; Rao & Gagie, 2006) and help students with ASD express thoughts and understand abstract concepts (Harris, 2012). Karleen Beemer championed the use of visual supports and added that she frequently sought out new strategies on her own. Concurrently, Sue Watson and Shelly Larsen each emphasized their school districts use of visual supports and project access teams. Additionally, Paul Mullins learned new strategies to improve ASD education though Project ACCESS training and adaptive technology conferences. Fiona Gable shared:

For our nonverbal students, we have amazing assistive technology people that will try different things to assist communication. Technology is so important for our kids so just getting them PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System] so they can communicate their wants and needs is huge.

Augmentative communication systems such as PECS created for individuals who are nonverbal or have few communication skills have demonstrated effectiveness in the use of visual supports to assist students with ASD with the rapid acquisition of a functional means of communication (Harris, 2012). Kelly Black also emphasized that communication devices were a key piece of technology within her students' education.

Creating partnerships with outside agencies was a strategy to offset some of the high cost of certain ASD education strategies. Paul Mullins of Oakmont school district stated, "We put a ton of money into those [ASD] programs we have support from the [community organization] that they'll donate five to seven thousand dollars a year really to help our kiddos on the spectrum for programming. Kelly Black added "We have a sensory room, weighted blankets, fidget devices, visuals...and those outside agencies help pay for that."

Preferential placement with regular education teachers was a key ASD education strategy. Veronica Smith and Fiona Gable both detailed the importance of placing ASD students with teachers who were "a good fit". Usually this meant that these teachers are not easily upset by smaller abnormal behaviors of their students. Shelly Larsen shared that her students with ASD like a very rigid schedule. Furthermore, Shelly shared that demonstrating, modeling, TouchChat AT and eye contact were all frequently employed on a case by case basis. Abby Williams used the state Assisted Technology agency in

conjunction with Functional Behavior Assessments, and card sorting strategies while also recommending:

Informal assessment that helps drive goals and objectives, that has really been my push. That and behavior...one feeds the other...[also recommended] Essential for Living, it does what the VB-MAPP [Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program] does for our younger kiddos, that's what it does for our older kiddos. It's basically a road map that shows us what essential skills that they need to function independently in society. Project Access out of Springfield, IDAC [in-district autism consultant] training, Zones of Regulation, the Incredible Five Point Scale. These...help kids regulate both their emotions and their behavior...delayed gratification, they can accept "no" without a full meltdown...Super-flex is high in our district...blessed to have Pennsylvania training.

To summarize, there are great strategies available to ASD educators however, study participants struggled to find the time to train their peers.

The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation

Distribution Disparity of Resource Allocation. Educating funding disparity is a significant issue for students across the world. However, participants of this study repeatedly detailed its enhanced impact on students with ASD, for most students with autism require unique strategies, equipment, and other forms of educational support to reach their potential (Schlosser, Blischak, Belfiore, Bartley, & Barnett, 1998). Relatedly, social justice theory values distribution, opportunities, and recognition for disadvantaged groups (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Interviewees, shared many examples of significant

resource investment within their respective school districts, Steven Morgan, “We put a ton of money into those (ASD) programs.”

However, many participants described how their previous experience, often in rural and urban ASD programs, contrasted sharply with those of their more affluent suburban districts. This dichotomy was illustrated by Karleen Beemer, “I did not feel like there were many resources available [in previous urban setting]. In Lakewood, I am given everything I need.” This disparity was echoed by May Martin description of her experience working with students with ASD within an urban district, “it was an urban district with very urban problems and we didn’t do much for autism students.” Resource disparity was cited with rural districts as well as Abby Williams’ description of her son’s ASD educational experience illustrated, “our rural district did a nice job through fourth grade but then he needed some things they couldn’t provide so we had to move.”

Even with the better resourced settings of the study, some of the individuals critical to helping to develop and effectively incorporate specific strategies that assist learners with ASD were not fully included as school personnel and suffered from disparity of resources. In her specific ASD focused role, special education teacher Abby Williams was not fully included within her school system and shared, “I receive no retirement or health benefits. I spent a lot of time trying to get my technology to work, it took forever to get wifi access.” Furthermore, many of the settings specific to students with ASD were in older facilities that were not designed with these students in mind. Jamie Blocker stated that most of their playground equipment is obsolete as it requires physical skills that her students do not have. Lastly, Madeline Roe shared, “You can’t live on a paraprofessional’s salary with a child.”

Recognition of students with ASD. Most educators interviewed for this study had a personal connection to a young person with ASD or other disability. Abby Williams shared, “Our son was diagnosed at 20 months” while Kelly Black added “My brother has down syndrome” and May Martin stated, “My son had a lot of struggles in school and it seemed a place where they could not see the good in him.”

Madeline Roe continued, “My son was on the autism spectrum. I was thirty-three and realized that education, specifically special education, was my calling.” Their personnel experience made it difficult not to recognize and subsequently advocate for these individuals that others may overlook. Collectively, they described great frustration at the lack of compassion and slowness or unwillingness to make even the smallest change to help students with ASD seen in some of their peers and society. Furthermore, these educators concurrently recounted many examples of struggles to develop their empathy and recognition of individuals with ASD in those without their level of personal experience and admitted the separation of both themselves and their students from the general student population is an obstacle in their efforts.

Conversely, interviewees also expressed immense joy to the point of tears at some of the great efforts the staff and students of their schools had made to recognize their students. Within Oakmont School District, participants collectively described several big recognition events held annually for their students including Special Olympics, Job Olympics, and associated parade festivities. Shelly Larsen detailed this event:

We have the students line up just like we would normally do for a pep assembly for the football team or baseball team...we get the band out, and the drum line and they lead the students on the parade through the school, and all the students

come out and cheer on our athletes. It's amazing and our student counsel actually make signs and everything.

Veronica Smith, shared, “it’s just amazing to watch. [School leader] has done really good at making sure that we recognize these kids just like we recognize others.” Jamie Blocker made and distributed autism shirts and she has repeatedly witnessed those shirts spark conversations within school and community settings which in turn can lead to recognition. Abby Williams shared, “I do a class presentation and the teacher is also there to learn as the students do.” May Martin observed that after such events, “When the regular students know my students, they will kind of pull them in under their wing and protect them and protect them.”

Participants affirmed that ASD specific training occurs at the beginning of the school year at the building level at some schools within the Jefferson district. Sharon Weaver added that there are always awareness materials and activities during Autism Awareness month when they do some training with their regular education peers, resource teachers, and support staff. Additionally, Angela Jones stated:

Often, [colleague] and I are asked to come to staff meetings. Last year, especially. There were some more intensive kiddos in a building that I served last year...which demonstrated that there was, with certain regular ed personnel, a lack of awareness. The principal had us come in, we went in during several staff meetings and did training.

The general overview of the participants related to recognition was the need for a shift from “the students with ASD” language to “our students with ASD.” Unfortunately, without significant and ongoing investments of time and training, educators within all

settings feared their students would continue to struggle to find recognition and subsequent valuation among many of their student peers, teachers, school leaders, and community members.

Opportunities for students with ASD. Abby Williams comprehensively expressed the thoughts on opportunities that many of her colleagues shared in one form or another:

There is a place for each and every one of us...we provide access, then train those kiddos up to be productive members of society and then raise awareness...because otherwise you're just kind of feeding them to the wolves...I think that's what we're in the business of, building up the students' quality of life, they may be different, but are they happy in their lives? I think the other thing that we, as educators, need to be cognizant of [is] are we...equipping this student with tools that they're going to need to be happy in their life? ...and successful and contributing...Are they going to find fulfillment? That's what it's all about.

To this end, interviewees elaborated upon a variety of opportunities that they were proud to offer to their students with ASD. For example, Shelly Larsen had seen her students with ASD take advantage of opportunities including:

Job Olympics, life skills programs, career based classrooms and centers...welding and fire fighter programs. I had students get their CNA last year. There are life centered programs for lower functioning students...and they do a lot of career exploration...that [ranges from] the grocery store to a Vet clinic.

Shelly Larsen also shared that her students shopped twice a month both in person and online. She was also able to use this opportunity to foster a partnership with the places they shop that makes this life skills activity more affordable.

Additionally, participant schools held several events that focused on opportunities for their students currently and after graduation. For example, Oakmont hosted a transition fair that their co-op of schools put on. At this fair, numerous outside agencies present on topics related to different opportunities for students. These outside agencies may offer lifelong employment and included: The Whole Person, Preferred Employment, Vocational Rehabilitation, [local city name] Regional Office. Students may take advantage of those services and opportunities immediately, or they may wait and call after they graduate and suddenly decide that they want to go to school. The point for these study participants was that these students actually had choices.

Another common theme was the day-to-day opportunities participants sought to offer their students as these efforts need not take the form of a big event or necessitate building of community partnerships. This was evidenced by Fiona Gable's story:

A [student] I transitioned...who had huge behavioral issues...she had a trach so I started teaching her some sign and she picked it up and she started communicating and she was fine so we were able to move her back to her home school. She was in the talent show, her peers all signed a song for their graduation with her because she can't speak so they learned how to sign this with her.

At the onset of their relationship Fiona shared, "She would bite the crap out of me....I taught her sign and then she could communicate what she wanted." The teaching of sign to both her nonverbal student and their class provided an opportunity for an invaluable lesson in inclusion, and understanding to a greater extent someone different than

themselves, while that student has the opportunity to become a full participant despite their differences.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of stakeholders charged with the charge of educating students with ASD within three public Midwestern school districts. This phenomenological study sought to further the understanding of the unique and varied needs of both the ASD student subgroup, and the multiple school stakeholders charged with providing equity within ASD education using the lens of social justice theory. The researcher examined participant's perceptions with regard to challenges and obstacles to ASD equity, and strategies used to overcome those challenges.

The study's data were collected through interviewing twenty-one participants. Analyzed were transcripts from the participants that evolved into patterns. These patterns, as well as excerpts from the participants, were used to provide triangulation to the quantitative analyses. Presented in this chapter were the research questions and analysis of the data. Discussed in Chapter Five are the study's findings, conclusions, limitations, implications for practice, and further research recommendations.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS

Introduction

Justice to people with mental impairments remains an unresolved social justice issue (Nussbaum, 2006). Therefore, the focus of this qualitative inquiry was in making a contribution to the literature on social justice studies which according to Chin (2009) have not given learning ability impairments the same scholarly attention as race, sexism, and poverty. Additionally, Browne (2012) and Gay (2010) shared limited equity research is implemented while Zeichner (2009) contended students in specialized programs are more likely to be marginalized. However, little is known about the obstacles educators attempting to include students with ASD as full participants in the classroom encounter (Lindsay, 2013). In addition, Bogotch (2002) supported the notion that social justice only has meaning when there is engaged social and academic discourse and this study engaged paraprofessionals, special education teachers, and special education directors in such discourse.

The researcher employed the aforementioned data analysis processes and methods until a richly detailed picture of the participants and their lived experiences (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005) in relation to social justice issue associated with ASD education could be painted and readers could appreciate and comprehend the lived experiences of study participants (Kuper et al., 2008). Important themes that emerged from the data collection and analysis were: 1) *Obstacles to Equity* with the subthemes of: a) *ASD Student Inclusion*, b) *The role of Law and concern for the future of ASD Education*, and c) *Educator Training*; and 2) *Advancement of ASD education* with the subthemes of: a)

Development and implementation of ASD Education, b) *Strategies that improve ASD education* and 3) *The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation* with the subthemes of: a) *Distribution Disparity of Resource Allocation*, b) *Recognition of students with ASD* and c) *Opportunities for students with ASD*. Collectively, these themes create a timely, relevant, and comprehensive stakeholder account of the state of ASD education and its social impact on students. Discussed in Chapter Five, and guided by the literature on social justice, (Goodlad and Riddell, 2005; Hytten & Bettez, 2011; Rawls, 1999; 2001; Theoharis, 2007) are the study's findings, conclusions, limitations, implications for practice, and further research recommendations.

Summary of Findings

Within this section, are the findings of this research study examining the extent to which common themes throughout literature on effective ASD education practices are understood and implemented by educators seeking to fulfill their moral imperative to meet ASD student academic needs through research-based strategies (Foster et al., 2012; McLeskey et al., 2010). The researcher employed the conceptual lens of social justice theory which values distribution, opportunities, and recognition for disadvantaged groups (Hytten & Bettez, 2011) in efforts to illuminate social justice issues in ASD education through rich and detailed descriptions of the challenges faced by study participants within their respective settings and settings of which they had direct knowledge.

The following themes that emerged from the data collection analysis were: 1) *Obstacles to Equity* with the subthemes of: a) *ASD Student Inclusion*, b) *The role of Law and concern for the future of ASD Education*, and c) *Educator Training*; and 2) *Advancement of ASD education* with the subthemes of: a) *Development and*

implementation of ASD Education, b) Strategies that improve ASD education and 3) The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation with the subthemes of: a) *Distribution Disparity of Resource Allocation, b) Recognition of students with ASD and c) Opportunities for students with ASD.* Within the context of each unique educational environment described by interviewees, these research questions developed from the social justice conceptual framework served as a guide:

1. What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?
2. What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?
3. According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?
4. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?

5. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

The researcher reviewed and summarized the interview data presented in Chapter Four, addressing each research question and the literature review guided data interpretations.

What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?

Special education administrators collectively emphasized the high cost of developing, implementing, and improving education supports for students with ASD and their educators as a significant barrier, even within their respective school districts, all of which possessed above average fiscal resources. Furthermore, each special education administrator described a supportive superintendent and board of education as essential to success in their efforts to promote equity for students with ASD within their special education programs. In order to address funding obstacles, these administrators sought out community agencies to supplement the high costs of assistive technology and other supports needed by some students with ASD. However, this external supplemental funding was, for the most part, only useful for individual items for classrooms and certain programs; administrators lamented that regular education class sizes were probably not coming down in the immediate future. Rather, they asserted those numbers will continue to hinder inclusion efforts as explicitly stated by Sue Watson, “our regular classroom numbers are so high that the needs of our students can’t be met although that is the best place for many of them.” None the less, these administrators each shared that they relied

heavily on their special education teachers to work in collaboration with their paraprofessionals to make them aware of both immediate and long term needs for students with ASD.

Furthermore, special education teachers and paraprofessionals shared that special education administrators made a big difference in their daily experience as educators of students with ASD. They championed administrative changes that brought in new support staff and worked to remove equity barriers in various ways within each school. As well as coordinated efforts across the school district and in some cases across other area school districts. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals with experience working in other school districts, or in their districts prior to significant investments in ASD programming, described how “blessed” they were to be in their current settings. The review of literature outlined that social justice disrupts and subverts arrangements that promote marginalization and exclusionary processes (Gewirtz, 1998) however, most of the more experienced special education teachers and paraprofessionals related stories in which little was done for students with ASD and exclusion was all too prevalent.

Karleen Beemer shared:

The students [with ASD] used to be pulled into more isolated classrooms, and that’s not really an appropriate thing to do...they would take kids with more severe autism and send them to outside agencies. Our goal [now] is to keep more kids in the district and teach them the way they need to be taught.

Additionally, special education teachers in particular shared that grant-writing was often a key to funding supports for students with ASD but it is time intensive and most already feel that they were already stretched too thin. Furthermore, special education teachers

collectively confessed a lack of skills and training related to effective management of their respective paraprofessional teams as a difficult barrier to overcome.

Within the review of literature, Chin (2009) shared as an equity obstacle that many regular education teachers are still undertrained and frequently judge ASD student behavior on normative standards that assume fully able status. This is due in part to the frequently inconspicuous manifestations of ASD student disabilities that are difficult for untrained educators accustomed to visible recognition of the obstacles facing students within the special education communities (Hart 2012). In particular, paraprofessionals observed and often cited this aforementioned lack of training and awareness of ASD traits and needs among school personnel as a major equity barriers. Respectively, Beatrice Murphy and Barbara January detailed multiple incidents of equity barriers stemming from lack of ASD training among bus drivers and regular education teachers. They described staff who judged and disciplined the behaviors of students with ASD against normative standards and under assumptions that their students with ASD were capable of eliminating certain behaviors or immediately understanding and following instructions. Importantly, when staff were aware and gave special consideration to disruptive or non-compliant behaviors, it was frequently in the form of ignoring the students and failing to try new methods that would more clearly demonstrate expectations and help overcome barriers to learning and inclusion. Veronica Smith expanded upon this equity barrier:

It [lack of classroom teacher training and ASD awareness] is my biggest frustration. Students with ASD can be hard to connect to and teachers who aren't educated on methods to relate to these students take the path of least resistance.

In the co-taught class, it is that co-teachers job to coach up the regular education teacher, but then that's on us [special education leaders] to make sure that person [classroom teacher] is informed. The overall lack of knowledge is a problem because you have teachers who are uncomfortable, and if you are uncomfortable ...if you have a kid with the tics, or noises, or movements or blurts out...you are going to have some butting of heads. Then the teacher is like, "Oh my god I can't stand him he is always yelling out." We need to train, that's ok, you correct him and show him what you do want. If you have the co-teacher in there to show the regular education teacher what to do it can help, but if not...it starts a negative attitude where regular education teacher is like [sarcastically] "Oh, great, I've got another one [student with ASD]."

Lastly, school law and related legislation was described as barrier that special education administrators were constantly aware of, while most special education teachers and paraprofessionals only took notice when alerted by school leadership of the potential negative effects legislative could have on their students. Sue Watson expanded upon her concerns:

[Legislation] does not inform our practice. I can't say a positive thing about it. I also feel that now that they have changed [modified standardized test]...it's a thorn in everyone's side. Instead of one single day [of testing] like in regular education we have to [take an alternative] test all year long, so to me it is very discriminatory about what we have to do. They [legislators] want it to be a guide for their [special education students] instruction. We feel as professionals we should be able to guide our instruction. That is where we come in to help

politically at the central office. I can't really say legislatively I seen very many positive things [lately].

What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?

Emerging ASD education issues may represent one of the most perplexing challenges facing school district personnel (Burns, 2013). Fortunately, for educators, there are numerous practical techniques applicable to their unique learning settings (Hart, 2012). Certain treatments and interventions may be used in conjunction with ASD specific education strategies to alleviate and even remove many of the obstacles facing students with ASD (Foster et al., 2012). Research supporting ASD education strategies and treatments includes the use early intervention services to improve speech, mobility, and social interaction (CDC, 2014; Foster et al., 2012). Additionally, Palm (2012) championed the importance of creating lessons with unique ASD student strengths in mind within organized and predictable educational environments. These strategies can be coupled with other research supported methods including, providing choice (Ramsey, Jolivet, Patterson, & Kennedy, 2010), functional behavioral assessments (FBA) (Hart, 2012), and inclusion literature (Green, Mays, & Jolivet, 2011; Miller, 2013) to improve the educational experiences of ASD learners.

Paraprofessionals and special education teachers commonly reported consistent collaboration in efforts to develop and incorporate research supported strategies as evidence by Kelly Black, "I bounce stuff off my paras all the time." However, in some

cases, special education teachers and directors would consider the situation, and direct their staff in a specific method or change related to programming for students with ASD students and instruct them that they needed to “get on board” as “this is the direction we are heading” despite individual reservations. The results of these interactions in efforts to incorporate new research supported strategies and methods were generally positive as evidenced by Beatrice Murphy who stated, “I was skeptical of the program but now I can see its value.”

According to participants, paraprofessionals would often describe a specific student problem or need and special education teachers would assist in finding solutions. Special education teachers Angela Jones and Sharon Weaver, among others, described searching the internet individually or contacting their district autism behavior specialists or special education directors for advice specific to meeting the needs of their ASD learners. For their part, special education administrators managed all the pieces of the special education budget and evaluated and prioritized requests while also being there to answer questions, listen, and provide feedback to their special education teachers as they shared their problems, and new solution ideas. Furthermore, these school leaders would attend conferences to keep abreast of new developments in ASD education. Moreover, special education administrators and teachers frequently collaborated in selection of conferences to attend or choice of outside agencies to work with, or technologies to purchase that would improve, to the greatest extent, the quality of ASD education within their respective educational settings.

According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the

training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?

All special educator directors cited examples of traveling across the state or country to conferences in order to learn new ASD specific strategies. They contended that this learning and peer collaboration led to more efficient distribution of resources in their efforts to increase recognition and opportunities for their students with ASD. Afterward, special education administrators would either train their special education teachers or provide them resources to attend learning conferences themselves. In both cases, the special education teachers would in-turn be in charge of training some portion of their special education staff on strategies and methods they learned. Moreover, all school districts within the study had brought in individual companies that specialized in evaluating and incorporating methods to meet the needs of their students with ASD more effectively. In addition, Nancy Miller expanded upon the need for educator training, particularly for regular education teachers:

They [regular education teachers] have to understand how that child [with ASD] perceives information and how they learn in order to be more effective in working with them. They [regular education teachers] may perceive something as being disrespectful, noncompliant, but it is really not. It's really, "I'm taking you literally and I don't really understand." So many of our students are able go into regular classrooms, but sometimes when there is an issue teachers are quick to be judgmental or place a label on them.

The opportunity for inclusion still eludes many students with ASD for it is predicated upon training being provided to all educators.

Additionally, special education administrators within this study were able to recognize that meeting the needs of many of their students with ASD necessitated the distribution of added training resources to their educators. However, it is noteworthy that special education administrators did not unilaterally decide what should be done. Rather, they collaborated with special education teachers within the study, who had received training specific to ASD learners, to develop and offer training to paraprofessionals. Special education teachers recognized the lack of fiscal compensation for paraprofessionals and subsequent impetus for finding other ways to improve the work setting for these individuals. Additionally, special education teacher Angela Jones shared how difficult working with her students with students could be; she contended her struggles were often amplified within paraprofessionals as they sometimes possessed fewer coping mechanisms. Moreover, paraprofessionals reported being “repeatedly bitten, scratched, and clawed at by students”, but often chose to forgo typical consequences for their students and rather sought to understand root causes and worked to keep their students with ASD in the least restrictive environments. Collectively, special educator teachers described the need to get “more tools in the tool belts” of their ASD focused paraprofessionals. However, paraprofessional needs varied as the younger study participants had formal training in education but little practical experience, while the more experienced paraprofessionals had practical experience but little to no formal training.

To this end, special education administrators lead the creation of various training efforts described by one paraprofessional, Fiona Gable, as an “eye opener.” Fiona went on to share that as a result of these trainings she was able to ascertain the root cause of

many of the behaviors exhibited by her students with ASD. As a consequence, she was able to relate to and empathize with her students in deeper ways and help them achieve greater success. Fiona light-heartedly added that seeing the amazing growth within her students “almost made up for the lack of pay.” Relatedly, Goodman (2011) stressed the importance of group knowledge in fostering the empathy needed to meet the needs of marginalized groups and all directors described the importance of their efforts aimed at providing collaboration time to special education teachers and paraprofessionals who often work isolated environments that can impede knowledge sharing.

Furthermore, the social justice principles of distribution and opportunities were reflected within resources provided to support students with ASD as evidenced by special education director Paul Mullins, “We put a ton of money into these [ASD] programs.” Paul Mullins’ was able to help pass a bond to get students with ASD out of exclusionary settings. However, the school districts in this study possessed above average fiscal resources, leaving the researcher and participants to consider the increased challenges to inclusion of students with ASD facing neighboring school districts operating under increased fiscal constraints. Additionally, preferential placement with regular education teachers was another key resource offered to students with ASD. This modification employed by administrators necessitated in-depth knowledge of the nuances of various regular education teachers and students with ASD. Moreover, Sue Watson shared how she spent time educating building principals on what an ASD classroom might look like as they are often different than typical educational settings.

Notably, Nancy Miller cautioned, that “ASD education is the big thing right now” but cautioned that the reallocation of resources to meet the needs of this growing group of students must not come “at the expense of our many other types of special education students.” Her sentiments were supported by her colleagues who told of different groups within the field of special education that had been the focus in the past and some offered thoughts and which groups would be the focus next. Furthermore, Sue Watson and Nancy Miller shared that school law does not drive what they do but rather that they were going to find ways to distribute resources needed regardless of external factors.

According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?

Study data indicated insufficient implementation of the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD many educators received. Most examples of training were recently implemented, and it was generally acknowledged that this training specific to students with ASD was absent in most settings. According to participants, university systems provided little to no instruction the education of students with ASD in the years many of the more experienced educators within the study were in attendance. As a veteran educator, Karleen Beemer shared, “back then there wasn’t a lot of talk about kids with autism, in fact I don’t remember learning about it at all. In retrospect, I had some experience working with kids with autism but they were not labeled.” Another participant with extensive experience working with special education students, Veronica Smith stated, “I’ve never had formal training [within her degree programs]”.

Furthermore, for educators within the study who graduated within the last five years ASD education was a brief and mostly overlooked topic of training and study. Moreover, special education teacher Kelly Black, who had just concluded her first year of teaching a class of mostly students with ASD, also received little training specific to ASD learners within her special education degree program.

Most participants included inadequate ASD training for regular classroom teachers as an inclusion obstacle. In order to develop empathy for students with ASD among staff, most districts had recently implemented new training efforts. However, many of these initiatives were still in their infancy and had not spread widely across the settings within the study nor to other area school districts as evidenced by Abby Williams, “As far as I know we are one of only two schools in state doing this [training].” Fiona Gable added:

Our regular education teachers struggle with student first language...students with ASD are viewed differently. We offer a three-day course that is open for anyone. Parents of students also attended...[we] are learning together. I had a very limited understanding of ASD. The sensory needs are a huge part of it.”

Special educators often collaborated with administrators to ascertain and address staff needs. Angela Jones shared an example of the distribution of resources aimed at providing greater opportunities for inclusion and recognition of student with ASD:

Often, [colleague] and I are asked to come to staff meetings. Last year, especially. There were some more intensive kiddos in a building that I served last year...which demonstrated that there was, with certain regular education

personnel, a lack of awareness. The principal had us come in. We went in during several staff meetings and did training.

Abby Williams shared recognition lessons and methods employed at her school, “I do a class presentation and the teacher is also there to learn as the students do.” Sally Cross a method she employed to foster the recognition of her students and offer an opportunity participate fully:

We have twelve kids specifically trained on how to interact and play with them [her students with ASD] so my kids are not on the playground alone. Everyone needs at least one friend to be successful...and research supports that too, and we have a ton of kids here who are running around out there and don't have one friend.

Special education teacher's views aligned with those of their administrators as many cited examples of traveling across the state or country to conferences in order to learn new ASD specific strategies. They would in-turn be in charge of training some portion of their staff on strategies and methods they learned. Moreover, they celebrated the amazing contributions of outside ASD training agencies that improved ASD education in their settings. They also supported individual companies that specialized in evaluating and incorporating ASD education methods. Karleen Beemer shared:

Our district will have them [training agencies] come out because they will do it for free [after paying for the original training] and this year I had professors come in spend a day in the classroom and provide feedback specific to my kids. It's been amazing.

Karleen Beemer added that her school provided summer school for her kids in order to decrease the skill loss over that break as it had historically been a significant barrier.

According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

The literature on essential ASD education methods was repeatedly reflected within participant responses. For example, the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities were reflected in the methods used to inform, empower, and build relationships with parents and community members employed by study participants. Moreover, Iovannone et al. (2003) listed individualized support services for students and families as common successful ASD education components. In connection, Sue Watson shared, “We have a lot of community involvement...our behavior specialists will hold trainings open to all...our district is really good at providing community supports.”

Additionally, participants were proud of the progress they had made in their inclusion efforts as they contrasted social justice ASD education efforts in their current settings with those previous. For example, Karleen Beemer shared, “I did not feel like there were many resources available [in previous urban setting]. In Lakewood, I am given everything I need.” This disparity was echoed by May Martin description of her experience working with students with ASD within an urban district, “It was an urban district with very urban problems and we didn’t do much for autism students.” Resource disparity was cited with rural districts as well as Abby Williams’ description of her son’s

ASD educational experience illustrated, “Our rural district did a nice job through fourth grade but then he needed some things they couldn’t provide so we had to move.”

Relatedly Angela Jones shared, “It [effective ASD programming] is pretty cost intensive.” However, resources were distributed in efforts to provide social just education to ASD students with the research settings. For Abby Williams added, “there’s not an absence of good materials.” Rather the struggle, according to participants, was in advocating for needs of students with ASD with time and budget constraints. Furthermore, participants often lacked the time to learn and effectively implement ASD focused methods as evidenced by Sally Cross, “it’s not like there is an extremely good program that’s affordable that you can just implement and the teachers can us take off and run with it.” Additionally, interviewees state difficulty building social skills and appropriate behaviors the greatest problem they face in their efforts to promote inclusion efforts in ASD education. In support, Sally Cross asserted:

The big academic pieces are important, all those pieces need to go together, but I think social skills wise, that’s kind of where some of our focus needs to be...it’s hard for teachers to parse out what they need to do when it comes to social skills.

Recognition of ASD problems and provision of opportunities to educators to address these problems was common however, training was only effective when trainees followed through in application of learned lessons and methods. For numerous interviewees shared that even when resources are distributed to teach individuals in ASD strategies and further time is offered for them to share their knowledge, obstacles to socially just ASD education often remain. Abby Williams related an example, “I teach it [ASD programming] the way I expect it to be run, it’s just not always followed through

that way.”

According to Stromer (2006), activity schedules, a type of visual support, and computer technology also bolster ASD education while Harris (2012) added visual supports reduce anxiety and improve ASD student behavior and help students with ASD express thoughts and understand abstract concepts (Harris, 2012). In connection, Karleen Beemer championed the use of visual supports and Sue Watson and Shelly Larsen concurrently, emphasized their school districts use of visual supports and project access teams. Furthermore, Kelly Black, among others, also shared that communication devices were a key piece of technology within her students’ education. Furthermore, Iovannone et al. (2003) supported the use of functional approaches to problem behaviors through applied behavior analysis as an important ASD educational accommodations. Applied behavior analysis was highly regarded and frequently incorporated by study participants as evidenced by Sally Cross who shared: “First and foremost is understanding the characteristics of behavior. Applied behavior analysis is like the gold standard for the treatment of autism.”

Within Oakmont School District, participants collectively described several big recognition events held annually for their students including Special Olympics, Job Olympics, and associated parade festivities. Shelly Larsen detailed this event:

We have the students line up just like we would normally do for a pep assembly for the football team or baseball team...we get the band out, and the drum line and they lead the students on the parade through the school, and all the students come out and cheer on our athletes. It's amazing and our student counsel actually make signs and everything.

Veronica Smith, shared, “It’s just amazing to watch. [School leader] has done really good at making sure that we recognize these kids just like we recognize others.” Jamie Blocker made and distributed autism shirts and she has repeatedly witnessed those shirts spark conversations within school and community settings which in turn can lead to recognition. Abby Williams shared, “I do a class presentation and the teacher is also there to learn as the students do.” May Martin observed that after such events, “When the regular students know my students, they will kind of pull them in under their wing and protect them.” Furthermore, Sharon Weaver added that there are always awareness materials and activities during Autism Awareness month when they do some training with their regular education peers, resource teachers, and support staff.

The general overview of the participants related to recognition was the need for a shift from “the students with ASD” language to “our students with ASD”. Unfortunately, without significant and ongoing investments of time and training, educators within all settings feared their students would continue to struggle to find recognition and subsequent valuation among many of their student peers, teachers, school leaders, and community members.

Abby Williams comprehensively expressed the thoughts on opportunities that many of her colleagues shared in one form or another:

There is a place for each and every one of us...we provide access, then train those kiddos up to be productive members of society and then raise awareness...because otherwise you're just kind of feeding them to the wolves...I think that's what we're in the business of, building up the students' quality of life, they may be different, but are they happy in their lives? I think the other thing

that we, as educators, need to be cognizant of [is] are we...equipping this student with tools that they're going to need to be happy in their life? ...and successful and contributing...Are they going to find fulfillment? That's what it's all about.

To this end, interviewees elaborated upon a variety of opportunities that they were proud to offer to their students with ASD. For example, Shelly Larsen had seen her students with ASD take advantage of opportunities including:

Job Olympics, life skills programs, career based classrooms and centers...welding and fire fighter programs. I had students get their CNA last year. There are life centered programs for lower functioning students...and they do a lot of career exploration...that [ranges from] the grocery store to a Vet clinic.

Shelly Larsen also shared that her students shopped twice a month both in person and online. She was also able to use this opportunity to foster a partnership with the places they shop that makes this life skills activity more affordable.

Additionally, participant schools held several events that focused on opportunities for their students currently and after graduation. For example, Oakmont hosted a transition fair that their co-op of schools put on. At this fair, numerous outside agencies present on topics related to different opportunities for students. These outside agencies may offer lifelong employment and included: The Whole Person, Preferred Employment, Vocational Rehabilitation, [local city name] Regional Office. Students may take advantage of those services and opportunities immediately, or they may wait and call after they graduate and suddenly decide that they want to go to school. The point for these study participants was that these students actually had choices.

Conclusions

A social constructivist lens provided the rationale for the use qualitative data collection instruments and a phenomenological research model provided direction for this study (Creswell, 2009; Hatch, 2002). Understanding people from their own frames of reference is central to the phenomenological perspective of qualitative research and Creswell (2009) supported a phenomenological research model appropriateness for studies seeking to “identify the essence of human experiences about a phenomenon as described by participants” (p. 13). This study elicited interview data from special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals with experience educating students with ASD in order to ascertain the extent to which the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities were reflected within the individual study participants and within their respective settings. Furthermore, this study investigated barriers educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD. Moreover, the various roles special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions were outlined. Ultimately, the data collected painted detailed and a comprehensive picture of ASD education within specific settings. The researcher employed the conceptual lens of social justice theory which values distribution, opportunities, and recognition for disadvantaged groups (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011) in efforts to illuminate social justice issues in ASD education through rich and detailed descriptions of the challenges faced by study participants within their respective settings and settings of which they had direct

knowledge. The following conclusions are based on the study's findings of perceptions of educators in relation to ASD education as examined through the lens of social justice.

Obstacles to Equity

Obstacles to Equity was the first overarching theme identified based upon the data. The three subthemes identified as important constituents of *Obstacles to Equity* were: ASD Student Inclusion, The role of Law and concern for the future of ASD Education, and Educator Training.

From the data, it can be concluded that within the context of each unique educational environment described by interviewees the inclusion of students with ASD was a focus and participants rightfully celebrated the progress they had made in their inclusion efforts. Shelly Larsen stated, "We try and do inclusion as much as possible...and we get that done because we do a lot of accommodations...we meet the students where their needs are." In fact, inclusion to the greatest extent possible in all settings was a central goal of many of the educators in this study as evidenced by Jaime Blocker who stated, "Our goal is to get them back into their home schools." However, Jamie was referencing the outsourcing to for private educational institutions or removal to isolated school settings within their local campuses that was a common practice within all study settings.

Furthermore, participants extensively elaborated upon the obstacles impeding their inclusion goals for students with ASD whose limited verbal and social skills often lead to tantrums, defiance, self-injury, and aggression (Hart, 2012). Mesibov, Adams, and Klinger, (1997) noted over one third of children with autism are nonverbal and study participants repeatedly contended that obstacles to the inclusion of students with ASD into mainstream settings often stemmed from communication and subsequent behavior

difficulties. Fiona Gable described the communication struggles of a student with ASD and ensuing behaviors such as frequent lashing out and repeated biting of Fiona. In order to address the cause of the behavior rather than the behavior itself, Fiona taught this student some sign language. Now this student was able to communicate their wants, and their removal from regular education settings became much more infrequent. Kelly Black added that socialization is a significant inclusion barrier and “Behavior training is all I do and sometimes it feels we never get anywhere, but it is an important life skill.” Her sentiments were echoed by Karleen Beemer who added, “Their [students with ASD] self-regulation skills are so low that it’s frustrating...even when we have the materials the behavior gets in the way.”

Stories of success like Mallory’s were common as barriers to inclusion were not described as insurmountable by any participant. Rather, these educators collectively stated that regular classroom teachers were already stretched so thin that it is difficult for them to give a student or students with ASD the attention they need and as a consequence these students are not placed in the least restrictive environment. These sentiments were explicitly stated by Sue Watson, “Our regular classroom numbers are so high that the needs of our students can’t be met although that is the best place for many of them.” Shelly Larsen described additional inclusion obstacles such as difficulties funding inclusion devices and time to continuously write grants and seek out other alternative funding sources that will allow students with ASD to be included to the greatest extent.

Notably, many participants described education settings that they were previously in or had direct knowledge of, in which the cost of creating and implementing programs to effectively meet the needs of students with ASD was deemed too great. Consequently,

these schools sent their students with ASD to larger school districts or to for profit private educational institutions with programs more specifically tailored to their students' needs. Collectively, interviewees shared that this removal was not inherently damaging however, most participants admitted several negative issues associated with this exclusionary practice, the first of which was student travel time. Oakmont school district received students with ASD from several smaller school districts that were often quite far away. Sally Cross stated: "They ride over an hour each way to school...that is a significant portion of the day and an obstacle that most students do not face." Abby Williams outlined the complexities of her districts inclusion efforts:

If you have a student in the middle of the hallway that's charging adults and yelling profanities and stuff like that, you don't want to expose, repeatedly, your entire student population to that. They [outside education agencies] just have a better place and way of managing those behaviors. Typically, it involves either self-injuries or significantly aggressive types of behaviors that we're looking at. There are cases like that where we may need to do that, temporarily or in some cases, more long term. We do stay in touch regularly. We have somebody who manages just that caseload that is going out, so that we are always looking at when are they ready to come back. We've transitioned several [students with ASD] back last year, successfully. Hopefully it stays that way.

Inclusion obstacles were outlined in a different way by special education directors who described the tipping point number at which it becomes more cost effective to educate your students with ASD in district. Oakmont educators described their school cooperative as a good program with financial benefits for all districts involved and

service benefits for the students; though most admitted transpiration time could be excessive in some cases. Notably, school personnel transporting these students have no training on the unique traits and needs of their students with ASD and paraprofessional Beatrice Murphy contended that many students were already off track for their school day at arrival due to a negative incident on the bus. Additionally, special education directors shared that many school leaders utilize for profit agencies in lieu of creating their own programs as these institutions may often offer services that schools with smaller populations or underdeveloped programs for students with ASD do not provide. However, they admitted concern over situations in which fiscal motivations become a significant driver of education for student with ASD.

Moreover, despite taking the first step toward inclusion by creating programs for students with ASD, each district in study this struggled improve the settings in which their services were offered. For instance, the special education director at Oakmont School District Paul Mullins stated:

One of the things that is really frustrating that we have is called the passage house, it's a separate building for kiddos and...it doesn't feel good and I want them out of there full time...to get those kiddos more with their peers...it just doesn't feel good where they are at.

Despite these obstacles, all participants described gains related the inclusion of students with ASD within their respective school districts. For example, Paul Mullins' district, Oakmont, was able to pass a bond issue to get their students out of their aforementioned exclusionary settings. However, the school districts in this study possessed above average fiscal resources, leaving the researcher and participants to

consider the increased challenges to inclusion of students with ASD facing neighboring school districts operating under increased fiscal constraints. Relatedly, many participants shared that in the past within their school districts and currently in many neighboring school districts, exclusion continues to be the norm for students with ASD. Jaime Blocker of Lakewood School District stated: “some of our students have been contracted out to private institutions before and we have tried to pull them back into our program since we have this [new programs for students with ASD] now.” These transitions are difficult for many students with ASD whose struggles with even minor changings were repeatedly emphasized by participants as the source of major education setbacks. This assertion is evidenced by Mallory Jones who worked one-on-one with a student for whom it was decided that forgoing the middle school level entirely was the best option as data showed major losses in verbal and academic skills during prior setting transitions.

Previously, the researcher tried highlight equity obstacles from the perspective of the students with ASD. However, one must also consider the value inclusion holds for all students. Most interviewees championed this value despite it not being specifically elicited by interview protocol questions. Participants shared detailed and sometimes emotional descriptions of the development of character and cultural sensitivity skills regular education students who partnered with students with ASD gained. These mutually beneficial interactions are not possible without inclusion and work best when directly facilitated by educators. For example, Beatrice Murphy as paraprofessional and Karleen Beemer as a special education teacher, collaborated with their peers in purposeful selection of students from regular education classrooms to partner with students with ASD. They described this as a powerful tool that improved the educational

experience of both students. Their efforts were mirrored by Sally Cross who shared:

We have twelve kids specifically trained on how to interact and play with them [her students with ASD] so my kids are not on the playground alone. Everyone needs at least one friend to be successful...and research supports that too, and we have a ton of kids here who are running around out there and don't have one friend.

None the less, participants lamented that when students are excluded so are their teachers. Karleen Beemer stated: "as a special education teacher here in your own little world it's really hard if you don't have anybody. I feel like we are on our own."

Educators at all levels face significant challenges in providing equitable education services that meet specific ASD student needs within least restrictive environments (Merchant, 2005; Scheurich & Skrla, 2003) and rapid adaptability to meet individualized student needs was a critical component of inclusion efforts described by participants.

Yet, participants in general described a need for peer support in their efforts to meet the unique needs of their ASD learners. In conclusion, inclusion can take many forms, but those forms do not represent the fullest expression of social just education if students spend over two hours being transported to a from school or spend the majority of their day isolated from peers who have no opportunity to understand and appreciate them during shared learning experiences.

The role of Law and Concern for the Future of ASD Education

Conclusions stemming from the research data on school law and related standardized testing show this to be a nuanced and complex issue within ASD education. Participants expressed contrary opinions on the topic throughout the data collection. For

example, Abby Williams stated, “It [school law] very much drives what we do” while Kelly Black added that “Without it [school law] I wouldn’t have a job.” Several participants contended that in particular the I.E.P. [Individualized Education Program] determinations what they do. In continuation, May Martin shared:

I know a lot of people didn't agree completely with the No Child Left Behind. But I think that it has kind built up that every student has a right to a free and fair education...offer the strategies and the accommodations to ensure that those laws are being met.

Conversely, Shelly Larsen stated in response to school law questions “I think there's always a hoop to jump through” and Abby Williams added that the complex bureaucracy often drives people out of special education. In addition, Sue Watson expanded upon her concerns:

[Legislation] does not inform our practice. I can’t say a positive thing about it. I also feel that now that they have changed [modified standardized test]...it’s a thorn in everyone’s side. Instead of one single day [of testing] like in regular education we have to [take an alternative] test all year long, so to me it is very discriminatory about what we have to do. They [legislators] want it to be a guide for their [special education students] instruction. We feel as professionals we should be able to guide our instruction. That is where we come in to help politically at the central office. I can’t really say legislatively I seen very many positive things [lately].

In particular, teachers and paraprofessionals administering the tests, had greatest concerns about the law mandated standardized testing process. As the coordinator of

modified standardized testing in her school, Shelly Larsen stated, “We have real strict guidelines...the majority of my students taking the [modified standardized test] have no business taking it.” Abby Williams concurred, “We have some nonverbal students taking the test and they’re using twitches and we will try to interpret what they actually mean. It’s kind of silly. So in my opinion it is still very rigid.” Jaime Blocker added:

My students may not even physically be able to understand or indicate a response. And all those EOCs [end of course assessments], when you're in a life skills functional classroom it is...sad. I have students with an IQ of 45, and they're asking them to graph equations because with the [modified standardized test], it just keeps going and going and they’re maybe guessing an answer that throws them into questions that they have no business trying to answer. So it's painful. [Modified standardized test] is painful not only for the students but for the staff as well.

Abby Williams offered that [modified standardized test] was more of an assessment of the teacher than it was of the student although she added that this assessment has made positive changes in the last few years. Frustrated students often start to make “design bubbles” and students rarely get a scribe. Moreover, participants lamented the misalignment between what they are teaching their students as part of their I.E.P. goals and what is being tested. Expanded upon by Kelly Black, “Most of my kids have social skills...social goals...so they don't have reading writing or math...but they are tested on it. In support, Beatrice Murphy stated, “No way our students will know the answers to the [standardized test] or the [modified standardized test], socialization is more important to their life long happiness.” The researcher concluded that changes are needed but they

would be concerned that resources currently directed to the improvement of ASD education could potentially be in jeopardy in some school settings if this group was no longer assessed. An individualized test that aligns with a student's written learning goals would be a fair and more relevant assessment tool to administer to many students with ASD.

Lastly, the word "fear" was repeatedly used by interviewees when concluding their thoughts on school law and its relationship to ASD education. Madeline Roe shared that currently legislative initiatives "scare" me. Shelly Larson concurred:

I think that this is kind of a scary time. So I think that it's really important that we all listen and read what's going on, and make your voice be heard by writing letters. Our superintendent is really good at keeping us all informed of new legislation. I myself read a lot of the new legislation.

Angela Jones added, "I worry a little bit about that...that what we have in place now might fade. I think maybe this group would be more the first to be effected by that. It's pretty cost intensive." Williams' concerns are supported by special education director Paul Mullins "We put a ton of money into these [ASD] programs"

Moreover, insurance law was an unintended subtheme common among special education teacher responses. They shared that the medical and educational diagnoses for ASD differ. This becomes very important when these educators are trying to help the parents of ASD students find ways to afford treatment for their children. Abby Williams detailed:

I think we've made quite a few gains in terms of health care initiatives for coverage for ABA [applied behavior analysis] services and things like that. Part

of that is just having the patience to let the insurance companies, to let everybody learn. My prayer is that it doesn't go away...that it actually maybe, improves...I do think it's been important to families. I wish it was covered better. There are only certain insurance groups that have coverage. Some insurances don't cover it and don't have to.

In conclusion, it is hard to overstate the necessity of all stakeholders associated with individuals with an ASD diagnosis keeping abreast of current law in areas of school and disability funding.

Educator Training Conclusions stemming from the data collected on the topic of educator training supported Chin (2009) who contended that without comprehensive training for all stakeholders, social justice for students with ASD remain elusive.

Students with disabilities such as ASD often fail to fully benefit from the provisions of the IDEA (1988) and related laws due to lack of educator training in the use of innovative research supported ASD education strategies (Chin, 2009; Hess et al., 2008;) and this absence of sufficiently trained ASD educators (Browne, 2012) has been successfully contested under IDEA (Yell et al., 2003). In support, Abby Williams shared, “There’s not an absence of good materials.” Her sentiments were supported by other participants who also stated that the resources were out there but the time to learn and effectively implement them is absent from ASD education improvement equation.

University systems unsurprisingly provided little to no instruction the education of students with ASD in the years many of the more experienced educators within the study were in attendance. As a veteran educator, Karleen Beemer shared, “Back then there wasn’t a lot of talk about kids with autism, in fact I don’t remember learning about

it at all. In retrospect, I had some experience working with kids with autism but they were not labeled.” Another participant with extensive experience working with special education students, Veronica Smith stated, “I’ve never had formal training [within her degree programs]”. For educators within the study who graduated within the last five years ASD education was a brief and mostly overlooked topic of training and study. The researcher was surprised that special education teacher Kelly Black, who had just concluded her first year of teaching a class of mostly students with ASD also received little to no ASD training within her special education degree program.

Most participants included inadequate ASD training for regular classroom teachers as an inclusion obstacle. In order to develop empathy for students with ASD among staff, most districts had recently implemented new training efforts. However, many of these initiatives were still in their infancy and had not spread widely across the settings within the study nor to other area school districts as evidenced by Abby Williams, “As far as I know we are one of only two schools in state doing this [training].” Nancy Miller expanded upon the issue of educator training and inclusion of ASD students:

They [regular education teachers] have to understand how that child [with ASD] perceives information and how they learn in order to be more effective in working with them. They [regular education teachers] may perceive something as being disrespectful, noncompliant, but it is really not. It’s really, “I’m taking you literally and I don’t really understand.” So many of our students are able go into regular classrooms but sometimes when there is an issue teachers are quick to be judgmental or place a label on them.

Fiona Gable added:

Our regular education teachers struggle with student first language...students with ASD are viewed differently. We offer a three-day course that is open for anyone. Parents of students also attended. [We] are learning together. I had a very limited understanding of ASD. The sensory needs are a huge part of it.”

Lastly, Abby Williams shared, “I teach it [ASD programming] the way I expect it to be run, it’s just not always followed through that way.”

Concurrently, the training of paraprofessionals and training in management of teams of paraprofessionals for special education teachers were seen as keys to providing equity for students with ASD. Kelly Black and Jaime Blocker both felt unprepared to manage their respective teams of paraprofessionals and stated that paraprofessional management should be part of every special education teacher training program.

Paraprofessionals are the educators that often spend the greatest amount of time working directly to assist and support special education students and their regular classroom teachers. Additionally, they play an increasingly important role concerning decisions related to instructional content and practice (Tews & Lupart, 2008) as evidenced by Kelly Black, “I bounce stuff off my paras all the time”, Kelly’s colleagues concurrently elaborated on their own extensive collaborations with their paraprofessionals.

However, many paraprofessionals lack education training as evidenced by May Martin who applied for another position within a school district and was asked during her interview about filing a role as a paraprofessional despite not know the meaning of the term. Paraprofessionals with degrees in fields related to special education within this study had little work experience with special education students. Additionally, Karleen

Beemer emphasized that, “Paras are not paid very much.” Thus, it is especially critical that they feel valued and are professionally developed so they have the tools to effectively support equitable and inclusive education of their students with ASD despite their often severe behavior and social impediments.

School districts cannot be the first place a new educator receive training specific to learners with ASD. Especially when one takes into account reports from the CDC (2014) highlighting the growing numbers of children with an ASD diagnosis. 730,000 of the approximately 1.5 million individuals with ASD in the United States are between the ages of 0-21 years (CDC, 2014) and thus fall within the age range where public school is, or will soon be, a major component of their days and 90% of students with ASD between the ages of 6-21 are educated in public schools (United States Department of Education, 2013). There needs to be at least a basic understanding of needs of students with ASD within new graduates within the field of education. Concurrently, school districts cannot assume that their new educators have any relevant knowledge or experience in meeting the needs of students with ASD. This includes new staff from universities or other school districts as participants repeatedly cited lack of experience and training in both settings. From bus drivers to regular education teachers, districts must implement at least a minimum level awareness where none exists, and areas that have the basics in ASD training, skills need to be developed further. Inclusion can be mandated and small improvements within ASD education may be made however, without comprehensive training for all stakeholders, social justice for this subgroup will remain elusive. The equity barriers evidenced by Veronica Smith must become a thing of the past:

It [classroom teacher training] is my biggest frustration. Students with ASD can be hard to connect to and teachers who aren't educated on methods to relate to these students take the path of least resistance. In the co-taught class, it is that co-teachers job to coach up the regular education teacher, but then that's on us [special education leaders] to make sure that person [classroom teacher] is informed. The overall lack of knowledge is a problem because you have teachers who are uncomfortable, and if you uncomfortable ...if you have a kid with the tics, or noises, or movements or blurts out, you are going to have some butting of heads. Then the teacher is like, "Oh my god I can't stand him he is always yelling out." We need to train, that's ok, you correct him and show him what you do want. If you have the co-teacher in there to show the regular education teacher what to do it can help, but if not...it starts a negative attitude where regular education teacher is like [sarcastically] "Oh great, I've got another one [student with ASD]."

Advancement of ASD Education

Advancement of ASD education was the second overarching theme identified based upon the data. The two subthemes identified as important constituents of *Advancement of ASD education* were: Development and implementation of ASD Education and Strategies that improve ASD education. From the data, it can be concluded that within the study settings effective development and implementation of ASD education requires input from a variety of stakeholders, including parents and paraprofessional in addition to the typical leaders in this area, special education teachers and administrators. Seeking out and evaluating programs that meet the needs of learners

across the autism spectrum is a multifaceted and nuanced balancing act performed under pressure from the immediate need for new ASD strategies and time and fiscal concerns.

Sally Cross described the complex nature of the development and implementation of ASD education:

It's not like there is an extremely good program that's affordable that you can just implement and the teachers can us take off and run with it. It's really hard, and it's hard for the teachers to parse out what they need to do when it comes to school social skills.

While Karleen Beemer described the setting she came into when arriving starting work in her current role:

They [Lakewood] did not have a good reputation in the past. I have only been working here for five years, since they started the new program. I think they are doing a great job starting the new program but there is still that reputation from the past.

Viewed from her role as special education director for Lakewood, Sue Watson espoused the necessity of the support from the superintendent and the board of education as she attempted to implement the programs tailored to meet the individualized needs of learners with ASD in which Karleen Beemer worked as a special education teacher. On of Karleen's paraprofessional colleagues, Beatrice Murphy described the implementation process and in doing so illustrates the patience and dedication needed for any program to produce improvements for students with ASD:

I was skeptical of the program but now I can see its value. At first there was a lot of scuffling and kids fighting. Their behaviors are lessening. We spent a lot of

time carrying them out to an area that was safer...letting them be under the tables...they just didn't want to learn. I think it comes from when they were in early childhood, whenever they would have a behavior people would leave them alone...Now he can verbally tell us what he wants...he used to be like a little kitty-cat under the desk scratching at you.

Beatrice Murphy and her colleagues described Lakewood's program diversity and complexity which included a: Life skills program for students with low IQ and another program for kids whose IQ's are normal or high but their social ability is really low and they are "trying to socially get them ready to go into other classrooms." Abby Williams championed the necessity of their Essential Skills curriculum as it forms the foundation for the rest of their efforts. "They may not be learning as many new skills, but they are building a foundation that will help them meet learning targets at much faster rate later...patience, being flexible." There is a great deal of understanding and patience required from administration when using these programs as some of the typical measures of student success are not applicable.

Another conclusion drawn from interview data was that the advanced of ASD education was partially predicated up certain positions that focused on instructional strategies for this group. Shelly Larsen as the process coordinator and transition coordinator for the Oakmont High School described several other roles filled by her colleagues that were essential to their districts development and implementation of effective ASD education. These roles included: behavior interventionist, assistive technology director, and IDAC consultants. Special education teachers Abby Williams and Kelly Black spoke of their autism consultant and Board Certified Behavior Analyst

[BCBA] as an essential assets; while special education director Sue Watson contended that Lakewood's autism behavior specialists and Process Action Teams made of teachers and specialists assess ASD student needs to drive programming.

The research also concluded that transitions were an increasing important theme within the education of students with ASD according to multiple study participants.

Shelly Larsen described:

Transition became really big. Our Transition Coordinator group meets twice a month. We're constantly giving each other new information about new programs in order to help individuals. So I gain my knowledge there. There is a transition fair here that our co-op puts on and we get all those outside agencies involved in here, and currently we have thirty-five vendors and we are trying and expand it more. I go around and I talk to them and we have people present on certain topics and I get information from them. My main goal has always been to work myself out of a job. We do a lot of train the trainer in our district. We will get knowledge and then we will come back and we will train people, we will go into their classrooms and talk to them. Anytime that we see a deficit some place, we go and help. So if that means that somebody from the elementary school is coming up to talk to me or I'm going down to talk to them, we'll do it.

Unfortunately, it was repeatedly evidenced that much of the new research-supported programming implemented within the study settings was not yet experiencing wide-spread adoption. This conclusion is supported by Abby Williams who shared that for their Essential Skills curriculum, as far as she knew, her district was one of only two schools in the state using this program to give their students with ASD foundational learning skills.

Strategies that improve ASD education. The researcher was curious if the myriad of research supported strategies that improve education for students with ASD were making it into the classroom. The review of literature cited instruction in metacognitive awareness (Gunn, 2013), cognitive behavioral therapy and instruction in self-monitoring techniques (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012), early intervention strategies (Foster et al., 2012), Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) (Hart, 2012), certain classroom structures (Palm, 2012), and technology and visual supports (Cafiero, 2008) among others as strategies shown to demonstrate effectiveness in the improvement of ASD education outcomes. Fortunately, data repeatedly supported the conclusion that research support strategies were being used to improve outcomes for students within the autism spectrum. The alignment between participant responses and the data from the review of literature was a clear theme stemming from interview data as each district to some extent or another incorporated these strategies into their ASD programming.

Of note, in order to create the buy-in needed to incorporate strategies that supported ASD education, districts had to show the need for improvement. Efforts to this end were discussed by many participants. Nancy Miller cited a good example, “We brought in a speaker and it was great because he spoke what it was like to be a student in the school system and growing up and it kind spoke to those misperceptions.” Shelly Larsen described other examples of events and collaboration meetings that created buy-in and gave training knowledge to attendees who in turn trained their peers within that own settings:

PowerUp was a State Conference...Missouri Assistive Technology asked that [us] to go and present all the good things that we're doing. [Furthermore] we formed

this co-op, so that everybody can be trained by one person. Then that has morphed into behavior. So we started training. Then we noticed lack in behavior management skills, so we went to that in data collection...and right now our co-op is being used for transition, so post-secondary students get help. We get together twice a month. We plan things. Special education directors get together quarterly and talk about things. One of their events is paraprofessional development...we do that once a year...actually get together and talk about...what are our needs are and how can we get better and what are the needs of your district and can we help you in your district...we're all hungry for new knowledge.

Visual supports reduce anxiety and improve ASD student behavior (Harris, 2012; Rao & Gagic, 2006) and help students with ASD express thoughts and understand abstract concepts (Harris, 2012). Karleen Beemer championed the use of visual supports and added that she frequently sought out new strategies on her own. Concurrently, Sue Watson and Shelly Larsen each emphasized their school districts use of visual supports and project access teams.

Paul Mullins learned new strategies to improve ASD education through Project ACCESS training and adaptive technology conferences. Fiona Gable shared:

For our nonverbal students, we have amazing assistive technology people that will try different things to assist communication. Technology is so important for our kids so just getting them PECS [Picture Exchange Communication System] so they can communicate their wants and needs is huge.

Augmentative communication systems such as PECS created for individuals who are nonverbal or have few communication skills have demonstrated effectiveness in the use

visual supports to assist students with ASD with the rapid acquisition of a functional means of communication (Harris, 2012). Kelly Black also emphasized that communication devices were a key piece of technology within her students' education.

Creating partnerships with outside agencies was another common strategy used to offset some of the high cost of certain ASD education strategies. Paul Mullins of Oakmont school district stated, "We put a ton of money into those [ASD] programs we have support from the [community organization] that they'll donate five to seven thousand dollars a year really to help our kiddos on the spectrum for programming. Kelly Black added that "We have a sensory room, weighted blankets, fidget devices, visuals...and those outside agencies help pay for that."

An important and necessary ASD education strategy employed by school districts within the study was preferential placement with regular education teachers. Veronica Smith and Fiona Gable both detailed the importance of placing ASD students with teachers who were "a good fit". Usually this meant that these teachers are not easily upset by smaller abnormal behaviors of their students. Shelly Larsen shared that her students with ASD like a very rigid schedule. Furthermore, Shelly shared that demonstrating, modeling, TouchChat AT and eye contact were all frequently employed on a case by case basis. Abby Williams used the state Assisted Technology agency in conjunction with Functional Behavior Assessments, and card sorting strategies while also recommending:

Informal assessment that helps drive goals and objectives, that has really been my push. That and behavior...ne feeds the other...[also recommended] Essential for Living, it does what the VB-MAPP [Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and

Placement Program] does for our younger kiddos, that's what it does for our older kiddos. It's basically a road map that shows us what essential skills that they need to function independently in society. Project Access out of Springfield, IDAC [in-district autism consultant] training, Zones of Regulation, the Incredible Five Point Scale. These...help kids regulate both their emotions and their behavior...delayed gratification, they can accept "no" without a full meltdown...Super-flex is high in our district...blessed to have Pennsylvania training.

To summarize, there are great strategies available to ASD educators however, study participants struggled to find the time to train their peers. Without training across the board students on the spectrum will continue to have their progress impeded by unnecessary negative events and setbacks within their school day.

The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation

The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation was the third overarching theme identified based upon the data. The three subthemes identified as important elements of *The Manifestation of the Social Justice Orientation* theme were: Distribution Disparity of Resource Allocation, Recognition of Students with ASD, and Opportunities for Students with ASD. It can be concluded from interview descriptions that educating funding disparity is an especially significant issue for students on the autism spectrum. Most students with autism require unique strategies, equipment, and other forms of educational support to reach their potential (Schlosser, Blischak, Belfiore, Bartley, & Barnett, 1998). Relatedly, social justice theory values distribution, opportunities, and recognition for disadvantaged groups (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011). Interviewees, shared

many examples of significant resource investment within their respective school districts, Steven Morgan, “We put a ton of money into those (ASD) programs.” However, many participants described how their previous experience, often in rural and urban ASD programs, contrasted sharply with those of their more affluent suburban districts. This dichotomy was illustrated by Karleen Beemer, “I did not feel like there were many resources available [in previous urban setting]. In Lakewood, I am given everything I need.” This disparity was echoed by May Martin description of her experience working with students with ASD within an urban district, “It was an urban district with very urban problems and we didn’t do much for autism students.” Resource disparity was cited with rural districts as well as Abby Williams’ description of her son’s ASD educational experience illustrated, “Our rural district did a nice job through fourth grade but then he needed some things they couldn’t provide so we had to move.”

Even within the fiscally advantaged settings of the study, some of the individuals critical to helping to develop and effectively incorporate specific strategies that assist learners with ASD were not fully included as school personnel and suffered from disparity of resources. In her specific ASD focused role, special education teacher Abby Williams was not fully included within her school system and shared, “I receive no retirement or health benefits. I spent a lot of time trying to get my technology to work, it took forever to get wifi access.” Furthermore, many of the settings specific to students with ASD were in older facilities that were not designed with these students in mind. Jamie Blocker stated that most of their playground equipment is obsolete as it requires physical skills that her students do not have. Lastly, Madeline Roe shared, “You can’t live on a paraprofessional’s salary with a child.” This is especially significant as

paraprofessionals are often the individuals most directly responsible for implementation of ASD education methods and strategies.

Recognition of Students with ASD Most educators interviewed for this study had a personal connection to a young person with ASD or other disability. Abby Williams shared, “Our son was diagnosed at 20 months” while Kelly Black added “My brother has down syndrome” and May Martin stated, “My son had a lot of struggles in school and it seemed a place where they could not see the good in him.”

Madeline Roe continued, “My son was on the autism spectrum. I was thirty-three and realized that education, specifically special education, was my calling.” Their personnel experience made it difficult not to recognize and subsequently advocate for these individuals that others may overlook. They described great frustration at the lack of compassion and slowness or unwillingness to make even the smallest change to help students with ASD seen in some of their peers and society. They recounted many examples of struggles to develop their empathy and recognition of individuals with ASD in those without their level of personal experience and admitted the separation of both themselves and their students from the general student population can pose an obstacle in their efforts.

Conversely, interviewees also expressed immense joy to the point of tears at some of the great efforts the staff and students of their schools had made to recognize their students. Within Oakmont School District, participants collectively described several big recognition events held annually for their students including Special Olympics, Job Olympics, and associated parade festivities. Shelly Larsen detailed this event:

We have the students line up just like we would normally do for a pep assembly for the football team or baseball team...we get the band out, and the drum line and they lead the students on the parade through the school, and all the students come out and cheer on our athletes. It's amazing and our student counsel actually make signs and everything.

Veronica Smith, shared, "It's just amazing to watch. [School leader] has done really good at making sure that we recognize these kids just like we recognize others." Jamie Blocker made and distributed autism shirts and she has repeatedly witnessed those shirts spark conversations within school and community settings which in turn can lead to recognition. Abby Williams shared, "I do a class presentation and the teacher is also there to learn as the students do." May Martin observed that after such events, "When the regular students know my students, they will kind of pull them in under their wing and protect them and protect them."

Participants affirmed that ASD specific training occurs at the beginning of the school year at the building level at some schools within the Jefferson district. Sharon Weaver added that there are always awareness materials and activities during Autism Awareness month when they do some training with their regular education peers, resource teachers, and support staff. Additionally, Angela Jones stated:

Often, [colleague] and I are asked to come to staff meetings. Last year, especially. There were some more intensive kiddos in a building that I served last year...which demonstrated that there was, with certain regular ed personnel, a lack of awareness. The principal had us come in, we went in during several staff meetings and did training.

The general overview of the participants related to recognition was the need for a shift from “the students with ASD” language to “our students with ASD”. Unfortunately, conclusions drawn from participant responses related to recognition show that without significant and ongoing investments of time and training, students many with ASD would continue to struggle to find recognition and subsequent valuation among many of their student peers, teachers, school leaders, and community members. Moreover, an impetus exists for increased recognition efforts that engage and empower individuals without the personnel experience common among study participants.

Opportunities for students with ASD. Conclusions stemming from participant responses related to opportunities for students with ASD were some of the most exciting and encouraging of the study. Each school district had made great strides in their efforts to provide opportunities for students with ASD of all ages. Abby Williams comprehensively expressed the thoughts on opportunities that many of her colleagues shared in one form or another:

There is a place for each and every one of us...we provide access, then train those kiddos up to be productive members of society and then raise awareness...because otherwise you're just kind of feeding them to the wolves...I think that's what we're in the business of, building up the students' quality of life, they may be different, but are they happy in their lives? I think the other thing that we, as educators, need to be cognizant of [is] are we...equipping this student with tools that they're going to need to be happy in their life? ...and successful and contributing...Are they going to find fulfillment? That's what it's all about.

To this end, interviewees elaborated upon a variety of opportunities that they were proud to offer to their students with ASD. For example, Shelly Larsen had seen her students with ASD take advantage of opportunities including:

Job Olympics, life skills programs, career based classrooms and centers...welding and fire fighter programs. I had students get their CNA last year. There are life centered programs for lower functioning students...and they do a lot of career exploration...that [ranges from] the grocery store to a Vet clinic.

Shelly Larsen also shared that her students shopped twice a month both in person and online. She was also able to use this opportunity to foster a partnership with the places they shop that makes this life skills activity more affordable.

Additionally, participant schools held several events that focused on opportunities for their students currently and after graduation. For example, Oakmont hosted a transition fair that their co-op of schools put on. At this fair, numerous outside agencies present on topics related to different opportunities for students. These outside agencies may offer lifelong employment and included: The Whole Person, Preferred Employment, Vocational Rehabilitation, [local city name] Regional Office. Students may take advantage of those services and opportunities immediately, or they may wait and call after they graduate and suddenly decide that they want to go to school. The point for these study participants was that these students actually had choices.

Another common theme was the day-to-day opportunities participants sought to offer their students as these efforts need not take the form of a big event or necessitate building of community partnerships. This was evidenced by Fiona Gable's story:

A [student] I transitioned...who had huge behavioral issues...she had a trach so I started teaching her some sign and she picked it up and she started communicating and she was fine so we were able to move her back to her home school. She was in the talent show, her peers all signed a song for their graduation with her because she can't speak so they learned how to sign this with her.

The teaching of sign to both her nonverbal student and their class provided an opportunity for an invaluable lesson in inclusion, and understanding to a greater extent someone different than themselves, while that student has the opportunity to become a full participant despite their differences. The researcher concluded that is critical that these stories are shared become prevalent all school settings.

In summary the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities were reflected in many aspects of ASD education. However, participants collectively shared that these social justice principles were not reflected evenly.

Limitations

Every research study contains limitations that are important to acknowledge (Connelly, 2013) and it is imperative for researchers to describe their influences, positions, and bias prior to qualitative data collection (Hatch, 2002). This provides readers of qualitative studies an opportunity to consider how the settings, researcher bias, and researcher presence affected data collection and subsequent analysis and findings as they evaluate applicability to their own settings. However, qualitative researchers and readers of qualitative studies need not merely focus on removal of limitations but should rather reflect upon how limitations influence and shape a study (Creswell, 2009).

For example, the researcher's use of social justice as a theoretical lens certainly created a different picture of the settings and daily realities facing study participants as did his background as a public school educator charged with the task of implementing ASD modifications within the classroom in efforts towards the provision of equitable education outcomes. Moreover, the many meetings involving a range of school educators, parents, and their students with ASD built within the researcher preconceived ideas related to issues of social justice within ASD education. However, "Qualitative researchers empathize and identify with the people they study in order to understand how those people see things" (Taylor et al., 2015, p. 8). Consequently, the aforementioned connections may be viewed as an asset to the study.

Reflexivity is the recognition of how a researcher's background effected the study (Kuper, Lingard, & Levinson, 2008) and also pertains to the influence the researcher's presence has on data collection (Kuper et al., 2008) as interviewees may hold or display bias related to the presence of the researcher (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). For the study, information was not collected in the natural fields setting and this may inhibit the accuracy of findings (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 1998). Furthermore, research has shown increases in stress levels of educators of students with ASD (Carter & Hughes, 2006) and the mood of participants at the time of data collection had the potential to influence responses and subsequent coding and themes developed by the researcher limiting what can be explicitly known or said to be true of findings.

The researcher mitigated potential research limitations by allowing study participants to evaluate accuracy of themes created by the researcher using member-checking and peer debriefing (Sharpe & Faye, 2009) while also describing in detail their

bias and role within the research. The use of bracketing to isolate the researcher's early interpretations, feelings, and thoughts from participant data further limited bias (Hatch, 2002) as did the routine usage of thick and rich description (Creswell, 2009; Merriam & Associates, 2002) to provide readers detailed context (Flick et al., 2004) in order for them to determine the homogeneity and subsequently transferability of study findings.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this inquiry could be used by readers of this study at all levels to strengthen their own ASD programs. For example, the implications for this qualitative inquiry affect educators in K-12 institutions and higher education institutions and indicate a need for comprehensive educator training in the areas of social justice and education of students with ASD. In particular, special education programs need to reflect the needs of the schools in which their graduates will be working. Schools have increasing populations of students with ASD and the study findings did not show an equivalent corresponding increase in time spent on topics related to ASD education, nor did participants share that the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities were adequately understood and reflected in the efforts of ASD stakeholders within their respective educational institutions. Moreover, study participants repeatedly cited inconsistent knowledge and attention to issues related to social justice and ASD education within their school and legislative leaders. Therefore, this study could serve as an impetus for higher education institutions to bolster the attention they give to social issues associated with the education of students with ASD. Furthermore, increased societal awareness of social justice and ASD issues stemming

from trained education stakeholders would translate into increases in equity for individuals with ASD and other marginalized groups.

Additionally, this study could help school leaders recognize and advocate for the distribution of added resources or more efficient use of current resources to meet the needs of students with ASD. This distribution could include structural changes to educational settings and enhanced and individualized personnel training that promotes inclusion of students with ASD. This training could take the form of increased attention within all educational degree programs, including those of school leaders and regular education teachers. Additional implications include the need for additional time and resources aimed at assuring the increasing variety of ASD education stakeholders are prepared to effectively recognize and address deficiencies in current ASD education described in this study. Moreover, findings illustrated the need for developing teams of ASD educators to share knowledge across levels to prevent situations where precious resources are squandered, such as the example shared by Jaime Blocker who described, “our new ASD program has a new playground, a significant resource investment, but most of the playground equipment is unusable for my students.” The provision of equitable outcomes for ASD learners will be enhanced if organizations create opportunities for their members to collaborate and increase the amount of collective knowledge among their members.

Furthermore, educators could use recognition findings within this study to plan events to recognize students with ASD while classroom teachers could be inspired to create new methods that promote the breaking down of barriers between all of their students. The study findings detailed a variety examples of recognition efforts, both great

and small, that are applicable to all school settings. Moreover, educators seeking to answer questions related to the development and implementation of ASD programs or those evaluating the myriad of strategies that support ASD education have and first-hand ASD educator account to consult. Specifically, enhanced training and collaboration time in areas of ASD education for regular education teachers, support staff, and administrators will allow these individuals to align and support the efforts of their colleagues with greater knowledge related to research supported methods that support equitable ASD education outcomes. Specific examples of these efforts described within the study include creating partnerships with outside agencies to offset the high cost of certain ASD education strategies. When funds are available, sensory rooms, weighted blankets, fidget devices, and visual supports help many students with ASD. Furthermore, modeling, TouchChat AT, eye contact, and utilization the state Assisted Technology agency in conjunction with Functional Behavior Assessments and card sorting strategies are also common components of successful ASD programs. In addition, study findings support the effectiveness of the use of informal assessments to drive goals and objectives in conjunction with programs such as Essential for Living and Verbal Behavior Milestones Assessment and Placement Program (VB-MAPP), Zones of Regulation, the Incredible Five Point Scale, and Super-flex. Moreover, participants advocated for the incorporation of support from outside agencies such as Project Access out of Springfield and the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network (PaTTAN). Furthermore, findings supported the use of an in-district autism consultant (IDAC) to increase quality and cohesiveness of programming for students with ASD and their educators.

Additionally, emergent themes within this study created a full and rich description (Creswell, 2009) of the experiences of paraprofessionals which were, for the most part, absent from the literature review. In turn, educators seeking to examine and improve ASD student education within their own settings could utilize the paraprofessional perspective. These individuals possess a great deal of practical advice stemming from their extensive day-to-day experience with students with ASD and school leaders would benefit from increased solicitation of paraprofessional views of issues associated with ASD education. Furthermore, the study illuminated the lack of training paraprofessional educators have and schools must provide additional time for these educators to collaborate to learn and implement new methods and strategies aimed at providing socially just education within their respective settings. Relatedly, special education teachers shared that they were unprepared to manage their teams of paraprofessionals. Therefore, school leaders and higher education programs should find ways to bolster training of this stakeholder group while simultaneously creating time for these managers to share successful implementation strategies among their peers.

Special education directors shared that many school leaders utilize for-profit agencies in lieu of creating their own programs as these institutions may often offer services that schools with smaller populations or underdeveloped programs for students with ASD do not provide. However, they admitted concern over these exclusion practices, and these concerns should be considered by all school leaders involved in student exclusion decisions. In particular, stakeholders need to weigh issues associated with travel time, accountability of partner education institutions, and fiscally driven inclusion decisions.

Within the realm of school law, concerns related to standardized testing should be evaluated and recommended changes to standardize testing of IEP goals could be considered. If students have no reading and math goals, then it seems counterintuitive to test these student in those areas. Rather, IEP aligned assessments could be considered. Additionally, as it was shared that the modified standardized test is now meant to drive special education programming and decisions we must consider the impact taking this role from professional educators has on their students. Lastly, it is important to share and celebrate the progress with ASD education and to show its value in order to prevent the removal of the resources on which this progress is built. To that end, ASD stakeholders need to keep themselves aware of current legislation with the potential to reduce education fiscal supports as the resource intensive nature of ASD education would likely enhance the significance of these changes.

Recommendations for Future Study

The results of this study should contribute to the current body of research and literature on social justice for individuals with learning disabilities. Concurrently, this study will also add to the knowledge that already exists about the experiences of students with ASD and their educators. In light of the increasing population of students with ASD, a subsequent need for information on ways to effectively provide equitable education that meets the needs of individuals across the autism spectrum is apparent.

Additionally, the findings of this study indicated a strong connection between personal experience with individuals with special needs and the choice of participant to work in this field. This study could serve as an impetus for investigating and the motivating factors influencing these dedicated educators in the hope of spreading their

empathy. Moreover, regular education teachers were not interviewed for this study but their role, according to participants, is critical to inclusion. Highlighting the voices of regular education teachers with experience working with ASD would add a valuable chapter to the collective book related to the education of ASD students. Additionally, participants shared that school leaders could be a great asset or an obstacle to their success. Therefore, research into administrative knowledge and attitudes related to social justice in education in general and how it applies specifically to students with ASD is needed.

Furthermore, the researcher was surprised to hear interviews describe the absence of ASD training within their degree programs despite their special education focus. A widespread investigation into education related to learners with ASD within higher education institutions across the country would help to expand upon and clarify data from this study. Moreover, participants supplied very little detail regarding the experiences of students outsourced to for-profit educational institutions and the researcher feels this knowledge is critical to those involved in placement decisions for students with special needs. Lastly, participants shared a common need for changes in standardized testing procedures. In conjunction with current agencies, education practitioners could research the plausibility and practicality of the creation of an IEP driven test in which students are evaluated individually against their own targets, IEP driven testing.

Concluding Overview

Through the lens of social justice theory, this phenomenological study sought to further the understanding of the unique and varied needs of students with ASD and the multiple school stakeholders charged with providing equity within ASD education.

Through the social justice lens, the researcher examined alignment among participant's perceptions with regard to challenges and obstacles to ASD equity, and detailed methods used to overcome those obstacles. Of particular interest, were barriers to equity with the education of students with ASD that were not overcome and various explanations from participants for the insurmountability of those barriers.

Participant responses demonstrated that the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities (Hyttén & Bettez, 2011), are reflected in the practices of ASD educators at multiple levels. However, within certain school personnel, a lack of knowledge and valuation of students with ASD is still prevalent. Therefore, the findings of this study identified a need for K-12 school districts and higher education institutions to offer more opportunities for educators of students with ASD to learn about their unique traits and strategies the study findings and research have shown improve learner outcomes for students across the autism spectrum.

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APPENDIX A

Informed Consent

1. District Gatekeeper Educator Participant Permission Letter
2. Letter of Informed Consent – Educator Participant
3. Recruitment Script for Special Education Administrator
4. Recruitment Script for Special Education Teacher
5. Recruitment Script for Paraprofessional Educator

District Gatekeeper Permission for Educator Participation Letter

<Name of District>

Dear <Title> <First Name> <Last Name>,

I am writing to request your permission as the Gatekeeper administrator of the <Name of District> School District to contact educators of students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) within your district to participate in a research study titled *A qualitative inquiry into social justice issues facing educators of students with autism spectrum disorders*.

The study is being conducted by me, Adam Stephens, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia and is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia.

Special education teacher participants would need to have at least two years of experience educating students with ASD and paraprofessional teachers would need to have at least one year of experience educating students with ASD. The director of special education, special education teachers, building principals, and/or yourself would select special education teachers and paraprofessionals that meet the criteria for the study. I would also obtain permission from building principals supervising interviewees to participate in the study if needed. I would then interview each participant at their convenience in order to gather their knowledge related to current issues within associated with educating students with autism spectrum disorders. Individual interviews will last

no longer than 60 minutes. Copies of the interview protocols and informed consent forms are attached for your review.

Participation in the study is completely voluntary. Research participants may withdraw from participation in the study at any time they wish, including in the middle of or after completion of the interview. They may also choose not to answer individual questions and ask clarifying questions of their own. Participants' answers and the district's identity will remain confidential and separate from any identifying information. The researcher will not list any names of participants, or their corresponding institutions, in his dissertation or any future publications of this study.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns about participation either by phone at (816) 863-4224 or by electronic mail at ajstephens44@gmail.com. In addition, you are also welcome to contact the dissertation advisor for this research study, Dr. Barbara Martin, who can be reached at 660-543-8823 or by email at bmartin@ucmo.edu. If you choose to allow me to contact the Director of Special Education in your district regarding participation in this study, please complete the attached permission form. You should retain a copy of this letter and your written consent for future reference.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Adam Stephens - Doctoral Candidate

Administrative Gatekeeper Permission for Educator Participation

I, _____, grant permission for educators of students with autism spectrum disorders in my district to be contacted regarding participation in research conducted by Adam Stephens, doctoral candidate at the University of Missouri – Columbia.

By signing this permission form, I understand that the following safeguards are in place to protect educators choosing to participate:

- All participation is voluntary, and may be withdrawn at any point before culmination of the study.
- All responses will be used for dissertation research and for potential future journal publications.
- All identities and affiliations will be kept confidential in all phases of the research.
- Interviews will take no longer than one hour to complete.

Please keep the consent letter and a copy of the signed consent form for your records. If you choose to grant permission for educators in your school district to participate in this study, please complete this *Administrative Gatekeeper Permission for Educator Participation Form*, scan, and email it to Adam Stephens (ajstephens44@gmail.com) at your earliest convenience.

I have read the material above and any questions that I have posed have been answered to my satisfaction. I grant permission for educators in my school district to be contacted and invited to participate in this study.

Signed: _____ Date:

Title/Position:

School District:

Please return to Adam Stephens

Phone: (816) 863-4224

Email: ajstephens44@gmail.com

Letter of Informed Consent – Educator Participant

[DATE]

Dear (Participant):

Thank you for considering participation in a research study titled *A qualitative inquiry into social justice issues facing educators of students with autism spectrum disorders*.

This study is part of my dissertation research for a doctoral degree in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia. You have been invited to participate in this study because you have experience working with students who have autism spectrum disorders. Information gathered should be beneficial to educators who responsible for improving educational outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorders. The district [gatekeeper] has approved participation of [the employing institution].

PURPOSE

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of various educators charged with the task of educating students with ASD. To highlight the various obstacles facing educators within secondary educational settings, the resistance they face in that work, and the resilience they develop to sustain their social justice work, the following research questions served as guideposts for this qualitative study:

1. What barriers do educators encounter with regard to promoting education equity and social justice for students with ASD and how are they able or unable to overcome these barriers?
2. What role do special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within their institutions?
3. According to secondary public school special education administrators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training provided to ASD educators and resources provided to support students with ASD within their educational settings?
4. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the training pertinent to students with ASD they receive and resources they provide their students?
5. According to secondary public school ASD educators, how are the social justice principles of distribution, recognition, and opportunities reflected in the daily lessons and methods they use to educate students with ASD?

Before you make a final decision about participation, you must know how your rights will be protected:

INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT FOR EDUCATOR PARTICIPANT

- Participation in the study is voluntary. You may withdraw at any time. If later you do not wish the data you provided to be used, inform me; your wish will be honored before culmination of the study. Your refusal to participate will have no adverse consequences. For any questions about your participation in this research, please contact me at (816) 863-4224 or by e-mail at ajstephens44@gmail.com. You may also contact my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Barbara N. Martin, at (660) 543-8823 or by e-mail at bmartin@ucmo.edu.
- As an interview participant your name and answers will remain confidential; only my dissertation supervisor and I would have access to identifiable data. Any materials identifying specific individuals, district, or school will be kept locked and destroyed three years after the completion of this project. Data collected from the school participants will be coded for qualitative analysis, and summarized for reporting. Results may be published in *Dissertation Abstracts* and in professional journals at any time, protecting your anonymity and confidentiality.
- Your control as to which interview items you choose to answer ensures that there will be no identifiable risk for you greater than that encountered in your everyday life. The University of Missouri does not compensate human subjects if injury or discomfort results from the research. Nonetheless, the university holds medical, professional, and general liability insurance coverage, and provides its own medical attention and facilities in the unlikely event that participants suffer as a direct result of negligence or fault from faculty or staff associated with this research. In such eventuality, the Risk Management Officer should be contacted immediately at (573) 882-3735 to obtain a review of the matter and receive further information. Ethical guidelines about Protection of Human Subjects set forth in the Code of Federal Regulations “45 CFR 46” will be upheld. This statement is not to be construed as an admission of liability.
- This research has been preauthorized by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Missouri – Columbia. If you have further questions regarding research participants’ rights, please contact the Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585, or visit <http://ohrp.osophs.dhhs.gov/humansubjects/guidance/45cfr46.htm>.

If you elect to participate and make your professional perspective count as part of this study, please review this informed and contact me with any questions you have and we will set a time a place to meet for the interview. Keep this letter for future reference, if you wish. The individual interview will take approximately one hour to complete. Your participation is very valuable. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Adam Stephens

Doctoral Candidate

University of Missouri – Columbia

Recruitment Script for Special Education Administrator

Name of Person: _____

Phone Number: _____

Time Called: _____

Better Time to Call: _____

Hi, my name is Adam Stephens and I'm a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. This study involves research. I'm interested in interviewing paraprofessional educators of students with autism spectrum disorders regarding their experiences working with this subgroup. I would like to meet with you one-on-one to get your input on this topic. I am flexible about the day and time we meet. The meeting will last no longer than 60 minutes. Will you be able to accommodate this request? If so, where and when would be convenient for you to meet?

Date of Meeting: _____

Time of Meeting: _____

Location of Meeting: _____

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-863-4224 or ajstephens44@gmail.com

Recruitment Script for Special Education Teacher

Name of Person: _____

Phone Number: _____

Time Called: _____

Better Time to Call: _____

Hi, my name is Adam Stephens and I'm a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. This study involves research. I'm interested in interviewing paraprofessional educators of students with autism spectrum disorders regarding their experiences working with this subgroup. I would like to meet with you one-on-one to get your input on this topic. I am flexible about the day and time we meet. The meeting will last no longer than 60 minutes. Will you be able to accommodate this request? If so, where and when would be convenient for you to meet?

Date of Meeting: _____

Time of Meeting: _____

Location of Meeting: _____

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-863-4224 or ajstephens44@gmail.com

Recruitment Script for Paraprofessional Teacher

Name of Person: _____

Phone Number: _____

Time Called: _____

Better Time to Call: _____

Hi, my name is Adam Stephens and I'm a doctoral student at the University of Missouri. I'm working on a study about social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. This study involves research. I'm interested in interviewing paraprofessional educators of students with autism spectrum disorders regarding their experiences working with this subgroup. I would like to meet with you one-on-one to get your input on this topic. I am flexible about the day and time we meet. The meeting will last no longer than 60 minutes. Will you be able to accommodate this request? If so, where and when would be convenient for you to meet?

Date of Meeting: _____

Time of Meeting: _____

Location of Meeting: _____

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this study. If any issues arise with this meeting please contact me at 816-863-4224 or ajstephens44@gmail.com

APPENDIX B

Interview Protocols

1. Special Education Director Interview Protocol
2. Special Education Teacher Interview Protocol
3. Paraprofessional Educator Interview Protocol

Special Education Administrator Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code:

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Location: _____

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. My name is Adam Stephens, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable or would rather not answer a question please let me know. If you want to follow up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be comfortable conversation between educators.

Our session will last approximately one hour and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions	Research Questions
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Opening Questions: 5-10 min.

1. What is your name and position within your school district?	Learn about participant
2. Can you please tell me about your experiences working with students with ASD and their educators? <i>Probe: How many years have you spent working with students with ASD and in what roles and settings has this work occurred?</i>	Q1, Q2, Q3

Introductory Question: 5 min.

3. What is your perception with regard to your school district's efforts to meet the needs of students with ASD; what do you feel the district does well and what areas do you feel have room for improvement?	Q1, Q2, Q3
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Transition Questions: 10 min.

4. In your experience, what methods do you feel are critical to educators seeking to meet the unique and varied needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?	Q1
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<p><i>Probe: Could you please describe some of the best practices you associate with providing equitable education to students with ASD?</i></p>	
<p>5. Who are the primary stakeholders involved in developing and implementing educational strategies targeted at meeting the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?</p>	Q2
<p>6. What are your primary sources for new information on students with ASD and strategies research has shown improve their education outcomes?</p>	Q1, Q2

Key Questions: 30-40 min.

<p>7. Can you please describe some of the greatest challenges you as an administrator face with regard to the education of students with ASD?</p> <p><i>Probe: What barriers facing students with ASD and educators do you see and which are the most difficult to overcome?</i></p>	Q1
<p>8. How do education stakeholders within your district work together to overcome barriers to ASD student success?</p>	Q1, Q2, Q3

<p><i>Probe: Can you please describe how secondary schools in your district address social and academic gaps between students with ASD and typical students?</i></p>	
<p>9. What additional programs or resources offered to students with ASD and educators?</p> <p><i>Probe: What training and preparation specific to meeting the needs of students with ASD is provide to educators of students with ASD within your school district?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3
<p>10. What training and preparation specific to meeting ASD student needs have you received?</p>	Q1
<p>11. Which types of training have you found most valuable in efforts to promote inclusive and effective ASD education?</p> <p><i>Probe: What types of training have produced the most desirable results?</i></p>	Q2, Q3
<p>12. What role do various school leaders play in developing and incorporating research supported strategies and</p>	Q2

<p>methods that improve the quality of ASD education within your school district?</p>	
<p>13. Please detail the interactions and roles special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within your school district?</p>	<p>Q2</p>
<p>14. What instruction strategies do students with ASD receive in order to meet requirements related to their educational rights contained within education legislation contained in Section 504, the ADA, ATA, IDEA, NCLB, and ESSA?</p>	<p>Q1, Q4, Q5</p>
<p>15. How does your school district identify, hire, and retain quality ASD educators?</p>	<p>Q1, Q3</p>
<p>16. What new developments related to the education of students with autism spectrum disorders have you seen related to ESSA and what predications for future changes associated with this legislation to you foresee?</p>	<p>Q1</p>

<p>17. What efforts are made to increase awareness, appreciation, inclusion, and understanding of ASD culture among students and staff?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there any direct instruction on this topic? Are there additional efforts that you would recommend or have planned for the future?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3
<p>18. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of marginalized individuals. Can you please describe how your school(s) exemplify the meaning of social justice for students with autism spectrum disorders?</p>	Q1, Q3
<p>19. What would you consider to be the most important issue or issues and/or pressing problems related to education students with ASD with your school and school district?</p> <p><i>Probe: What resources are needed and which would/will you give top priority to?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q3, Q3, Q5

Ending Question: 5-10 min.

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<p>20. Is there anything critical to understanding the complete picture of ASD education within your school and school district that we have neglected to discuss?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there anything important related to this topic that we have failed to address?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4</p>
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Special Education Teacher Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code:

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Location: _____

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. My name is Adam Stephens, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable or would rather not answer a question please let me know. If you want to follow up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be comfortable conversation between educators.

Our session will last approximately one hour and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions	Research Questions
------------------	-------------------------------

Opening Questions: 5-10 min.

<p>1. What is your name and position with your school district?</p> <p>2. Can you please tell me about your experience working with students with ASD?</p> <p><i>Probe: How many years have you spent working with students with ASD and in what roles and settings has this work occurred?</i></p>	<p>Learn about participant</p> <p>Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5</p>
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Introductory Question: 5 min.

<p>3. What is your perception with regard to your school district's efforts to meet the needs of students with ASD?</p> <p><i>Probes: What do you feel the district does well and what areas do you feel have room for improvement?</i></p>	<p>Q3, Q4, Q5</p>
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Transition Questions: 10 min.

<p>4. Could you please describe some of the best practices you associate with the education to students with ASD?</p> <p><i>Probe: In your experience, what methods do you feel are critical to educators seeking to meet the unique and varied needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?</i></p>	<p>Q4, Q5</p>
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5. Who are the primary stakeholders involved in developing and implementing educational strategies targeted at meeting the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?	Q2
6. What are your primary sources for new information on students with ASD and strategies research has shown improve their education outcomes?	Q4

Key Questions: 30-40 min.

7. Can you please describe some of the greatest challenges you as a special education teacher face with regard to the education of students with ASD? <i>Probe: What barriers facing students with ASD and educators do you see and which are the most difficult to overcome?</i>	Q1
8. What training and preparation specific to meeting ASD student needs is provided to educators of students with ASD within your school district?	Q1, Q3
	Q2, Q3

<p>9. Which types of training have you found most valuable in efforts to promote inclusive and effective ASD education?</p> <p><i>Probe: What types of training have produced the most desirable improvements and results for students with ASD?</i></p>	Q1, Q3, Q4, Q5
<p>10. Could you please describe any extra resources that are afforded to students with ASD and their educators?</p> <p><i>Probe: What resources are offered that are different than those for students without disabilities?</i></p>	Q1, Q3
<p>11. How does your school district identify, hire, and retain quality ASD educators?</p>	Q2, Q3
<p>12. Please describe the various roles special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within your school district?</p>	Q2, Q3

<p><i>Probe: What is your role specifically and what do you understand the role of special education administrators and paraprofessionals to be?</i></p>	Q4
<p>13. What specific accommodations and instruction strategies do students with ASD receive in order to meet requirements related to their educational rights contained within education legislation in Section 504, the ADA, ATA, IDEA, NCLB, and ESSA?</p>	Q1, Q2, Q3
<p>14. What new developments related to the education of students with autism spectrum disorders have you seen related to ESSA and what predications for future changes associated with this legislation to you foresee?</p>	Q1, Q4, Q5
<p>15. What efforts are made to increase awareness, appreciation, inclusion, and understanding of ASD culture among students and staff?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there any direct instruction on this topic? Are there additional efforts that you would recommend or have planned for the future?</i></p>	Q1

<p>16. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of potentially marginalized individuals. Could you please describe how your school(s) exemplify the meaning of social justice for students with ASD?</p> <p>17. What would you consider to be the most important issues and pressing problems related to education students with ASD with your school and school district?</p> <p><i>Probe: What resources are needed and which would/will you give top priority to?</i></p>	
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Ending Question: 5-10 min.

<p>18. Is there anything critical to understanding the complete picture of ASD education within your school and school district that we have neglected to discuss?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there anything important related to this topic that we have failed to address?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5</p>
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Paraprofessional Teacher Interview Protocol

Participant Identification Code:

Date: _____ Start Time: _____ End Time: _____

Location: _____

Introduction

Thank you for taking the time to answer my questions focusing on social justice issues associated with the education of students with autism spectrum disorders. My name is Adam Stephens, and I will be conducting the interview. In order to ensure accuracy, I will be audio recording the interview.

There are no right or wrong answers. If you feel uncomfortable or would rather not answer a question please let me know. If you want to follow up on a question or give an example, feel free to do so. I want this to be comfortable conversation between educators.

Our session will last approximately one hour and we will not be taking a formal break. Please let me know if you need to leave for any reason. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions	Research Questions
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Opening Questions: 5-10 min.

1. What is your name and position with your school district?	Learn about participant
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<p>2. Can you please tell me in general about your experience working with students with autism spectrum disorders?</p> <p><i>Probe: How many years have you spent working with students with ASD and in what roles and settings has this work occurred?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5
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Introductory Question: 5 min.

<p>3. What is your perception with regard to your school district's efforts to meet the needs of ASD student; what do you feel the district does well and what areas do you feel have room for improvement?</p>	Q1
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Transition Questions: 10 min.

<p>4. In your experience, what methods do you feel are critical to educators seeking to meet the unique and varied needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?</p> <p><i>Probe: Could you please describe some of the best practices you associate with providing equitable education to students with ASD?</i></p>	<p>Q4, Q5</p> <p>Q2</p>
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5. Who are the primary stakeholders involved in developing and implementing educational strategies targeted at meeting the needs of students with autism spectrum disorders?	Q4
6. What are your primary sources for new information on students with ASD and strategies research has shown improve their education outcomes?	

Key Questions: 30-40 min.

7. Can you please describe some of the greatest challenges you as a paraprofessional teacher face with regard to the education of students with ASD? <i>Probe: What barriers facing students with ASD and educators do you see and which are the most difficult to overcome?</i>	Q1
8. What specific training and preparation specific to meeting ASD student needs have you received?	Q3, Q4
9. Which types of training have you found most valuable in efforts to promote inclusive and effective ASD education?	Q3, Q4

<p><i>Probe: What types of training have produced the most desirable improvements and results for students with ASD?</i></p>	Q1, Q3
<p>10. How does your school district identify, hire, retain quality ASD educators?</p>	Q2, Q3
<p>11. Please describe the various roles special education administrators, special education teachers, and paraprofessionals play in developing and incorporating new researched supported strategies and methods that improve the quality of ASD student education within your school district?</p> <p><i>Probe: What is your role specifically and what do you understand the role of special education administrators and special education teachers to be?</i></p>	Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5
<p>12. What specific accommodations and instruction strategies do students with ASD receive in order to meet requirements related to their educational rights contained within education legislation in Section 504, the ADA, ATA, IDEA, NCLB, and ESSA?</p>	Q1, Q4, Q5

<p><i>Probe: What new developments have you seen related to ESSA and what predications for future changes associated with this legislation to you foresee?</i></p>	
<p>13. What efforts are made to increase awareness, appreciation, inclusion, and understanding of ASD culture among students and staff?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there any direct instruction on this topic? Are there additional efforts that you would recommend or that you are aware your school has planned for the future?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q4, Q5</p> <p>Q1</p>
<p>14. Social justice involves equity in rights, resources, and the treatment of potentially marginalized individuals. Could you please describe how your school exemplifies the meaning of social justice for students with ASD?</p>	
<p>15. What would you consider to be the most important issues and pressing problems related to education students with ASD with your school district?</p> <p><i>Probe: What resources are needed and which would you give top priority to?</i></p>	

Ending Question: 5-10 min.

<p>16. Is there anything critical to understanding the complete picture of ASD education within your school that we have neglected to discuss?</p> <p><i>Probe: Is there anything important related to this topic that we have failed to discuss?</i></p>	<p>Q1, Q2, Q4, Q5</p>
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APPENDIX C

July 13, 2017

Principal Investigator: Adam Stephens, EdD Educational Leadership & Policy Analysis

Department: Education

Your Exempt Application to project entitled A Qualitative Inquiry into Social Justice Issues Facing Educators of Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders was reviewed and approved by the MU Institutional Review Board according to terms and conditions described below:

IRB Project Number	2006081
IRB Review Number	227527
Initial Application Approval Date	August 11, 2016
IRB Expiration Date	August 11, 2018
Level of Review	Exempt
Project Status	Active - Open to Enrollment
Risk Level	Minimal Risk

The principal investigator (PI) is responsible for all aspects and conduct of this study.

The PI must comply with the following conditions of the approval:

1. No subjects may be involved in any study procedure prior to the IRB approval date or after the expiration date.
2. All unanticipated problems, adverse events, and deviations must be reported to the IRB within 5 business days.
3. All changes must be IRB approved prior to implementation unless they are intended to reduce immediate risk.
4. All recruitment materials and methods must be approved by the IRB prior to being used.
5. The Annual Exempt Form must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval at least 30 days prior to the project expiration date. If the study is complete, the Completion/Withdrawal Form may be submitted in lieu of the Annual Exempt Form
6. Maintain all research records for a period of seven years from the project completion date.
7. Utilize all approved research documents located within the attached files section of eCompliance. These documents are highlighted green.

If you are offering subject payments and would like more information about research participant payments, please click here to view the MU Business Policy and Procedure:

http://bppm.missouri.edu/chapter2/2_250.html

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB at 573-882-3181 or irb@missouri.edu.

Thank you,

MU Institutional Review Board

APPENDIX D

Data Codes

A1	Special Education Administrator Participant 1
A2	Special Education Administrator Participant 2
A3	Special Education Administrator Participant 3
T1	Special Education Teacher Participant 1
T2	Special Education Teacher Participant 2
T3	Special Education Teacher Participant 3
T4	Special Education Teacher Participant 4
T5	Special Education Teacher Participant 5
T6	Special Education Teacher Participant 6
T7	Special Education Teacher Participant 7
T8	Special Education Teacher Participant 8
T9	Special Education Teacher Participant 9
P1	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 1
P2	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 2
P3	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 3
P4	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 4
P5	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 5
P6	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 6
P7	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 7
P8	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 8
P9	Paraprofessional Educator Participant 9

VITA

Adam Stephens was born in Creston, Iowa to John and Karleen Stephens. He graduated in 1999 from Diagonal High School in Diagonal, Iowa. In 2004, he received a Bachelor of Science degree in Unified Science-Biology/Education from the Northwest Missouri State University. He later earned a Masters of Secondary School Leadership from The University of Central Missouri, followed by a Doctorate in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis from the University of Missouri – Columbia in 2017.

Adam's work experiences include teaching middle school science, coaching basketball and track, 504 coordinator, and energy use reduction committee for Blue Springs R-IV School District- Moreland Ridge Middle School. Adam also serves as a school foundation board member for his alma mater Diagonal Community School. Research interests include the experiences of students with ASD and educators. Adam's additional work focuses on environmental and political causes.

Dr. Stephens currently resides in Lee's Summit, Missouri, with his wife Quinn and daughters Aria and Everly.